

Cleveland's Charles Ramsey: Hood or Hero?

Written by George E. Curry
Wednesday, 15 May 2013 00:00

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When some of us saw the first video of Charles Ramsey, the colorful Black dishwasher in Cleveland who is being celebrated as a hero for rescuing three White women captives from horrid conditions in a Cleveland house, we had a flashback to Antoine Dodson, who became a flamboyant Internet sensation after saving his sister from a would-be rapist in their Huntsville, Al. housing apartment, and Sweet Brown, who barely escaped a fire in her Oklahoma City complex.

But more than any other famous “hilarious Black neighbor” Internet sensation, the coverage of Ramsey – and his criminal past – raises serious questions about how we treat a hero with a troubled past and, yes, how Blacks and Whites look at the same event through different prisms of race.

First, as they say in TV news, let's go to the videotape.

“I've been here a year,” Ramsey said in an interview with WEWS, a local television station. Referring to Ariel Castro, the suspect arrested for holding the women against their will, Ramsey said, “You see where I'm coming from? I barbeque with this dude. We eat ribs and whatnot and listen to salsa music...”

“He just comes out in his backyard, plays with the dogs, tinkers with his cars and motorcycles, goes back in the house. So he's somebody you look, then look away. He's not doing anything but the average stuff. You see what I'm saying? There's nothing exciting about him. Well, until today.”

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Ramsey explained that Castro “got some big testicles to pull this off, bro.”

He added, “I knew something was wrong when a little, pretty White girl ran into a Black man's arms. Something wrong here. Dead giveaway.”

There was plenty wrong, as Ramsey learned when he put down his McDonald's Big Mac and answered a call for help from Amanda Berry, who had been last seen in 2002 on the eve of her 17th birthday. The two other women were Georgina “Gina” DeJesus, who had been missing since 2004 at the age of 14, and Michelle Knight, who disappeared in 2002 at the age of 21.

While being hailed as a hero, Ramsey was the object of both racism and ridicule.

Though we're reluctant to publicly admit it, some African-Americans cringed at the sight of Ramsey. His hair, curled in the back like Al Sharpton's do and as slick as Chuck Berry's, is interspersed with what we once called post office hair – each nap has its own route. This is one of the few cases where a person's mug shot looks better than his real life photo.

To put this in context, think back to when Black civil rights protesters dressed up in their Sunday's best, knowing they were going to get physically assaulted by police and White supremacists. Then, as now, image matters. Especially when one of us appears on TV. Still, there are plenty of people in our community who look like Ramsey and their speech and appearance make them no less valuable than the best dressed and most articulate among us.

Some have suggested that many Whites take delight in seeing Blacks caricatured in the image of Charles Ramsey and Antoine Dodson.

“Perhaps it's time for the world's meme artists to stop assuming that any black dude getting interviewed on local news about a crime he helped to foil can be reduced to some catch-phrase or in-joke,” Miles Klee wrote on Blackbookmag.com. “It's just baffling that we're trying to find a way to laugh about what is, in itself, a harrowing turn of events.”

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Most of us knew, or at least suspected deep down, that something about Ramsey's past would surface, causing further embarrassment.

The Smoking Gun website disclosed on May 8 that Ramsey "is a convicted felon whose rap sheet includes three separate domestic violence convictions that resulted in prison terms."

Blacks instantly asked: Why is something that happened a decade ago – and had nothing to do with Ramsey's heroism – relevant today? Cleveland's WEWS-TV, facing a backlash from viewers, apologized for reporting on Ramsey's criminal past.

"While the story was factually sound, the timing of it and publication of such information was not in good taste, and we regret it," the station said on its Facebook page.

Normally, I would agree that Ramsey's criminal past, certainly in this situation, should be irrelevant. But there's nothing normal about this case. Unfortunately, Ramsey invited the scrutiny when he said he suspected domestic violence because he "was raised to help women in distress."

In view of that assertion, Ramsey's domestic violence convictions – hardly a record of helping women in distress – became fair game and should have been reported by the news media. But the reporting should not end there. Ramsey's ex-wife, since remarried, said Ramsey eventually apologized for battering her and they now interact on "an okay basis."

In addition, she posted two earlier photos of Ramsey on her Facebook page. She told the Smoking Gun, "For my daughter's sake I show he didn't always look hood."