

Don't make 17-year-old Kenosha shooter a hero

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The treatment of Kenosha shooter Kyle Rittenhouse of Antioch shows why America has a policing problem. This 17-year-old vigilante is no hero.

How does a teenage vigilante get to be the hero?

A white police officer in Kenosha, Wisconsin, shot Jacob Blake Jr., a Black man, in the back, for reasons that are still unclear; a Black man whose three young children were sitting in the back seat of his SUV; a Black man who is now paralyzed from the waist down and might never walk again; and that Black man initially was chained to a hospital bed to fight for his life.

But a white teenager, Kyle Rittenhouse, could walk down a public street in that same city during a chaotic protest — in violation of a curfew — with a military style semi-automatic long gun strapped over his shoulder, and police officers didn't stop him.

Instead, they tossed him a bottle of water and thanked him for his help.

If you haven't been able to see the injustice that has moved thousands of people across the nation to march in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, then this stark contrast of how two human beings of different races are treated by police should wake you up.

This is the problem.

And it is a problem that can't be solved by people who are blind to their racial biases.

Do you really think a young African American male could walk down the middle of the street during a protest march carrying a semi-automatic weapon, and police wouldn't stop him?

So why was Rittenhouse treated like a hero?

Anthony Huber, 26, of Silver Lake, Wisconsin, and Joseph "Jojo" Rosenbaum, 36, of Kenosha, were killed, and Gaige Grosskreutz, 26, of West Allis, Wisconsin, was wounded.

According to news reports, protesters actually shouted to police officers riding in armored trucks that the 17-year-old Rittenhouse had shot someone.

Yet not one officer grabbed hold of him.

Not one officer used a Taser.

Not one officer drew a weapon.

When reporters asked Kenosha County Sheriff David Beth why Rittenhouse — who walked toward the police with his arms raised after the shootings — wasn't taken into custody right then and there, Beth said he wasn't sure but suspected the chaotic scene that included people running and screaming might have given officers "tunnel vision."

On Friday, Daniel Miskinis, Kenosha's police chief, told reporters, "There was nothing to suggest [Rittenhouse] was involved in any criminal behavior."

Let that marinate for a moment.

Rittenhouse, who could not legally carry a deadly weapon because of his age, was allowed to go back to his home in Antioch and get his story straight even though witnesses had identified him as the shooter.

The teenager later was charged with first-degree reckless intentional homicide, attempted first-degree intentional homicide and two counts of first-degree recklessly endangering safety as well as with possessing a weapon while underage.

His lawyer said Rittenhouse had acted in self-defense.

On Friday, the American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin and the national ACLU called for the "immediate resignation" of the Kenosha police chief and the sheriff.

"The ACLU strongly condemns Sheriff Beth and police Chief Miskinis' response to both the attempted murder of Jacob Blake and the protests demanding justice for him," said Chris Ott, executive director of the ACLU of Wisconsin. "Their actions uphold and defend white supremacy while demonizing people who were murdered for exercising their First Amendment rights and speaking out against police violence."

And then there's this:

Rittenhouse has been described as someone who is fascinated with police. And there are videos of him marching like he is the police, boldly carrying a weapon he's too young to even hold.

If he were a Black youth, he would be depicted as a thug or a gang-banger or a criminal.

But he is white.

And because he is white, he is likely to be seen by many as a young person who was seduced by the "Militia Movement" or as just some wannabe police officer.

The Anti-Defamation League defines the "Militia Movement" as a "right-wing extremist movement consisting of armed paramilitary groups, both formal and informal, with an anti-government, conspiracy-oriented ideology."

But empathy makes all the difference when it comes to policing, and it is unlikely that police officers had any for Blake.

Eleven percent of Kenosha's 99,000 residents are Black, but only seven of the police department officer's 207 officers are black. Whites make up 67 percent of the population and 89 percent of the department.

Both of my parents moved to Milwaukee late in life. In their declining years, I was going to Milwaukee on a regular basis. I'd zip past Kenosha and the Mars Cheese Castle without stopping.

I was disappointed that the protests over the police shooting again erupted into vandalism, and the images of armed men with big guns was shocking and scary.

If it could happen in Kenosha, it could happen anywhere citizens are allowed to carry guns in the streets as if they live in the Wild West.

"What do you think is going to happen if you have an agitated man with a long gun walking down the streets thinking that he's some sort of peacekeeper?" Wisconsin Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes said at a news conference Thursday.

"And that sort of behavior shouldn't be enabled either," he told the Milwaukee Journal.

Marc Morial, president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League, has urged the Kenosha Police Department to take "appropriate measures," against the militia.

Unfortunately, I don't expect that to happen with the current administration in Washington. In Trump's America, we saw armed protesters storm the Michigan Capitol building during this coronavirus pandemic just to express their anger over stay-at-home orders.

There was no "law and order" message then.

And the president urged protesters to "Liberate Michigan" and "Liberate Minnesota" and "Liberate Virginia" and "save the 2nd Amendment."

There's never a good reason for protesters to loot and riot and destroy someone else's property any more than there's ever a good reason for a vigilante to bring a gun to a protest.

It is all the more disturbing that this chaos is happening as the nation celebrates the 57th anniversary of the March on Washington because it shows just how far we have not come.

Right now, our prayers should be with Blake's family and also with the families of the two young men who were gunned down exercising their right to free speech.

But we cannot let the cries for justice for Blake be turned into adoration for Rittenhouse.

And protest organizers can't keep letting marches erupt into mayhem because that strategy will only help keep the system just the way it is.

And police will continue to treat Black men like slaves and white men like masters.

Militia groups, like the one that showed up in Kenosha, should not be allowed to operate anywhere in America.

As far as I can see, there are no heroes here.