

JIM SLEEPER

Racial roots of the LIRR massacre

Ever since the Long Island Rail Road massacre, a chorus of commentators has cited the sheer diversity of gunman Colin Ferguson's griev-

ances against Caucasians, Chinese, "Uncle Tom Negroes" and "so-called civil rights leaders" to argue that he's just a deranged loner — not a deranged loner steeped in a particular delusional subculture.

Ferguson is surely deranged. But no one, it seems, wants to entertain even the possibility that Ferguson's delusions about omnipresent racism and anti-black conspiracies were fed by the politics of the Tawana Brawley, Central Park jogger, Korean boycott, Crown Heights and other cases — politics of rage and paranoia that dominate some of the city's black media and tolerate even the repeated broadcasting of death threats at white journalists.

Notes found on Ferguson after the slayings repeat, with eerie fidelity, the catechism of hatred for whites, Asians and Uncle Toms taught recently by many black activists, including attorney Colin Moore, who has abetted attacks on all these groups and now wants to be Ferguson's lawyer.

That Moore wasn't actually on Ferguson's list of "so-called civil rights leaders" intrigued me, for he'd been active in Ferguson's Flatbush neighborhood. Just after the massacre, on a hunch, I wrote that "the only people who can reach victims of racism such as Ferguson are those, like Moore, who may have reached them already."

That very day, Moore revealed that in 1991 Ferguson had in fact asked him for help in a discrimination case against Adelphi University. Ferguson had professed to admire Moore's handling of the Central Park case (in which Moore charged that the jogger's injuries were trumped up and that her sex life had caused them). Ferguson "felt we had a lot in common," Moore wrote.

Yet, for the next seven days, the flood of commentary about the massacre rolled on without one reference to Moore's revelation. If Ferguson had been white and had sought out, say, an attorney for David Duke, we'd have heard about it endlessly. Pundits had lots to say, too, about the culpability of



anti-abortion activist killed a doctor at a clinic last year. And newspapers gave plenty of space to talk about the "climate of racism" and "white backlash" surrounding New York's other railroad gunman, Bernhard Goetz — even though, provoked by four youths, Goetz hadn't fired indiscriminately at the nonwhites in his subway car.

In those cases, it was legitimate to argue that tormented loners swim in a sick social sea — isolated from the rest of us in some ways but more attuned to our subconscious hatreds and fears than we care to admit.

So why not give similar attention to Ferguson's apparent susceptibility to the delusions of white conspiracy that have come to characterize some strains of black protest politics? Why not consider the influence of rhetoric that vilifies members of other groups, elevates rage to a virtue and speaks simplistically of "fighting the power" "by any means necessary"?

For years, the most militant black leaders have traded in that sort of currency. As the black boycotters of Korean stores called the shopkeepers "yellow monkeys" and their

the ugliness and embarrassed Mayor Dinkins by thwarting negotiations on behalf of his client, a Haitian shopper who claimed she'd been beaten.

When Red Hook Principal Patrick Daly's killers were sentenced last year, Moore said they'd been "lynched by a bloodthirsty mob who wanted someone to pay for the death of this white Samaritan."

When Moore's legal colleagues, Alton Maddox Jr. and C. Vernon Mason, claimed that New York Attorney General Robert Abrams had masturbated over photos of Brawley and that Irish Republican Army rituals guided Brawley's supposed abductors, they had the support or acquiescence of many black leaders.

When WLIB talk-show host Clayton Riley referred to several white journalists by name during the mayoral campaign and reminded listeners of Gen. Colin Powell's maxim, "Find the enemy, isolate it and kill it," he did so without criticism by black leaders. Two months ago, Village Voice columnist Nat Hentoff wrote an open letter to WLIB owner Percy Sutton, asking what

Riley's comments to heart. Sutton never replied, and Dinkins appeared for 10 minutes every Monday on Riley's show.

And now, Moore has offered to represent Ferguson — at Ferguson's request and, Moore says, at the behest of some in the black community. "Whether they agree or disagree with what Mr. Ferguson did," Moore said, "they would like to see that he has proper representation." *Whether they agree or disagree?* Yet no one dares call Moore delusional. To do so might implicate black misleadership in Ferguson's rage.

It's time we stopped denying the fact that no man is an island. When Louis Farrakhan referred to Ferguson at the Javits Center last Saturday, his audience erupted in an ovation that seemed to startle Farrakhan himself. That recalled the Central Park jogger and Reginald Denny cases, which seemed open and shut until fantasists transformed the perpetrators into martyrs.

Skewed by a taboo

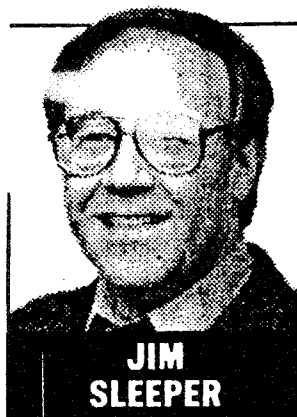
Incredibly, a similar impulse to shift the racial blame seems to be emerging now. Instead of wondering what explains the applause of Farrakhan's enthusiasts — and instead of acknowledging, as did Michael Meyers of the New York Civil Rights Coalition, that "Ferguson's crime was a race crime" and suggesting that some black activists might benefit from a little soul-searching — mainstream pundits have moved seamlessly from denying any link between Ferguson and black-activist histrionics to linking some white pols' calls for the death penalty to a general white backlash that hasn't even occurred.

