US media campaign to exonerate cop who killed Michael Brown

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On Wednesday, the *Washington Post* and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* joined the ongoing media campaign to vilify Michael Brown, the unarmed teenager gunned down by a cop in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9.

The media reports are part of a coordinated campaign to prepare the public for the possibility that a grand jury will fail to charge the officer, Darren Wilson. The grand jury is expected to decide whether to charge Wilson early next month.

On Wednesday morning the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* published what it claimed to be "the most detailed account of Wilson's version of the Aug. 9 event to be made public," in an article entitled: "Source: Darren Wilson says Michael Brown kept charging at him."

The publication of Wilson's account was coordinated with the release by the newspaper of the St. Louis medical examiner's autopsy of Brown, which had been provided to the newspaper by an unnamed source.

The *Post-Dispatch* sought to present the autopsy report as confirming Wilson's version of events, claiming that a grazed bullet wound on Brown's hand indicated that the young man was reaching for Wilson's gun. It quoted Judy Melinek, a former medical examiner, saying that the autopsy definitively supports claims that Brown was shot at least once at close range and had reached for Wilson's gun. She told the *Post-Dispatch*, "If he has his hand near the gun when it goes off, he's going for the officer's gun."

This interpretation is entirely speculative and groundless. Witnesses have said that Wilson attempted to choke Brown through the window of his car, and that he was attempting to get free when Wilson shot him the first time. If the circumstances described by witnesses is true, it is not at all implausible for Brown's hand to have been near Wilson's gun when it went off.

Melinek is not an impartial expert. In an August 20 column on CNN.com, months before she saw the official autopsy, Melinek sought to cast doubt on witnesses' accounts that Brown was surrendering when he was killed. She also sought to discredit the second autopsy performed by former New York City medical examiner Michael Baden, claiming that "releasing preliminary information when the investigation is still ongoing is premature and potentially inflammatory."

In fact, the report does not even unambiguously indicate that Brown was shot in the hand at close range. The report notes the absence of powder burns around the edge of the gunshot wound, which would be expected if the wound had in fact been inflicted within the car.

The real story revealed in the autopsy is one of a young man who was apparently brutalized and then shot multiple times by a police officer. The autopsy shows two gunshot wounds to the head, including one to the crown of the head in a downward direction and another to the forehead, also aimed downward. That is in addition to multiple gunshot wounds to the chest and arms, as well as abrasions on the face.

The autopsy report should in any case be treated with a high degree of skepticism, as the police had hours to tamper with the scene before the medical examiner even arrived. The medical examiner was only contacted an hour and a half after the shooting, and by the time he arrived "the deceased was cool to the touch," and "rigor mortis was slightly felt in his extremities," according to the autopsy.

Brown's lawyers pointed out that what happened inside Wilson's police vehicle had no bearing on Wilson's decision to shoot Brown as he was running away. "We are not surprised by the information leaked last night by the St. Louis Medical Examiner's office," said Benjamin Crump, the lead attorney for the family,

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in an email to the *World Socialist Web Site*. "Several independent witnesses indicated there was a brief altercation between Michael Brown and Officer Wilson at the patrol car."

He concluded, "What we want to know is why Officer Wilson shot Michael Brown multiple times and killed him even though he was more than 20 feet away from his patrol car; this is the crux of the matter!"

"Keep in mind there are two separate and distinct events occurring on this day: one at the vehicle, the other one, outside of the vehicle," said Anthony D. Gray, a lawyer for the family of Michael Brown, also in an email to the WSWS . According to the account allegedly given by Wilson to the grand jury, Brown, after having been shot twice, began to run away from the police car, then turned around and "began running toward" the officer, was shot twice more, then resumed charging at Wilson.

Mr. Gray called this version of events "absurd." He added, "That version of events is not supported by anyone that witnessed this shooting." Wilson "can't concur with what the majority of the witnesses saw outside of the vehicle because if he does, he would be confessing to cold-blooded murder."

While none of the witnesses who have spoken to the press agreed with Wilson's claims, the *Washington Post* reported Wednesday, based on unnamed sources, that unnamed individuals have testified before the grand jury backing up Wilson's account of the shooting. "Seven or eight African American eyewitnesses have provided testimony consistent with Wilson's account, but none of them have spoken publicly out of fear for their safety, The Washington Post's sources said."

Here, again, nothing can be taken at face value. In all likelihood the *Post's* sources for the grand jury proceeding are elements within the state that have a vested interest in seeing Wilson go free. Instead of treating the sources with requisite skepticism, the *Post* and other newspapers are taking these unnamed sources entirely at their word and passing on their claims to the public as good coin.

The *Washington Post* and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* did not reply to voicemails requesting more information on what level of fact-checking had been conducted on their sources' claims.

Wednesday's leaks follow the publication of an article Friday by the *New York Times*, based on unnamed sources in the federal government, claiming that evidence presented to the grand jury pointed to Wilson's innocence. The *Times* also indicated that the federal government is not planning on filing civil rights charges against Wilson.

The coordinated leaks, presented uncritically by major newspapers and used as the basis for sweeping and groundless claims, are made possible by the decision of St. Louis County prosecuting attorney Robert McCulloch to present evidence in the shooting before a grand jury.

The decision to even go before a grand jury is entirely voluntary on the part of McCulloch. Those suspected of murder in Missouri usually have a hearing where evidence is reviewed by a judge who decides whether there is a basis to proceed with a prosecution.

McCulloch has a record of using grand jury proceedings. Despite more than a dozen police killings in St. Louis County since he became prosecutor, McCulloch has never filed criminal charges against any of the officers. He did present four such cases to a grand jury, but he obtained no indictments.

Contrary to the usual procedure, McCulloch has not made any recommendation to the grand jury as to whether to indict Wilson. Instead, he is presenting a voluminous amount of evidence to the grand jury, including testimony by Wilson himself, in an unusually long procedure.

By using this method, McCulloch is creating the illusion of a fair procedure, while in fact stacking the deck in favor of Wilson. The entire proceeding is being kept secret. At the same time, this procedure allows state authorities to selectively leak information to the press that will be favorable to Wilson's case.

In this charade, the press—including the *Washington Post, New York Times, and St. Louis Post-Dispatch*—is functioning as a pliant tool of the state in order to condition public opinion for what is looking increasingly likely: the failure to bring charges against the killer of Michael Brown.

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