

Loss of Rights in San Francisco

By Vernon E. Jordan Jr.

Under pressure of court challenge and black protests, the large-scale stop-and-frisk operation undertaken by the San Francisco police to find the so-called Zebra murderer has been modified. It amounted to the most senseless violation of civil rights in years, yet few people outside the northern California black community spoke out.

Part of the reason may be the horrible nature of the crimes. In each instance, white persons on a relatively deserted street have been shot, usually in the back, by one, sometimes two, unidentified black men. The toll has reached a dozen dead in five months and quite naturally San Franciscans, black and white, are alarmed about the killings and want the killers apprehended.

No one will argue seriously that the situation is not urgent or that unusual actions are not called for. But the police actions taken have been illogical and racially inspired.

Take logic first. No one in his right mind could really believe the killer would pack his pistol in his pocket and walk the streets knowing that every black man in his age, height and weight group is going to be picked up by the police. There was no chance of finding the killer by stopping and questioning black men on the street in a dragnet operation that in effect suspended the Bill of Rights for black San Franciscans; now only black men who appear to be "suspicious" will be stopped.

Even the argument that this would deter the killer does not hold up. It may have deterred him so long as the dragnet continued. But what now?

Will officials plan a permanent pass system for black people along South Africa's lines? That hasn't stopped murders from occurring in South Africa and it will not stop them in San Francisco.

About all the dragnet accomplished was to manipulate public opinion to give the appearance that something was being done to catch the killer. It reinforced public prejudices linking all blacks to the crimes committed by a handful.

Last, and far from least, it increased the rage of black people, for whom this is the latest of a series of indignities heaped upon them, and thus worsened the very racial tensions that may be at the root of the crimes.

I expect a lot of people to disagree with me that the city's action is racial in nature. Mayor Joseph L. Alioto went to lengths to separate race from the manhunt, saying he's "not making a racial issue out of this."

But if applying special restrictions to black citizens is not racial, what in the world is? Put it another way. Would the city fathers have acted the same if the victims were black and the suspect white? Would they have ordered that all whites be frisked? Would they have subjected all young whites to a "pass" system? The questions answers itself. It has never happened and never will. When the so-called Boston strangler, a white man, was at loose in that city, no one ever heard the suggestion that white people who resembled his description should be stopped and questioned in the street.

In 1942, Californians followed the same method of group attack, with Japanese-Americans. Because it was thought that a few might be disloyal to the nation, then at war, the state

convinced Federal authorities to ship every man, woman and child of Japanese ancestry to internment camps. Is this going to be the next aim of panicky extremists now that the dragnet failed?

So paranoia stalks the streets. The constitutional rights of all black people have been freely violated and the "killer" stigma placed on all young blacks. The black community is fearful of what new racist policies may be lurking in the wings, and the white community's fears have been whipped into unreasoning fury.

This is a model lesson in how not to go about handling a volatile situation. The panic and hysteria that gripped the city's leadership in a moment of crisis has now spread outward, a sizable stain of unreason and fright that will take years to erase.

And behind it all is the implicit suggestion that the rights of black people are less worthy of respect and more fragile than those of white citizens. That is the basic lesson of the San Francisco panic, and it is the one that most people seem intent on ignoring.

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