

Remembering 'Red Summer,' when white mobs massacred Blacks from Tulsa to D.C.



The U.S. was gripped by a reign of racial terror after World War I, when whites rose up to quash prosperous Black communities.

BY DENEEN L. BROWN

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A Black man lay half-conscious in the street after being beaten by a white mob during the East St. Louis Massacre of 1917. As the man tried to get up, a well-dressed white man standing behind him “lifted a flat stone in both hands and hurled it upon his neck,” a reporter for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* wrote on July 3, 1917.



For an hour and 30 minutes on the evening of July 1, the reporter witnessed barbaric scenes of white mobs “destroying the life of every discoverable black man.” The gruesome displays of racial violence were among the worst the United States would ever see.

The Illinois massacre had been sparked by the fear of Black men migrating from the South to factories in the North and taking jobs from white people. Tensions exploded that July 1, and raged for three days and nights, leaving as many as 39

Black people and nine white people dead, according to reports. But historians believe hundreds more Black people were killed during that time. (*Read how the death of George Floyd connects to this brutal American legacy.*)



**Top:**

Two National Guard soldiers escort a Black man in East St. Louis, Illinois, during the tense days leading up to the race riot that launched the Red Summer in 1917.

Bottom:

Many houses were burned and at least 39 Black residents were killed, although historians believe that the death toll was likely much higher.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BETTMANN, GETTY IMAGES

Carlos F. Hurd, the reporter for the *Post-Dispatch*, wrote in the archived article that he was appalled by the casualness with which white mobs roamed East St. Louis and stoned Black men who had their “hands raised, pleading for life.” He witnessed a Black man, “almost dead from a savage shower of stones,” hanged with a clothesline. When that broke, the mob hanged him with a rope.





A group of white women beat a group of Black women with sticks and stones as they begged “for mercy,” Hurd wrote. But the white women “laughed and answered the coarse sallies of men as they beat the negresses’ faces and breasts with fists, stones and sticks.”

The East St. Louis Massacre launched a reign of racial terror throughout the U.S. that historians say stretched from 1917 to 1923, when the all-Black town of Rosewood, Florida, was destroyed. During that period, known as the Red Summer, at least 97 lynchings were recorded, thousands of Black people were killed, and thousands of Black-owned homes and businesses were burned to the ground. Fire and fury fueled massacres in at least 26 cities, including Washington, D.C.; Chicago, Illinois; Omaha, Nebraska; Elaine, Arkansas; Charleston, South Carolina; Columbia, Tennessee; Houston, Texas; and Tulsa, Oklahoma.

“During the massacres, they murdered and maimed people indiscriminately, unprovoked,” said Alice M. Thomas, a Carnegie scholar and a professor in the School of Law at Howard University. “They went into homes, stole personal belongings, and burned down homes. They used the massacres as a cover to murder without sanction, maim without sanction, and steal without sanction. No one, to this day, has been held accountable.”

Racial terror was common in many parts of the country following the end of slavery. “It was an intentional use of violence against African Americans,” said David F. Krugler, author of *1919, The Year of Racial Violence*. “The motivation was to punish African Americans for economic success and take it away. In Tulsa, they burned it to the ground.”



In Rosewood, Florida, the ruins of a two-story building still smolder where some 20 Black residents fought off a white mob in 1923.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BETTMANN, GETTY IMAGES

President Donald Trump is holding his first political rally since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic on June 20 in Tulsa, a city still haunted by the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, which left more than 300 Black people dead and more than 10,000 homeless. White mobs destroyed 35-square-blocks of Greenwood, a Black neighborhood that was so prosperous it was called “Black Wall Street.”

Trump initially scheduled the rally for Juneteenth, a date revered and celebrated by African Americans. June 19 commemorates the date 250,000 enslaved people were freed in Texas—two-and-a-half years after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. After widespread criticism, the Trump campaign moved the event by a day.



