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RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION FEATURE AUGUST 20, 2001 ISSUE

Tulsa, 1921

On the eightieth anniversary of the riot in that city, we commemorate the report written for this magazine by a remarkable journalist.

By the Editors and Walter F. White

AUGUST 23, 2001

Introduction by RUSSELL COBB

The 1995 Oklahoma City bombing is to many people a powerful symbol of hatred and intolerance taken to tragic lengths. But eighty years ago there was an even more lethal, more intolerant day in Oklahoma, one which represented perhaps the worst instance of racial violence in America since slavery.

And while the details of the Oklahoma City bombing are well-known to most Americans, the events of the Tulsa Race Riot were covered up for almost seventy-

five years in a "conspiracy of silence"—a silence that was only recently broken by the courageous testimony of the few living survivors before a state commission.

It began on Memorial Day 1921, in downtown Tulsa, a boomtown flush with oil money, and by the time the three-day massacre was complete, a well-armed white mob, some of them deputized by the police department, had ruined Tulsa's prosperous black neighborhood Greenwood—"the black Wall Street"—had razed thirty-six square blocks, burned to the ground more than 3,000 homes and killed as many as 300 people, many of whom were buried in mass graves or simply dumped anonymously into the Arkansas River. By the end of the onslaught, Tulsa's thriving black community, which numbered some 15,000 people and was famous for its cultural and financial achievements, rivaling New York City as a national center of urban black life, was destroyed.

ADVERTISING



The Nation sent Walter White to Tulsa to report on the aftermath of the riots in 1921. A journalist and the future director of the NAACP, White came back with an essay that came to be considered one of the seminal accounts of what happened and which still makes for searing reading today.

To commemorate the eightieth anniversary of the Tulsa riot, we've collected this article, a more timely report that the magazine published and a set of relevant links to some of the scarce Internet-based resources devoted to forging a collective memory of what happened to the black community in Tulsa in 1921.

Russell Cobb was a Spring 2001 Nation intern.

June 15, 1921

Tulsa

"An impudent Negro, a hysterical girl, and a yellow journal"—this, according to the Adjutant General of Oklahoma, is the combination which precipitated the terrible race riot in Tulsa and the killing of a score or so of people. Just how "impudent" the Negro was—impudence in a Negro is often self-respect in a white—remains to be proved, and how hysterical the girl; the deadly possibilities of yellow journal reporters the country, alas, knows to its shame. This time the unscrupulous journalist brought about the worst riot since East St. Louis's. The Negro quarter was destroyed by deliberately kindled fires, and thousands of persons were made homeless and penniless, the property damage alone being \$1,500,000. But the damage to Tulsa itself would be irreparable if the attitude of that community were the brazenly defiant one which usually marks a Southern community after a scene of such violence and lawlessness. Happily, Tulsa has had remorse and is not afraid to admit it. A former mayor, Judge Loyal J. Martin, chairman of the emergency committee, has declared:

Tulsa can only redeem herself from the country-wide shame and humiliation into which she is today plunged by complete restitution and rehabilitation of the destroyed black belt. The rest of the United States must know that the real citizenship of Tulsa weeps at this unspeakable crime and will make good the damage, so far as it can be done, to the last penny.

There at last we have the true American note—no effort to blacken a race or to mitigate the shame, but that honest confession which alone is good for the soul of the guilty. To quote Judge Martin again:

We have neglected our duties and our city government has fallen down. We have had a failing police protection here, and now we have to pay the costs of it. The city and county are legally liable for every dollar of the damage which has been done. Other cities have had to pay the bill of race riots, and we shall have to do so probably, because we have neglected our duty as citizens.

Precisely; that is a good explanation of the intensity of the race problem in most of our cities. Your business men lure the blacks into the cities from the land; they pour into already overcrowded "quarters" to live in hovels or apartments so dilapidated as to be abandoned by all but the most shiftless whites. The burned Negro quarter in Tulsa was described as "a mile-square of shacks, huts, and hovels." Then if the Negro seeks to break out of such a ghetto you denounce him for his impudence in intruding upon the white man's preserves and lowering the value of his property. You curse him if out of his slough of despond come contagious diseases, if immorality and vice are rampant among human beings living like animals; and if a criminal bred in this environment comes out of it, you lynch him.

