

In Cold Blood?

✘ I read an op-ed in the New York Times the other day about the Trayvon Martin shooting. The writer, an author named Rich Benjamin, was mainly talking about his dislike of gated communities where residents, he says, develop a bunker mentality and see outsiders – “the young, the colored and the presumably poor” – as threats to their safety. So it “isn’t just racism,” as a sub headline states, it’s also “the bunker” that led to Trayvon Martin’s death.

Benjamin says people who live in gated communities often have an exaggerated fear of crime. They think it’s a greater threat to them and their families than it really is, based on police statistics. He makes their desire to stay safe inside the confines of their gated community sound like a bad case of paranoia, or some other kind of mental disorder. But that’s not why I’m writing.

In his op-ed he casually states that George Zimmerman shot “the youth in cold blood.”

Could be. And if that’s what happened, Mr. Zimmerman must be punished. But Rich Benjamin, since he wasn’t there, has absolutely no way of knowing if that is what happened. Besides, “in cold blood” means that the deed was done ruthlessly and without any emotion. That’s a reckless term to use when you can’t possibly know what you’re talking about. Did Mr. Benjamin learn nothing from the so-called Duke Lacrosse rape case?

A lot of people also knew for sure, without a shred of evidence, that three young white men supposedly from privileged backgrounds raped a not-so-well-off black woman who had to dance at frat parties to make a living. How could it be otherwise, they figured? The athletes were white, right? The “victim” was black. The story fit all their pre-conceived

notions about jocks and race and power and powerlessness.

Except, it turned out that the woman was mentally unstable and made the whole thing up. Oops!

Every decent person wants justice in the Sanford shooting. But by promiscuously stating that a young black man was shot “in cold blood” – and stating it in the New York Times, no less – Mr. Benjamin may have made that goal more difficult. So has Florida Congresswoman Frederica Wilson, who recently said, “Now, I’m not going to be politically correct. I’m going to say it like I see it. Trayvon was hunted down like a rabid dog.”

Given America’s history with race, we can understand why African Americans (both Mr. Benjamin and Congresswoman Wilson are black) might jump to conclusions, absent any hard facts. We can understand that black people experienced things that whites haven’t and so assume certain things – about the police, the justice system, and other powerful American institutions – that whites might not.

But Congresswoman Wilson doesn’t know that “Trayvon was hunted down like a rabid dog” anymore than Mr. Benjamin knows that he was shot “in cold blood.” You get the impression that while they may see themselves as progressives, they haven’t allowed themselves to progress very far from the bad old days of Jim Crow.

What if it turns out that George Zimmerman, the shooter, committed no crime? Will the people yelling loudest for justice accept such a finding – or is “guilty” the only permissible verdict for a “cold-blooded” shooting?