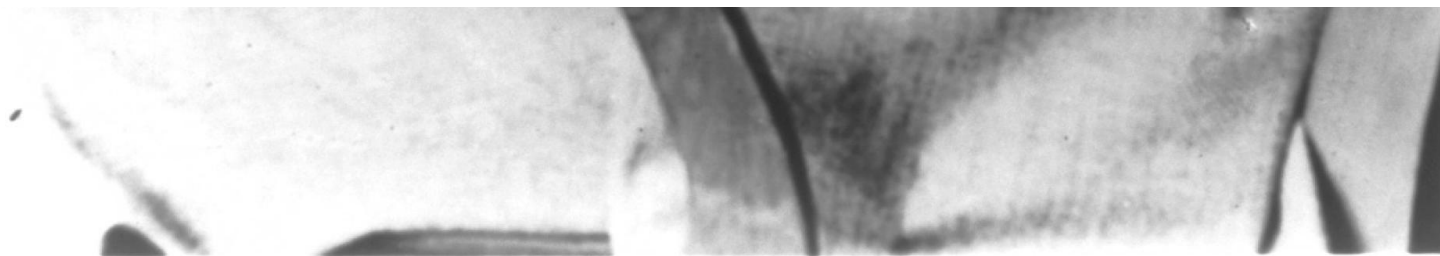
The decision to hold the rally in Tulsa is a sharp reminder that the country has not made amends for its history of racial massacres. That history is inextricably connected to current demands for justice.

The legacy of the Red Summer

The term “Red Summer” was coined by James Weldon Johnson, the composer who wrote the “Negro National Anthem” and an executive director of the National

Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) who fought for federal anti-lynching laws.





James Weldon Johnson named the period of racial terror between 1917 to 1923 the “Red Summer.” A novelist, composer, and civil rights activist, Johnson became executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) during that time.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Ibram X. Kendi, author of *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, wrote that the Red Summer describes “all the blood spilled in the deadliest series of white invasions of Black neighborhoods since Reconstruction.”

To understand current racial unrest, people must understand the Red Summer. “You have whites organized with a specific purpose. They want to keep blacks in subordinate positions so they do not dare assert their equality or autonomy,” said Krugler, a professor of history at University of Wisconsin—Platteville.

The Red Summer also coincided with the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and the Great Migration, an exodus of Black people fleeing racial terror and brutal Jim Crow laws in the South. They traveled in droves to cities in the North, where they were confronted by northern racial hostilities. Often whites viewed Blacks as competition for jobs, homes, and political power.

That power was propelled by increased Black resistance to injustice. Some called it the rise of the “New Negro,” no longer subservient to white people. Black soldiers had returned from World War I expecting the human rights they had fought for abroad—rights for which they were willing to die defending at home. Black veterans

refused upon their return to accept injustice, inequality, and brutality by a white society.

“Because of their military service, black veterans were seen as a particular threat to Jim Crow and racial subordination,” according to a report by the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), an Alabama-based non-profit focusing on criminal justice reform and racial inequality.

“But by the God of heaven,” wrote W.E.B. Du Bois, cofounder of the NAACP and author of *The Souls of Black Folk*, “we are cowards and jackasses if now that the war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land. We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting.”





Black men who served in World War I, such as these soldiers from the 369th Infantry, returned home determined to have the same rights for which they'd fought.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL THOMPSON/INTERIM ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Washington, DC, 1919

One of the first Black men killed during the Red Summer violence in Washington, D.C., was Randall Neal, a 22-year-old veteran who had just returned home from the war, according to the Equal Justice Initiative.

Neal's killing sparked the "D.C. Race Riot of 1919," which began on July 19. Black veterans organized and retaliated against the attack on Neal and others, as if in battle.

"In the negro district along U Street from Seventh to Fourteenth streets," reported the *Washington Post*, "Negroes began early in the evening to take vengeance for assaults on their race in the downtown district the night before."

"Race war galloped wildly through the streets of Washington last night, reaping a death toll of four and a list of wounded running into the hundreds," the *Washington Times* reported on July 22. "Bands of whites and blacks hunted each other like clansmen throughout the night, the blood-feud growing steadily. From nightfall to nearly dawn ambulances bore their steady stream of dead and wounded to hospitals."

President Woodrow Wilson ordered federal troops into the city to quell the violence.

“I remember talking to an elder,” said C.R. Gibbs, an author and historian of the African diaspora. “He spoke with pride about guns brought in from Baltimore. Black people took up rooftop positions. They were determined to pick off members of the white mobs, [who had] infiltrated Black neighborhoods.”

The official death toll was 15. The total damage to property is unknown. The riot, Gibbs said, was fueled by “not just blind race hatred, but resentment of social gains the Black community made just after World War I. When we embraced the capitalist aesthetic, folks lynched us. When we showed we were prosperous, people burned down stores on the premise we violated social codes and legal codes.”

Elaine, Arkansas, 1919

An even deadlier massacre occurred in Elaine, Arkansas.