"We Americans," President Harding has just said, "are united in the sweetest concord that ever united men." Witness the smoking ruins of Tulsa, ruins that are to be rebuilt, though the innocent dead cannot be made to walk again! Is it all to end there? Surely there could be no clearer cause than this for the passage of Senator McCormick's bill for a commission to study the race issue. If Mr. Harding is to be President of the whole nation, if he is to do anything to bring about that "sweetest concord" which today is a figment of his imagination, he should insist upon an immediate inquiry into the color problem.

June 29, 1921

The Eruption of Tulsa

by WALTER F. WHITE

A hysterical white girl related that a nineteen-year-old colored boy attempted to assault her in the public elevator of a public office building of a thriving town of 100,000 in open daylight. Without pausing to find out whether or not the story was true, without bothering with the slight detail of investigating the character of the woman who made the outcry (as a matter of fact, she was of exceedingly doubtful reputation), a mob of 100-per-cent Americans set forth on a wild rampage that cost the lives of fifty white men; of between 150 and 200 colored men, women and children; the destruction by fire of \$1,500,000 worth of property; the looting of many homes; and everlasting damage to the reputation of the city of Tulsa and the State of Oklahoma.

This, in brief, is the story of the eruption of Tulsa on the night of May 31 and the morning of June 1. One could travel far and find few cities where the likelihood of trouble between the races was as little thought of as in Tulsa. Her reign of terror stands as a grim reminder of the grip mob violence has on the throat of America, and the ever-present possibility of devastating race conflicts where least expected.

Tulsa is a thriving, bustling, enormously wealthy town of between 90,000 and 100,000. In 1910 it was the home of 18,182 souls, a dead and hopeless outlook ahead. Then oil was discovered. The town grew amazingly. On December 29, 1920, it had bank deposits totaling \$65,449,985.90; almost \$1,000 per capita when compared with the Federal Census figures of 1920, which gave Tulsa 72,075. The town lies in the center of the oil region and many are the stories told of the making of fabulous fortunes by men who were operating on a shoe-string. Some of the stories rival those of the "forty-niners" in California. The town has a number of modern office buildings, many beautiful homes, miles of clean, well-paved streets, and aggressive and progressive businessmen who well exemplify Tulsa's motto of "The City with a Personality."

So much for the setting. What are the causes of the race riot that occurred in such a place?

First, the Negro in Oklahoma has shared in the sudden prosperity that has come to many of his white brothers, and there are some colored men there who are wealthy. This fact has caused a bitter resentment on the part of the lower order of whites, who feel that these colored men, members of an "inferior race," are exceedingly presumptuous in achieving greater economic prosperity than they who are members of a divinely ordered superior race. There are at least three colored persons in Oklahoma who are worth a million dollars each; J.W. Thompson of Clearview is worth \$500,000; there are a number of men and women worth \$100,000; and many whose possessions are valued at \$25,000 and \$50,000 each. This was particularly true of Tulsa, where there were two colored men worth \$150,000 each; two worth \$100,000; three \$50,000; and four who were assessed at \$25,000. In one case where a colored man owned and operated a printing plant with \$25,000 worth of printing machinery in it, the leader of a mob that set fire to and destroyed the plant was a linotype operator employed for years by the colored owner at \$48 per week. The white man was killed while attacking the plant. Oklahoma is largely populated by pioneers from other States. Some of the white pioneers are former residents of Mississippi, Georgia, Tennessee,

Texas, and other States more typically Southern than Oklahoma. These have brought with them their anti-Negro prejudices. Lethargic and unprogressive by nature, it sorely irks them to see Negroes making greater progress than they themselves are achieving.

One of the charges made against the colored men in Tulsa is that they were "radical." Questioning the whites more closely regarding the nature of this radicalism, I found it means that Negroes were uncompromisingly denouncing "Jim-Crow" cars, lynching, peonage; in short, were asking that the Federal constitutional guaranties of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" be given regardless of color. The Negroes of Tulsa and other Oklahoma cities are pioneers; men and women who have dared, men and women who have had the initiative and the courage to pull up stakes in other less-favored States and face hardship in a newer one for the sake of eventual progress. That type is ever less ready to submit to insult. Those of the whites who seek to maintain the old white group control naturally do not relish seeing Negroes emancipating themselves from the old system.

