



In Our View: Justice for the Central Park Five

October 14, 2002

Manhattan DA 's Foot-Dragging Contrasts With Zealous Prosecution

It was by any measure a horrific crime. Twelve years ago a female jogger making her way through New York City's Central Park was brutally assaulted and raped. She was found unconscious in the wee hours of the morning, clinging to life in a pool of muddy water. Even for a city that prides itself on its toughness, it was a crime that came to represent all of the ills most people associated with urban living. And more so, it was wrapped up in the racial politics of the Big Apple at a time when the city was considering the candidacy of a Black man for mayor.

Already in custody on the evening of April 19 was a group of teenage boys whom police had suspected were responsible for a series of random attacks in the park. Over the next twenty-four hours, four of the teenagers, ranging in age between 14 and 15, admitted to participating in the attack. A fifth boy was said to have admitted his role but refused to record or write a statement. The crime now had a face. It was young, it was Black, it was uptown Harlem, and it was about to be set upon by all the force New York's political and media complex could muster.

Yusef Salaam, Kevin Richardson, Antron McCray, Raymond Santana, and Kharey Wise were now the poster boys for deviant social behavior.

The tabloids, "rag sheets" and the so-called mainstream press, fueled the flames of outrage against the suspects. Sensational headlines using inflammatory phrases such as "Wolf Pack!" and "Wilding!" whipped the public into a frenzy and gave politicians a bully pulpit to express their indignation over the increase in street crime. The media, press, radio and television, also created the climate for the conviction of the young suspects in the court of public opinion. Due process was tossed to the wind as the media determined that this crime required swift, albeit unqualified, justice. In retrospect, the media set the stage for a gross miscarriage of justice.

The Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau, and Elizabeth Lederer, the assistant district attorney who prosecuted the case, were zealous in their pursuit of convictions of the five young suspects. There were troubling signs from the outset of this case. Videotaped confessions were taken after the boys had been in custody for almost one day. The accounts given on tape were inconsistent with the time and place of the attack, and precisely who participated. Flimsy hair evidence found on the clothing of one of the teens was said to "resemble" that of the victim. None of the semen collected from the victim could be tied to the teenage suspects.

In spite of the obvious weakness of their case, the Manhattan District Attorney's Office went forward and tried the case. And they were successful. All five boys were convicted for the crime. They all did time. Their reputations were soiled. Their futures were stolen. Their dignity was trampled upon. Their families were devastated.

Now we learn that DNA evidence exonerates Mr. Salaam, Mr. Richardson, Mr. McCray, Mr. Santana and Mr. Wise. The DNA of a convict, Matias Reyes, a serial rapist, matched the semen collected from the victim. Mr. Reyes had been arrested three months after the Central Park attack for the murder of a pregnant woman, three rapes, and a robbery. He was sentenced to 33 years to life. Another DNA test revealed that the hair evidence, presented in trial by the district attorney's office, did not link the teenagers to the crime.

Mr. Reyes has not only confessed to the Central Park attack, according to sources in the Manhattan District Attorney's Office he has accurately described the crime.

It is now time for District Attorney Robert Morgenthau to come clean and exonerate these five young men. They have been tried and convicted for a crime they did not commit. Their reputations have been unfairly impugned with the stigma of rapist. Their family members have suffered great emotional and physical stress, to the point of illness and death.

Still, Mr. Morgenthau is dragging his feet in clearing these young men of this crime. Why? Could it be that his office has much to answer for in the manner in which it sent these innocent young men to jail? In the height of arrogance Mr. Morgenthau has suggested that he would ask the court to vacate the convictions due to technical considerations. Defense attorneys at the time did not know a similar crime had been committed in the same area two days earlier, a fact that could have been helpful in the defense of the teenage boys.

What about the innocence of these five young men? Does Mr. Morgenthau believe the public, particularly the Black community, is so unaware that it will not demand the complete exoneration of these young men? Does he really believe that we will not put up as strong a fight for their rights as his office did for their conviction? Does he really think that setting aside this verdict on a technicality will suffice?

The media must also be taken to task for their role in creating a lynch mob atmosphere during the time of the attack. We have yet to see the ownership of New York's tabloid press come forward to take responsibility for the manner in which they poisoned the environment with their shoddy journalism. NorthStar is pulling the press and media coverage of the attack in an effort to demonstrate just how the media influenced the course of events in 1989.

We urge our readers to call on Mr. Morgenthau and demand that he do the following:

1. Petition the court to set-aside the verdicts of Mr. Salaam, Mr. Richardson, Mr. McCray, Mr. Santana and Mr. Wise.
2. Issue a formal and public declaration of the innocence of these young men.
3. Petition the court for their immediate removal from the sex offenders' registry.
4. Petition the court to expunge the criminal record for this conviction of these young men.
5. Issue a formal and public apology to the young men and their families.
6. Petition the court for financial remuneration for these young men for their unjust convictions.

Mr. Morgenthau it is time to give these young men the justice they are due.