Historian Gibbs said that the massacre in Elaine “should be better known today in terms of loss of life. More people know about Rosewood and Tulsa. In my judgment, when all is said and done, the Elaine, Arkansas, massacre may rival those.”

The Elaine Massacre began September 30, 1919, after Black sharecroppers dared to organize a union to bring an end to the unscrupulous practices of land owners who were cheating them out of money and crop. According to reports, attempts to organize their labor force prompted a ruthless “crusade of death” by a white mob that left as many as 800 Black people dead.

On Sept. 30, the union members were holding a meeting at a Black church, guarded by men outside, when two white men drove by.

A shot was fired. A white man was killed. Rumors of a black uprising spread quickly. The city filled with hundreds of white men with guns. The local sheriff led a white posse that burned houses and schools and shot Black people at random.

“The press dispatches of October 1, 1919, heralded the news that another race riot had taken place the night before in Elaine, Arkansas, and that it was started by Negroes who had killed some white officers in an altercation,” wrote the anti-lynching crusader and famed journalist Ida B. Wells in her book *The Arkansas Race Riot*.

“Later on, the country was told that the white people of Phillips County had risen against the Negroes who started this riot and had killed many of them, and that this orgy of bloodshed was not stopped until United States soldiers from Camp Pike had been sent to the scene of the trouble,” Wells wrote.





White men (left) stone an African-American man during the Chicago race riots in 1919. The man died from his injuries. Later, policemen (right) examine his body.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JUN FUJITA/CHICAGO HISTORY MUSEUM/GETTY IMAGES (TOP) AND PHOTOGRAPH BY CHICAGO HISTORY MUSEUM/GETTY IMAGES (BOTTOM)

White mobs “slaughtered African Americans in and around Elaine,” according to an account in the *Arkansas Gazette*.

The newspaper later explained that soldiers in Elaine “committed one murder after another with all the calm deliberation in the world, either too heartless to realize the enormity of their crimes, or too drunk on moonshine to give a continental darn.”

In Krugler's research on the massacre, he noted the particularly vicious lynching of an elderly black woman, the wife of a sharecropper.



After the 1923 massacre in Rosewood, Florida, white residents of nearby Sumner stand around three graves where six African-American victims were buried, two to a grave.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BETTMANN, GETTY IMAGES

“After killing the elderly woman they pulled her dress over her body and dragged her body down a road,” Krugler said. “The corpse was desecrated. This was done to send a message to other African Americans.”

According to reports, 285 Black people were arrested after the massacre in Elaine. A grand jury in Phillips County charged 122 Black people with crimes related to the massacre. "No white attackers were prosecuted, but twelve black union members convicted of riot-related charges were sentenced to death," according to EJI.

"The 12 men accused of leading the 'conspiracy' were tortured," Krugler said. "They had formaldehyde stuffed up their noses. They used electrical shocks on their genitals. They were brought to court in chains and not allowed to see an attorney. They were quickly convicted and sentenced to death within minutes."

The NAACP intervened in the case and brought national attention to the men who would become known as the "Elaine Twelve." Scipio Jones, an NAACP attorney, argued the case for the sharecroppers, and it ultimately went to the U.S. Supreme Court.

On Feb. 19, 1923, four years after the massacre, the Supreme Court decided in favor of the "Elaine Twelve," ruling that the Black men had been denied due process and that the sham trial in which they were convicted had been influenced by a mob that gathered outside the courthouse, according to Brian Mitchell, a professor of history at the University of Arkansas in Little Rock. On Nov. 3, 1923, Arkansas's governor commuted the death sentences.

Rosewood, Florida, 1923

Rivaling the prosperity of Eatonville, the Florida town made famous by writer Zora Neale Hurston, Rosewood was a middle-class town of proud Black people who had developed their own community, built their own houses.

The "Rosewood Massacre" began on January 1, 1923, after a white woman named Fannie Taylor, of Sumner, Florida, said she had been assaulted by a Black man.

