The Lost Revolution
Capitalism, Democracy and Black Citizenship in Early Twentieth-Century America's Biggest Race Conflicts

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Introduction

At the dawn of the twentieth century, a rapidly-industrializing United States of America offered new opportunities for economic mobility to all of its citizens. This changing face of the United States also prompted unprecedented social change as millions fought to secure the political rights and responsibilities concomitant with greater economic security. The promise of full (though not necessarily equal) citizenship took a step closer to reality for millions of blacks and women. Even in Chicago, where blacks could and did vote in large numbers by 1920, they could not fully participate in American political life. Though the United States was a republic founded upon the lofty rhetoric of political liberty and social equality for all, in a heavily-racialized state, this rhetoric applied only to those classified as “white” and “male.” For black Americans, this inherent contradiction between high-minded ideology and sober reality became the basis for pitched legal and extralegal challenges to the status quo that resulted in the untimely loss of hundreds of lives.

Near the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, the participation of the United States in World War I found its justification for millions of Americans of all backgrounds in the idea that both the political system of democracy and the ideals of a free society had to be preserved where it existed and promulgated where it did not throughout the world. However, popular accounts of American life during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries failed
to fully grasp the fundamental ideological paradox that gave rise to the considerable bloodshed of thousands of Americans who were forced to engage in open warfare on American soil to realize the same free and democratic ideals for themselves. After the failure of the United States government to fully secure black citizenship during Reconstruction a half-century earlier, blacks throughout the country witnessed their civil liberties vanish amidst an onslaught of both legal and extralegal opposition by recalcitrant white supremacists who were determined to keep America’s peculiar racial caste system intact. American democracy was failing for millions of its own citizens. And to an overwhelming extent, the casualties of this modern American civil war shared one damning trait: their dark skin color.

As economic and political forces associated with rapid industrialization and urbanization altered the cultural landscape of the United States, its citizens transformed their needs, desires and identities in response. For blacks, their perception of a progressive American society offered some hope of greater economic mobility. As a rise in economic status allowed those who could achieve it to exercise an unprecedented level of self-determination, they forged newer identities associated with their feelings of greater self-worth. Political interests became intertwined with these newer identities. In major American cities with large and expanding black populations such as Chicago and New York, enfranchised blacks were able to make greater strides toward self-determination as a community in the face of systemic racial discrimination. In other parts of the country, blacks organized unions and other sociopolitical groups in an effort to seek legal redress for violations of their civil rights. This nascent political growth, however, incurred a vicious racial backlash reminiscent of the Post-Reconstruction period, when former slave owners in the South reasserted their control over blacks through a combination of political maneuvering and extralegal coercion. Unlike the Post-Reconstruction period backlash, however, the racial backlash of the first decades of the twentieth century was national in scale.
This new racial conflict over the future of blacks’ social, political and economic self-determination became an inescapable “trial by fire” for American democracy.

Throughout the United States, W.E.B. Du Bois’ “New Negroes,” molded on the battlefields of Western Europe and the shop floors of the American mill, were determined to assert their claims to equal American citizenship. During the period of racial tumult following the end of World War I, three riots that were notable for their scale and significance to both American race relations and black political activism occurred in the United States: the Chicago Riot of 1919, the Elaine Riot of 1919 and the Tulsa Riot of 1921.

All three riots involved armed, organized mobs of hundreds to thousands of whites fully mobilized against armed black communities that were resolute in the defense of their lives, property and rights as citizens. The three riots were additionally notable for the character of the black communities involved; although only Chicago’s South Side escaped total destruction, armed and organized elements of blacks in each locale attempted to repel attacks by whites.

All three riots saw the intervention of armed troops, though not necessarily in a bid to restore order. Once the troops arrived, only the black communities were occupied. Only in Chicago, where the black community enjoyed the most protection of their civil rights, did the government troops actually mobilize to protect the black population. At best, the troops did not actively move against the white mobs, allowing further bloodshed to occur (Chicago). At worst, they were implicit in the white mob violence that claimed hundreds of black lives and millions in property (Elaine and Tulsa). In each case, when the dust settled, the predominant racial caste system was still intact. In none of these communities were the mass of white rioters ever brought to justice for their atrocities. Many blacks, however, were detained and formally prosecuted for numerous offenses stemming from the violence.

In the wake of each of these race riots, however, blacks had not surrendered their identities, their political selves. While the character of the race conflict in each of the three cities
appears to bear similarities in political motives and methods of resistance, the ultimate outcome for the black communities in each locale was completely different. In the midst of continued socioeconomic oppression, Chicago laborers returned to work in the packinghouses and steel mills under the protection of the Illinois National Guard. The survivors of the Elaine and Tulsa riots who did not flee the violence or migrate north were forcibly detained for days. Denied any constitutionally-protected rights, the survivors were released to the control of their white employers. Returning to their destroyed neighborhoods to find themselves illegally divested of their property, the survivors of the Elaine and Tulsa riots were forced to work under an even more oppressive racial regime.

In each of the riots, popular opinion placed responsibility for the outbreak of violence on the black community. Ironically, it was the unprofessional reporting of the white press that fueled racial hatred and violence before, during and after each of the riots. While the violent last week of July 1919 in Chicago has been well-documented and publicized as rioting by blacks and whites, the narratives of the Elaine and Tulsa race conflicts were immediately rewritten and suppressed by the local authorities, who persuaded the national press that the riots were black “insurrections.”

Both during and after each of these riots, the black population and the white ruling elite struggled to influence public opinion with their perspectives and their narratives of the events. Economically, the business and civic leaders of Chicago, Elaine and Tulsa had much to lose from a bad public image. In the cases of Elaine and Tulsa, cheap, coerced black labor could (and did) flee north, never to return. Furthermore, an image of lawlessness would keep any significant future capital investment from flowing into the areas.

The black community of Chicago, one of the most prominent in the country, had a highly influential press composed of several newspapers. In addition, the black community of Chicago had a resilient social, economic and political infrastructure with which to engage the white
community as peers. As a result, Chicago's white community had to share control of the riot's public image with its black community. Elaine and Tulsa were the complete opposite. Largely due to geography, Elaine and Tulsa's location in the South meant that its black populations were subject to a much more oppressive racial regime that included legal segregation, coerced labor, disenfranchisement, debt peonage, and state-sanctioned extralegal violence. Because of this overtly oppressive environment, Blacks in rural Elaine had no prominent press. In the wake of the Elaine riot, white control over its public image was countered only through the efforts of external black activist organizations such as the NAACP, black newspapers like the Chicago Defender, and individuals such as the Ida Wells-Barnett and Scipio Africanus Jones. Though Greenwood existed in a much more urbanized environment and was much more prominent than Elaine's black community, it too was subject to the same uniquely Southern sociopolitical system. Its press apparatus was destroyed in the riot. White control over its public image was countered only as a result of outside actors in the guise of the black press and the American Red Cross.

In the wake of scathing international condemnation of the violence in Chicago, prominent elements of the black and white communities conducted a comprehensive investigation into the problem of race relations through the creation of the Chicago Commission on Race Relations. It is remarkable that blacks in Chicago, who were enfranchised in large numbers (unlike in Elaine or Tulsa) and possessed the most influential black sociopolitical apparatus of the period in the U.S. (with mass publications such as the Chicago Defender and influential political leaders such as Oscar DePriest), were able to avoid annihilation at the hands of their white neighbors. In Tulsa, the residents of the wealthy Greenwood community never saw any response from the state or federal government to either the destruction of their community or the infringement upon their Fourteenth Amendment rights by state militia troops who herded them into detention camps and closely monitored their movements. The narrative of the riot quickly disappeared.
from history. Approximately three quarters of a century passed before renewed attention to the Tulsa Race Riot brought to bear enough pressure on the state of Oklahoma and the city of Tulsa to convene a commission charged with examining it. Despite the findings of the state commission in favor of reparations to the former residents of Greenwood, no further actions have been taken to implement its goals in the name of recovery and restitution. In Elaine, as in Chicago and Tulsa, there was no justice for the survivors in the form of seeing all those who participated in the riot arrested and prosecuted. There would be no remuneration for the loss of life and property that they suffered. The only justice experienced by the Elaine community occurred in the aftermath of the riots when twelve prominent black men were arrested and condemned to death for inciting an “insurrection.” Blacks around the country, upon hearing of the race riots, mobilized to protect the “Elaine Twelve.” Financed by the NAACP and led by Scipio Africanus Jones, Arkansas’ most famous black lawyer, the convictions of six of the men were overturned in later court proceedings after a U.S. Supreme Court decision against the state of Arkansas in the famous Fourteenth Amendment case of Moore v. Dempsey. The other six men were finally set free as a result of later state court proceedings. As in the case of Tulsa, the narrative of the riot fell away from the pages of history for several decades. There have been no reparations made toward the survivors of the massacre or their families.

Each community did exist within a different sociopolitical region of the country. Chicago was distinctly Northern and urban. Elaine was distinctly Southern and rural. Tulsa was distinctly Southern and urban. There are many factors to consider in approaching an answer to this question; many of them have been discussed in the previous pages. A newly-empowered black identity was influenced by a multitude of factors in each of the communities. Each community was subject to the social, political and economic forces that characterized the environment within which it existed. As a result, the organizations that operated within these communities were developed to different degrees before the riots began. Clearly, the black population of
each locale attempted to fight for greater self-determination and equal citizenship. What remains to be sufficiently understood has been the effect of black social and political organizing both within and outside each community on the incident violence of each riot, how each riot was perceived publicly and why each outcome took its particular form.

The question of the differing outcomes of the riots is answerable. Due to recent historical scholarship in these three tumultuous episodes in twentieth-century U.S. history, a great deal of primary sources can now be studied. Black and white newspapers across the nation covered all three race riots. Aside from the archives of the *New York Times*, notable Chicago newspapers include the *Daily Tribune, Daily News, Daily Journal*, and *Herald-Examiner*. Notable black newspapers of the time, other than the *Defender*, include the *New York Age, Broad Ax, and Chicago Whip*. Interviews with survivors of the Chicago and North Tulsa Race Riots yield incredibly moving personal accounts, however weathered by the passage of time; these are found not only in newspapers of the times, but also state commissions and court cases. National publications such as the *Chicago Defender* and the NAACP's *Crisis* yield not only first-person accounts of the violence in Chicago, Elaine and Tulsa, but also convey a sense of the mood of the black community in the wake of the riots. These publications could also be sources of contextual (though not necessarily factual) information concerning the riots and their aftermaths. Numerous books have been written by scholars studying all three race riots. These studies attempt to explain the events before, during and after the riots as well as the social, political and economic context in which they took place. Additionally, due to efforts at limited reconciliation in Chicago and Tulsa, there exist state-funded studies into the race riots: the Chicago Commission on Race Relations' *The Negro in Chicago: a Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot* (1922) and the *Final Report of the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (2001). The Supreme Court Case of *Moore v. Dempsey* yielded information concerning the events around the riot as well as the legal strategy employed by the
complainants. Additionally, the archives of the NAACP, which was actively involved in the wake of both the Chicago and Elaine conflicts, will allow for a detailed characterization of the communities to be formed. Lastly, informational material distributed by black unions and social organizations may be very useful as an indication of the level of organizational activity preceding and resulting from the riots.

As a result of this thesis research, I hope to offer a clear and compelling explanation for the disparity in the conditions that this newer generation of politically- and socially-conscious blacks found themselves inheriting in the aftermath of devastating racial conflicts that were similar in time and circumstance. Though the race conflicts were the most violent manifestations of the desire of the white communities to preserve the sociopolitical status quo, the “New Negro” and his aspirations were not destroyed in defeat.
Chapter 1

Chicago, 1919

A year after the end of World War I, whites’ fears over race warfare coincided with fears of anti-capitalist labor violence during the twentieth century’s first “Red Scare.” Spurred largely by rumors of black aggression and race-specific, incendiary journalism, armed white mobs in urban and rural locales across the country destroyed black communities and murdered untold numbers of people. When widespread racial violence came to Chicago, blacks chose to fight back in a determined assertion of their right to exist as fully American citizens. As a result, the Chicago race riot of 27 July – 8 August 1919 became the first significant instance of successful black self-defense against overwhelming white mob violence.

The racial tensions that pervaded daily life in Chicago were amplified by the arrival of thousands of blacks from the South who sought to escape the peonage and violence that defined their lives under legalized segregation and disenfranchisement. These people left behind impoverished and segregated neighborhoods and schools. Forced to work under a violently coercive labor system, they could not organize to address their grievances. They were not guaranteed a fair trial in court, were disenfranchised, and faced both systematic and personal persecution at the hands of whites. The Chicago Commission on Race Relations calculated that between 1895 and 1918, eighty-five percent of the 2,881 lynchings of blacks in
the United States occurred in the South. By comparison, the cities of the North (specifically Chicago) offered blacks enfranchisement, better schools, better housing, integrated schools and freedom from systematic social, economic and legal persecution. From 1916-1918, approximately 500,000 southern blacks moved to the North to take advantage of the vast opportunities for a better life. Chicago became a popular destination for blacks along the Mississippi Valley in particular; during that period, over 65,000 blacks moved to the city from there.