I don't think most commentators mean to do this. I think our discussions have been skewed by a virtual taboo against exploring what Moore's involvement with Ferguson really means. What it means is what the black poet Julius Lester wrote in 1985 when Farrakhan last visited New York:

"The time has come to stop making apologies for black America, to stop patronizing black America with that paternalistic brand of understanding which excuses and finds reasons for the obscenities of black hatred ... Farrakhan is subtly but surely creating an atmosphere in America where hatreds of all kinds will be easier to express openly, and one day, in some as yet unknown form, these hatreds will ride commuter trains into the suburbs. By then it will be too late for us all."

Massacre in Israel forces a hard look inward

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JIM SLEEPER

In December, I wrote that LIRR gunman Colin Ferguson can't be understood outside the sea of racial bile and paranoia he swam

in. I added that, while black radicals weren't culpable for his crimes, they could use some soul-searching. Now Baruch Goldstein makes us apply the same standard to part of the Jewish community, and you may be interested to know that that means applying it, harshly, to me. Goldstein's is a road that beckoned me in my youth.

At 13, I left my Yankee hometown to spend the first of many summers at a Hebrew-speaking camp with kids from, among other places, Goldstein's yeshiva in Flatbush. I learned to chant the Book of Esther, which Goldstein read to his children before embarking on his mission of death. I went on a group tour of a still-fledgling Israel, whose energy and sweetness intoxicated me as deeply as Holocaust movies had shaken me. When the Six-Day War began on my 20th birthday, I tried to become a noncombatant volunteer, but my parents refused the required legal permission.

None of which distinguishes me from thousands of other young Americans who became vigorously Jewish in the '60s. The sense of embattlement that was mixed with our pride seemed to satisfy deep cravings for belonging, direction, even defiance. It seemed to free us from countless insecurities, including a baseless yet gnawing fear of rejection by an America that was someone else's country.

Israel's physical distance deepened the romance of our self-imposed peril. It was a giant screen where we could project our fantasies with a clarity the real world rarely supports. Africa serves Leonard Jeffries' followers similarly, as Cuba and China did young leftists. While Jews' and blacks' experiences here differ vastly, what strikes me about nationalistic young blacks is the all-too-familiar misplaced enthusiasm, the too-easy answers to per-

*Choosing America's
ambiguity instead of
deceptive clarity*

sonal doubts and American dilemmas.

In the 1970s, a few things made me do a double take on my own posture of defiance, as if I'd stumbled suddenly upon my reflection in a full-length mirror. First, my Jewish education had a liberal bent that kept Arabs human. Israelis face a grim reality, and I honor their legendary toughness and pragmatism. Still, their situation attracts fanatical American wannabes who annoyed me so much in 1969 that I returned to Israel on an Arab-Jewish relations project, meeting Palestinians in Acre and Haifa — a lasting antidote to nationalistic excess.

Second, growing up in New England made it hard to give up on America, as Goldstein did. Unlike him, I had the democratic faith of my Yankee mentors. Unlike blacks who feel shunned by non-blacks, I had non-Jewish friends who were more ready to accept me than I was to trust them — an insight that shamed me

as time passed. Even in a racist society, similar regrets may haunt blacks who segregate themselves, with empty defiance, on liberal campuses.

Eventually I chose American Jewishness, in all its ambiguity, over Jewish nationalism, in all its deceptive clarity. Out of love for my friends, many far removed from any recoverable ethnic past, I shed my own ancient feuds and fears to seek an American identity that's thick enough to live in. Because Goldstein chose otherwise, I say he was right to leave the country. The line I draw is not the one separating him from saner Jewish expatriates, but the one separating all of them, living out their nationalism in the blinding clarity of the desert, from the rest of us, who risk ourselves differently, across lines of religion and race, to create a new kind of national community.

Unlike some leftist moralizers, I don't doubt the fateful grandeur of the Jewish nationalists' choice. I do doubt the right of their bellowing supporters here, and counterparts in other ethnic groups, to turn the American experiment, which has its own grandeur, into a West Bank, Belfast, Bosnia or Boer War. America is about not having to live that way. I won't trade Louis Brandeis or Saul Bellow for Meier Kahane; blacks needn't trade Ralph Ellison and Martin Luther King Jr. for Louis Farrakhan.

In other words, not only don't we need Colin Ferguson or Baruch Goldstein, we don't need the smooth-talking fanatics who handed them their bloody scripts. We shouldn't aid them by shrinking — leftists from misplaced shame, rightists from misplaced pride — from defending America's flawed but precious legacy. I am nothing if not consistent on this. This time, some Jews have soul-searching to do.