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By DAVID J. GARROW

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One Saturday afternoon in November 1987, a 15-year-old black woman, seemingly unconscious and smeared with dog feces, was discovered wrapped in a trash bag on the lawn of an apartment complex in the Dutchess County village of Wappingers Falls, N.Y. Neighbors, police officers and hospital personnel all presumed that the girl was the victim of a horrific assault; how else to account for the feces and the racial slurs that were scrawled on her chest and clothes?

Only 10 months later would a comprehensive, 170-page report from a 23-member grand jury convened by the New York State Attorney General, Robert Abrams, conclusively prove that there had been no assault and that the girl, Tawana Brawley, probably in conjunction with her mother, had created her own condition to avoid violent punishment by her stepfather after having been gone from home for four days.

One tragedy of the Tawana Brawley hoax is that its central character, now an 18-year-old sophomore at Howard University in Washington, may well never be able to free her life from the small family deception that unintentionally snowballed into a national racial controversy. But the importance of the Brawley hoax lies not in that individual tragedy, nor in the thousands of hours of hard detective work that transformed a search for assailants into an exposé of fraud. Instead its importance lies in the racial politics and racial symbolism in which the Brawley family found itself caught up as a result of the efforts of three of America's most energetic

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Outrage

The Story Behind the Tawana Brawley Hoax

By Robert D. McFadden, Ralph Blumenthal, M. A. Farber, E. R. Shipp, Charles Strum and Craig Wolff

408 pages. Bantam Books. \$21.95.

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The New York Times

Tawana Brawley

self-promoters, the lawyers Alton H. Maddox Jr. and C. Vernon Mason and the Rev. Al Sharpton.

Mr. Sharpton, Mr. Maddox and Mr. Mason were already well-known public figures in New York because of their active championing of the surviving victims of the 1986 Howard Beach racial attack, and their gift for angry and dramatic oratory guaranteed, as the authors of "Outrage" tellingly phrase it, that reporters would respond "like moths drawn to the flame." Three news organizations — The New York Times, Newsday and WCBS-TV — committed extraordinary resources to covering the Brawley case in the spring and summer of 1988. "Outrage" — like half a dozen long and impressive stories that appeared in The Times during

those months — is the joint product of six staff members at The Times.

Although the book will contain few factual surprises for those who fully recall the previous detailed reporting, "Outrage" is an important and persuasive reminder of how frustrating and painful the Brawley saga became, in large part because of the dishonest and duplicitous efforts of Mr. Sharpton, Mr. Maddox and Mr. Mason, the family's three spokesmen and advisers.

This careful recapitulation of the gradual exposure of the hoax contains reminder after reminder of how uninterested the three advisers were in the facts of the case and of how stunningly reckless and irresponsible all three men were in accusing people of sordid crimes without credible evidence. When challenged on their facts and their integrity by state officials and reporters, the three men responded with crude ad hominem falsehoods, accusing one investigator of masturbating on the evidence. It bears remembering, as "Outrage" fails to note, that by June 1988 a New York Times/CBS News survey indicated that only 7 percent of New Yorkers (and only 18 percent of black New Yorkers) believed the advisers' story and that only 4 to 7 percent had a "favorable impression" of them.

"Outrage," while superb on the facts of the case and sometimes notably self-critical of The Times's responses to the story, offers relatively little self-reflection on the media behavior that was itself one of the major parts of the Brawley saga. The book makes no comment on the process and considerations that led The Times to choose and commit a team of six or seven reporters to one story, and similarly says very little about the group tensions and personal stresses that inescapably accompany such a very visible project. Mike Taibbi and Anna Sims-Phillips of WCBS-TV provided much more com-

mentary on the behavior of news organizations in their compellingly written 1989 volume, "Unholy Alliances: Working the Tawana Brawley Story," but "Outrage" benefits from its additional one year's distance from the events in question.

Most notably, "Outrage" offers what may be the all-but-final chapter to the Brawley story, namely the admission in April 1989 by Miss Brawley's former boyfriend, Daryl T. Rodriguez, that the young woman had admitted to him that no assault or rape occurred. Mr. Rodriguez's per-

The racial politics and symbolism of the Tawana Brawley case.

suasive account, first and most fully reported by Les Payne of Newsday, will help convince anyone with an open mind that the authors of "Outrage," like Mr. Abrams's investigators, have demonstrated and explained the hoax.

Some may want reminding that larger truths about American racism are in no way disproved simply because one accidentally designated symbol of black suffering became caught up in a huge falsehood. The heroes of "Outrage" are those participants and journalists who had the courage to acknowledge that racism can never be fought with racism, nor can some larger truth be advanced by means of a white or black lie. As one black neighbor of the Brawleys concluded: "Don't go telling me I'm disloyal or I've forgotten my roots just because I reason on my own and question you. That's not right. And besides, eventually you'll be found out."