By 1920, the United States Census recorded 109,594 black residents of Chicago. Increasing in size by over 148.5 percent since the 1910 census, they constituted approximately 4.1 percent of the city’s total population around the time of the riot. Though the tens of thousands of migrants faced a considerable culture shock, Chicago’s black community possessed a both rich and diverse network of social and civic organizations that existed to assist them in making a successful transition from rural to urban life. Organizations such as the Chicago Urban League, the Wabash Avenue YMCA, and the estimated 170 black congregations throughout the city were also instrumental in helping to restore the community’s socioeconomic infrastructure in the wake of the 1919 riot.

Due to wartime industrialization and the mobilization of thousands of working-age white men to fight in Europe, opportunities abounded for the migrants to attain a rise in socioeconomic status. The war temporarily closed the stream of immigrants that were nominally relied upon to work in Chicago’s factories. The migrants responded to the demand for labor. Out of Chicago’s

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2 Chicago Commission on Race Relations 602.

3 Chicago Commission on Race Relations 602.

4 Chicago Commission on Race Relations 605.
black population of 110,000 circa 1920, an estimated 70,000 were employed in some capacity.⁵ Prior to the outbreak of war in 1914, over sixty percent of the black labor force in the North was employed in the domestic service industry; only an estimated fifteen percent of workers were engaged in manufacturing.⁶ As World War I raged on, the number of blacks engaged in manufacturing jobs increased. In a study of sixty-two manufacturing plants throughout the North, the Chicago Commission on Race Relations observed a thousand-percent increase in employed black labor from 1,346 in 1915 to 10,587 in 1920.⁷ Chicago bore no exception to this phenomenon as its iron and steel mills, millineries and meat packing plants opened their doors to thousands of black workers. These opportunities for economic advancement allowed for the growth of a vibrant, socially- and politically-active black community on Chicago’s South Side.

On the afternoon of Sunday, 27 July 1919, a group of six young black men made their way from Chicago’s South Side to the black section of the beachfront on Lake Michigan at Twenty-Sixth Street. The beaches were a popular destination for the people of Chicago during the summer, and that hot Sunday afternoon bore no exception. Making their way into the lake amidst crowds of blacks, the young men knew to stay clear of the waterfront around Twenty-Ninth Street. There, the whites who crowded the beach repulsed any attempts to infringe upon what was generally observed as their territory. All that afternoon, according to eyewitness accounts, stones were thrown back and forth across the implicit color line segregating the two beaches.⁸

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⁵ Chicago Commission on Race Relations 623.
⁶ Chicago Commission on Race Relations 623.
⁷ Chicago Commission on Race Relations 623.
⁸ Chicago Commission on Race Relations 596.
As seventeen year-old Eugene Williams and his friends floated into the lake on their makeshift raft, they travelled past the color line. Stones fell upon them from the shore, hurled by angered whites. Williams, reportedly hanging on to a railroad tie, lost the grip on his raft and drowned. That his drowning was the result of a criminal act was indisputable. That this particular event within an environment already characterized by intermittent racial violence precipitated a week of murderous rioting in one of America's largest cities, however, merits giving the circumstances surrounding it special attention.

The tragic events that began on the Twenty-Ninth Street Beach on Sunday, 27 July 1919 were preceded by many others in Chicago's troubled past. The vagaries of race relations in Chicago entailed violent confrontations between segments of the city's black and white populations. The most salient characteristic of the criminal act that precipitated the widespread violence of late July - early August was that it involved significant numbers of both blacks and whites. The occurrences of racial violence in Chicago prior to 29 July were predominantly personal in nature; they often involved attacks by a single person or group of people of one race against a person of another race. Many of these clashes occurred as overcrowding in the "Black Belt" led black families to seek homes in and around the white-dominated sections of the city.

On 3 July 1917, the Tribune erroneously reported that a local white saloonkeeper who died of heart trouble was murdered by a black male. That evening, according to police reports later compiled by the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, a gang of young white men drove to the intersection of Chicago's Fifty-Third and Federal Streets and fired their guns upon a group of blacks. On the night of 21 June 1919, just five weeks before the mass riots, Sanford Harris, a black male, was shot and killed by a gang of young white men as he returned to his home on Dearborn Street in the South Side from escorting his wife's friend to a streetcar. On 5 Chicago Commission on Race Relations 595.
the same night, forty-seven year-old Joseph Robinson, another black male, died from stabbing wounds sustained from an assault by a gang of young white men as he returned home through the South Side's Fifty-Fifth Street and Princeton Avenue.\textsuperscript{10} Though there were witnesses to each attack, in neither case were the guilty parties ever brought to justice. After these attacks, notices indicating that unnamed parties would "get all the niggers on July 4th" were found posted in locations inside the "Black Belt."\textsuperscript{11} Organized gangs of young white men, known as "athletic clubs," were credited both by local community leaders and the Chicago Commission on Race Relations with being the likely perpetuators in the murders in particular and the primary source of racial violence in general in Chicago both during and after the riot.

The riot that would occur was not America's first race riot. It was not even Illinois' first. From 14-15 August 1908 in Springfield, Illinois, white mobs burned down the black district of the town and killed seven people (two black, five white) in response to being denied access to two jailed black men separately accused of the alleged sexual assault of a local white woman and the murder of a local white man.\textsuperscript{12} The Springfield riot was significant in that is credited with directly motivating the founding of the NAACP, America's premiere civil rights organization, in New York City less than a year later. From 2-4 July 1917, anger over labor competition, rumors of black men fraternizing with white women, and rumors of a black uprising on Independence Day gave rise to the East St. Louis, Illinois riot. The East St. Louis riot was Illinois' most violent racial confrontation prior to Chicago. Over several days of rioting, white mobs destroyed portions of the black district and indiscriminately shot, stabbed, clubbed and lynched any blacks they came upon. As a result of the carnage, thirty-nine blacks and nine whites were confirmed
\textsuperscript{10} Chicago Commission on Race Relations 595.
\textsuperscript{11} Chicago Commission on Race Relations 596.
dead; as many as 150-200 unconfirmed deaths have been associated with the event.\textsuperscript{13} The riot, one of the worst in American history, inspired outrage amongst blacks across the nation. In the wake of the riot, the NAACP mobilized to put pressure on the federal government to pass anti-lynching legislation. On 28 July, the organization staged a silent parade down Fifth Avenue in New York City in protest against the persistent racial violence directed against blacks across the country. In addition, a delegation of prominent blacks (including famous personalities such as Madame C.J. Walker and James Weldon Johnson) made a visit to the white House to persuade President Woodrow Wilson to act on anti-lynching legislation.\textsuperscript{14}

That Sunday, a critical mass of people gathered on the beach, stirred by anger rising from the senseless murder of a young Eugene Williams. Both white and black swimmers searched unsuccessfully for his body. On the beachfront, blacks demanded that the local police called to the scene arrest the white man whom was witnessed throwing the stone that resulted in Williams' drowning death. When the policeman on the scene arrested one of the black men on a white man's complaint instead, he was attacked by several black men.\textsuperscript{15} This act instigated a riot as rumors concerning the event spread quickly, bringing together crowds of both races in neighborhoods within and around Chicago's South Side. Violence erupted at the beach, and a mob of blacks reportedly beat four white men, stabbed five and shot one.\textsuperscript{16} In an altercation with a group of policemen at the beach, James Crawford, a black man, was shot dead after


\textsuperscript{15} Chicago Commission on Race Relations 597.

\textsuperscript{16} Chicago Commission on Race Relations 597.
firing his gun at them. That night, violence erupted in the white neighborhoods around the “Black Belt” as a reported twenty-seven blacks were beaten, seven stabbed and four shot.\(^\text{17}\)

The morning of 28 July was quiet by comparison to the preceding night. However, when black laborers returned home from their jobs that afternoon, mob violence broke out anew. Much of the press coverage did not help to dissipate the environment of fear that pervaded Chicago’s South Side at the time. The *New York Times*’ front page coverage of the previous day was entitled, “2 Killed 50 Hurt In Furious Race Riots In Chicago – Blacks Said To Have Invaded Section Reserved For Whites – Precipitates General Fight. – 2,000 Negroes Applaud Speakers Who Advise Them to Use Force to Gain Rights.”\(^\text{18}\) Responsibility for the outbreak of violence, at least according to the *New York Times*, rested largely with Chicago’s black population. Breaking the implicit color line that segregated the races in Chicago was somehow tantamount to an “invasion” of white “racial” space. Fearing more violence that afternoon, crowds of curious, expectant whites and blacks gathered on the streets of their neighborhoods. Taking advantage of the environment, the more violent elements of the mobs in the neighborhoods between the packinghouses of the Stock Yards and the homes of the “Black Belt” directed assaults against blacks travelling home along every major thoroughfare. Street cars were taken off of their tracks as mobs of whites descended upon any black person they could find. That evening, an estimated thirty black men were beaten. Four more black men and one white man were killed.\(^\text{19}\) As a result of these attacks, the streetcar conductors went on a general strike that halted service on the surface and elevated lines through the rest of the week.

\[^{17}\] Chicago Commission on Race Relations 597.


\[^{19}\] Chicago Commission on Race Relations 6.
When news of the white mob-led assaults and murders reached the black neighborhoods of the South Side that evening, black mobs retaliated by reportedly beating nine white men, stabbing six, shooting five, and killing four. Through the night, clashes continued as black mobs assaulted whites within the “Black Belt” and whites assaulted blacks caught outside of it. Smaller mobs of white men attacked black settlements on the periphery of the “Black Belt.”

At that point, the local police did little to stem the tide of violence. They focused their riot suppression efforts primarily within the “Black Belt” instead of on the periphery where most of the violence was occurring. Although several companies of the state militia were officially mobilized in the local armories that night, Chicago Mayor William Thompson did not authorize them to take control of riot suppression. He reportedly believed that the local police was capable of suppressing the riot with the use of its own resources.

Unfortunately, blacks felt the sting of the popular stereotype that labeled them as inherently more criminal than whites. Importantly enough, at that time, Chicago’s police and criminal judicial statistics were inaccurate and incomplete. Since no central, authoritative clearinghouse existed to assess and publish comprehensive criminal statistics, no hard empirical data existed to confirm such a stereotype. Although an Illinois state law was passed in 1912 creating a central bureau responsible for compiling and publishing all statistics related to crime and law enforcement, it had not yet been implemented. So although it can not be definitively asserted that blacks in Chicago were targeted more often by the police, testimonies given by local judges to the Chicago City Council Crime Committee indicated that blacks were

20 Chicago Commission on Race Relations 6-7.

21 Chicago Commission on Race Relations 328.
more easily identified and more likely to be arrested.\textsuperscript{22} This perception of the inherently "dangerous" black person likely influenced the thoughts and decisions of many of Chicago’s police officers. For its part, the black community perceived the police force as not having their interests at heart, especially in light of the lack of arrests for the numerous acts of terrorism committed against blacks in and near white areas of the city. As a result of this mistrust, Chicago’s blacks committed themselves to prepare for and execute their own defense during the riot.

By Tuesday morning, 29 July, new waves of clashes occurred as black laborers attempted to walk to their jobs in the Stock Yards and other surrounding white communities. Again, newspaper accounts from around the country sensationalized the violence. The \textit{Atlanta Constitution} headline of the previous day’s events read, “Seven Persons Are Killed in Renewed Chicago Riots.” The \textit{Washington Post} featured a sensationalized story of questionable factual content with the highly-racialized headline “6 Die in Chicago Riot – ‘Flying Squadron’ of Negroes Fire Into Group of Whites.” Both articles featured nearly the exact same content, reporting exclusively on rumors of black looting and widespread attacks by blacks on defenseless whites. Not a single instance of white aggression was described in detail in the papers.\textsuperscript{23} Use of such racially inflammatory language in reporting about the riot unfairly placed unwarranted scrutiny (and blame) upon Chicago’s blacks, who appeared to be the aggressors. Inaccurate reporting made the real facts surrounding the riot much harder to discern.

Gangs composed of young male members of “athletic clubs” attacked and killed more blacks as Tuesday evening wore on. A mob of composed of white soldiers, sailors and civilians descended upon downtown Chicago, killing two blacks, injuring scores of others and destroying

\textsuperscript{22} Chicago Commission on Race Relations 330.
white businesses. By Tuesday night, white raids on black neighborhoods continued as homes on the periphery of the "Black Belt" were robbed, bombed and fired upon. Drive-by shootings continued to take place, as well as assaults upon blacks who were found in or near white neighborhoods.

