

Dream unrealized in Ferguson

Fifty years ago, the civil rights movement emphasized the pressing need for non-violent protest and a greater representation of minorities in the nation's police departments. But the civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, first after the shooting death of Michael Brown in August and more recently after the grand jury decision not to indict Darren Wilson, the white police officer who shot and killed him, raises the question if we, as a nation, learned anything at all from that movement.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. used peaceful protest to achieve equality for African-Americans. "It was," he believed, "the only logical and moral approach to the solution of the race problem in the United States."

But Ferguson flatly rejected that philosophy.

The turmoil might have been avoided if the police force better represented the town's racial demographic.

Of the 53 officers in the Ferguson Police Department, only three are black. That's hardly representative of a town where nearly 70 percent of the 21,000 residents are African-American. Nor does it show much progress since the early 1960s when civil rights leader Bayard Rustin called for greater racial parity in the nation's overwhelmingly white police departments.

Rustin made that plea during the 1963 March on Washington. He was especially color-conscious in organizing a police force to assist the 4,200 District of Columbia patrol officers, National Guard members and park police already assigned to that historic event.

Rustin's police force consisted of unarmed African-American law enforcement officers because he did not want only white officers arresting blacks. If an African-American person misbehaved



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during the event, both black and white officers were directed to address it. As a result, violence was non-existent at the March on Washington, and only three arrests were made.

Had the Ferguson police department paid attention to that history, it's doubtful that any rioting – and perhaps even the shooting of Brown – would have taken place. Instead, many of the town's black residents have long complained of racial profiling.

Crime statistics released by the Missouri attorney general's office support their case.

Blacks accounted for 86 percent of the vehicle stops made by Ferguson police last year and nearly 93 percent of the arrests made from those stops. FBI statistics show that 85 percent of the people arrested by Ferguson police are black.

A recent analysis of census records by the

Washington Post suggests that Ferguson is a reflection of the nation as a whole.

The study shows that more than three-quarters of the cities have a police presence that's disproportionately white relative to the local population. What's more, blacks are under-represented among police officers in more than 40 percent of the cities in the study.

Because of the institutional nature of racism in the United States, any time a white police officer arrests or does physical harm to an African-American, the specter of race discrimination clouds the action.

There's no avoiding that reality.

Unless the nation's police departments become more color conscious, there will be many more incidents of "white-cop-kills-black-youth" in the future, and the legacies King and Rustin will continue to go unfulfilled.

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