

Selma's long shadow

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America's conversation about race has, like all of our public conversations, come to consist largely of a running commentary on viral spectacles. Recent weeks have been rife with them—the Oklahoma University SAE video chant and the dreadful scene of the double shooting of police in Ferguson; the awesome images of a sitting and a former president crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma on the anniversary of Bloody Sunday, heading a massive multiracial and multigenerational crowd; the face of University of Virginia student Martese Johnson, bloodied by Alcohol Board of Control officers.

These spectacles, because they are shareable and abstracted from any context, polarize instantly. (I don't have the heart to look for them, but I would guess that some TownHall commenters are already insisting Martese Johnson must have been violently resisting arrest.) Less shareable, though probably more important, was the Justice Department's 102-page report on its investigation of the Ferguson law enforcement system. The report's shocking conclusions were enough to prompt some conservative writers to point out how scandalous to constitutional rights this situation was—and to chide their ideological allies for not taking its findings more seriously. "No conservative on earth should feel comfortable with the way the Ferguson PD has been operating for years, even according to their own documents," says Leon Wolf at RedState.

This rare moment of ideological line-crossing only serves to highlight something deeply discouraging about the report itself, however. President Obama's speech in Selma touched stirringly on the gains in social and political equality that have been made in the 50 years since the marchers there pushed the Voting Rights Act forward, bringing large-scale African American participation in elections to some places it hadn't been seen since the terrorist-aided [Redeemers](#) brought Reconstruction to an end in 1877. And yet, Obama insisted—alluding specifically to the Ferguson report—"this nation's racial history casts its long shadow upon us."

And the report makes it clear—clearer than Obama’s speech did—that racial discrimination is no mere waning holdover, incompletely overcome by people of fair minds and good will. It reveals an approach to policing aimed at milking Ferguson’s black residents for fines and court fees, an approach more like debt imprisonment than any defensible notion of public safety. One notable offender, municipal judge Ronald J. Brockmeyer, imposed steep (and possibly unlawful) fines while fixing similar fees for friends—and owing some \$170,000 in unpaid taxes of his own. Last week, Brockmeyer resigned from the court, maintaining his other lucrative positions as a public prosecutor and private attorney.

The scourge of profit-driven law enforcement is increasingly coming under [scrutiny](#). But the Ferguson report goes further, explicitly connecting exorbitant fines to a deeply embedded culture of bigotry, limned in shockingly racist emails and openly hostile police interactions. Racism endures in part because it is highly profitable. It isn’t simply a toxic personal quirk destined to ebb away, soon or late. It undergirds a meaningful transfer of wealth out of the black community and into the white community. It creates winners as well as losers.

American racism has always done this, going back to slavery, in which belief in racial hierarchy was created by and reinforced a system of forced labor. This continued with the large-scale expropriation of small black farmers during and after Reconstruction, the racial cleansing of cities and towns around the country, and the denial of access to credit. Racially exclusive housing policies at federal and local levels benefited white homeowners at the expense of potential black homeowners. Racially exclusive employment practices shielded white workers from competition.

The economic engines that drove the creation of 20th-century America’s massive middle class were, often by design, biased against black Americans. As these policies have been painfully and unevenly roused out, they have sometimes persisted or reappeared in formally “race-neutral” ways.

This is why—despite all the hype, pointless vitriol, and instant conclusions our public conversation urges on us—I told the students in the preaching class I taught last fall that we have to be on guard against moving to a stance of premature transcendence where race is concerned. This is a common enough tendency among well-meaning white preachers (myself very much included), one that pushes us to seek a higher ground on the gospel vision of a shared and unbroken humanity. But overcoming racial inequality requires more than acknowledging the universal

humanity uniting us across historically contingent lines of race. It requires more than wanting what is best for all people, more than honestly and fully acknowledging a cruel history, more than expressing the socially and humanly acceptable kind of shock at yet another bloodied face.

It will require something more than even our most honest pundits and eloquent politicians are likely to ask: a willingness, on the part of some of us, to let go of things we would rather keep.