Though much of the mob violence associated with the riot ended by Wednesday, 30 July, sporadic outbreaks of violence still plagued the South Side. By 10:30 that night, the state militia was deployed to the "Black Belt." It took control of riot suppression activities, relegating the police to a support role. Working together with ministers, employers and civic leaders of both races in the area, the militia quickly confined South Side residents to their communities and disarmed the population within the riot zone. They also set up protective details for blacks commuting to and from their jobs.

The residents of the "Black Belt" welcomed the state militia, which acted with greater professionalism than the local police force. Also, since many of the soldiers were not from the area, they exercised greater impartiality than the local police force in dealing with the black population. Its presence allowed for order to finally be restored to the smoldering city. With the exception of a fire that burned through an estimated forty-nine homes in the Polish and Lithuanian neighborhood west of the Stock Yards early Saturday morning, the mob-led murder and property destruction that marked the first three days of the riot had given way to scattered reports of racial clashes. Newspapers from around the country continued to publish these reports. Race continued to be a prominent factor in the riot reporting. For example, a Boston Globe article from 5 August reported on the post-riot indictments under the heading "17 Negroes

24 Chicago Commission on Race Relations 7.
Indicted for Chicago Riots."25 The story gave an impression to *Globe* readers that, again, blacks were largely responsible for the Chicago riots.

The heavily-racialized popular reporting of the later stages of the riot had no immediate effect on the lives of Chicago’s black population. Black laborers returned in small streams to their jobs, guarded by local police and the state militia. At that time, labor disagreements with their largely-unionized white coworkers were superseded by lingering racial tensions. By Thursday, 8 August, the riot was officially declared over and the state militia companies were withdrawn from the city. The people of Chicago returned to work.

All told, according to reports compiled by the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, the rioting resulted in thirty-eight dead, five-hundred and thirty-seven injured and approximately one thousand left homeless.26 Of these, not one of the thirty-eight deaths was that of a female. Only ten women were reported injured. Black males accounted for twenty-three dead and three-hundred forty-two injured. Additionally, though blacks accounted for the majority of the dead and injured, they were arrested at approximately twice the rate of whites.27

The events of 27 July – 8 August 1919, though arguably less devastating than the Springfield and East St. Louis riots, nevertheless left white and black community leaders endeavoring to find a justification for the violence. On 1 August 1919, an interracial group comprised of eighty-one citizens representing forty-eight civic, commercial, social and professional organizations including the Chicago Medical Association, Chicago Bar Association, the Federation of Churches, the Chicago Woman’s Club and the Packing House Industries met at Chicago’s Union League Club to discuss how do deal with the unprecedented violence that

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26 Chicago Commission on Race Relations 598.

27 Chicago Commission on Race Relations 599.
swept through their city. Each organization represented at the meeting had a vested interest in the social and economic well-being of Chicago. As a result of the meeting, a letter was sent to Governor Lowden that obliged him to

"...appoint at your earliest convenience an emergency state committee to study the psychological, social and economic causes underlying the conditions resulting in the present race riot and to make such recommendations as will tend to prevent a recurrence of such conditions in the future."²⁸

This letter, along with many others pressing similar action, prompted Governor Lowden on 20 August to establish a twelve-member Chicago Commission on Race Relations that would be composed of six members from each race. Their membership included Chicago Defender owner Robert S. Abbott, ex-Chicago Bar Association and ex-Illinois Bar Association President Edgar Addison Bancroft, Chicago Daily News owner Victor F. Lawson, Illinois General Assembly Representatives Edward H. Morris and Adelbert H. Roberts, and Sears, Roebuck and Company president Julius Rosenwald. These men were all prominent, progressive civic leaders who possessed a great deal of knowledge and experience in dealing with race relations. In a press release, the governor noted the necessity of the Commission's work when he stated, "These riots were the work of the worst element of both races... The great majority of each realizes the necessity of their living upon terms of cordial good will and respect, each for the other. That condition must be brought about."²⁹

Starting their work on 7 December 1919 and concluding it just over a year later, the Commission, with the assistance of community leaders and civic organizations of both races, compiled a comprehensive report detailing the events of the riot, its underlying conditions, its

²⁸ Chicago Commission on Race Relations xv.

²⁹ Chicago Commission on Race Relations xvi.
consequences, and recommendations for a profound improvement in race relations in Chicago.

In referring to its work, the Commission concluded that:

"The riot was merely a symptom of serious and profound disorders lying beneath the surface of race relations in Chicago. The study of the riot... as to its interlocking provocations and causes, required a study of general race relations that made possible so serious and sudden an outbreak. Thus to understand the riot and guard against another, the Commission probed systematically into the principal phases of race contact and sought accurate information on matters which in the past have been influenced by dangerous speculation."\(^{30}\)

Their work identified and expounded upon six significant facets of Chicago's crisis in race relations that led to the riot: previous racial clashes, daily racial contacts, housing, industry, crime, and public opinion.

To a significant degree, labor relations between blacks and their employers were only slightly stymied by racial stereotypes and racial discrimination. Although generally kept out of managerial positions within companies or occupations that involved public interaction (excluding railroad porters), blacks enjoyed similar, though still unequal, wages to their white counterparts. When considering the racial discrimination faced by Chicago's black workers, the Commission noted,

"Whether or not the Negro will be able to hold the position in industry made possible for him by the war depends much on employers' attitude toward him as a worker. Common explanations given before this period as a reason for not employing Negroes more were

\(^{30}\) Chicago Commission on Race Relations 602.
that they were lazy, shiftless, irresponsible, and inefficient. Generalization of this sort
demonstrate[s]... that employers were not speaking from their own experiences."31

The majority of local employers of blacks, when questioned by the Commission about race
differences in labor habits and practices, reported that they experienced no disparity between
their black and white employees. For example, when asked "Has your Negro labor proved
satisfactory?" 118 of the 137 businesses employing five or more blacks responded in agreement
with the statement.32 Still, the long-term career prospects for an unskilled black Chicagoan were
poor at best. When the end of World War I brought thousands of working-age white men back to
Chicago, blacks, who were employed in higher proportions than any other ethnic group in
Chicago at the time, were the first to be fired from their jobs to make way for the returning men.

The experience of Chicago's blacks with organized labor was less genial. Due in large
part to the persistent conflict between white labor unions and business owners, black migrants
found employment in many instances as strike-breakers. The majority of Chicago's labor unions
maintained an implicit policy of racial segregation. And among those labor unions that did allow
blacks to join, white workers enjoyed greater benefits of membership. As a result, blacks'
mistrust of unions resulted in only small numbers retaining memberships. With the labor unions
divided by race, employers were able to exploit readily-available black labor, and demagogues
were able to exploit antagonistic race-feeling on the part of white labor.

Competition over housing played a huge role in establishing the environment of hatred
and misunderstanding that existed before the riot. As the black population of Chicago more than
doubled from 1910 to 1920, instances of violence increased as blacks attempted to move out of
the overcrowded "Black Belt" and into the traditionally white-dominated residential areas

31 Chicago Commission on Race Relations 624.
32 Chicago Commission on Race Relations 624.
surrounding it on all sides. Communities such as Kenwood and Hyde Park, which lie between the “Black Belt” and Lake Michigan, became hotly-contested battlegrounds. White residents quickly formed neighborhood “protection” associations to keep blacks out of their “space.” They blacklisted realtors whom were sympathetic to blacks and pressured other blacks who did attempt to move into their neighborhoods to move out. When these tactics were unsuccessful, gangs terrorized the homes and business of blacks and uncooperative white realtors through bombings and random shootings. For many years, the white communities around the “Black Belt” successfully utilized violent coercion as a means to maintain residential segregation in Chicago. These abhorrent practices did not change as a result of the riot.

Public opinion played a significant role in whites' perceptions of blacks as individuals and as possible neighbors. The prevailing social dogma concerning blacks during that time asserted that blacks were mentally inferior, amoral, inherently criminal (black men were predisposed to sexual crimes), physically unattractive, indolent, puerile, and motivated singularly by passion (as opposed to reason). While it is difficult to qualify the foundations of beliefs, the history of blacks in the United States as slaves, mixed with their general socioeconomic status at the time, likely lent credence to the negative perceptions held by their white neighbors. Additionally, the average white Chicagoan had few, if any, meaningful interactions with blacks in their daily lives. Because of their negative perception of blacks, they possessed no motivation to actually interact with their fellow black citizens. For blacks, this aspect of public opinion only complicated their already burdened lives. Concerning the uniquely unpleasant position of the black person in American society, the Commission noted:

“Negroes... have been intellectually isolated from the white group. They have not participated fully and freely in community and cultural activities. The pressure of the white group in practically every ordinary experience has kept their attention... centered upon themselves, and they have become race conscious. White persons know very little
about what Negroes are thinking, because they are not familiar with their experiences; they... are not acquainted with the processes of thought by which the opinions of Negroes are formed."

Such a profound and persistent ideological separation, in the absence of any countervailing influences, sets the basis for seething racial antagonism, which is simply reinforced by local economic, political, and cultural institutions.

In the end, not even the most powerful privilege of citizenship possessed by Chicago's black population was enough to counteract the virulent pattern of racial confrontation and violence that split Chicago apart and ultimately led to the riot. Though the influential exercise of black electoral power in local politics did lead to a greater voice for blacks in local affairs, it did not lead to the promotion of greater racial understanding and unity in the years leading up to the riot. Blacks, who still voted solidly within the column of the "party of Lincoln," were largely credited by the local newspapers with Republican William Hale Thompson's victory in Chicago's mayoral election of 1915. Constituting a majority of the voting population in several city wards throughout Chicago's South Side, blacks were additionally able to elect a black alderman and secure the appointment of several blacks to important positions in the city government. The general consensus within the white community (according to the local newspapers) was that Thompson was a corrupt, ineffectual leader. Public opinion voiced through the local newspapers also regarded local black city officials as engendering corruption through the promotion of vice in the "Black Belt." To many white Chicagoans, both Mayor Thompson's administration and the local black politicians did not provide a path to resolving Chicago's race problem. They were ruinous influences on the city's white neighborhoods and, by extension, the city itself.

33 Chicago Commission on Race Relations 633.
Among the arbiters of public opinion, it was the major newspapers, above all else, that bore a great deal of responsibility for manufacturing and heightening negative racial feeling before, during and after the riot. Before the riot, blacks had long accused both the national and local press of exciting race feeling with racist and purposefully incendiary writings. The Associated Negro Press accused the Associated Press of fostering race hatred through its stories which:

"... always in its first paragraph... attributes the source of the trouble to our people 'molesting white women.' That, the Associated Press knows, is always fuel for the fire of the fury... It arouses certain elements of whites to indignation by the thoughts of the ever 'burly black brutes,' and it stirs the people of our group to a state of fighting, mad by the folly of it."34

The same sensationalized, incendiary reporting helped spark the devastating East St. Louis and Washington, D.C. riots.

The Commission on Race Relations conducted a study of race-based stories printed in the Chicago Tribune, Chicago Daily News and Chicago Herald-Examiner from 1916-1917. In general, the articles were found to contain incomplete information, uninformed conjecture, and exaggerated language and images. In articles dealing with the black population, the themes of crime, housing, politics, riots and the military received the most attention. The articles served to reinforce prevalent stereotypes and assumptions concerning race relations in general and black behavior specifically. Confrontations between blacks and whites were labeled as "riots." News of any criminal activity involving a black perpetrator and a white victim always focused on the criminal's race, and often exaggerated the details of the act. Examples of white newspaper headlines before the riot include, for crime: "Negro Attacks Woman. Her Screams Bring Help."

34 Chicago Commission on Race Relations 521.
for housing: "Court Blocks Negro Invasion," for politics: "Negro Vote Manipulation Alleged in East St. Louis," for military: "Negro Stevedores To France," and for general race relations: "Mammy Kidnaps Her Child." Of all of the topics covered by the white press, only stories dealing with black soldiers evoked positive sentiment. As a result of such reporting, the Negro press was highly defensive, often responding to what was printed in the white papers. Chicago's black newspapers, the *Whip, Broad Ax, Defender* and *Searchlight*, mimicked the white newspapers by printing racially-charged stories as well. Crimes involving white perpetrators and black victims were printed under headlines such as "Kills White Man for Girl's Honor," "White Woman Confesses Lies on Colored Men," and "Maid Is Robbed by White 'Iceman'." Unlike the white newspapers, heavy-handed racial language is not present outside of that class of stories.

In terms of riot reporting, both the white and black presses in Chicago were uncharacteristically subdued. There was extensive riot reporting on the part of the white Chicago papers, but they were credited with not exacerbating the violence in the same manner as the local papers at the sites of other race riots. While irresponsible journalism did plague Chicago's race relations on both sides of the color line, the riot was not further exacerbated by its press providing a greater outlet for the wild conjecture and rumor that swept through the South Side neighborhoods.

