

Ferguson ... and the Time Machine to the Glory Days

☒ For all those young, liberal journalists who weren't around to cover one of the most important stories of our time – the struggle for civil rights in the 1960s – the shooting of an unarmed black teenager by a white police officer gave them the opportunity to jump into the time machine and do their best to turn Ferguson into Selma.

Except Michael Brown was no civil rights martyr. He wasn't Emmett Till or Medgar Evers or any other African American murdered in cold blood by white bigots.

Michael Brown was a menacing young man who stood 6 foot four and weighed nearly 300 pounds who before going after a police officer had brazenly taken some merchandise from a convenience store and then pushed aside the frightened store owner who was half Michael Brown's size.

A few minutes later he mouthed off to officer Darren Wilson, who had told him to walk on the sidewalk, not the middle of the road. There was a scuffle. The officer told the grand jury that Brown went for his gun. Wilson shot Brown several times but it didn't stop him and when, according to one witness, Brown put his head down and charged the officer like a football player, Wilson fired the fatal shot into Brown's head. The grand jury believed Wilson who said he feared for his life and ruled the shooting was in self-defense.

It's a safe bet that if officer Wilson were black or if Michael Brown had been white, there wouldn't be a journalist outside the immediate area who would have shown the slightest interest in the story. But Wilson is white and Michael Brown is black and that's all those journalists who weren't in Selma needed to turn a crime story into something they thought was

much more significant – which, of course, was a way to turn themselves into something much more significant.

And the civil rights establishment jumped into the time machine too. They bought into the story that Brown had his hands up in the air and said, “don’t shoot” – a story that turned out to be a lie. They were willing to believe the story that he was shot in the back – except he wasn’t. Over and over we heard that the shooting of an unarmed black teenager by a white policeman could not be tolerated – because “black lives matter.” Ferguson gave the civil rights establishment an opportunity to relive those glory days, when civil rights heroes marched and protested against real bigotry and for real justice.

And Ferguson also gave thousands of mostly young protestors in dozens of U.S. cities, protestors who weren’t even born when courageous Americans marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma on their way to Montgomery, a chance to pretend they were civil rights heroes too.

Except in the old days, Americans of good will marched and demonstrated for the right to vote and the right to sit anyplace on the bus, not only in the back, and the right to eat at the lunch counter and stay at hotels – just like white people.

Now they weren’t marching for basic human rights. They weren’t marching for Till or Evers or Martin Luther King. Now, all the civil rights movement could muster were demonstrations for the likes of Michael Brown, a kid whose thuggish actions brought about his own demise.

Maybe there’s something in all of us that yearns to go back to a time when truly important things were happening and imagine that we could be actors in the drama. Still, no amount of pretending will bring back the glory days. Ferguson will never be Selma. And Michael Brown was never Emmett Till.