A third cause was the rotten political conditions in Tulsa. A vice ring was in control of the city, allowing open operation of houses of ill fame, of gambling joints, the illegal sale of whiskey, the robbing of banks and

stores, with hardly a slight possibility of the arrest of the criminals, and even less of their conviction. For fourteen years Tulsa has been in the absolute control of this element. Most of the better element, and there is a large percentage of Tulsans who can properly be classed as such, are interested in making money and getting away. They have taken little or no interest in the election of city or county officials, leaving it to those whose interest it was to secure officials who would protect them in their vice operations. About two months ago the State legislature assigned two additional judges to Tulsa County to aid the present two in clearing the badly clogged dockets. These judges found more than six thousand cases awaiting trial. Thus in a county of approximately 100,000 population, six out of every hundred citizens were under indictment for some sort of crime, with little likelihood of trial in any of them.

Last July a white man by the name of Roy Belton, accused of murdering a taxicab driver, was taken from the county jail and lynched. According to the statements of many prominent Tulsans, local police officers directed traffic at the scene of the lynching, trying to afford every person present an equal chance to view the event. Insurance companies refuse to give Tulsa merchants insurance on their stocks; the risk is too great. There have been so many automobile thefts

that a number of companies have canceled all policies on cars in Tulsa. The net result of these conditions was that practically none of the citizens of the town, white or colored, had very much respect for the law.

So much for the general causes. What was the spark that set off the blaze? On Monday, May 30, a white girl by the name of Sarah Page, operating an elevator in the Drexel Building, stated that Dick Rowland, a nineteen-year-old colored boy, had attempted criminally to assault her. Her second story was that the boy had seized her arm as he entered the elevator. She screamed. He ran. It was found afterwards that the boy had stepped by accident on her foot. It seems never to have occurred to the citizens of Tulsa that any sane person attempting criminally to assault a woman would have picked any place in the world rather than an open elevator in a public building with scores of people within calling distance. The story of the alleged assault was published Tuesday afternoon by the *Tulsa Tribune*, one of the two local newspapers. At four o'clock Commissioner of Police J.M. Adkison reported to Sheriff McCullough that there was talk of lynching Rowland that night. Chief of Police John A. Gustafson, Captain Wilkerson of the Police Department, Edwin F. Barnett, managing editor of the *Tulsa Tribune*, and numerous other citizens all stated that there was talk Tuesday of lynching the boy.

In the meantime the news of the threatened lynching reached the colored settlement where Tulsa's 15,000 colored citizens lived. Remembering how a white man had been lynched after being taken from the same jail where the colored boy was now confined, they feared that Rowland was in danger. A group of colored men telephoned the sheriff and proffered their services in protecting the jail from attack. The sheriff told them that they would be called upon if needed. About nine o'clock that night a crowd of white men gathered around the jail, numbering about 400 according to Sheriff McCullough. At 9:15 the report reached "Little Africa" that the mob had stormed the jail. A crowd of twenty-five armed Negroes set out immediately, but on reaching the jail found the report untrue. The sheriff talked with them, assured them that the boy would not be harmed, and urged them to return to their homes. They left, later returning, 75 strong. The sheriff persuaded them to leave. As they complied, a white man attempted to disarm one of the colored men. A shot was fired, and then—in the words of the sheriff—"all hell broke loose." There was a fusillade of shots from both sides and twelve men fell dead—two of them colored, ten white. The fighting continued until midnight when the colored men, greatly outnumbered, were forced back to their section of the town.

Around five o'clock Wednesday morning the mob, now numbering more than 10,000, made a mass attack on Little Africa. Machine-guns were brought into use; eight aeroplanes were employed to spy on the movements of the Negroes and according to some were used in bombing the colored section. All that was lacking to make the scene a replica of modern "Christian" warfare was poison gas. The colored men and women fought gamely in defense of their homes, but the odds were too great. According to the statements of onlookers, men in uniform, either home guards or ex-service men or both, carried cans of oil into Little Africa, and, after looting the homes, set fire to them. Many are the stories of horror told to me—not by colored people—but by white residents. One was that of an aged colored couple, saying their evening prayers before retiring in their little home on Greenwood Avenue. A mob broke into the house, shot both of the old people in the backs of their heads, blowing their brains out and spattering them over the bed, pillaged the home, and then set fire to it.