Altogether, there existed a multitude of factors that gave the Chicago riots a unique character when compared to the Elaine and Tulsa riots. Significantly, it marked the first time that a black population openly organized and retaliated against racial violence instigated by whites. Greater economic mobility and the attitude of the self-determined, confident "New Negro" are seen as major contributing factors to this outcome. The riot was not precipitated by rumors of

35 Chicago Commission on Race Relations 530.

36 Chicago Commission on Race Relations 560-561.
black violence, specifically allegations of sexual violence against a white woman. For the first time, the black neighborhoods were not the central focus of the rioting. An estimated forty-one percent of the reported activity associated with the riots took place in the Stock Yards district and adjacent white settlements to the south and west of the "Black Belt," with only an estimated thirty-four percent of reported clashes occurring within it. There were no lynchings or immolation of blacks committed by whites, and not a single female fatality was recorded. Chicago's blacks fought their aggressors on a virtually equal footing. The Commission on Race Relations also found that organized raids occurred "only after a period of sporadic clashes and spontaneous mob outbreaks." The rioting, even during the most violent days, was "intermittent" in nature and generally occurred near the end of the work day.

Undoubtedly Chicago's urbanized, interracial socioeconomic landscape also contributed to the riot's unique characteristics. Unlike most other areas of the United States at the time, Chicago contained a highly-concentrated, educated, wealthy, politically active and socially empowered black population that attained a wealth of experience in the privileges and responsibilities of American citizenship. Due to the resiliency of its cultural institutions in the face of systemic racial oppression, Chicago's black community was much more resistant to acts of terrorism and other modes of extralegal white violence.

As blacks constituted a significant portion of Chicago's industrial labor force, it was in the best interests of the city's business leaders to help to bring an end to the riot and mitigate its lingering effects. Economically, the riot was damaging to the Chicago economy in terms of destroyed property and labor disruption. However, the severity of the damage was minimized as much of the early violence took place at the end of the work day. Why, unlike elsewhere, was

37 Chicago Commission on Race Relations 601.
38 Chicago Commission on Race Relations 601.
there a cessation in mob violence during work hours? The economic reality of life in an urban area such as Chicago demanded that laborers work in order to afford the higher cost of living, or risk losing everything they possess. Unlike most other areas of the country at the time, the average Chicagoan was not a producer of personal consumable goods, but a consumer. If he did not have a wage-earning occupation, he would not be able to live in the city. The fact that the Chicago riot, though destructive to life and property, did not have a prolonged adverse affect on the supply or disposition of its labor force was a positive factor in the quick recovery of Chicago’s black community.

Throughout the violent episode, blacks learned the cost of pursuing citizenship and social equality in Chicago. They realized that they could not depend upon the police or the political structure to fully address their needs as a population. Their efforts at self-defense attained fruition during the riot as well-armed blacks all over the South Side successfully defended themselves, their families and their property against mob violence. As a consequence of the progressive economic and sociopolitical landscape of Chicago, they emerged as one of the most powerful black communities in the nation. Though the racial violence would continue, they would no longer remain passive victims. They would take responsibility for realizing social, economic and political equality on their own terms.
Chapter 2

Elaine, 1919

While the deplorable events of mid-Summer 1919 forced the city of Chicago into profound introspection, an outbreak of racial violence some 600 miles away in the “alluvial empire” of the Arkansas Delta would also leave its imprint on the incipient national struggle for black civil rights. From 30 September until 7 October 1919, Elaine, Phillips County, Arkansas erupted in a paroxysm of white mob violence that destroyed the lives and property of hundreds of its black residents.

In the early twentieth-century South, cotton was still king. It wasn’t until the forces of capitalism brought finance, industrial development and logistical infrastructure in the form of railroads to the Arkansas Delta that sustained, widespread agricultural growth and exploitation occurred. Fueled largely by northern capital, the Mississippi/Arkansas Delta region, home to some of the most fertile soil on the planet, was transformed into an “alluvial empire” of massive timber mills and cotton plantations. By the end of World War I, massive rail and drainage projects transformed the Mississippi/Arkansas Delta region into the second largest hardwood processing center in the United States. In addition, the value of the 1919 cotton harvest was
estimated at over $2 billion, the highest value attained to that date. As a result of these developments, the region began to generate an unprecedented amount of wealth. Despite these economic gains, however, the bleak reality of the South's racial caste system still circumscribed the social, economic and political existence of the Delta's black communities.

Like the black population of Chicago, the socioeconomic upheaval caused by World War I made the blacks of Elaine more acutely aware of the cost and privileges of citizenship in an American democracy. Some 1,000 black soldiers from the region fought "to preserve democracy" in Europe. When they came home, they brought their determination to assert their citizenship with them. Such attitudes were not without consequences; at least eighteen lynchings nationwide, aside from other types of murders, were reported to the NAACP that year. In addition to alleged "violations" of a white woman's "honor," many veterans became victims for simply being "uppity." For those at home, wartime demand for cotton and timber sent prices skyrocketing, resulting in greater economic fortunes for the sharecroppers and tenants who constantly suffered under the weight of a system of debt peonage. Though higher prices and increased production generated unprecedented wealth for the region, the planters still controlled the access of the sharecroppers and tenants to the commercial market.

Unlike their contemporaries in Chicago, blacks living in Phillips County, Arkansas could not exercise their constitutional rights free of the threat of retaliatory violence. Qualitatively, the lives of Arkansas' black share tenants and sharecroppers differed only minimally from those of their slave ancestors of two generations before. Forced into debt peonage and threatened with injury or death for any breach of racial conventions, the lives of these people were literally in the hands of the plantation owners that "employed" them. However, in spite of the overwhelming

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40 Kieran Taylor, ""We Have Only Just Begun": Black Organizing and White Response in the Arkansas Delta, 1919," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 58 (Autumn 1919): 270.
oppression exerted by the minority population of wealthy (and well-armed) whites, the blacks of Elaine chose to organize in an attempt to challenge the legal basis of their continued debt peonage during this period of record-high cotton prices.

The founding of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America (PFHUA) in 1918 was a manifestation of the sharecroppers' attempt to secure their right to participate as free citizens in America's capitalist economy. The "union" was, according to historian Nan Woodward, likely not a labor union in the usual sense. It was more like a secret fraternal order, which has existed as an important civic institution in the black community since emancipation. It was organized as a joint stock company, and each member bought a one dollar share to join. The union itself became an important center of the community's social, economic and political life. The union, which planned to use its capital stock to purchase real estate, extended credit to sharecroppers and farmers whom were rejected by white banks. It served as the principal conduit of information into and out of the region. There the sharecroppers could learn about what was happening outside of Arkansas, join the NAACP, and read black publications. It was a popular social venue that served luncheons, held dances and coordinated charity drives. Political experience was gained by those in leadership positions who organized investment portfolios and led membership drives. Additionally, the union, which used as its slogan "We Champion the Moral, Material, Political and Intellectual Interest of Our Race," served as an all-too-important venue for discussing the sociopolitical goals of the community. To the white planters, this organization existed to overthrow white supremacy in the Arkansas Delta. By any account, the riot was preceded by the efforts of PFHUA members in and around the town of Elaine to organize and initiate a lawsuit against their employers.

Prior to 30 September, the PFHUA hired the services of Ulysses S. Bratton, a famous white attorney in Little Rock who was known to be sympathetic to the plight of the black community. A staunch Republican, Bratton won an earlier peonage suit against some of the Delta’s planters. Earlier that September, he was asked by a sharecropper from the town of Ratio to initiate a class-action suit representing the claims of sixty-eight PFUA members against their employer, plantation owner Theodore Fauthauer. According to their testimony, the plantation manager refused to pay them for the cotton harvested, and rebuffed requests to present itemized accounting records for each sharecropper. Because he could not pay a personal visit to his clients, Bratton sent his son Ocier to meet with them in Ratio on 1 October to record further testimonies and discuss the case.\textsuperscript{42}

Arriving in town on 30 September, Ocier Bratton was one of the first to be swept up in the wave of violence that quickly enveloped the region. Before his official meeting with the PFHUA members, he met with a small group of approximately two dozen sharecroppers near the local railroad stop. For approximately an hour the sharecroppers gave him the details of their accounts with Fauthauer and, after consulting with him, retained his services. Before this meeting was concluded, however, an armed group of white men arrived and abducted him. He was taken to Elaine where he was detained and interrogated, ostensibly for inciting “insurrection” amongst the Fauthauer plantation sharecroppers. Though a lynch mob stood ready to deliver its “justice,” Ocier Bratton was instead sent to jail in the nearby town of Helena. That evening, Bratton received news of a violent confrontation between a group of blacks and a number of white men in the nearby town of Hoop Spur. Bratton never made the appointed

\textsuperscript{42} Woodruff 84.
meeting with his father's prospective clients. Illegally detained, he spent the next four weeks incarcerated in the Helena jail.\textsuperscript{43}

The violent confrontation in Hoop Spur that Ocier Bratton heard about that evening was, to the Delta's whites, the start of the black "insurrection" that threatened to annihilate them. That evening, the PFHUA members who initially sought to retain the services of his father met in a church in Hoop Spur to discuss moving forward with their lawsuit. The fact that armed men were posted as guards outside of the church was not an unusual practice. The people inside the church knew the implications of their organizing. Reprisals against such moves by the sharecroppers generally took the form of beatings, false imprisonment, or lynchings.

Receiving a tip about the existence of the meeting, Phillips County Deputy Sheriff Charles Pratt tried, with some effort, to create a posse.\textsuperscript{44} He arrived at the church with special agent W.A. Adkins of the Missouri Pacific Railroad and Ed Collins, a black trusty from the county jail. The details of the confrontation that ensued are still subject to debate, but numerous shots were fired by the deputy and special agent into the church. According to NAACP assistant secretary Walter White, the meeting inside was "thrown into panic as fusillade after fusillade of bullets poured into the crowded church, killing a number of women and men and wounding others."\textsuperscript{45} Returning fire, the guards outside of the church killed Adkins. Deputy Pratt sent Collins to a nearby town to get help and, upon receiving word of the shootout, Sheriff Frank Kitchens organized a posse of three-hundred men under the command of local World War I veterans and sent them to the scene.\textsuperscript{46} Word spread quickly through the entire Delta that night.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{43} Woodruff 85.
\bibitem{44} Woodruff 86.
\bibitem{46} Woodruff 86.
\end{thebibliography}
By the morning of Wednesday, 1 October, the church at Hoop Spur had been torched and massive mobs of hundreds of armed whites led by planters from every corner of the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta had descended upon the town of Elaine. Receiving news from Sheriff Kitchens of an "insurrection," Arkansas Governor Charles Brough asked for and received permission from the U.S. Secretary of War to deploy federal troops to the area. Though Governor Brough was informed that Sheriff Kitchens had deputized a posse of armed white men to deal with the shootout at the church at Hoop Spur, he still felt the need to deploy not just state troops, but extensively-armed federal troops to the area. It is conceivable that potential fears of an actual armed insurrection by the majority black population in Elaine led the governor to bring to bear upon the area the most substantial level of force available to him. The mobilization of professional troops from outside the region was a clearly effective means of restoring order as evinced in Chicago. In Elaine, however, the mobilization of federal troops with considerable firepower served only to initiate war against the "insurrectionist" black population. The phone lines to Elaine and several surrounding towns were severed, closing off any communication with the outside world. Hell was about to descend upon every black person that lived in or near Elaine with all the irresistible force of a tsunami.

The blacks who met at the church fled for their lives in the surrounding forests and swamps as mobs of white vigilantes descended upon the area through 1 October and into 2 October. That Thursday morning, Governor Brough personally escorted 583 battle-hardened soldiers from the Third Infantry Division, United States Army (including a twelve-member machine-gun battalion) into Elaine from Camp Pike, Little Rock. Commanded by World War I veteran Colonel Isaac C. Jenks, the soldiers were charged with disarming all vigilantes, sending every white woman and child in Elaine to nearby Helena, and detaining every black man, woman and child within a two-hundred mile radius. The soldiers were ordered to execute on
sight any black person that refused to surrender to them. By the end of the first day of their deployment, three white men and seven black men were reported dead.\textsuperscript{47}

Due to the circumstances surrounding the first day’s violence, the ten reported dead was likely an underestimate. According to various eyewitnesses, mobs of hundreds of white vigilantes were well-armed. They roamed the countryside alongside the soldiers, rounding up and murdering blacks at will wherever they were found. Many recorded eyewitness accounts described the appalling acts committed by these soldiers and vigilantes. Louis Dunaway, a reporter for the \textit{Arkansas Gazette}, published an account by a local schoolteacher who witnessed “twenty-eight black people killed, their bodies thrown into a pit and burned.”\textsuperscript{48} Dunaway himself followed the soldiers and wrote about how they

“...left a path strewn with orphans and widows and made a mockery of the laws they were sworn to uphold and obey... the soldiers marched rough-shod over the vast community inhabited principally by negroes, and shot them down in cold blood without any reason or excuse – thus manifesting a blood thirstiness without any parallel disclosed in the history of civilization.”\textsuperscript{49}

According to Dunaway, the death toll at the end of the military occupation included “856 dead negro bodies with a wounded list probably five times greater.”\textsuperscript{50}

As the week drew to an end, every black man, woman and child in the area that was not killed was rounded up and taken to the Elaine schoolhouse where they were interrogated and tortured. As the planters were losing money as a result of the riot, they were eager to get their

\textsuperscript{47} Woodruff 86-87.

