

Juneteenth, reparations and the legacy of Tulsa

written by John Parker
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A truck filled with Black prisoners during the 1921 Tulsa massacre. An armed white man rides on the running board guarding the prisoners.

On June 19, 1865, the Union Army arrived in Galveston, Texas, to end slavery there. It has become the symbolic date for the ending of slavery in the United States.

After the Emancipation Proclamation officially abolished legal slavery on Jan. 1, 1863, some African people were still forced to work as slaves until freedom was enforced by the U.S. government in those locations — two-and-a-half years, and in some cases up to six years, later.

Like all historical achievements regarding African people in this country, Juneteenth has two sides — one for celebration, and one that painfully shows how systemic racism endures in this capitalist and imperialist country. For those who want to change the world, it is always important to appreciate both sides of that coin, in order to remain realistic and optimistic in preparing other possible victories.

The other aspect of our historical achievements is that, when they become too visible to ignore, the ruling class sends in its political lackeys to defang its most potent effects. President Joe Biden, who just sent a solid endorsement of white supremacy and genocide with his \$735-million gift to the racist Israeli government, continues to echo his inaction and enabling of systemic racism here in this country, especially in regards to police terror and mass incarceration of Black people.

Biden has a history of passing legislation encouraging racist incarceration and the prison-industrial complex, and his public statements refusing to hold police accountable or even approach the subject with any seriousness make that clear.

Biden also recently addressed a 100-year commemoration of what is now officially called the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921, when a terrorist, racist white mob destroyed the entire Greenwood neighborhood in a day and took the lives of

hundreds of Black people, with cooperation from the police and Oklahoma National Guard.

However, Biden refused to mention the demand that survivors, their descendants and people around the world have endorsed, and that members of the Congressional Black Caucus put before Congress year after year - reparations for the victims and community institutions to help rectify and reverse some of the damage that was done.



Ruins of the Williams Dreamland Theatre in Greenwood after the white terrorist riot left hundreds of Black residents dead and thousands of families homeless.

Biden spurns Tulsa survivors

The massacre saw the first ever use of aerial bombings in the U.S. and the burning of homes and buildings while Black people were burned alive. Like the many white mob riots that occurred before and after Tulsa, including in Rosewood, Fla., that damage destroyed lives and wealth for future generations.

Millions of dollars of property was destroyed and hundreds of millions of dollars of potential wealth was looted by the white terrorists and the corporate and government institutions that facilitated the riot.

In the audience for the Tulsa commemoration, there were three people listening to Biden who made a special effort to attend, who had given congressional testimony for the case for reparations, and whose time was running out.

Those three were surviving victims of the Tulsa massacre. All were over 100 years old and desperately hoped to see some type of remedy for the victims' descendants and the Black community of Tulsa, still affected by the massacre and stripping of their relatives' wealth.

And they all witnessed how U.S. educational and financial institutions continue to deny the pursuit of life and liberty for their community — something the reparations proposal they and many others advocate would address. Imagine their disappointment when Biden methodically avoided using the word.

Another victim from Tulsa, Olivia Hooker, who died in 2018 at the age of 103, was 99 when she [shared her story](#) with Al Jazeera.

Olivia witnessed the Tulsa massacre when she was just 6 years old. Her parents hid her while white thugs rampaged through her home and poured gas inside. She recalled seeing those same men set fire to dolls made for her by her mother as a testament to their hatred for Black children.

During her rich and successful life, Hooker spent much of her time fighting for

reparations and hoped to see that happen before she died.

She rightly called the massacre a “catastrophe” – reminding us of another “race” massacre, when white Western colonialists drove Arab people out of their homes to create the state of Israel. The Palestinian word for it is al-Nakba, and it continues today.

Like in Tulsa, aerial bombings are used, with thugs and murderers all blessed in their evil by the Israeli government – which, in addition to the recent \$735-million gift from Biden, gets \$3.8 billion and weapons every year from the U.S. to target Palestinian children en masse.

It’s a catastrophe of stolen homes and property and land, just like Tulsa. And like what’s going on in Palestine, the theft continues here too.

In Tulsa, the property that was destroyed or seized along with the land was never given back to its owners, who still hold the deeds to the property. They were robbed and left with nothing to pass on to their descendants.

Tulsa Tribune’s racist role

That is a very different reality from that of the Jones family, the white owners of a conservative newspaper, the Tulsa Tribune, whose claim to fame today is its responsibility for setting off the 1921 riot by white terrorists.

The Tulsa Tribune headline and article that sparked the riot incorrectly stated that a 19-year-old Black youth had attacked and possibly raped a white woman. An editorial promoted a group that was actively planning to take the youth from police custody and lynch him.

The white woman who was the alleged victim said it didn’t happen and was adamant in her denial of any wrongdoing by the youth. She refused to press any charges

against him. But the paper's owner, Richard Lloyd Jones, wasn't interested in the truth. That lie helped continue the profitability of the paper and would be passed on down the line.

Richard Lloyd Jones [passed on control of the newspaper](#) to his sons, Richard Lloyd Jones Jr. and Jenkin Lloyd Jones Sr. In 1984, the Tribune's corporate owner merged with Swab-Fox Companies Inc., a diversified energy and real estate firm, and the paper finally ceased publication in 1992. The initial wealth, compounded by its sale and diversification into real estate and energy, undoubtedly lined the family's pockets for generations.

Not so for Olivia Hooker. Her father's department store was destroyed, and her family never received a penny.

In fact, none of the victims, as of this writing, have ever received repayment of the wealth that was stripped from them and transferred to those responsible for the terrorism they survived. And, although they had insurance, the state of Oklahoma helped insurance companies avoid paying out for the damage and loss of homes and businesses to the property owners.

Not one person was held accountable for this racist murder and terrorism. As Donald Glover's Childish Gambino character says: "This is America."

The case for reparations

Tulsa shines a light on the experience of African people and the arguments for reparations in general. After all, it was African slaves who created the foundation of wealth that U.S. capitalism rests upon.

As we commemorate Juneteenth, we should also understand that Tulsa provides an excellent example of the reality of imperialism and capitalism, its racist and violent nature, just as it exposes those who perpetuate that system.

Let's commemorate Juneteenth by drawing the conclusion, if you haven't already, that these good-for-nothing politicians from Biden on down, either Democrat or Republican, who enable systemic racism, legitimize inaction and actively block any real attempts at attacking the systemic causes, are an integral part of this anti-human system.

They can't be trusted to make any real change — that's not what they were given millions of dollars in campaign funds by the corporations and monopolies that run this country to do.

But there is something very powerful that we can do and have done. Black people have forced great achievements in the struggle for liberation and social justice in general - and that's a testament to our strength and determination.

Those strides allowed us a greater ability to effect change. We must continue to do what works — build the power of the movements for liberation and self-determination that empower our working class, both here and abroad.

Defend the right of Black and Brown people and all oppressed peoples to live free from the terror of the police and ICE! Continue to call for those police and ICE entities to be abolished and replaced by the community.

We must defend the right of every person to a job or income. We must join the local tenant rights organizations fighting homelessness, and join the struggle for health care for all, especially for Black and Brown people still dying from COVID-19.

Let's build on our unity and solidarity, so that the next time a white supremacist mob comes to a Black or Brown neighborhood, they will be met with a righteous wrath that spares not a one. Those capitalists and politicians who enable them and the system they protect must be dismantled through the building of a movement that cannot be ignored.

Let's get to it.