Another was that of the death of Dr. A.C. Jackson, a colored physician. Dr. Jackson was worth \$100,000; had been described by the Mayo brothers as "the most able Negro surgeon in America"; was respected by white and colored people alike, and was in every sense a good citizen. A mob attacked Dr. Jackson's home. He fought

in defense of it, his wife and children and himself. An officer of the home guards who knew Dr. Jackson came up at that time and assured him that if he would surrender he would be protected. This Dr. Jackson did. The officer sent him under guard to Convention Hall, where colored people were being placed for protection. En route to the hall, disarmed, Dr. Jackson was shot and killed in cold blood. The officer who had assured Dr. Jackson of protection stated to me, "Dr. Jackson was an able, clean-cut man. He did only what any red-blooded man would have done under similar circumstances in defending his home. Dr. Jackson was murdered by white ruffians."

It is highly doubtful if the exact number of casualties will ever be known. The figures originally given in the press estimate the number at 100. The number buried by local undertakers and given out by city officials is ten white and twenty-one colored. For obvious reasons these officials wish to keep the number published as low as possible, but the figures obtained in Tulsa are far higher. Fifty whites and between 150 and 200 Negroes is much nearer the actual number of deaths. Ten whites were killed during the first hour of fighting on Tuesday night. Six white men drove into the colored section in a car on Wednesday morning and never came out. Thirteen whites were killed between 5:30 a.m. and 6:30 a.m. Wednesday. O.T. Johnson, commandant of the Tulsa

Citadel of the Salvation Army, stated that on Wednesday and Thursday the Salvation Army fed thirty-seven Negroes employed as grave diggers and twenty on Friday and Saturday. During the first two days these men dug 120 graves in each of which a dead Negro was buried. No coffins were used. The bodies were dumped into the holes and covered over with dirt. Added to the number accounted for were numbers of others—men, women, and children—who were incinerated in the burning houses in the Negro settlement. One story was told me by an eye-witness of five colored men trapped in a burning house. Four burned to death. A fifth attempted to flee, was shot to death as he emerged from the burning structure, and his body was thrown back into the flames. There was an unconfirmed rumor afloat in Tulsa of two truck loads of dead Negroes being dumped into the Arkansas River, but that story could not be confirmed.

What is America going to do after such a horrible carnage—one that for sheer brutality and murderous anarchy cannot be surpassed by any of the crimes now being charged to the Bolsheviki in Russia? How much longer will America allow these pogroms to continue unchecked? There is a lesson in the Tulsa affair for every American who fatuously believes that Negroes will always be the meek and submissive creatures that circumstances have forced them to be during the past

three hundred years. Dick Rowland was only an ordinary bootblack with no standing in the community. But when his life was threatened by a mob of whites, every one of the 15,000 Negroes of Tulsa, rich and poor, educated and illiterate, was willing to die to protect Dick Rowland. Perhaps America is waiting for a nationwide Tulsa to wake her. Who knows?

the Editors

Walter F. White

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LAW SOCIETY IMMIGRATION

Immigration Agents Are Making Arrests In New York's Courts

These arrests have jumped about 17-fold over two years.

By Michelle Chen

TODAY 10:48 AM



Protestors rally to prohibit US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents from entering New York Courts. (AP Images, Sipa / dpa, Michael Brochstein)

New York's courts aren't as dramatic as the movies suggest; they're mostly filled with bureaucratic affairs and small-scale trials and civil proceedings. But the biggest drama in courthouses these days comes from the blowback from Trump's border war, as federal immigration agents have for the past two years been stalking immigrants in the courts, threatening to make deportation the cost of seeking justice.

Such encounters between immigrants and ICE agents were rare under previous administrations, but under Trump they have jumped about 17-fold over two years. This has meant more than 200 encounters with Homeland Security, including direct arrests and eavesdropping, mostly in New York City. Not only have

the number of incidents exploded; so has ICE's aggression, according to an analysis by the Immigrant Defense Project, drawn from field surveys and data collected by local community groups. ICE activity in New York courts reflects a wider trend in cities across the country, as the Trump administration has steadily crept into public institutions previously avoided by ICE.

Even when ICE officers merely approach an immigrant, the encounter can quickly escalate, IDP reports:

Reports of ICE using violent force to conduct arrests—slamming family members against walls, dragging individuals from cars, and even pulling guns on people leaving court—have become commonplace. Witnesses to ICE arrests have called 911 to report that they were witnessing a kidnapping.

