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The Evolution of Racial Justice Coverage in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*

“The secret of freedom lies in educating people, whereas the secret of tyranny is in keeping them ignorant.” - Maximilien Robespierre

The American press was seen by the founding fathers as a shield against mob rule or abuse of government power. By informing the public on the issues, they would be able to make the necessary decisions when it came time to vote that would allow the government to adjust its policies and target the problems the nation might be facing. However, while the founding fathers were so concerned with creating a government that could withstand corruption or abuse of power, that they did not see there was a fatal flaw with their idea of the press as a shield. If the public could only learn from the press about the issues affecting the nation, then the way that the press chose to cover these events, or if they even chose to cover them at all, would influence how the American public perceived the events and issues facing the nation. There are many examples of this throughout American history, however, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and its coverage on issues of civil rights and racial justice, provides a case where the attitudes of the press shifted clearly from one position to another over time. However, even though the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* went from a newspaper that supported the southern ideas of race and of segregation, to one that supports the modern American ideals of racial equality, the echoes of its earlier beliefs and biases can still be seen in its reporting. This is a stark reminder that as much as America wants to believe it has changed and become progressive, post-racial, equal, whatever

you want to call it, there is still much work to be done. And the first step towards making these beliefs into reality is for the falsity of those beliefs to be called out, and the truth revealed. The best and only institution capable of doing this is the American press, and it starts with changing for good how these issues are reported on, ensuring that they are told fairly and that these old biases and ways of thinking are cast out.

This essay will focus primarily on the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*'s coverage of two major events in the civil rights movement and in the modern Black Lives Matter movement: the murder of Emmett Till, and the murder of George Floyd. Starting with Emmett Till, he was a 14-year-old boy from Chicago who, while visiting his family in Mississippi, was beaten to death for supposedly whistling at a white woman. Despite this being untrue, despite his uncle identifying the perpetrators in court, and despite the image of his beaten corpse being displayed on the front page of many newspapers such as *Jet*, his murderers still got away with it, and even later sold the story of how they murdered him to a newspaper (Roberts and Klibanoff 87, 88, 98-99, 101, 102-106). This was not a shocking verdict, as Roy Wilkins, an NAACP leader, noted even before the trial "The killers of the boy felt free to lynch him because there is in the entire state no restraining influence, not in the state capital, among the daily newspapers, the clergy, nor any segment of the so-called better citizens" (Roberts and Klibanoff 88). His statement vindicates the idea that without the press reporting responsibly on tragedies like this, and rightfully condemning it as an unjustified murder of an innocent boy, these ideas will continue to spread and these murders will continue. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* was no exception to Wilkins accusations, and this can be seen through their reporting on the murder and trial. One common occurrence is the use of the word "negro", usually not capitalized either, to describe Till and his family, such as in one article, and one hesitates to even call it that, at the very back of the paper and amounting

to probably no more than 100 words, where Till's mother Maime Bradley is described simply as "A Negro mother", and Till is not even mentioned in the headline, only being called a "Slain Boy" ("Mother of Slain Boy to Attend Mississippi Trial" 54). This was all, of course, done intentionally. Newspapers often denied to black Americans anything that would denote a sense of dignity (if they even covered a story involving a black American to begin with), and this included withholding capitalization on their names, referring to them by racial epithets, or not using titles such as Mr. or Mrs., and if these were used, they would typically be spelled out (Roberts and Klibanoff 5, 13, 55-56, 88). Although in this specific article Maime Bradley does get named and gets the title of Mrs. and capitalization to boot, this by no means disquiet the fact that these practices were still widespread, it merely shows that by the time of the Till trial, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* had begun to slowly change. In nearly every case, however, the news presented on Till's murder and the trial was relegated to the middle or back of the paper. There is one exception, on the day the jury reached its not guilty verdict, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* did run it as front-page news, however without any accompanying pictures of the boys disfigured corpse, and it mostly focused on the (entirely false) accusations of Carolyn Bryant, and her embellished claims of how he had grabbed her hand and waist, and there is no mention of the verdict anywhere in the article, just fluff about how a 21-year-old woman (with a pistol in her car) was the "victim" of the "aggression" of a 14-year-old black boy, reasserting the narrative of racial fear, the need for segregation and subjugation, and looming above this, entirely unsaid, hangs the age-old falsehood of the lust of black men being forcefully satiated by white women ("Mrs. Bryant Testifies Youth Grabbed Her" 1, 17). Another interesting item here is that Carolyn Bryant gets the headline honorific of "Mrs." while Maime Bradley was only a "Negro Mother", and Emmett Till is still merely a "Youth". By presenting these new allegations, and by favorably

depicting the white defendants with honorifics, they warp the public perception of the trial and the murder, and focusing on the alleged crimes or actions of the black victims at the hands of white authority is a common practice in the American press and one that still persists to this day.