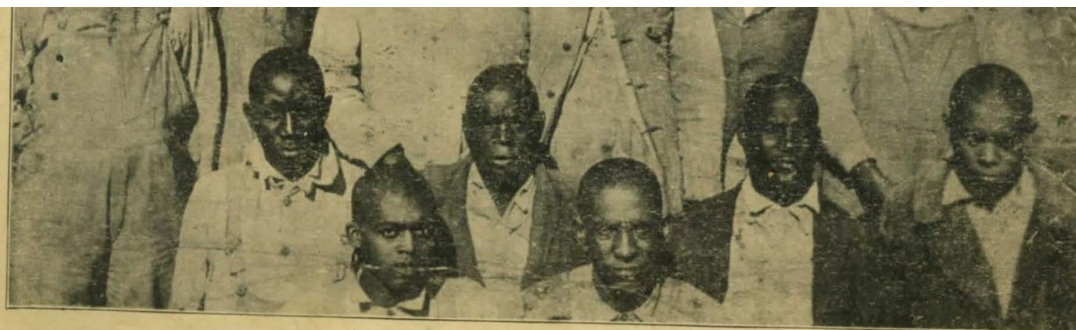
“Claiming she had been assaulted by a black man, Taylor allowed others to say that she had been ‘raped.’ It was the one word that no one in the region wanted to hear, least of all the black residents of Sumner and nearby Rosewood,” David R. Colburn wrote in the *Florida Historical Quarterly*. “What happened to Fannie Taylor on that cold New Year’s morning will remain forever sealed in history, but the events that followed her alleged attack will not.”

Within an hour of the allegation, news spread. “Bloodhounds tracked the scent of the alleged attacker to Rosewood, three miles from Sumner. Although Fannie Taylor never suggested that her attacker was a resident of Rosewood, the community would be permanently damaged by the events that unfolded during that first week of January 1923.”

The mob encountered a Black man, who was tortured, shot, and hanged from a tree.

Sylvester Carrier, a Black man, tried to defend himself and his property from the mob. “Carrier was killed in a shootout,” according to Encyclopaedia Britannica, “but not before killing two whites, and word of that act quickly spread to surrounding communities. Hundreds of whites joined the mob already in Rosewood, and acts of systematic violence against blacks continued until January 8.”





TWELVE MEN CONDEMNED BY THE COURT.

White mobs killed as many as 800 African Americans in Elaine, Arkansas, but only Black men, shown here in a page from Ida B. Wells's book *The Arkansas Race Riot*, received death sentences, which were later commuted.

PHOTOGRAPH BY UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE/INTERNET ARCHIVE/IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT

More than 10,000 white men from across the state of Florida descended on Rosewood. Black men, women, and children hid in the swamps around the town.

“Before the week was out,” Colburn wrote, “the mob returned to plunder and burn down the town of Rosewood and drive all the black residents from it forever.”

It is still unknown how many people were killed in Rosewood. In 1994, the Florida state legislature voted to pay \$1.5 million in reparations to be divided among at least 11 survivors of the massacre to compensate them for loss of property. The Rosewood Massacre was dramatized in a 1997 film by director John Singleton.

Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1921

Three-hundred-thirty-five miles from Elaine, the Tulsa Race Massacre erupted in what historians call one of the worst episodes of racial violence committed against Black people in the country's history.

The Tulsa Race Massacre began on May 31, 1921, after the arrest of Dick Rowland, a 19-year-old shoe-shiner. Earlier that day, Rowland walked to the Drexel Building, which had the only bathroom available to Black people in downtown Tulsa. He stepped into an elevator on the first floor. When the elevator reached the third floor, Sarah Page, a white elevator operator, screamed. “The most common explanation is that Rowland stepped on Page’s foot as he entered the elevator, causing her to scream,” the Oklahoma Historical Society said in a report.

A mob of white men gathered outside the Tulsa courthouse, where Rowland was taken after his arrest for assaulting the elevator operator. Black World War I veterans confronted the mob, determined to protect Rowland.

A struggle ensued and a white man was shot, sparking the murderous rage that would follow. Hundreds of white people marched on the Black neighborhood of Greenwood. Whites killed more than 300 Black people—dumping their bodies into the Arkansas River or burying them in mass graves. More than a hundred businesses were destroyed, as well as a school, a hospital, a library, and dozens of churches. More than 1,200 Black-owned houses burned. The economic losses in the Black community amounted to more than \$1 million.

Walter White, who later became executive secretary of the NAACP, said in a NAACP report: “One story was told to me by an eyewitness of five colored men trapped in a burning house. Four were 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 were reports that white men flew airplanes above Greenwood, dropping kerosene bombs. “Tulsa was likely the first city” in the U.S. “to be bombed from the

air,” according to a report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921.

B.C. Franklin, a lawyer in Greenwood and the father of famed historian John Hope Franklin, witnessed the massacre. “The sidewalk was literally covered with burning turpentine balls,” Franklin wrote in a manuscript later donated to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture. “For fully forty-eight hours, the fires raged and burned everything in its path and it left nothing but ashes and burned safes and trunks and the like that were stored in beautiful houses and businesses.”

