

Mad country, mad world

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“Man who swindled millions set free”

“Graffiti artist hit by police car dies”

MIAMI – The preceding headlines appeared in the Miami Herald on the same day (December 11, 2014) and page (3B). The chance juxtaposition throws a damning spotlight on the workings of the U.S. justice system and the prevailing strategy of policing here and in many other cities around the country.

A 42-year-old man, a white Latino jeweler, who conned \$40 million from people who trusted him walks the streets after just 4 and 1/2 years, despite an original sentence of ten years.

A 21-year-old dark skinned Latino, Delbert Rodriguez, will never walk the streets again for painting walls with a spray can. This is madness.

We know that the scales of justice often don't yield a fair result. Indeed, sometimes it seems that the eyes of justice are covered by impenetrable scales.

But, unlike the more celebrated cases in Ferguson, Missouri, New York, and several other cities, Rodriguez's demise prompted no real investigation, no rethinking of police practices, no protests and no national media attention.

Yet there are many elements of this tragedy that are identical or similar to what has provoked all

that and more elsewhere. Indeed, the issue has become national. Or, as a December 5 Herald headline put it, "Police cases converge to stir national debate."

This headline distorts and understates the reality. It should read not police cases but police killings. And these have not just stirred a national debate but a national movement as passionate if not yet as massive as the civil rights and Vietnam protests of the 1960s.

These police homicides follow a pattern. Like many of the others killed, Rodriguez was young, unarmed, and not ready to submit meekly to the police, although in his case, unlike in the Ferguson shooting, the extent of his rebellion against police authority consisted of merely trying to run away. For that, a very young man loses his life. Madness.

There is, however, a method to this madness, namely a prevailing philosophy that demands aggressive police tactics against even the most trivial offenses. It is a philosophy that is bound to produce frequent confrontations and senseless deaths. In Staten Island, New York, Eric Garner lost his life because he was selling single, allegedly untaxed cigarettes.

In another part of the city aggressive policing led to another needless death when an unarmed young African American man was shot and killed by police while on the stairs of his own apartment building with his girlfriend. The officer had not been called to the scene. He and another rookie officer were conducting "routine vertical patrolling" – a fishing expedition – in a high crime housing project. The police say the shooting was "accidental." That's really stretching the meaning of accidental. Experts say the shooting could only have been accidental if the cop had his finger on the trigger. But there was no imminent threat so police rules were violated. This amounts more to a reckless homicide than to a genuine accident.

What outrages people even more than the killings is the impunity. Police and prosecutors work hand in glove, so prosecutors seldom take a police killing to trial. They also know they would be likely to lose because juries in this culture usually side with police, even in the face of undeniable video evidence.

When it comes to impunity and lack of compassion, however, the police killing of Delbert Rodriguez, also ruled accidental, tops them all. As Rodriguez lay dying, the Miami police chief said if he recovered he would probably be charged with vandalism. After he died, he announced there would not be any change in the aggressive police pursuit of "taggers." Madness squared.

But this society's madness today goes far beyond police violence. A small sampling of headlines, most of them recent, plus a few other tidbits culled from the press, say it all.

"Report Alleges CIA Cruelty, Lies: The Senate's report describes a savage and ineffective program."

"Florida sees a surge in gun sales since Thanksgiving."

"Study: Burger King move could save \$1 billion in U.S. taxes."

Then there was the piece that said business had nothing to fear from the upcoming climate summit in Lima because nothing would be accomplished. Indeed, a later story said a proposal on the table would leave developed countries off the hook. That was about the same time that a bird that spends part of the year in Miami was identified as the first avian in the world endangered by climate change.

This story also struck me. In a city with few historical landmarks and a county where half the population lives below or just above the poverty line, a mogul moved a 1924 mansion on an exclusive island so he could build a much bigger mansion – 20,000 square feet and closer to the water.

Police violence. Savage torture. The worship of the gun. Massive tax avoidance by big companies. Environmental injustice and inaction on climate change. Outrageous levels of inequality. Want more?

There is, finally, one form of madness – in both senses of the word – that in its persistence and its perversity deserves a special category.

“U.S. secretly sent foreign youths in bid to undermine Cuban regime.”

“U.S. stalled payment to {Cuban} doctors” risking their lives battling Ebola in Africa.
