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Trayvon Martin—A Personal Response

Chris Hobson

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It is very difficult to write about the outcome of the Trayvon Martin case. What happened hurts more than anything in years. My most basic thought is simply: that poor boy. And his parents—what they are going through would be unimaginable, except for the long line of Black parents and family before them who have suffered the same way: a son blown away by the police, by vigilantes, by a mob, youths lined up by dealers and executed on outdoor basketball courts, drive-by shootings, little children killed by stray bullets. All this is horrible beyond words and yet for one's son's killer to be indicted, tried, and then acquitted adds insult and dishonor—a weighing of the precise importance of a Black person's life in the United States—to the pain of death. And so Trayvon Martin's parents had to use the stoicism of so many thousands before them. It is all they have.

My sense is that Martin was as good as dead the moment Zimmerman spotted him. It was only necessary for something to go wrong, and something almost always does. The friend Martin spoke to by cellphone advised him to run for his father's fiancée's

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house; he said, “I’ll walk faster.” He was right—to run would have been to invite attack—but the decision didn’t help him. We don’t know what happened next and we never will. It is possible that stopping and meekly answering questions from an unknown white man would have saved Martin’s life, and it is possible that it wouldn’t have, or that Zimmerman gave him no chance to answer questions.

What happened later was more predictable. I myself expected an acquittal from the moment Zimmerman was indicted. My reasons were: the sense that the prosecution would never try the case seriously—that is, would never make race the center of the case; the sense that unstated stereotypes of Black male criminality would control the case; the sense that defense of property (white property) is sacrosanct in the United States. I believe the prosecution was embarrassed into bringing charges and never for a moment understood the case from the viewpoint of Black people—that is, as one of the thousands of killings of Blacks who were in “the wrong place” over the last century, almost always with full exoneration of the white perpetrators. I think the prosecution never understood the prejudices mobilized by the case—that if a young Black male in a gated community is not necessarily a criminal, it’s not unreasonable to think he might be; that a “neighborhood watchman” is a purely conscientious citizen without prejudices of his own. I think the prosecution never expected a conviction and never seriously fought for one. Why was there no Black prosecutor? Why didn’t the prosecution fight to get at least one Black person on the jury, with the hope that, if necessary, that person could hang the jury? Why didn’t the prosecution say the case was all about race, all about the long history of official and vigilante attacks against Black men—yelling it out to the jury, if need be, and letting the judge disallow it, just so it got said? Without these attempts, the jury could ignore race and yet vote the logic of race, at the same time.

But what has happened is more fundamental than the specifics of this case. It is 150 years and a few weeks since the battle of Gettysburg, just under fifty years since King's "I Have a Dream" speech, five years into the Obama presidency, and this is—yes, this *is*—justice for Black people in America. Make no mistake. In 2013, race is, as it always has been, the issue above all other issues in U.S. life, as anti-Semitism was the issue above all other issues under Hitler; because no other group, not even Hispanics or Native Americans, has been deprived of human rights as consistently and systematically as African Americans—not now in the lofty precincts of constitutional law, but where it counts: on the street, in the police station, in the ordinary criminal courtroom, in the gated community, in the everyday discrimination that continues without pause. Whether the United States can make room for African Americans to live in real equality and with real freedom will determine whether this society has a future worth the name.

For a very long time—since about half a century before the Civil War—the great majority of African-descended people in the United States have defined themselves, for better or worse, foolishly or wisely, as Americans. They have insisted that they are entitled to the full rights of citizens and that they mean to have them. Against this opinion of the large majority, a minority have argued that so long as events like this week's can happen, the United States "can never be accepted as a civil, much less a Christian country" (AME Bishop Henry M. Turner, 1883, on the Supreme Court's invalidation of the 1875 Civil Rights Act); that "I'm not an American. I'm one of the 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism" (Malcolm X, 1964). The separatist minority argued that the United States could never become more democratic and it was necessary either to emigrate, to form a separate Black state or nation, or, more recently, to form a spiritually, culturally, and economically distinct Black presence within the United States. (Malcolm X himself evolved in a different direction before his murder, favoring some undefined model of world anticolonial and class revolution.)

These views deserve full consideration and respect. I personally, however, don't believe any of the separatist strategies is viable—most African Americans are thoroughly intermeshed in the U.S. economy and share in U.S. culture in distinctive African American form. But even more important than these objective factors is the *decision* of Africans in the United States to call themselves and to become Americans in the full sense. This decision, as mentioned above, was made long ago and has never come close to changing.

This means there is no alternative to the struggle for full rights and freedom in the United States, and after messing around with this idea for a long while (and after a long earlier sympathy with Black nationalism, some of which shows above), I've decided to call this position by its right name, integrationism. But integrationism does not necessarily mean begging for inclusion, as it's often understood by leftists. Rather, the basic goal of African Americans for two hundred years has been what I would call *prophetic integrationism*—working ceaselessly for full rights and equality in a society that is pushed and goaded to change to make these possible, and working to gain and hold as many rights and as much leverage as possible in the meantime. Prophetic integrationism means an integrationism that projects and works for a future society in which what is impossible today becomes possible. This is the integrationism of Francis Grimké, who in 1919 wrote, “The colored man has no idea, not the remotest idea of accepting [present conditions] as a finality”; of Reverdy Ransom, who in 1935 said African Americans' goal should be to “level the walls of wealth and privilege, of bigotry and pride, of color and race”; and of many others besides them. I think this type of prophetic integrationism is the goal all of us should be working for, in terms of the race issue in the United States. Beyond this we are working for what James Baldwin, in the title of his 1962 novel, called *Another Country*. For Baldwin, *Another Country* referred to the biblical New Jerusalem in a secular form—a new society of love that Baldwin believed we could possibly achieve in the future. That is my goal too. But I believe we also

need the burning anger and contempt people like Malcolm X and Henry M. Turner felt for the United States and its virtually limitless violence and hypocrisy. Otherwise I think we can be thrown off guard, we can fail to anticipate what I think most Black Americans knew in their bones—the acquittal of Zimmerman was always the most likely outcome. We need anger and rage to clarify our understanding.

In the meantime the boulder we have been pushing up the mountain of racial justice for so long has rolled back down—not to the foot of the mountain, but some way down. The protests, prayer meetings, vigils, demonstrations that have occurred round the country in the short time since the Zimmerman verdict are, I hope, the start of something much bigger that will wipe away the insult. It will, I hope, not take another two hundred years to roll the stone back up the mountain, but we must put our shoulders to the stone now. But I hope too that we can take time just to mourn: *that poor boy*.