“Many black residents fought back, but they were greatly outnumbered and outgunned,” according to Human Rights Watch, which in May of this year released a 66-page report entitled “The Case for Reparations in Tulsa, Oklahoma: A Human Rights Argument.”

“At best, Tulsa Police took no action to prevent the massacre,” according to the document. “Reports indicate that some police actively participated in the violence and looting.”

Two weeks after the massacre, the Tulsa City Commission issued a report blaming the destruction on the Black people who lived there, not the white mob that pillaged, plundered, and destroyed Greenwood. “Let the blame for this Negro uprising lie right where it belongs—on those armed Negroes and their followers who started this trouble and who instigated it and any persons who seek to put half the blame on the white people are wrong,” according to the commission.

In 2018, Tulsa’s mayor, G.T. Bynum, announced the city would reopen an investigation to search for mass graves of massacre victims. In April of this year,

the city planned to dig for evidence in Oaklawn Cemetery, but the “limited excavation” was postponed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The destruction in Tulsa left an economic and emotional toll on generations of survivors and their descendants. No white person was ever arrested in connection with the Tulsa Massacre.



Dozens of churches were destroyed during the race riot in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Now each Wednesday, the Rev. Robert Turner, pastor of Vernon AME Church, marches at Tulsa’s City Hall, demanding reparations for massacre survivors and

their descendants. Vernon AME, which sits on the main street in Greenwood, was burned by white mobs during the massacre. Black people fleeing the raging white mobs hid in the basement, which was one of the only original structures remaining after the massacre.

DEMANDING REPARATIONS



The Reverend Robert Turner protests at Tulsa's City Hall every Wednesday.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BETHANY MOLLENKOF, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

"Since September 2018, I have been coming to the gates of this city we call Tulsa to remind you and to make some aware of the greatest race massacre that has ever occurred on American soil."

A determined activist, Turner grabs his bullhorn and turns it towards people walking by City Hall.

“The race massacre was done on May 31st through June the first, 1921, when a white mob descended upon law-abiding citizens in a community known as Greenwood,” he shouts. “And this Greenwood was inhabited by Blacks, a generation out of slavery, who had received no small business loans. Blacks who received no Pell grants to go to college. Blacks who lived in places where it was against the law to learn how to read in the states they were coming from. This generation out of slavery, who received no affirmative action, Blacks who never received a welfare check in their life. Blacks who bought land in Greenwood and built the most prosperous place for African Americans in this country. And you killed them out of envy.”

Kavin Ross, a photojournalist and historian in Tulsa who has spent years investigating the massacre, said many of the earlier massacres that led to the Tulsa Race Massacre followed similar patterns.

The massacres, Ross said, were stoked by the film *Birth of a Nation*, which then-President Woodrow Wilson had aired in the White House. “The white mobs got their ideas from that highly racially charged film depicting a white woman running in fear of a Black man, and a white mob, led by the Klan, destroying a Black community.”

For nearly a hundred years, the Tulsa massacre was left out of textbooks, even in Oklahoma. Olivia Hooker, one of the last survivors of the Tulsa massacre, said in one of her last interviews that she could still remember watching a white mob burn her house. She was six when the mob broke into her family home. Her mother hid Hooker and her siblings under an oak table.

SEEING PATTERNS



Kavin Ross is a photojournalist and historian who has spent years investigating the Tulsa massacre.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BETHANY MOLLENKOF, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

"The same M.O. in Greenwood occurred in other communities around the United States: A white woman accused a Black man, a white mob went into the Black community and destroyed it."

"They took everything they thought was valuable," recalled Hooker, who died at 103 years old in 2018. "They smashed everything they couldn't take. My mother had [opera singer Enrico] Caruso records she loved. They smashed the Caruso records."

Hooker watched from under the table as the white men poured oil over her grandmother's bed. "It took me a long time to get over my nightmares," she told me. "I was keeping my family awake screaming."

Her most searing memory of the massacre was how the mob destroyed her doll, a recent gift. “My grandmother had made some beautiful clothes for my doll,” Hooker said. “It was the first ethnic doll we had ever seen. She washed them and put them on the line. When the marauders came, the first thing they did was set fire to my doll’s clothes.” 🟡



In Tulsa's Oaklawn Cemetery, only two headstones mark the graves of victims of the race massacre. The city plans to conduct a test excavation in an effort to find the remains of more of those who were killed.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BETHANY MOLLENKOF, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

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