



Street Fight In Missouri

August 16, 2014

Tense brinkmanship is playing out on the streets of Ferguson, Mo.

Bricks, bottles and death threats hurled at police by menacing demonstrators are being met with tear gas, rubber bullets and orders to disperse from officers in military-style gear.

Making matters worse are FBI reports that representatives of the militant New Black Panther Party organization have arrived in this small St. Louis suburb.

A CBS affiliate there reported a recent Facebook post by the Panthers' national chief of staff: "This is the hour all the greats promised. If you die, die like a warrior. I'll see you on the ground."

These escalating tensions will do nothing to deliver justice for Michael Brown.

If anything, they will invite only more tragedy and widen the divide that mostly African-American community has with its mostly white police force.

"I understand the community's anger, and protests are legitimate and in order," the Rev. Jesse Jackson wrote in *USA Today*. "But Michael Brown's family said things should not be made worse with looting and vandalism. That will only cloud the real issues, will not bring Michael Brown back and will not facilitate justice."

The investigation into the 18-year-old Brown's shooting death is still open. Though circumstances may point to an unjustified use of force – the unarmed teen was shot several times while reportedly fleeing a confrontation with police near his grandmother's home – no one can be sure exactly what happened Saturday until all the evidence is processed.

Until then, both sides would be wise to calm down. It's obvious from the events unfolding in this city of 21,000 that both protestors and police are ratcheted too tight.

Walter Olson of the Cato Institute think tank says the unfolding drama "will be cited for years to come as a what-not-to-do manual for police forces."

Police officials say they are being measured in their responses. Yet, two reporters covering the unrest – one from *The Washington Post* and one from *The Huffington Post* – were told to disperse and stop recording before being wrongfully taken into custody. After news of their arrest spread, they were quickly released without being charged.

Video of the incident, widely available on the Internet, depicts an aggressive and overzealous response by officers.

In a separate incident, a St. Louis alderman was arrested for unlawful assembly and taken to the Ferguson jail.

If this is how police treat out-of-town observers, how are they treating residents?

The detainment of news media is just one of many public confidence-eroding judgment calls made by St. Louis County Police since they took over the investigation of the Brown incident six days ago.

For one, they still haven't released the identity of the Ferguson officer – said by witnesses to be white – who was involved in the deadly confrontation. Such a delay was understandable when security precautions would need to be taken to protect the officer and his family. But now?

All told, law enforcement officials have released remarkably few details about the incident. An official statement on the shooting itself wasn't issued until Wednesday.

And when police have talked about the case, some comments seemed to have bordered on the flippant. St. Louis County Police Chief Jon Belmar described the number of times Brown was shot during a news conference as “more than just a couple of times, but not much more.”

“When counting bullets, ‘just’ and ‘not much more’ are odd words to choose,” wrote Amy Davidson of *The New Yorker*.

The shooting of a reportedly unarmed black teen with no criminal record who was about to begin college was like putting a powder keg in the town square. Law enforcement officials have a duty to uphold the law and maintain order, but they don't need to further fan flames when they do.

Things aren't looking good in Ferguson right now. Pray they don't worsen.