

Progressive Racism and the Tulsa Massacre of 1921

President Trump was roundly criticized for scheduling a rally in Tulsa on a day celebrated by many African-Americans as “Juneteenth,” which commemorates Union General Gordon Granger’s announcement on June 19, 1865 in Galveston that those held as slaves in Texas were now free. Of course, they had been freed by the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863 but Granger’s announcement made their emancipation effective.

President Trump wisely agreed to postpone his rally until the next day. But the controversy did not end there because of a horrific event that took place in Tulsa in 1921: the greatest act of violence by whites against African-Americans in the history of the United States.

Indeed, the “Tulsa massacre” (to call it by its proper name) remains one of the darkest chapters in American history. Scores, if not hundreds of people were killed and hundreds of black residences and businesses were looted and burned.

Before they became issues associated with the upcoming Trump rally, it is doubtful that most Americans had ever heard of either Juneteenth or the Tulsa massacre. And of course, the latter will be treated as just one more example of the “systemic racism” that critics claim has afflicted America since its “founding” in 1619.

A Triumph of Progressive Scientific Racism

As in all such cases, the Tulsa massacre had its roots in local conditions. In 1921, African-American veterans of World

War I were competing with local whites for jobs. At the time, the predominantly African-American Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa was the wealthiest black community in the United States. Accordingly, white envy no doubt played a role in the orgy of destruction targeting black businesses.

But to a great extent, the Tulsa massacre represented the triumph of a particular species of racism based on the *rejection* of the real American Founding in 1776, which was taking hold of Americans at the time of the event: the “scientific” racism of Progressives such as Woodrow Wilson.

Progressives rejected the self-evident truths of the Declaration of Independence. Wilson’s disdain for the Declaration is evident in his many books and speeches. He argued during the 1912 presidential campaign that the teachings of Jefferson were utterly out of date. “The old political formulas do not fit the present problems: they read now like documents taken out of a forgotten age,” [Wilson insisted](#). It was “[what we used to think](#) in the old-fashioned days when life was very simple.” Accordingly, [Wilson argued](#) it was necessary to get “beyond the Declaration of Independence” because it “did not mention the questions of our day” and is “of no consequence to us.”

The Progressives’ denigration of the Declaration had a deleterious effect on African Americans. If the principles of the Declaration are not universally true, then there is no logical reason *not* to pursue racist policies. There was no logical reason *not* to condone the reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan in 1915—which is *exactly* what happened during the Progressive Era.

Today, when so many Americans defer to “science” and “expertise,” it is important to remember that the Progressives’ rejection of the Declaration’s teaching was based on the then-popular “scientific racial theory” and eugenics. Progressives claimed their beliefs were grounded in

fact and were true according to the leading lights of science. If Progressives had been using today's language, they would have argued the racial inferiority of blacks and other minorities was "settled science." Thus, it is no surprise that the Progressives insisted their "rational" public policy conformed with the dictates of the new racial science.

Real Progress Derailed

As C. Vann Woodward observed in his classic book, [*The Strange Career of Jim Crow*](#), blacks were making economic and social progress in the later 19th and early 20th centuries. Jim Crow had not been the norm before 1890, even in the South. It only took hold when it received sanction from the racist Progressives in the North. In the words of one late 19th-century writer, "Boston . . . and Ohio hold the coats of Georgia and Mississippi, while they slay the common victim of Northern prejudice and Southern hate."

As president, Wilson screened in the White House "Birth of a Nation," a film that helped to establish the "Second Ku Klux Klan," with a power and influence far exceeding that of the first wave, which had been suppressed by the Congress and Grant Administration in the 1870s. Wilson also re-segregated the federal civil service. Previously, appointments had been based on merit and performance on the civil-service examination. Thereafter, racial discrimination became the norm. The existing workforce was segregated. Many African Americans were dismissed.

But the impact of Progressive racism extended far beyond the employment of African-Americans by the federal government. Consider the idea of a "minimum wage." Economists agree that a major effect of a minimum wage is to increase the unemployment of lower-skilled workers. Today, the economic and social costs of the minimum wage are borne primarily by young workers new to the labor force, especially young black males.

As Thomas Leonard argues in [*Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics and American Economics in the Progressive Era*](#), for the Progressives of the early 20th century, this was a feature not a bug of the minimum wage. The minimum wage would permit the more skilled “native-stock” workers to earn a “living wage” while identifying “inferior” workers: blacks, Jews, Chinese, or other immigrants, who could be isolated. These “inferiors,” once identified, then could be subjected to abortion and sterilization, thereby improving the “breed” in future generations.

The Progressive racism of the time that preached the racial inferiority of blacks and that based public policy on “scientific racism” and eugenics was a contributing factor to the sort of racial violence that exploded in Tulsa in 1921. A president who condoned and even encouraged the rejuvenation of the Klan shaped the environment that permitted white citizens to believe that they could and should obliterate the neighborhoods of other citizens based on their skin color.

A Harbinger of Disasters to Come?

When considering the Tulsa massacre, it is useful to note that the strongest defense against such events is adherence to the principles articulated in the Declaration. Some may scoff at such a claim. *Such naïveté*, they will say, especially if they have imbibed the poison of the “1619 Project” and the like.

But the American Founding—[the real one in 1776](#)—changed the argument by *expressly* rejecting the argument that a political system should be based on oppression, including racial oppression, and instead demanded a system based on *justice*.

The essence of the pre-American case for the right to rule was best summarized by the argument of the Athenians at Melos as recounted by Thucydides in his history of the Peloponnesian War: “Justice arises only between equals. As for the rest, the strong do what they will. The weak suffer what they must.”

Before the creation of the United States, the world was divided between those “born booted and spurred,” possessing the supposed natural right to rule over others “born with saddles on their backs.” Philosophers may have condemned such injustice but rulers continued to rule as they always had: with the strong oppressing the weak and the master oppressing the slave.

The [United States was founded on a different claim](#), articulated in the Declaration of Independence: that human beings are equal in their possession of natural rights and that accordingly, no one has the natural right to rule over another without the latter’s consent.

The rejection of that claim, either by the Progressives of Wilson’s era or those claiming the progressive mantle in our own time, opens the door to unending racial strife. If we reject the claims of the Declaration, the Tulsa massacre of 1921 may turn out to have been merely a harbinger of things to come.

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