\textsuperscript{48} Louis S. Dunaway, \textit{What a Preacher Saw Through a Key-Hole in Arkansas} (Little Rock: Parke-Harper, 1925), 103-104.

\textsuperscript{49} Dunaway 108-109.

\textsuperscript{50} Dunaway 109.
sharecroppers to return to work. Most of those detained were released after proving their non-affiliation with the PFHUA and agreeing to work without pay for specified lengths of time for their employers. Additionally, each of the freed blacks was required to possess a pass at all times indicating his "status." As these sharecroppers were released under the authority of their plantation owners and managers, their freedom was contingent on the caprice of these men. These "freed" blacks were forced to work under considerable duress.

Eventually 122 people were singled out as instigators of the "insurrection" and were sent to the Phillips County Jail, where they awaited a loaded trial and certain life imprisonment or death. Additionally, countless numbers of blacks fled Phillips County in fear for their lives, never to return. According to later testimony, property losses for blacks who resided within the riot zone were near total. The mobs ransacked their homes, stole their property (including their crops), and, in many cases, destroyed their homes.

Order was declared restored by Colonel Jenks a week later on 7 October. The number of people murdered, according to Jenks' official report, stood at two blacks and one of his corporals. In addition, only one of his soldiers was reported wounded. He did not elaborate on the details of his soldiers' actions in suppressing the "insurrection," nor did he go into detail concerning the condition of the black community or the white vigilante mobs. Though his troops were deployed ostensibly to restore order, it is worth noting that they were not called in to protect the black community from the white vigilante mobs. They were called in to suppress a black "insurrection" to kill twenty-one planters that was such in name only. Their deployment did not occur as a result of actual reports of violence beyond the control of the local and state authorities. That Jenks' official report vastly underreported the number of dead, wounded and injured by comparison to every newspaper account of the event calls his motives into question. It is very likely that an accurate reporting of the dead and injured would have drawn intense public scrutiny to both Jenks and his unit. Despite the attempt to cut Elaine off from the outside
world, press reporters did manage to witness and report on everything Jenks chose to omit from history.

The press reports which served as a counterpoint to Colonel Jenks' accounting of the Elaine riot offered fabricated, racialized descriptions of the massacre that took place. They also differed considerably in the magnitude of the estimated number of dead. For example, a Memphis Press article on 2 October gave a fairly detailed description of the day's violence:

"Many negroes are reported killed by the soldiers. Two soldiers are seriously wounded. The negroes are surrounded in the woods near Elaine and have refused to surrender. A battle to the finish is expected. The negroes are well drilled and armed. The soldiers have trained machine guns on them. Constant fighting now in progress."

An almost identical 3 October New York Times article listed the number of dead at sixteen, including "four negro brothers." It described the wounding of the same two Army soldiers: Corporal Luther Earles, who "had his jaw shot off... by a negro he discovered hiding under a log" and Sergeant Bert B. Gay, who "was shot through the chest by a fleeing negro." In a 5 October article on the riot, the Helena World placed the number of dead at twenty-five. The Crisis put the ultimate death toll at twenty-five blacks and five whites. In their investigations, Walter White and Ulysses S. Bratton both placed the number of black dead at approximately two-hundred. The number of dead will never be known with any great accuracy, but it was by a majority of accounts much larger than the official report. For blacks, the number ranged from Colonel Jenks' "official" estimate to the Arkansas Gazette estimate of 856. For whites, the number ranged from five to twenty-five men killed.


The 122 who lived through the riot, but were indicted on 31 October on various crimes associated with it, were subjected to a travesty of justice. Seventy-three were indicted for murder. The other forty-nine were indicted for various crimes including "night riding," which had only been associated with white terrorist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. Despite protection from federal troops outside the courthouse, Elaine's "dingy courtroom" was crowded with armed men who pressured Judge J.M. Jackson to return speedy verdicts as the riot trials began on 3 November.53 The attorneys selected to defend the accused never met with their clients, produced any evidence or witnesses, or called their clients to give their testimony on the stand. The all-white grand jury took less than ten minutes to return each verdict. In less than a week, eleven men were sentenced to death for murder (another was charged, found guilty and sentenced to death several weeks later), and sixty-seven received sentences ranging from a year to life imprisonment for various crimes associated with the "insurrection."54 Ulysses S. Bratton, convicted of barratry in the course of his legal assistance to the black sharecroppers, was banished from the state of Arkansas for the rest of his life. Robert Hill, the organizer of the PFHUA, was indicted for murder and inciting "insurrection," but he escaped to Kansas and defeated efforts at extradition.

The ruling elite of Phillips County moved quickly to construct their version of events in the wake of the terrible devastation wrought upon the blacks of Elaine and the surrounding area by the mobs of white vigilantes. Retaining control over the flow of information into and out of the area, a group of local elites calling themselves the "Committee of Seven" convened from 2 – 6 October to construct and disseminate their version of the events of the riot. The members were Phillips County Sheriffs Frank F. Kitchens and Sebastian Straub, Judge H.D. Moore, Helena

53 White 49.
54 White 49.
Mayor J.G. Knight, planters E.C. Hornor and T.W. Keese, and Helena Businessmen's League president E.M. Allen. Their description of the "insurrection" became the official version of events published in every major newspaper in the country, including the aforementioned Memphis Press and New York Times.

Following upon the lead of the "Committee of Seven" to establish the riot solely as the fault of local black leaders, local sympathetic whites, and northern Republicans, the national press described it as either a "negro uprising" or "insurrection." A New York Times article of 6 October that reported on the riot went under the headline "Planned Massacre of whites Today – Negroes Seized in Arkansas Riots Confess to Widespread Plot Among Them." The story, which was a description of the riot provided by the "Commission of Seven," went on to elaborate on the details of the "general slaughter of white people" to take place. It included, oddly, an initial attempt by the sharecroppers to "take a bale of cotton by that date to certain prominent land owners, plantation managers and merchants and 'demand a settlement'." Upon meeting with these "twenty-one" prominent individuals, the black sharecroppers were to murder them. Word of the murders of these whites would be spread to every black person in Phillips County via "Paul Reveres" who would rouse everyone to "attack the white population." The PHFUA was named by the "Committee of Seven" as the organization that planned and instigated the attempted massacre of whites. The members of this organization and its leader, Robert Hill, were "rascals" and "mercenaries" who manipulated the "good Negroes" of Phillips County and "incited them in the name of the Federal Government." The innocent sharecroppers who were fooled by the PHFUA were "led to believe a part of the Government at Washington upheld them in arming and organizing against the whites, that a large temple and armories were to be

Woodruff 92.
erected at Washington for the convening of the 'congress' and for Federal training of 3,000 soldiers to protect them in their uprising.\textsuperscript{56}

In addition to the \textit{New York Times} article, other papers such as the \textit{Atlanta Constitution} also reported the committee's version of the event which started the riot:

"The facts are that the deputies sent out from Helena by the sheriff to arrest a white man [a local bootlegger] in Elaine were assassinated at Hoop Spur on Tuesday night... The posse sent out from Helena immediately after this assassination were surrounded and fired upon by the negroes north of Hoop Spur..."\textsuperscript{57}

Even without the help of the "Committee of Seven," unsubstantiated fabrications still appeared in newspaper articles. In a \textit{Los Angeles Times} 2 October article entitled "Arkansas Riot-Torn — whites Battle With Negro Gangs," the "gangs" of blacks were depicted as the violent aggressors. The customary practice of publishing uncorroborated rumors concerning attacks on white women and children was utilized in the story:

"An engineer of the Missouri Pacific Railroad who arrived in Helena tonight said he pulled a steel gondola loaded with women and children out of Elaine late today, and that his train was fired upon by negroes from trees along the track."\textsuperscript{58}

No other eyewitness account or general reporting on the riot existed to corroborate the engineer's story. Since the power possessed by the men who fabricated this version of the riot was substantial, their story persisted, even in the face of prominent challenges.

As quickly as the planters manufactured their version of events during the race riot, black activists mobilized to investigate and report on the riot from the sharecroppers' perspective.


\textsuperscript{57} "Planters Give Facts About Arkansas Riot," \textit{Atlanta Constitution}, 13 October 1919: 10.

\textsuperscript{58} "Arkansas Riot-Torn," \textit{Los Angeles Times}, 2 October 1919: 11.
perspective. Black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* received reports from blacks who successfully fled the massacre. Their stories offered glaring contradictions to what was being reported in the country’s major newspapers. Likely aware of the significance of securing the support of public opinion, the whites of the Arkansas Delta not only censored the distribution of black newspapers such as the *Defender* in their region, but also publicly castigated the black press for inciting the “insurrection.” Threats and other hate mail streamed into the *Defender*'s offices. An example of one such letter was published by the paper on 10 July 1920 under the title “The Soul of a Lyncher.” While the author’s identity as a “lyncher” may have been moot, his complicity in the riot of the previous fall was indisputable. Accusing northern blacks of sending threatening letters to the mayor of Elaine, the governor of Arkansas and the governor of Kansas in the wake of the riots, he wrote:

> “you are agitating... through your paper which is causing some of your good Bur heads [sic] to be killed and the end is not in sight yet. but you have not got since [sic] enough to see it. go on. you could be of assistance to your people if you would advise them to be real niggers instead of fools... keep this... propaganda up we are still in the saddle and some of your good niggers are paying the price of your ignorance...”

The letter underscored the mix of paternalism and hatred that defined whites’ regard for blacks in the Arkansas Delta. Thanks to black newspapers such as the *Defender*, the white population of Phillips County lost complete control not only over information reaching the black population, but also information being disseminated to the world about the black population. Unlike other racial atrocities, the black perspective of the Elaine riot would be recorded, published, and brought to bear upon the whites of Phillips County.

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Civil rights activists Walter White and Ida B. Wells easily countered the specious "official" account with the results of their own investigations. Alarmed by news of the riot, Walter White, who was then assistant secretary of the NAACP, travelled to the region posing as a reporter for the Chicago Daily News. Because of his lighter skin complexion, White could, and did, pass for a white man. Granted an audience with Governor Brough, White "led him to believe that I had little knowledge of the Negro question and was open-minded to whatever facts he, as chief executive of the state, cared to give me."\(^6^0\) The Arkansas governor appeared to be convinced of White's authenticity, as he was quoted as saying,

"I am delighted that a Northern newspaper has sent so able and experienced a reporter to answer the foul lies the Chicago Defender and that infamous National Association for the Advancement of Colored People have been telling about the good white people of Arkansas."\(^6^1\)

The governor then proceeded to relate to him the "Committee of Seven's" version of the events that took place, noting that "the white people of the county had shown remarkable restraint and human kindness in putting down the insurrection."\(^6^2\)

White was able to interview terrified refugees in Little Rock, but did not attempt to interview blacks in Elaine for fear of inciting reprisals against them. Travelling to Phillips County, he instead made an unsuccessful attempt to interview the riot prisoners being held in Helena's county jail. Walking near the railroad one afternoon before meeting with Sheriff Frank Kitchens, however, he was secretly warned by a black man that the local whites were "going to get" him.

\(^{60}\) White 49.

\(^{61}\) White 49-50.

\(^{62}\) White 50.
According to White, the man's motive for warning him was simple: "The way I figured it out is that if the white folks are so against you, you must be a friend of ours."\footnote{50}

White, fearing for his life, immediately ran to the railroad station in Helena and quietly jumped aboard the evening train out of sight of the people on the platform. As the train conductor collected White's cash fare, he commented to him that he was leaving "just when the fun is going to start." When asked why, the conductor told him, "There's a damned yellow nigger down here passing for white and the boys are going to get him."\footnote{51} Later, after taking the longest train ride of his life in reaching Memphis, White received word that he had been found and lynched earlier that same afternoon back in Helena. Amused yet relieved, he had his story.

