

What Would the Soviets Say About Michael Brown?

From Birmingham to Ferguson, a brief history of how racial tensions at home have undermined America abroad.

BY CAROL ANDERSON

Americans are not the only ones who have been riveted by the news out of Ferguson, Missouri, over the past two weeks. The images of tear gas-filled streets and camouflaged police pointing semiautomatic guns at unarmed demonstrators in the U.S. heartland have attracted laughable hypocrisy from around the world. Iran's grand ayatollah decried the "brutal treatment" of African-Americans in the United States. The major news organ in China pointed to Ferguson, where a police officer killed an unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown, as indicative of America's "human rights flaw." News broadcasts in Russia noted dryly, "Cases of racism are still not rare in the nation of exemplary democracy." And Egypt, which has come under heavy U.S. diplomatic fire for massacring protesters during the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood a year ago, threw right back at President Barack Obama his words urging "restraint and respect for the right of assembly and peaceful expression of opinion."

But for all of the recent schadenfreude on display, this diplomatic game isn't new. In fact, it has been around at least since the Cold War. The worst part of this posturing isn't its speciousness. It is the willingness to use the harassment and persecution of America's most vulnerable citizens as foreign-policy fodder, cynically casting human rights as just another diplomatic battleground rather than as a framework to bring about real equality, justice, and peace.

During the Cold War, the Soviets eagerly depicted every lynching or Klan-beaten Freedom Rider in Birmingham, Alabama, as a warning to the world that the United States was fundamentally unable to deal with non-whites on the basis of equality. The implications were clear: If the U.S. government could treat its own citizens with such disdain and viciousness, peoples in the Third World were in mortal danger if they aligned with the West. In 1951, Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk acknowledged that, "The greatest burden we Americans have to bear in working out satisfactory relations with the peoples of Asia is our minority problems in the United States."

The Soviets were determined to make relations with Africa a problem as well. When Watts, Detroit, and Newark exploded in riots in the mid- to late 1960s, the KGB seized the opportunity to turn the anger, frustration, and rage of black Americans into a foreign-policy coup. As America's inner cities burned,

Soviet agents sent, to African diplomats at the United Nations, forged letters full of "racially insulting" incitement from supposed U.S. white supremacists.

Soviet agents sent, to African diplomats at the United Nations, forged letters full of "racially insulting" incitement from supposed U.S. white supremacists. That successfully fueled distrust of the United States in Africa. One Soviet agent later remarked, "I lost no sleep over such dirty tricks, figuring they were just another weapon in the Cold War."

From Truman through Nixon, Washington was keenly aware of how the United States' racial tensions played out abroad. It became especially hard to ignore when diplomats from India, the Caribbean, and Africa became ensnared in the

discriminatory net of Jim Crow and were tossed out of a theater or denied hotel accommodations. But, despite the cost to its international objectives, the U.S. government was unwilling to attack the problem of racism at its roots. Instead, successive administrations used several strategies to counter Jim Crow's deleterious effects on U.S. foreign policy. One was to place token blacks, such as journalist Carl Rowan and singer Marian Anderson, on international delegations to give the illusion of equality. Another was to point to the riots, court cases, and demonstrations happening around the country during the civil rights movement as proof that the American system could tackle the "unfinished business of democracy." The primary strategy, however, was to go on the attack by highlighting widespread human rights violations in the Soviet bloc.

But just as the dismantling of the Jim Crow laws over the course of the 1960s failed to put an end to racial discrimination in the United States, neither did the end of the Cold War in the 1980s put an end to how racial discrimination at home affects America's image abroad.

In 2005, just two years into the war in Iraq that was cast as Operation Iraqi Freedom, Hurricane Katrina slammed into the U.S. Gulf Coast, inundating New Orleans. Thousands of Americans, the overwhelming majority of them poor and black, were trapped in a drowning city. The soaring rhetoric about democracy that had cloaked the war in Iraq quickly fell to earth -- in part due to the spectacle at the Superdome in New Orleans. Even the conservative-leaning Daily Mail in Britain, recognized that: "Here is a country that is able to overthrow a dictator if it chooses, but is so immersed in the outcome of a war that it is incapable of reacting accordingly to the problems of hundreds of thousands of its own citizens effected [sic] by a natural disaster." El Mundo, Spain's leading newspaper, emphasized that

the disaster in New Orleans "highlights the weaknesses of a country so preoccupied by its imperialist adventures that it is neglecting its most valuable asset -- the well-being of its people." France's *Libération* further explained, "Katrina has revealed America's weaknesses: its racial divisions, the poverty of those left behind by its society, and especially its president's lack of leadership." Hamburg-based *Die Welt* was even more succinct: "America is ashamed."

Fast-forward three years and Obama's election seemed to signal to the world that the United States had overcome its sordid past. It marked a chance, as one Iranian reporter said, for America to "fix its image in the world."

But since that electrifying November night in 2008, a strange paradox has occurred. While a black man has occupied the White House, conditions for African-Americans have at best stagnated and in many cases worsened. A 2013 report by researchers at Brandeis University calculated that "half the collective wealth of African-American families was stripped away during the Great Recession." A rash of voter-suppression laws targeted -- much like the old grandfather clauses -- at African-Americans and supported by the Supreme Court's ruling in *Shelby County v. Holder*, threatens to disfranchise millions of black voters. The economic and political onslaught is punctuated by the number of unarmed black Americans shot and killed by "stand your ground" vigilantes or increasingly militarized police forces, with no assurances whatsoever that justice will occur. These grievances converged in Ferguson, Missouri, and came to light for the world to see.

The United States has been grappling with its relatively diminishing economic global power since the 1970s by turning instead to what was supposed to be the nation's strength. A favorite trope for presidents and secretaries of state attempting

to project power abroad has been to talk of America as the land of opportunity, a bastion of human rights. But murdered teenagers and tear gas in Ferguson don't reflect the image of the "shining city on the hill" that politicians in Washington want the world to see. The ongoing inability to make the promises of democracy real for 44.5 million African-Americans will continue to vex U.S. foreign policy now, just as it has in the past. And, fair or not, America's enemies will continue to use this discomfiting reality to poke, embarrass, and shame the superpower.

Photo by Scott Olson/Getty Images