

The News—White Man's Paper

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

Although the media's coverage of the New Bethel incident has been at best confusing and at worst rampant with racial hysteria, it is not exceptional.

This is not the first violent confrontation between members of the black Community and the white police and white community. The significance of this incident is that whites were killed or injured instead of blacks.

Both the *News* and the *Free Press* have a tradition in their coverage of crimes committed by blacks against whites as compared to crimes committed by whites against blacks. Murders and other crimes of violence by whites against blacks receive second-page coverage, minimal follow-up and are generally reported as isolated incidents.

Murders and other crimes by blacks against whites receive front-page, top headline coverage for several days, human interest stories on the victim's family, and editorial comments on the “rising crime rate.”

Early Sunday morning, June 25, 1968, a black man attempting to protect his pregnant wife from a gang of white youths was shot in the head at Rouge Park. The eyewitness story of Mrs. Thomas, the victim's wife, appeared only in the *Michigan Chronicle*—a Negro Newspaper.

She and her husband had been spending the evening in the park with another couple. They were joined by several white youths. Mrs. Thomas reported that after the other couple left, her husband “said he heard the word ‘rape’ and heard that these guys were after a woman, any woman.”

The Thomases attempted to leave but found that their car would not start. According to the *News*, “Police found several wires had been pulled loose from the engine.” Thomas was shot in front of the park recreation center to which they were refused admittance. Mrs. Thomas lost her baby the following week, a point of ‘follow-up’ reported in neither the *Free Press* or *News*.

The *News* reported the Rouge Park Incident on page 2; the *Free Press* put it on page 15. The only further coverage within a full week of the incident appeared in the *Free Press* of June 17: an article regarding the release of all but one of the men held for investigation.

On Wednesday evening, November 31, 1966, a white store clerk in the downtown Hudson's was stabbed by a black shoplifter. The incident was reported on the front page of both the *News* and *Free Press*, with an additional human interest story on the front page of the *News*.

The *News* followed with a front-page top headline story on December 2, a story on page 3 December 3, front-page on December 4, and an editorial on December 8 entitled “What's the Answer to Crime in the Streets?—It's More Policemen.”

The editorial read in part: “The fatal stabbing of a salesman by a shoplifter in Hudson's downtown store simply drives home the gravity of a crime problem which seems to grow deeper each month.”

Why is one stabbing more indicative of a growing crime rate than the fatal shooting of a man in a park?

On Thursday evening, April 21, 1967, the 15 year-old son of a policeman was stabbed to death at Cobo Hall. The *News* devoted its front page, often with a top headline, to the incident for six days; the *Free Press* covered it for five days.

Several “human interest” stories appeared throughout the week, regarding the boy’s family and the band he was playing with at Cobo Hall the night he was killed. On April 22, the *Free Press* titled an editorial “Cobo Hall Murder Shows Need for Fight on Crime.”

Again we must ask—Why does the murder of a white boy by two black teenagers indicate the need to fight crime and the murder of a black man by a gang of white youths does not?

The coverage of confrontations between black people and the police is also revealing. The white policeman killed in the New Bethel Incident is called a “Police Hero.” Blacks killed by white police and guardsmen during the July 1967 rebellion are called “rebellious.”

The coverage of the Algiers Motel Incident is particularly significant. Many of the headlines in both the *News* and *Free Press* refer to the incident as “riot beatings” as often or more than as “riot deaths”—and never as “murder” (which one police officer was finally charged with).

The *Free Press* found the Algiers Motel Incident disturbing enough to print an editorial August 9 titled “Any Abuses of the Law Must Also be Punished.” It is interesting, however, that the editorial does not regard the incident as part of a growing trend in the Detroit Police Department or the National Guard.

Furthermore, editorials on a rising crime rate suggest solutions (primarily more policemen). The editorial on the Algiers Motel Incident calls for an “investigation”—not a solution.

The editorial on the Algiers Motel Incident was only one in a series of editorials by the *News* and *Free Press* concerning the rebellion. That particular editorial, however, was the only one to mention the fact that any black people had died. The lives of two white firemen and one white policeman (reported in the *Free Press* editorial “Exchanging Salutes” August 1, 1967) are worth more in the eyes of the media than are the lives of nearly forty black people.

Predictably, while the editorials were ignoring the loss of black lives, they were commending the forces of law and order and attacking the black community. The editorials in the *News* and *Free Press* on August 4 agreed with a statement by Hubert Humphrey that the “law of the jungle must go.”

In “Exchanging Salutes” the *Free Press* states “Guardsmen courageously patrolled the streets echoing with sniper fire.” In “How to Control Riots” (August 29), the *News* states that “Detroiters owe their generous thanks to the National Guardsmen who have risked their lives during our city’s crisis.”

What about the forty black lives that were lost?

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