White's published account of the riot in the \textit{Chicago Daily News}, the \textit{Crisis}, the \textit{Chicago Defender}, the \textit{Survey} and \textit{The Nation} not only placed the blame for the riot on the sharecropping system and its debt peonage, but also condemned the whites of Phillips County for leading a massacre of blacks who were only exercising their constitutional right to organize and seek redress for the injustices committed against them in the courts. The planters knew that the record-high price of cotton at forty to fifty cents a pound would have significantly diminished, if not destroyed, their system of debt peonage. For this reason, the planters seized the cotton of their sharecroppers and tenants and refused to pay them. Over the course of the riot, White estimated that over a thousand blacks were detained in the Elaine schoolhouse where they were denied access to lawyers, beaten and interrogated by members of the "Committee of Seven." Those whom were released received freedom under the control of their employers, and only after they convinced their interrogators that they had nothing to do with the PFHUA. Those

\footnote{50}{White 50.}
\footnote{51}{White 51.}
found guilty of "crimes" were taken to the Helena jail and made to confess via various methods of torture, including electrocution. 65

White's story was received by horrified whites and blacks from around the country, who sent letters of support to the NAACP and made contributions to the defense of the seventy-three blacks whom were indicted for murder. The story came as a shock to Governor Brough and Phillips County's prominent whites. Initially insisting that White never interviewed them, they realized that they had been mistaken concerning his true identity. From that point, they made stringent denials of the details of White's story. By that time, however, White had managed to mobilize a significant amount of press attention towards the twelve men condemned to be executed for their alleged roles in the Elaine riot. Desperately seeking support for the condemned men, White and the NAACP executed a successful public relations campaign that placed pressure upon both the Arkansas Supreme Court and the United States Supreme Court. As a result, the campaign, coincident with years of NAACP-sponsored legal battles, led to the overturning of execution sentences for the twelve men on three separate occasions, an unprecedented recognition of black civil rights in the Moore v. Dempsey decision, and eventual freedom for the each of the accused.

Civil rights activist Ida Wells-Barnett's investigation into the causes of the riot reached similar conclusions to that of Walter White, but her interviews with the incarcerated survivors and their families painted a much more detailed picture of the horrific mob violence that occurred over the course of the riot. Ed Ware, one of the condemned, testified to Wells-Barnett that when the white mobs set fire to the church in Hoop Spur early on the morning of 1 October, they did so with the bodies of the shooting victims still inside. Shortly after Ware returned home, his house was stormed by approximately "150 armed men" who either stole or destroyed all of

65 Woodruff 94.
his possessions and killed an old neighbor named Charley Robinson. Ware and his family escaped certain death by fleeing into the surrounding woods. Each of the other condemned men related similar stories of being chased by large, armed white mobs that ransacked their homes and killed those whom were too slow in escaping. Frank Moore, who was also a veteran of World War I, ran home from the meeting in Hoop Spur and awoke the next morning to witness the indiscriminate violence of the white mobs. As part of his testimony to Wells-Barnett, he stated:

“When we saw them (a mob of three- to five-hundred white men) shooting and burning... we turned running and went to the railroad east from there, and the white people tried to cut us off. They were shooting at us all the time... By 5 o’clock that evening, there was near 300 more white people coming on with guns, shooting and killing men, women and children. So I took the women and children and went to the woods and stayed...”\(^\text{66}\)

The image of women and children victims (as does the indiscriminate murder) in Moore’s testimony accentuates the inhumanity of the mobs of white men hunting them down.

Wells-Barnett’s investigation turned up multiple testimonies of violence against women and children, including the murder and mutilation of an elderly woman named Frances Hall and the torching of the Miller family home (with the family still inside). The difference between these testimonies, however, and the hearsay reported in the major white newspapers, is the existence not only of a large number of dead, but also corroborating eyewitness testimony. Moore, like all of his sharecropper brothers and sisters in the PFHUA, denied the assertions of the “Committee of Seven” and the “confessions” it gleaned from tortured detainees:

“... (the) white people want to say that union was the cause of the trouble. It’s not so; the white people were threatening to run us away from our crops before this trouble started.

\(^{66}\) Woodruff 97.
The Phillips County people know they started this trouble and they only got the army there to cover what they had done.\textsuperscript{67}

Wells-Barnett’s investigation, like that of White, was instrumental in countering the story disseminated by the “Committee of Seven.” Her reporting helped to garner public support behind the sharecroppers as they fought to reveal the truth surrounding the Elaine riot.

In the end, justice (in some small way) for the victims of the Elaine riot came in the decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in the landmark case \textit{Moore v. Dempsey}. This case decided the fate of six of the twelve men condemned to death for murder, and indirectly decided the fate of the other six. The twelve condemned men were Ed Ware, William Wordlow, Albert Giles, Joe Fox, Alfred Banks, Jr., John Martin, Frank Moore, Frank Hicks, Ed Hicks, J.E. Knox, Ed Coleman, and Paul Hall.\textsuperscript{68} Responding to the injustices endured by the defendants, the NAACP worked to secure the services of Scipio Africanus Jones, a famously-talented black attorney from Little Rock, and George W. Murphy, a Confederate veteran and former Arkansas Attorney-General. Funded in secret by NAACP donations, Jones and Murphy defended the twelve men through appeals filed in the state appellate courts. Eventually, the case against Ed Ware, William Wardlow, Albert Giles, Joe Fox, Alfred Banks, and John Martin for the murders of W.A. Adkins and Lewis Tappan, both white men, was overturned by the Arkansas Supreme Court. The defense lawyers successfully convinced the court that the jury in the original case neglected to state the formal charges being levied against the six men. Nevertheless, the Arkansas Supreme Court simply sent the case back to the lower courts for retrial and upheld the conviction of the other six men for the murder of Clinton Lee. Jones and Murphy petitioned for a writ of habeas corpus, stating that the trial given to the men, while superficially fair, was in fact

\textsuperscript{67} Woodruff 97.

\textsuperscript{68} Woodruff 98.
held under the coercion of a violent mob. Going first to the state chancery court and then to the federal district court, they argued that the Fourteenth Amendment right of the twelve men to due process of law had been blatantly violated. Although the federal district court denied their petition, they were allowed an appeal to the U. S. Supreme Court.

Finally argued on 9 January 1923, Moore v. Dempsey was the first great victory for black civil rights in the South in the twentieth century. Arguing for the fate of the six men still condemned to death (Frank Moore, Ed Hicks, Frank Hicks, J.E. Knox, Ed Coleman and Paul Hall), Jones, Murphy and famed civil rights lawyer Moorfield Storey convinced the court that the men's right to a fair trial under the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment had been violated. Although the court did not decide on the innocence or guilt of the six men, affidavits from T.K. Jones and H.F. Smiddy, two white men involved in the mob violence during the riot, may have assisted in Jones' and Murphy's victory. In an affidavit, the two men reversed their earlier testimonies accusing the condemned black men of murdering Adkins, Tappan and Lee. Their new testimony confirmed the sharecroppers' version of the events surrounding the riot. Both men confirmed the fact that Adkins' party started the firefight at the church in Hoop Spur, and that Tappan and Lee were likely killed by roaming mobs of white men shooting indiscriminately into groves, thickets and canebrakes outside of the town. Neither one had encountered an armed black person. The “confessions” of the condemned twelve men came out as a result of brutal torture at the hands of their interrogators. Describing the detention and interrogation of those blacks whom were rounded up, Smiddy testified that "no Negro freely and voluntarily testified in these cases. They were either whipped and compelled to testified [sic], or tortured in the other ways herein stated."\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{69} Woodruff 102.
In a 6-2 decision reversing the findings of the Arkansas court, Associate Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes argued for the majority that the due process protections afforded the men had been violated. While not commenting on the specific merits of the case, he stated:

"...if the case is that the whole proceeding is a mask—that counsel, jury and judge were swept to the fatal end by an irresistible wave of public passion, and that the State Courts failed to correct the wrong, neither perfection in the machinery for correction nor the possibility that the trial court and counsel saw no other way of avoiding an immediate outbreak of the mob can prevent this Court from securing to the petitioners their constitutional rights."\(^70\)

In addition, he argued that it was the duty of the federal courts to review petitions of habeas corpus for claims of discrimination in state trials that resulted in unjust convictions. Concluding his opinion, Justice Holmes wrote:

"...it does not seem to us sufficient to allow a Judge of the United States to escape the duty of examining the facts for himself when if true as alleged they make the trial absolutely void... it appears to us unavoidable that the District Judge should find whether the facts alleged are true and whether they can be explained so far as to leave the state proceedings undisturbed."\(^71\)

The decision was sent back to the lower courts in Arkansas, which overturned the convictions against the twelve men that same year. Finally, most of the other blacks whom were imprisoned for varying terms as a result of the trial had their convictions overturned as well. Despite the fact that justice, though delayed, was achieved in some small measure by the blacks of Elaine, untold numbers (including most of the 12 men saved from death) left the area never to return.


\(^{71}\) Moore v. Dempsey 261 U.S. 86 (1923).
Unlike Chicago, the events in Elaine witnessed a distinctly Southern approach to racial conflict. Any challenge initiated by blacks to the prevailing socioeconomic order was violently put down. Whites utilized the method of violent coercion because blacks were legally stripped of the protections of citizenship. Remarkably, though they were fully cognizant of the risks in organizing and defying the rule of whites in any manner, the blacks who lived in Phillips County still fought for their political and economic freedom. Much like the blacks in Chicago, they were heavily armed – an indication that they were prepared to defend their rights by force, and with their lives if necessary. Notably, the preamble to the charter of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union declared, "We Battle for Our Rights." Self-defense was a new priority for the blacks of Phillips County as they pursued the promise of American citizenship.

Although the South’s racial order was incompatible with this new assertion of black identity, the black population did not cease organizing and asserting their claims to American citizenship. The events that occurred in Elaine from 30 September to 7 October were a manifestation of the Delta’s planter class’ fears of black social, economic and political ascendance. Though the planters knew that the Progressive Farmers and Household Union was not a radical labor organization, they couched it in those terms anyway to provide a public justification for their attempt to suppress growing black socioeconomic independence. In terms of social, political, and economic activism, the blacks of Phillips County differed little from their counterparts in Chicago. The South’s systematized racial discrimination and (often violent) coercion limited the scope and extent of blacks’ self-deterministic activities. It was only in the face of overwhelming, brutal violence that they chose to flee for their lives and the lives of their families.

72 Woodruff 109.
In Phillips County, the black population, though concentrated at Elaine, possessed no political power at any level of government, no economic power, no access to public opinion through an organized press, no labor bargaining position, limited access to information, and a limited freedom of mobility. Just as damaging was the lack of coherent leadership by an informed, propertied class of elites with access to deeper political and economic resources. The only viable organizations that provided a social, economic and political outlet for the sharecroppers were churches and fraternal orders such as the Masons, the Odd Fellows and the Elks. Unions like the PFHUA posed a real threat to the planters because of their added economic and legal dimensions.

Though the PFHUA was effectively destroyed in the Elaine riot, unexpected support for the sharecroppers came in the form of a prominent NAACP that helped to initiate landmark legal proceedings to free those wrongfully imprisoned and condemned to die in the wake of the riot. In investigating and publicizing the atrocities committed during the riot, lawyers, reporters and NAACP activists such as Walter White and Ida B. Wells-Barnett brought the support of blacks (and sympathetic whites) across the nation to the disenfranchised and oppressed blacks of Elaine. For those who chose not to migrate elsewhere in the aftermath, the violence of the riot did little to stop the progress of black civil rights, especially in the wake of the Moore v. Dempsey decision.

Though the Elaine mobs killed or wounded untold numbers of blacks, they failed in their determined effort to impede the forward progress of the community. Through their organizing to assert and defend their rights as American citizens, the blacks of Phillips County represented a new generation whose attempts at forward social, economic and political progression posed a serious threat to the racial status quo. These efforts would grow to bear fruition nearly half a century later as the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s successfully brought the South’s de jure system of segregation, disenfranchisement and state-sanctioned racial violence to an end.
Chapter 3

Tulsa, 1921

The tide of violent racial conflict sweeping the United States during the early twentieth century rose to envelop Tulsa, Oklahoma on 31 May 1921 after an unfortunate encounter between a young black man and a young white woman in the elevator of a downtown building. A confrontation between an armed, angry mob of whites and an armed group of blacks near the jail where the young man was being detained turned violent, setting off a day-long race war that destroyed Tulsa’s black community of Greenwood. The conflict left an untold number of white and black residents dead or wounded. The violence caused much of Tulsa’s black population to scatter about the region in search of new homes. The survivors who stayed behind were interred in makeshift detention camps around Tulsa. And though the survivors received relief, they were nonetheless left powerless as their once great community was taken from them.

Derisively referred to by whites as “Little Africa,” the Greenwood community was situated in the shadow of downtown Tulsa. It was bounded by Lansing Street and the Midland Valley railroad to the east, the Frisco railroad yards to the south, Standpipe and Sunset Hills to the west, and open countryside to the north. Greenwood Avenue, the community’s backbone, ran north from Archer Street near the Frisco railroad yards through newer black housing developments on the fringe of the community. Unlike other streets in Tulsa, Greenwood Avenue lied almost completely within the black community. It was also one of the few paved streets in
the Greenwood community. Ominously enough, it was an efficient transportation corridor that facilitated easy access to the heart of Tulsa’s black community.

