Modern European History

Unit 6 – Age of Revolutions

Enlightenment Perspectives of The Shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson

**What Happened in Ferguson?**

Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, was shot and killed on Aug. 9, by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, in Ferguson, Mo., a suburb of St. Louis. The shooting prompted protests that roiled the area for weeks. On Nov. 24, the St. Louis County prosecutor announced that a grand jury decided not to indict Mr. Wilson. The announcement set off another wave of protests.

**What Events Led to the Shooting of Michael Brown?**

**11:54 a.m.** Michael Brown and Dorian Johnson leave Ferguson Market and Liquor. Surveillance video shows Mr. Brown stealing some cigarillos. They walk along West Florissant Avenue and then in the middle of the street on Canfield Drive.

**12:01 p.m.** Officer Darren Wilson arrives, alone in his police vehicle. Speaking through his window, he tells the two men to move to the sidewalk. He sees that Mr. Brown fits the description of a suspect in a convenience store theft.

**12:02 p.m.** Officer Wilson makes a call to the dispatcher about the two men. He positions his S.U.V. to block the the two men as well as traffic.

There is an altercation between Officer Wilson and Mr. Brown, who is standing at the window of the vehicle. Officer Wilson fires two shots from inside the vehicle, one likely grazing Mr. Brown’s thumb, and the other missing him.

Mr. Brown runs east. Officer Wilson pursues him on foot. Mr. Brown stops and turns toward Officer Wilson, who also stops. Mr. Brown moves toward Officer Wilson, who fires several more shots. Mr. Brown is fatally wounded.

**What Evidence Was Presented About an Altercation at the Police Vehicle?**

Several witnesses reported seeing an altercation in the S.U.V. between Officer Wilson and Mr. Brown. Some said Mr. Brown punched Officer Wilson while Mr. Brown was partly inside the vehicle. At least one witness said no part of Mr. Brown was ever inside the vehicle. In his own testimony, Officer Wilson said that Mr. Brown reached into the vehicle and fought for his gun.

Examiners found Mr. Brown’s blood or other DNA outside the driver’s door, outside the left rear passenger door, inside the driver’s door, on the upper left thigh of Officer Wilson’s pants and on Officer Wilson’s shirt and weapon.

Two shots were fired by Officer Wilson. One bullet was found lodged in the driver’s door. Mr. Brown had a graze wound on his right thumb, consistent with a close range shot.

A medical examination indicated that Officer Wilson had some swelling and redness on his face.

**How Did Witnesses Describe Michael Brown’s Movements?**

Some witnesses said Mr. Brown never moved toward Officer Wilson when he was shot and killed. Most of the witnesses said the shots were fired as he moved toward Officer Wilson. The St. Louis County prosecutor said the most credible witnesses reported that Mr. Brown charged toward the officer. Officer Wilson also said that Mr. Brown charged at him, making “a grunting, like aggravated sound.”

Some witnesses said that Mr. Brown had his hands in the air. Several others said that he did not raise his hands at all or that he raised them briefly, then dropped them and turned toward the officer. Others described the position of his arms as out to the side, in front of him, by his shoulders or in a running position.

**Where Was Michael Brown Shot?**

Officer Wilson fired 12 rounds, including two from the car and 10 more down the street, where Mr. Brown sustained at least six more wounds, including at his forehead and the top of his head, which suggested that his body was bent forward at the waist.

Mr. Brown’s body was about 153 feet east of Officer Wilson’s car. Mr. Brown’s blood was about 25 feet east of his body. This evidence supports statements that Mr. Brown continued to move closer to the officer after being hit by an initial string of bullets.

**What Did the Grand Jury Decide?**

The grand jury decided not to indict Officer Wilson in connection with the shooting of Michael Brown, 18. The grand jury, made up of nine whites and three blacks, had been meeting to consider evidence in the case since Aug. 20. Its task was to determine whether there was probable cause to believe that Officer Wilson should be charged with a crime, and if so, which one. An indictment would have required nine of the 12 grand jurors to agree. The county prosecutor released forensic reports, photographs of evidence and transcripts of the proceedings, materials that are usually kept secret.

**What Happened After the Grand Jury Announcement?**

The decision not to indict Mr. Wilson set off a wave of anger among those who had gathered outside the Ferguson Police Department. As the night wore on, the situation grew more intense. Buildings were set on fire, and looting was reported in several businesses.

**Activity:**

You and your partner are now going to take on the role of one of the Englightenment philosophers we talked about today; imagine this philosopher has been asked to give a sound bite to a local news station describing his reation to this incident. Create a short script (a paragraph in length) about the shooting from the point of view of this philospher. Consider what parts of the incident this philosopher would support and which he would disagree with. Be sure to use specific information from both the philosopher’s ideals and the shooting in your statement.

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