

COMMENTARY

Just another tragedy

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"I been tied to the whipping post" — the Allman Brothers

About three weeks ago, the man who gave you City of Palms Park and the Boston Red Sox spring training program, Wilbur Smith, decided to come to the defense of an alleged shooter, one of four men accused of murdering a well-known professional football star in Miami.

Unfortunately for the Chamber of Commerce, the men came from Lee County, two of them (including Wilbur's 18-year-old client) from an east Fort Myers neighborhood lying in the shadow of Dunbar, the traditionally black and poor enclave flanking Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

Unfortunately for black cheerleaders, the perps are not only homegrown, but black, reconfirming those vague but well-entrenched notions, based on statistical evidence, that black males commit a lot of crimes — significantly more per capita than white males. And here they were doing it again, killing another black male (Sean Taylor) who was the antithesis of this statistics-driven stereotype.

The day after their arrest, Wilbur brought all this to a head by calling the crime "just another tragedy out of Dunbar." He was speaking as a defense attorney for the accused.

That did it. Suddenly there was a furor of disapproval. The criticism seemed to spring first from some black community leaders

(Willie Green, for one, in yet another incarnation as head of the antique NAACP). Then almost instantaneously Wilbur became the whipping boy of the daily newspaper, too.

Its columnist took him to task for kicking off an inept defense (amidst a lot of jokes suggesting that lawyers are liars, which continued after one of them tried to defend Wilbur in a letter to the editor a week later). And the daily's editors repeatedly ran a photo of Wilbur with his mouth in a pucker and his glasses sliding down his nose, making him look something like a flatulent prune topped by a gray mop. A picture is worth a thousand words, as we've all heard, and in this case they were not objective words.

Wilbur just plain shouldn't have said what he said, outraged pundits proclaimed, implying that if he stuck to it, he could be labeled just another bad lawyer, or just another very ignorant white boy playing to the same old racist stereotypes of black neighborhoods, which are actually chock full of wonderful people.

Shortly thereafter, the bold black headline on the front of the daily newspaper's local section proclaimed: "Attorney Wilbur Smith to Dunbar: I'm Sorry." And sure enough, Wilbur had apologized via the daily paper.

His graceful letter regretted his choice of words, noting that "95 percent" of the people in Dunbar or its nearby neighborhoods are great folks. Wilbur also pointed out that he had done a significant amount for that community (he's the first white politician ever to do so, and arguably the last).

All of it was true. But so was the fact that this is, indeed, just another tragedy out of Dunbar and its environs. And Dunbar is a place Wilbur has always tried to see as part of the larger community, not separate from it, which

is what distinguished him from his peers.

By Wilbur's logic, therefore, this was just another tragedy out of Fort Myers, which spawned Dunbar and then ignored it for decades, until he took office.

Wilbur is not just another money-making white boy, like so many others, although on the surface he looks like it. Now 62, he grew up a townie in a wealthy family, playing baseball and graduating from Fort Myers High School before going on to earn a degree from the University of Florida in Gainesville. He served briefly on active duty as an officer in the U.S. Army (a tank commander), and later he earned a law degree from his alma mater, which he hung on the wall in his hometown.

He sailed a lot, he once ran a marathon, he married and raised children, one of whom now practices law with him, he's remained an ardent Gators fan, he helped maintain the Smith family's business holdings downtown, and most importantly to people in Dunbar, he served either as a city councilman or mayor for 16 years.

In or near Dunbar he built the baseball stadium, created the Imaginarium with his wife, Marilyn, and insured the vitality of the STARS complex for children. That, alone, was a lifesaver: it provided the first swimming pool in Dunbar, where swimming lessons helped cut the high rate of child drownings in canals on the poor side of town. He also improved streetscapes, helped build single-family housing, and steadfastly supported the longtime leaders elected from that community, Veronica Shoemaker and Ann Knight.

He didn't have to do any of that; he could have lived in his big house on the river off McGregor Boulevard without all the hassles, comfortable and oblivious like so many other rich guys do.

When he left public office to resume his law career a decade ago, he was a bitter man — bitter at the criticism he'd endured for years, and bitter at the press, which had

energetically reported all the criticism and most of the mistakes he made, repeatedly and unfairly, in his view.

And now he's back in print again, defending a young black man from the poor neighborhoods on the east side of town. And unless I'm gravely mistaken (which is always possible), he isn't going to get rich or popular doing it.

Wilbur's comment and instant analysis, that Sean Taylor's murder can be described as "just another tragedy out of Dunbar," resonates with 45 years of Great Society thinking, the kind that began with John F. Kennedy and especially Lyndon Johnson. It was President Johnson, after all, who first presided formally over the notion that poverty causes crime, or at least provides a petri dish that nourishes its proliferation.

Think what you will of the '60s Democrats, the implicit argument of such a statement makes common sense, and it goes like this: Get rid of the poverty we helped create for blacks especially — with its attendant addictions, its broken homes and single parent families, its struggling public education systems — and you're a lot less likely to have four native sons, all black, murder somebody.

The spin-savvy leaders in the black community completely ignored this, however; they generously forgave their favorite white boy for his comment, when no forgiveness was required. What they should have been doing, instead, was applauding him, and agreeing with him, and asking themselves a simple question: What can we all do about this?

As for Wilbur's skills as a defense lawyer, I wouldn't have a clue. I know only that his is an honorable undertaking, because every poor black male accused of a crime should be held innocent until proven guilty — and defended skillfully as such. Like the rest of us.

It's either that or tie them to the whipping post, and so far, that tragedy hasn't yet occurred. ■

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