Greenwood’s famous commercial district, known prominently as “Deep Greenwood” and “Black Wall Street,” existed at the southern end of Greenwood Avenue. The commercial district boasted the black share of Tulsa’s oil wealth in its one- to three-story red brick homes and businesses. Before the 1921 race riot, the Greenwood community was home to a higher number of businesses, per capita, than most other black communities in the United States. Every type of commercial enterprise could be found there: hotels, cafes, dry goods, apothecaries, butcheries, barber shops, billiard halls, jewelers, tailors, upholsterers and photographers. These necessary businesses thrived since, due to segregation, blacks were often prohibited from patronizing white businesses. Historian John Hope Franklin wrote, “a suit of clothes could be purchased at Elliott & Hooker’s clothing emporium at 124 N. Greenwood, could be fitted across the street at H.L. Byars’ tailor shop at 105 N. Greenwood, and then cleaned around the corner at Hope Watson’s cleaners at 322 E. Archer.”^73^ If one was in the mood for a Coca-Cola, one could be bought as Rolly and Ada Huff’s confectionery on Archer Street between Detroit and Cincinnati Streets. John and Lula Williams’ seven-hundred-fifty seat Dreamland Theater, Tulsa’s second largest theater, offered Greenwood’s blacks musical shows and silent movies.

Standing parallel to the socioeconomic institutions of Tulsa’s white population, Greenwood’s commercial district was also home to a thriving service sector that drew upon the talents of Tulsa’s black intellectual class. Two black newspapers, the *Tulsa Star* and the *Oklahoma Sun*, had its presses located there. Located nearby were Tulsa’s black public library, the local black Y.M.C.A. branch, the local black business league, and various fraternal orders

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and women's clubs. Additionally, the offices of Tulsa's black lawyers, physicians, and other white-collar professionals were located in the commercial district and adjoining neighborhoods. Dr. A.C. Jackson, a black physician who was described by one of the Mayo brothers as the "most able Negro surgeon in America," had an office in the district.

By 1921, over ten thousand black men, women and children called the Greenwood community home. Most were neither businessmen nor businesswomen. Barred from Oklahoma's burgeoning oil industry and Tulsa's manufacturing sector, most of Greenwood's black residents took manual labor and domestic jobs: janitors, ditch-diggers, domestics, day laborers, and porters. Their income formed the basis of Greenwood's economic growth. However, these same people, some 95 percent, lived in what the American Association of Social Workers described as "poorly constructed frame houses, without conveniences, and on streets which were unpaved and on which the drainage was all surface." Greenwood's prosperous image became a racial liability for blacks as Tulsa's whites publicly condemned it during the months leading up to the riot. The prosperity of a few black Tulsans posed a threat to the twisted logic of white supremacy held by most white Tulsans. "Uppity" blacks such as Tulsa Star editor A.J. Smitherman were often accused of inciting trouble by "preaching racial equality." Greenwood itself stood as a contradiction to the perceived inferiority of black socioeconomic institutions. Its existence threatened Tulsa's color line by refuting the perceived inferiority of black socioeconomic institutions. In reestablishing the color line, Tulsa's whites found another group of blacks to pigeonhole with the "uppity" ones as the "real" threat to social order in the city.

74 Ellisworth 41.

Like any community, Greenwood possessed a criminal element. Much of the problem was due to the presence of a large labor force that worked in the nearby oil fields and sought pleasure in Tulsa. Though the United States was in the midst of the Prohibition era at the time of the riot, bootleg alcohol was easily found in hotels, clubs and illegal bars throughout the city. Roadhouses such as "Puss Hall's" on the outskirts of town were havens for gambling, prostitution, petty larceny, assault and murder. Illicit drugs, in the form of cocaine, opium and morphine were present everywhere. Despite the efforts (or lack thereof) of Tulsa's overwhelmed semi-professional police force, the city remained ravaged by crime and concomitant vigilantism.

Nevertheless, Tulsa's white newspapers fed the racial hysteria of the local white population by publishing sensational stories about vice in Greenwood. Despite the fact that Greenwood contained more churches per capita than Tulsa's other white communities, it was labeled as the epicenter of vice in Tulsa. A Tulsa Tribune editorial written three days after the riot summarized a popular position:

"Such a district as the old "Niggertown" must never be allowed in Tulsa again. It was a cesspool of iniquity and corruption. It was the cesspool which had been pointed out specifically to the Tulsa Police... and they could see nothing in it. Yet anybody could go down there and buy all the booze they wanted. Anybody could go into the most unspeakable dance halls and base joints of prostitution... In this "Niggertown" were a lot of bad niggers and a bad nigger is about the lowest thing that walks on two feet." 76

A consideration of the requisite attitudes and behaviors coincident with Tulsa's system of segregation would lead to the inference that none of Tulsa's whites had ever personally observed life in Greenwood. Additionally, they likely had no personal interactions from which to form an educated judgment about the community. Already possessing a belief in the inferiority

76 "It Must Not Be Again," Tulsa Tribune, 4 June 1921.
of blacks, it made sense to them that Greenwood was the source of the crime that plagued Tulsa. And as Tulsa's law enforcement seemed either unwilling or unable to stop it, the citizens (many of them Ku Klux Klan members) reverted to the vigilantism that had claimed the lives of dozens of Oklahomans in the years leading up to the riot.

Greenwood was a powder keg of racial animosity existing at Tulsa's color line. The country was still reeling from the race riots in Chicago, Washington D.C. and Elaine, Arkansas that had occurred just two years earlier. The riots of the previous years seemed to serve as a powerful lesson to the residents of Greenwood. The professional class, speaking through the *Tulsa Star* and *Oklahoma Sun*, attacked segregation and promoted racial equality. The local World War I veterans brought back with them from Europe a powerful lesson in defending the ideals of liberty and equality inherent in democracy. Each of these blacks, whom W.E.B. DuBois would term the "New Negro," resolved to assert their civil rights through a spirited defense of them. Most importantly, no black person had ever been lynched in Tulsa, and the community resolved to keep it that way despite random lynchings by white mobs outside of town. Like Chicago two years before, Tulsa was set to become a battleground in the event of a riot.

The ultimate destruction of Greenwood started when nineteen-year-old Dick Rowland crossed Tulsa's color line. Rowland, an orphan who had dropped out of high school, was performing his usual job of shining shoes in a downtown white-owned shoe shine parlor on Memorial Day, 30 May, 1921. As he worked in a white parlor, Rowland was not allowed to use the segregated restroom. He had to use a "Colored" restroom down the street in the Drexel Building, which was located at 319 S. Main Street. Making the situation worse for Roland was the fact that the restroom he had to use was located on the top floor of the building. He had to use an elevator. Typical of elevators of the time, it had an operator. The operator was a seventeen-year-old white woman named Sarah Page. What occurred next between the two will never be known incontrovertibly. A common account had Rowland tripping over Page as he
entered the elevator. It has been rumored, however, that Rowland, who had to have interacted with Page daily, was actually in a relationship with her. Whatever the case, a white clerk from an adjacent clothing store claimed to hear a woman screaming, after which he observed Rowland running away from the building. Believing Page to have been sexually assaulted, he called the police, whom quietly arrested Rowland the next day at his adopted mother’s home on Greenwood Avenue. After Rowland was taken to the jail on the top floor of the Tulsa County Courthouse, word quickly spread throughout the city of the alleged crime. Later that day, the evening edition of the *Tulsa Tribune* hit the streets of Tulsa with the headline “Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator.” Talk of a lynch mob followed.

Later that evening, hundreds of whites gathered at the Tulsa County Courthouse, located downtown at the corner of Sixth and Boulder Streets. Chants of “Let us have the nigger”77 echoed through the crowd. Inside, Tulsa County Sheriff Willard M. McCullough barricaded himself and his deputies on the top floor and placed six snipers on the roof. When he attempted to go outside to disperse the crowd, he was rebuffed.

Back in Greenwood, Willie Williams, whose parents owned the Dreamland Theater, joined a tense throng of people. From amidst the crowd, a man declared, “We’re not going to let this happen... We’re going to go downtown and stop this lynching. Close this place down.” Determined not to allow Tulsa’s first lynching of a black man, a group of prominent community leaders met at the offices of the *Tulsa Star*. The men, among them Star editor A. J. Smitherman and hotelier J.B. Stradford, resolved to arm themselves and proceed downtown to protect the life of Dick Rowland.

According to eyewitness accounts, a group of approximately twenty-five armed black men arrived at the courthouse around nine that evening to offer their services to the sheriff, who

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declined.\textsuperscript{78} Upon witnessing the armed group of black men, the crowd of whites, then estimated to number in the thousands, dispersed throughout the surrounding neighborhood to obtain weapons. Many went to break into the local National Guard Armory at the corner of Sixth and Norfolk Streets. The infantrymen inside were outnumbered, but the armory was highly defensible. Major James Bell, an officer with the Third Infantry Regiment, succeeded in keeping back the mobs, which assaulted the armory, nearly gaining access through its barred windows. The mobs only dispersed when Major Bell drew his weapon and informed them that the outnumbered soldiers inside were ordered to promptly shoot at trespassers on sight. Tulsa police were conspicuously absent the entire time. There is no doubt that the armory's defensibility, along with the actions of Major Bell, kept the incipient riot from being even bloodier than it would later become. A second, larger group of black men visited the courthouse around ten that evening to defend Rowland against a swelling white crowd, only to be rebuffed again by the sheriff. On their way out, a shot rang out amidst a scuffle between one of the black men and a white man in the crowd. More shots followed. The conflict had begun.

After the initial firefight, in which armed white civilians and law enforcement fired upon and killed several of the armed black men, the survivors fled toward Greenwood with the white mob in close pursuit. Gunfire erupted all over downtown, as whites murdered every black person in sight. Downtown pawnshops and sporting goods stores were broken into by white mobs, who "borrowed" all the guns and ammunition they could find. At the downtown Tulsa police headquarters on Second Street, as many as five-hundred white men and boys were sworn in as "Special Deputies."\textsuperscript{79} Sporadic fighting occurred throughout the night as whites and blacks exchanged gunfire across the Frisco railroad tracks on the southern border of ____________________

\textsuperscript{78} Ellsworth 61.

\textsuperscript{79} Ellsworth 64.
Greenwood. In the early hours of 1 June, the white mobs started setting fires to Greenwood's homes and businesses. The Tulsa Fire Department, responding to the fires, was repulsed at gunpoint by the mobs.

The local National Guard unit, ordered to mobilize before the city descended into open warfare, moved ostensibly to quell the "Negro uprising" only after assisting the white mobs in the destruction of Greenwood. Tulsa's Third Infantry "B" Company, Service Company and Sanitary Detachment were deployed throughout the downtown area. They invaded Greenwood, joined by the white mobs. Some of the guardsmen set up a truck-mounted World War I machine gun on Detroit Avenue between the black and white neighborhoods on Brady Street and Standpipe Hill. The machine gun was pointed towards the black neighborhood. Groups of whites from the mobs were recruited by the guardsmen to go on "patrols" throughout Greenwood, rounding up every black person and sending them to hastily-constructed detention centers. 80

Amidst the death and confusion in the early hours of 1 June, many Greenwood residents fled town. As whites invaded Greenwood from the south, east and west, many residents took Greenwood Avenue out of town as their homes and businesses were systematically riddled with bullets, looted and burned. Eyewitness accounts, including one of Greenwood physician Dr. R.T. Bridgewater, recalled planes flying overhead:

"Shortly after we left a whistle blew. The shots rang from a machine gun located on Standpipe Hill near my residence and aeroplanes began to fly over us, in some instances very low to the ground. A cry was heard from the women saying, 'Look out for the aeroplanes, they are shooting upon us.'" 81

Taking defensive positions in their homes and businesses, some blacks tried valiantly to hold the massive white mobs sweeping over the community. An armed group of black men positioned themselves in the belfry of Mount Zion Baptist Church, which overlooked Standpipe Hill. Their position allowed them to defend the newly-constructed church against sporadic mobs of whites. The effort was of no avail, however; the church was eventually burned to the ground. Facing superior numbers and firepower, they were simply outgunned and outflanked.

Luckily for Tulsa's black population, the state of Oklahoma was able to mobilize to restore order to Tulsa. The state National Guard troop mobilized from Fort Sill, Oklahoma City during the early hours of 1 June. It arrived in Tulsa 109 soldiers strong at approximately 9:15 in the morning. Unable to quickly secure the authority from the municipal government to establish martial law, the lawlessness and destruction would continue virtually unabated until that early afternoon. The only black homes and businesses left were those in the immediate vicinity of white neighborhoods. The portion of Greenwood's population that had not fled the city was detained at makeshift detention centers in the courthouse, Convention Hall, fairgrounds, and McNulty Baseball Park. After finally declaring martial law, the state guardsmen, led by Adjutant General Barrett, marched through Greenwood, dispersing and disarming the remaining white mobs. Announcing an evening curfew and clearing the streets, law and order had been restored by eight that night. By that time, Greenwood had been completely destroyed.