Agents sometimes take a stealthier approach, according to community observers, including “trailing attorneys to their offices and eavesdropping on confidential attorney-client conversations.” The past year, ICE has also reached into new communities in upstate New York, where more immigrant households are resettling. Westchester County saw the largest increase in ICE targeting.

Over the course of the year, the court-based contacts with ICE agents rose at a slower rate in 2018 compared to 2017, when the rate of incidents soared after Trump took office. But despite protests by local attorneys and civil-rights groups, the agency does not appear to be pulling back, according to IDP attorney Jane Shim: “We do not believe they have maxed out possibilities for arresting people in courts, nor is there any indication that the Trump administration will do anything but increase its efforts to deport more and more people.... the enforcement operations are still increasing at an extremely concerning rate.”

Even just tracking ICE actions is challenging for advocates, because of the agency’s tendency to flout basic precepts of transparency in law enforcement. Despite codes of conduct mandating public disclosure of officers’ identities, IDP observed, “In the vast majority of operations, ICE agents refused to identify themselves, explain why an individual is being arrested, or offer proof that they have reason to believe that the individual they’re arresting is deportable.”

This constant menace of ICE’s unpredictable intrusion into the courts may force many to choose between access to justice and exposing themselves to deportation. ICE might be lurking in the hallway or waiting on the sidewalk, dressed in ordinary clothes,

just to “catch” an alleged undocumented immigrant who was reporting to court to testify about intimate-partner abuse. Just attending a bureaucratic hearing to settle a summons for pot or speeding might end with a federal arrest; the cost of challenging an illegal eviction in housing court could be getting locked up in detention. Bringing your child to a custody hearing for divorce proceedings could put your whole family in the midst of a stealth ICE raid.

In one incident documented by IDP, “a domestic violence survivor had just had all charges dismissed at a criminal court hearing,” but before she could walk, “a local law enforcement officer (either a court officer or jail employee) returned to the court and said that ICE was waiting for her. The officer suddenly re-arrested her and took her to a holding cell inside the courthouse which is maintained by the Yonkers police,” where she remained until ICE came to sweep her into federal custody.

In just two years, New York’s legal infrastructure has become stalking grounds for Homeland Security, targeting many people who were previously never considered enforcement priorities, just ordinary residents with business before the court. After stripping down Obama-era policies that steered ICE toward criminal cases rather than immigrants not deemed to

be public-safety threats, Trump has intensified the scope and frequency of arrest and prosecution. Accordingly, IDP's analysis shows that ICE might on a given day pursue a range of immigrant groups, including aggrieved workers, domestic-violence survivors, and parolees in community-based alternative courts. ICE has even targeted a special diversion court for human-trafficking cases. Survivors—who already risk retaliation by voluntarily cooperating with authorities—might find their own narrow pathway to freedom derailed by an ICE arrest.

IDP also cites an increase in “arrests of youth, even when they were eligible for special forms of immigration relief like DACA,” which could deter young migrants from seeking humanitarian reprieve. And any relative or caregiver who wants to attend an immigrant's trial or hearing should worry about reports of ICE “targeting friends and family members who accompanied a loved one to court.”

Under current laws, court officials have little recourse when ICE intrudes. Although New York City has established broad sanctuary laws that bar local agencies from directly cooperating with ICE, agents themselves basically have free rein in the city's public spaces.

There are a few tools that judges and other court personnel can apply to resist ICE and protect immigrants' right to due process: For example, a defendant under threat of ICE arrest could arrange a teleconference hearing in order to avoid having to physically report to court. Occasionally, retroactive relief can be obtained on the grounds that a defendant's case had been disrupted by ICE's intervention, according to Shim:

ICE arrests in courthouses interfere with and undermine [the right to due process], both for individuals arrested in court, and also those who are intimidated from attending court at all. There are various procedural vehicles for vindicating these rights, and an appeal of a negative ruling caused by that interference may be one option.

The pending Protect Our Courts Act would outlaw civil arrest on court premises and ban immigration agents from courts without a warrant. Yet the damage to the court's social dynamics could be irrevocable.

Courtrooms are becoming even less welcoming to immigrants—yet another public institution where they must make a choice between recognition and safety.

Michelle Chen Michelle Chen is a contributing writer for *The Nation*.

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