

# Case Study of a Racist Institution

Coverage of the New Bethel Incident by the *Detroit News* and the *Detroit Free Press*, March 30 to April 3, 1969

## People Against Racism

1969

“Along with the country as a whole, the press has too long basked in a white world, looking out of it, if at all, with white men’s eyes and a white perspective.”

—*Kerner Report*, p. 389

The headline of the *Free Press* editorial of April 1 reads, “Keep Isolated Incidents Within Narrow Limits.” This is a typical example of the racist distortion of reality practiced by Detroit’s major newspapers. There is nothing isolated about assaults on the black community by the white police. There is nothing isolated about attacks on Judge George Crockett for dispensing true justice to black people.

The only isolated aspect of the New Bethel incident is that a white policeman died and no black people did.

The New Bethel Incident and its aftermath is a study in white power and racism. This is particularly evident in the reporting and interpretation of the incident by the *News* and *Free Press*. In a case which is confusing at best, neither of the city’s major papers has presented a balanced and clarifying account. Their coverage, instead, has been characterized by one-sidedness and inflammatory innuendo.

The questions omitted by the *News* and *Free Press* are as significant as what is reported. With only the testimony of officer Worobec, the papers assume there is basis for describing the New Bethel Incident six times as an “ambush” or “slaying” and once as a “murder.” Ambushes and murders are proven in court, not in the racist imaginations of the white press.

Reiterating eight times the police assertion that Czapski and Worobec had their revolvers in their holsters makes police provocation no less likely. Is it reasonable to believe two white policemen would approach 10 to 12 armed black men with no weapons in their hands? With ample precedent for police officers drawing their weapons on black people in less provoking situations, surely the press is being presumptuous in its conclusions.

The *News* and *Free Press* unquestioning support of the police action allows them to also accept police charges that they were fired on from inside New Bethel Church. While reporting the police version of the story over 20 times, the papers report the Republic of New Africa (RNA) denial of any such provocation only 5 times. Once again, the police side of the story seems sufficient evidence for the *News* and *Free Press*. They assume, moreover, that their readers are similarly uninterested in the testimony of the black people involved.

While summing up the incident in an editorial April 1 as an “irrational act” by an “irrational extremist organization,” the *Free Press* is unconcerned that the police involved might have acted irrationally. Yet what other expectations could we have of a police department infamous for its abuse of black people in the Algiers Motel executions, during Cobo Hall 1 and the Veterans’ Memorial Incident, during the July ’67 rebellion, the Howard King case, the harassment of Negro police officer Kenneth Johnson? There is clearly more historical evidence of irrational behavior on the part of the police than on the part of the 135 black members of the RNA subjected to gunfire and arrest.

The press is unwilling even to question the possibility that the police, in their need to justify their acts, could distort testimony. The only justification for firing into the church is that the police were fired on from the church.

Therefore, since the church was fired on, the justification logically follows. Could we expect the police to admit firing into the church with no justification—have they ever admitted to conscious or unconscious error?

In their editorial of April 1, the *Free Press* exhorts the black community to “Sort Out the Separatists,” while the *News* “questions the silence of moderate black leaders.” Assuming that the black community is susceptible to this sort of ‘divide and rule’ psychology, one wonders what the purpose is of this separation. The *Free Press* suggests that separatist attempts by the RNA will parallel the experience of the “American Indians.”

The *Free Press* forgets, of course, that the white man’s armed strength was responsible for the “Indians’ “experience of “physical separation into designated areas.” (In case the RNA misses the message, however, Commissioner Spreen’s recommendations are loud and clear: Detroit policemen in the 10<sup>th</sup> precinct will carry either M-1 rifles or their own weapons.)

The press view of the black community is further revealed in headlines such as “Ambush slayers of policeman hunted,” “Killer hunt feared ruined,” and “Church ambush slayers of patrolmen are hunted.” We assume journalists realize that people are searched for, animals are hunted. White racist mentality is fed by such nuance.

The same is true of the *News* statement that some of the people inside New Bethel were wearing “African garb,” and the *Free Press* labeling of the RNA as “black separatists” a total of 13 times on Monday alone. The latter is clearly intended to delegitimize the RNA, as is the labeling of their program for a black nation as “an empty doctrine.”

Even the *Free Press* is forced to acknowledge, however, that some blacks “feel a vague sympathy with the extremists” and that “a good many black men...describe themselves as ‘black nationalist’ or even separatist...” It is white racism that denies legitimacy or respect to the desire of black people to separate from a racist white society which has enslaved, oppressed and attempted to dehumanize them for nearly 400 years.

The hysterical response of the *News* and *Free Press* to the death of one white cop is reasonable if one shares the racist view of the police as the ‘thin blue line’ between the ghetto and the white community.

As Monsignor Canfield declared at Czapski’s funeral, “If it were not for these brave men (police), how quickly we would crawl back to the cave and the jungle.” Such response is an indication of the extent to which the normal expectation of whites is that only black people will die in confrontations between them and the police. When the possibility is opened that such results can be reversed, racist fears are bound to surface.

An additional assumption carried in the press’ frenzied response is that white life is worth more than black life. *News* and *Free Press* coverage of past incidents reflects this assumption.

Vindictive attacks on Judge Crockett reflect an expectation that black judges should understand that the law does not protect the rights of black people, When the legal actions of a black judge result in the protection of black people’s rights, the press and the white community begin to question whether he is qualified to be a judge.

Because of racism, whites are opposed to black people attaining positions in which they are able to protect one another. The response to Judge Crockett’s actions is that the ‘niggers’ are getting away with something—not that someone’ is getting away with something.

Someone gets away with something all the time. The police get away with murder, and they expect that right. They expect to be able to mobilize the national guard for five days in the ghetto without repercussions.

They expect to be able to kill nearly 40 black people (including those in the Algiers Motel) during a rebellion with no repercussions. And there are no objections from the press when police use every constitutional guarantee, legal maneuver, and ounce of judicial influence to protect themselves in the Algiers case or the Veterans’ Memorial incident.

The dispensation of the James Earl Ray case serves as a reminder of the fact that no white man has ever received the maximum penalty for causing the death of any black person in the history of this country.

In short, when it comes to crimes against black people, whites have traditionally been totally paralyzed in administering punishment against themselves. It clearly follows that if whites are to be restrained, it will be necessary for blacks to do the restraining.

## Related

See “The New Bethel Incident” in this issue.



People Against Racism  
Case Study of a Racist Institution  
Coverage of the New Bethel Incident by the *Detroit News* and the *Detroit Free Press*, March 30 to April 3, 1969  
1969

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/77-april-17-30-1969/case-study-of-a-racist-institution>  
Fifth Estate #77, April 17-30, 1969

**[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fifthestate.org)**