Almost seventy years later, George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin after kneeling on his neck for almost ten minutes, despite his cries of “I can’t breathe”. Almost immediately, there was widespread public outrage, and the officers involved were fired and then arrested. Compared to the response to Till’s murder, this is great progress, but this was no assurance of justice, as it is still an incredibly rare thing in America for a police officer to be found guilty of murder. So then, how did the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* respond to the murder and the trial? One of the first articles they published opened with the opinions of the Richmond police department, all of whom condemn the actions of Derek Chauvin, and this is a critical move. The authority of policemen, their cries of self-defense, fear, and resisting arrest, is often the bastion that supports a not guilty verdict. So to begin with overwhelming condemnation of Chauvin by the police is an action that grants the public an initial emotion of outrage, rather than one of justification. However, the published statement is important for one more reason, as can be seen in the full quote:

“‘It is hard for me to put into words the anger, shame and pain I feel as a result of these officers' actions,’ Richmond Police Chief William Smith said.

‘I am outraged and sickened by the actions I saw in Minneapolis,’ he said in an emailed statement to the Richmond Times-Dispatch that was later released by the Richmond Police Department on Twitter.

‘Mr. Floyd's egregious and unnecessary death reinforces just how far we still have to go as a nation in law enforcement to replace the fear, mistrust and bias felt among many in the communities we serve with relationships built on transparency, accountability, equity and inclusion. My heart goes out to Mr. Floyd's family and to the Minneapolis community, and I hope that both find healing and justice.’” (Rockett and Moreno).

That the police department accepts its own inadequacy, and that George Floyd gets his name with the honorary Mr. is a display of the progress made by the press in addressing issues of civil rights. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* also took a great step in seeking out the opinion of the black community and its leaders, something almost completely absent from the coverage of

the Till trial. Furthermore, this article was the verbal equivalent of Mose pointing out the defendants in court, as it begins with the words “The Virginia Legislative Black Caucus on Saturday called for the state's crime commission to take action to reduce racism in the criminal justice system” (“Black Caucus, VUU president address Floyd's death”). By all standards, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* has thoroughly changed its system of covering black issues and stories and improved remarkably. However, as protests turned to riots, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* continued its coverage, although here the inadequacies begin to be seen. In an article published about the protests in Richmond, they mentioned that the headquarters of the United Daughters of the Confederacy had been set on fire and that the statues of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson had been vandalized (Moreno). Their failure to address why the protestors targeted these statues and buildings leaves them as easy prey for strawman arguments and red herrings by the defenders of the statues and of the police. Identifying the statues and the UDC as symbols not only of the confederacy but also proponents of the lost cause, an effort to reshape the public view of the antebellum south and of the confederacy, would have changed the way the public viewed these actions. While yes, the actions were criminal, giving their actions a historical context, as well as a political one, protects them from slander, and the duty of the press should be to inform the public of the issues these statues present. This is eerily similar to the press’s willing ignorance of black issues in the Jim Crow south, and taking the time to bring the issues of these statues into the proper context in the eye of the public would allow the public to see that attacking the UDC and vandalizing confederate statues aren’t only “built up pain” but are actually directly connected, as both these statues and the murder of Goerge Floyd represent white authority being used to justify black oppression. Another critical error was made in failing to distinguish looters from protestors. Originally, the *Times-Dispatch* did note that the protests

“started peacefully” but that as the march continued, and gunshots rang out, it devolved into a riot (Moreno). While they did include quotes from black business owners and citizen leaders decrying the riot, their failure to distinguish the protestors from the looters or to provide more accurate coverage of how the protest turned into the riot can lead to the public perceiving the protests as just poor people taking advantage of a tragedy to steal and loot.

There is some measure of pride to be taken in the changes that the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* has gone through and that it now provides much greater coverage on issues of race and civil rights. However, there can still be seen in its omissions and verbiage the echoes of the systems and beliefs of the past. If the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* wants to continue to serve its community, it must also unite its community. To truly serve as the system the founding fathers desired it to be, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, and the rest of the press, must present the issues in a way that makes the issues affecting the nation readily available and understandable to its readers. The days of willful ignorance and disrespect towards the issues affecting the black community are thankfully over, but as coverage of these events continues, they must be wary of their unknowing ignorance, such as with the statues and looting, to present these issues in their proper light.

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