

Blaming the Dark Skin Man

Written by Dr. Julianne Malveaux
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I don't know where CNN's John King got the information that a suspect in the Boston bombing was "a dark-skinned male", but beyond apologizing he needs to explain himself. How many sources gave him the false tip? If it was fewer than two, then he violated a basic journalism rule. Who were these sources (if you don't want to out them publicly, tell your editor)? Did King understand that he used the kind of racial/ethnic coding that once got people, even uninvolved and innocent people, lynched?

Remember Charles Stuart. He was riding through Roxbury (used to be the 'hood) when he says a black man of indeterminate description, wearing a jogging suit with a stripe on the sleeve, shot him and his wife in an attempted carjacking. Pregnant Carol Stuart lived for just a few hours, and their baby, delivered by C-section, lived for only seventeen days. Stuart's report of the alleged incident sparked a national outpouring of sympathy of him, and an excoriation of "black criminals" who do such senseless things.

The police were nearly going door to door looking for a suspect, and several black men were interrogated. Stewart identified one man in a line-up, and police were building a case against him when it discovered that Stuart's wounds were self-inflicted and that his brother had helped him slaughter his wife. Meanwhile, Stuart collected at least \$100,000 from an insurance policy on his wife, using the money to pay for a new car in cash, and to buy jewelry. Unable to face the consequences of his actions, Stuart committed suicide by jumping off a bridge.

Stuart was too much a coward to be judged by a jury of his peers, but hundreds of black men could not escape the injustice of the Stuart accusations. The Roxbury community was traumatized by the results of Stuart's lies. Innocent men were questioned, many spending time at police stations in an effort to clear themselves. Those questioned and detained included students, professional men, the unemployed, and everybody in between. When in doubt, blame a black man, any black man, and let the chips fall where they may.

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In 1994 Susan Smith, a South Carolina housewife, said that a black man stole her two children. Later, she confessed to killing her own children. Meanwhile, again, dozens of innocent black men were stopped, frisked, and taken to police stations for questioning. Clearly Susan Smith was mentally ill, but she wasn't so broken that she didn't know that blaming her children's disappearance on a black man gave her lies more credibility.

The Stuart and Smith cases made headlines in the late twentieth century. Now our feet are firmly planted in the twenty-first century. Does this kind of racist stereotyping still take place? While these kinds of cases no longer make headlines, I wouldn't be surprised if any of these occurrences continue to be. When in doubt, blame a black man.

So here comes CNN's John King, a heretofore-respected newsman, who repeatedly said that a "dark skinned man" was a suspect in the Boston bombing. Here we go again. This kind of false reporting makes every dark-skinned man in Boston a suspect, reminds Bostonians of the Stuart hoax, and sends a shudder through those African Americans who remember police officers going door to door in housing projects rounding up the black men.

Thanks, John King. Your job is to report the news, not make it. I wonder if you will apologize as many times as you said "dark-skinned man" or if you will ever explain where you got your false information. I'd hate to think that you transitioned from journalist to creative writer when you shared this information.

Some will say no harm was done because there was a correction. No harm was done if you don't know the history. If someone described an alleged criminal as a white man with brown hair, it is unlikely that the police would go door to door looking for a white man with brown hair. That's the basic racism that is the foundation of our nation's history. John King's erroneous reporting reminds us how easy it is to blame a "dark skinned" man.

As President Obama said, those responsible for the Boston bombings must be caught and punished. There is the possibility that those terrorists are white (remember Timothy McVeigh), and also the possibility that the terrorists are "dark sinned" men of African, Middle Eastern, or even Hispanic descent. Let's wait until there is proof, John King, before you report it.

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