

Walter White, “The Eruption of Tulsa,” Nation, June 29, 1921 (Excerpts)

Background: In Tulsa, Oklahoma, on Memorial Day, Monday May 31, Dick Rowland approached a public elevator in the Drexel building near his shoe-shine parlor. According to the city’s Jim Crow regulations, the only restroom available to him was on the Drexel’s top floor. As he stepped into the elevator, its operator, seventeen-year-old Sarah Page, screamed, and Rowland ran from the building. At first, Page claimed that Rowland had assaulted her, but she later clarified that he had grabbed her arm to steady himself as he accidentally stumbled over her foot. She declined to press charges. However, the story of the alleged assault was published in the Tulsa Tribune on Tuesday afternoon. Within a short time that evening, plans were underway in the white community to lynch Rowland. The racial tension that characterized many American cities of the era exploded as black men promised to aid law enforcement officers protecting Rowland and white men determined to punish blacks for the offense against a white woman. The rumors and accusations escalated into one of the nation’s worst instances of racial violence. Rowland was arrested in the Greenwood district, where his mother lived. Greenwood, also known as “Black Wall Street,” was the wealthiest black community in the United States, having prospered greatly in the economic boom that followed discovery of oil nearby in 1901. Greenwood was home to black doctors, lawyers, and business owners, encompassing a bank, stylish brick homes, hotels, grocery stores, a theater, department store, churches, two hospitals—all the hallmarks of a thriving, upwardly-mobile, self-sufficient community.

Within less than 24 hours, Greenwood was laid waste and burning, resulting in more than \$1.5 million in damage. Accounts vary, but at least 300 people, black and white, were killed, and thousands of black families were homeless and jobless due to the destruction.

Walter F. White, a blond and blue-eyed man of African-American heritage, had started the Atlanta chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People as a young adult and later became the organization’s national leader. Throughout his career he investigated race riots and worked to end lynchings and other crimes against blacks in America. Shortly after the leveling of Greenwood, White traveled to Tulsa to study the causes and effects of “The Eruption of Tulsa.”

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... [Second] 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” [railroad] 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...

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...

[Soon after the newspaper published the story of the alleged assault] 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. [A white mob of about 400 assembled at the jail, followed by a crowd of about 100 blacks.] The sheriff persuaded [the blacks] 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 [white] 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...The colored men and women fought gamely in defense of their homes, but the odds were too great... [Attackers] 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 the death of Dr. A. C. Jackson, a colored physician...[considered] “the most able Negro surgeon in America”... 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... 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...

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?

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What event sparked the conflict in Tulsa?
2. Construct a brief timeline of the events described.
3. According to White, what were the underlying causes of racial tension there?
4. What virtues and principles of constitutional government are addressed or implied in the documents?
5. What does White say is the “lesson in the Tulsa affair”?