The city of Tulsa proved incapable of organizing any constructive response to the disaster in either its incipient stages or its aftermath. In light of the massive loss of life and property, city leaders established a "Public Welfare Board" to organize recovery efforts. The board, under the leadership of Tulsa Mayor T.D. Evans, placed all responsibility for disaster relief in the hands of the Red Cross. Evans called on the organization to "establish headquarters

81 Testimonial of Dr. R.T. Bridgewater in Parrish, *Events of the Tulsa Disaster*, 45.
for all relief work, & bring all organizations who [sic] can assist you to your aid."\(^{82}\) Meanwhile, Greenwood’s population was held for weeks in detention centers. Those who wished to leave had to be signed out by a white person who could vouch for them, usually an employer. A curfew for Tulsa’s blacks was still in effect as well.

The refugees were quickly put to work. On 2 June, Oklahoma National Guard Field Order Number 4 was issued, requiring

“All the able bodies negor [sic] men remaining in detention camp... to render such service and perform such labor as required by the military commission and the Red Cross in making the proper sanitary provisions for the care of the refugees.”\(^{83}\)

Able-bodied black women were also required to “perform such service as maybe required in the feeding and care of the refugees.” As if that were not enough, Tulsa police issued an order banning unemployed blacks from all white neighborhoods, and requiring all blacks to wear a green identification card that indicated their employment status.\(^{84}\) Use of the green card was justified, according to an article in the *Tulsa Tribune*, because the city “does just what it should do when it gets rid of the negro who cannot give a good account of both his time and conduct.”\(^{85}\)

Though the city government proudly proclaimed its intention to unilaterally incur all the costs of disaster relief, it did nothing to tangibly support the black riot victims. Why did the needed disaster relief for blacks have to come from outside Tulsa, when it was awash in oil wealth? It stood to reason that the same thousands of people who destroyed Greenwood


\(^{83}\) Oklahoma National Guard Field Order No. 4, June 2, 1921 in Hower 12.

\(^{84}\) “Police Order Idle blacks to Fair Camp,” *Tulsa Tribune*, 7 June 1921.

\(^{85}\) “Get A Green Card,” *Tulsa Tribune*, 8 June 1921.
harbored no desire to rebuild it. Additionally, most white Tulsans blamed blacks for the riots and ultimate destruction of Greenwood. A *Tulsa Tribune* editorial on 5 June stated that

"Niggertown" [sic] has been a cesspool of iniquity. There the most criminal of the community, both white and black, found harbor. There crimes were plotted. There an uprising has long been in process of planning. There this disorder began. The bad element among the negroes... brought this upon Tulsa just as the winds gather into a cyclone and sweep upon a city. This bad element... must learn that this is not a city of, for and by their kind. NEVER.\(^8\)

The editorial went on to label the city and county police as "a sad bunch of servants of Uncle Sam." To Tulsa's whites, if the police did their job of protecting the city from the inherent evil within the institutions of Greenwood, there would have been no racial conflict.

Interestingly, many other papers across the country adopted the almost exact same rationale. While noting that "taxpayers must pay for the folly of the *mad* mob," the *Witchita Eagle* instead focused on pointing out how "a flying squad of well-armed, well-drilled policemen could have broken up the Tulsa mob during its inception."\(^8\) A *Kansas City Star* editorial proposed that no case of race rioting existed that could not be "stamped out by prompt and intelligent police action at the outset."\(^8\) The citizens of Tulsa that participated in the "lawless" or "mad" mobs were seen as simply dealing with the realities of race conflict in American cities. Law enforcement existed to "prevent" these mobs from destroying black lives and property, not necessarily to punish them for doing so. Virtually nowhere was there a discussion of the serious, calculating nature of the crimes committed by the white mobs, the need for full and

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\(^8\) "The End of Argonaut Days," *Tulsa Tribune*, 5 June 1921.

\(^8\) "Cost Must Be Figured," *Witchita Eagle*, 5 June 1921.

\(^8\) "Efficient Police Chief Needed," *Kansas City Star*, 5 June 1921.
comprehensive punishment of those complicit in the destruction of Greenwood or the magnitude of the injustice suffered by Tulsa’s black community before, during and after the riots.

It was the first time that the Red Cross had ever responded to a man-made disaster. Maurice Willows, the director of the Red Cross Disaster Relief Committee in Tulsa, was credited by the black community with having "heard our ever cry in this our dark hour and... extended to us practical sympathy." In his notes about the disaster, Willows wrote:

“The story of the tragedy enacted in Tulsa, Oklahoma... has been told and retold, with all sorts of variations, in the press of the country. Whatever people choose to call it, “race riot”, “massacre”, “negro uprising”, or whatnot, the word has not yet been coined which can correctly describe the affair.”

To the end, Willows refused to bend to pressure by Tulsa city officials to refer to the riots as a "negro uprising." He was very self-conscious of his organization’s role as a neutral party in the aftermath of Tulsa’s race conflict.

The numbers associated with the disaster were staggering. Thirty-five city blocks were "looted systematically, then burned to a cinder, and the ten thousand population thereof scattered like chaff before the wind." Property damages filed by Greenwood residents up to a month after the riots went as high as four million dollars. The total number of casualties, though it likely will never be known, has been estimated to be as low as 55 and as high as 300. The discrepancy was due to the fact that many of those killed were buried in mass, unmarked graves. Untold hundreds of blacks and whites were wounded. Dozens of wounded blacks ended up in the surrounding cities and on the main roads exiting Tulsa. Families were split apart. The most immediate problem was, however, the health and welfare of the surviving “refugees.”


90 Hower 146.

91 Hower 148.
Central to Willows' relief effort was the establishment of a series of refugee camps around Tulsa. Every available public and private structure was utilized, but the main camps were constructed at the sites of the detention centers at Convention Hall and the municipal fairgrounds. Each camp was equipped with mass plumbing, refrigeration, mobile hospitals and first aid stations. The First Baptist Church and the local Y.M.C.A. were employed as collection centers for food, clothing, bedding and medical supplies. The Red Cross' General Relief Headquarters was set up at Greenwood's Booker T. Washington School. At the fairgrounds and the Booker T. Washington School, over two thousand people were housed, clothed and fed. Transportation and communication was established for those looking to reunite with family members. Willows achieved his stated goal:

"...the Red Cross will have functioned when all the homeless are provided with shelter, laundry, and cooking outfits and stoves; when the families are reunited as far as possible; when the destitute women and orphaned children are cared for, and those who are able-bodied are placed on a self-supporting basis."92

Thanks to the phenomenal achievements of the Red Cross in providing relief, recovery and a basic social infrastructure to the riot victims, they were able to focus on the reconstruction of Greenwood. The Red Cross could not involve itself in the problem of reconstruction; it was a task for the hostile city government.

Greenwood, still a charred battleground, became the object of an attempted takeover by the Tulsa city government. Maurice Willows wrote in his personal notes about the political battles that surrounded Greenville for months after the riots. He stated, in response to local government pressure, that the Red Cross "made it clear that it was not its function to engineer

92 Hower 153.
plans for the acquisition of a new residence district, nor for converting any portion of the burned area into a commercial wholesale or industrial district.\textsuperscript{93}

Public opinion supported the idea of transforming the areas of Greenwood that abutted the railroad tracks into a commercial and/or industrial district. The rightful black property owners were left out of the discussion. Willows reminded the Public Welfare Board (later renamed "The Reconstruction Committee") that several considerations were involved in such a plan, namely:

(1) The organization of a Housing Corporation or Holding Company which would act for the municipality in appraising and purchasing from the negro property owners their holdings;

(2) The raising of sufficient funds to back the enterprise;

(3) The acquiring of a new residential district to be sewer[ed] [sic], watered and lighted;

(4) A committee or sub-committee to help the negroes clear up their property equities and to assist them in repurchasing and rebuilding.\textsuperscript{94}

The city government never offered a practical reconstruction plan to the former residents of Greenwood. It could be inferred that they expected the former residents, facing such massive devastation, to simply leave their properties and settle on the northern outskirts of Tulsa.

In any case, further actions taken by the city government belied any publicly honest intentions concerning the purchase of large areas of the Greenwood community. The city’s "Reconstruction Committee" extended fire limits throughout the burned areas of Greenwood, precluding the rebuilding of frame houses. Though a brief intervention by Willows bought enough time for more families to construct temporary wooden frame homes on their burned-out

\textsuperscript{93} Hower 158.

\textsuperscript{94} Hower 158.
properties, by and large, the city government stood directly in the way of blacks attempting to reconstruct their once-prosperous community.

Greenwood was a victim of its own success. Created in the midst of the “Oil Capital of the World,” it saw a remarkable level of prosperity for a southern black community. Its proximity to downtown Tulsa placed it not only in the physical center of urban life, but also in the social, political and economic center. Socially, it was the location of a high level of vice endemic to major city centers of the day. Politically, it was the center of Washingtonian self-sufficiency and empowerment; its political leaders preached equality through racial uplift. Economically, despite its overwhelmingly modest character, its prosperous professional class brought a clear contradiction to the stilted racial logic that underpinned segregation. More than anything else, Greenwood proved that a population of blacks was imminently capable of not only surviving, but growing as a community in the South. Behind that community growth was an assertion of American citizenship on the same level as whites. Some of the residents of Greenwood attempted to assert those citizenship rights on the night of 31 May, and paid the ultimate cost for it. In defending their community from mobs of whites whom were intent on preserving the predominant racial order, they lost it. In seeking justice and restitution from the state for the destruction, they received empty promises and deaf ears. If it were not for the extraordinary actions of the American Red Cross and aid from blacks all over the country, it is likely that the true story of Greenwood and the Tulsa riot would have been successfully omitted from history.
Chapter 4

Standards of Justice

The United States of the first decades of the twentieth century was a nation undergoing an unprecedented transition socially, economically and politically. At the beginning of the century, the demographic makeup of American society continued to shift as large numbers of primarily Eastern and Southern European immigrants entered the country. The irresistible force of industrial progress began to change the way Americans lived, worked and viewed themselves in a volatile world. Though the predominant social and economic mode for the majority of Americans remained agricultural, great new industries spurred by technological advances were drawing millions of people to burgeoning cities that rapidly grew to dozens of square miles in size. Within these new urban areas resided Americans who could no longer utilize subsistence farming in order to provide for their survival and material comfort. Faced with an aggressively evolving market economy, those who sought a new life in America’s growing cities found themselves commoditized as either skilled or unskilled labor with a future that was heavily dependent upon the caprice of their employers. Additionally, divisions along ethnic lines dominated the social and political character of both urban and rural areas across the nation as newcomers brought their unique cultural attitudes and behaviors with them.

As this transformation took place, blacks were swept up along with the rest of American society. However, their citizenship status, even more so than the recently-arrived immigrants, was stymied by either law, custom or both. A legal system of racial segregation coupled with
disenfranchisement defined the oppressive social, political and economic lives of blacks in the South. Outside of the South, blacks were generally both enfranchised and integrated into the social, political, and economic infrastructure of their communities. These advantages, however, were tempered by the presence of de facto segregation in every aspect of the community infrastructure. And while blacks outside of the South were not coerced under the threat of violence to observe a system of etiquette that demeaned them and elevated whites, they nevertheless faced institutionalized discrimination, systematic exclusion from the higher levels of social, political and economic life, and retaliatory racial violence from white communities that resisted any attempts at integration.

In spite of the tremendous obstacles placed in their way, black Americans at the onset of the twentieth century made significant gains compared to the lives of their predecessors. Though blacks in the South were, at best, second-class citizens at the bottom of the racial caste system, they were no longer slaves. And although sharecropping did little more than keep blacks in a state of subservient labor to the white plantation owners, they were able to freely move about (for the most part) and earn wages. Some enterprising black farmers, share tenants and mill workers were even able to attain high-value consumer goods and property. Outside of the South, blacks found higher-paying careers that allowed them to experience a rise in economic class. Greater integration with whites allowed them to pursue greater educational and professional opportunities. Densely concentrated in segregated urban communities, blacks outside the South formed powerful social, political and economic institutions that ran parallel to those of whites. Institutional racial discrimination may have resulted in massive inequalities between the black and white communities outside of the South, but the black communities nonetheless possessed the freedom to pursue equality with the whites on their own terms.

In this environment of greater economic freedom, it is no surprise that black Americans would desire the chance for a better life that the blessings of full citizenship would bestow upon
them. Blacks in every section of the country worked to prove their equal worth as citizens through legal challenges to racial discrimination, political organizing, and public relations battles. On a more fundamental level, most blacks sought ultimate social redemption by simply living their lives in tune with the American ideal of thriftiness, hard work and adherence to Protestant morality. When World War I brought Western Europe to the brink of destruction, black Americans heeded the call to defend democracy there. Thousands of young black men who did not possess the rights of full citizenship were willing to accept the full responsibilities of citizenship. They carried that spirit to Western Europe and, having experienced the cost of defending democracy abroad, were filled with a determination to make it a reality for their communities at home.

Full citizenship was long overdue; it was an unfulfilled promise of the federal government's Reconstruction policies of approximately half a century before. To that end, self-defense became the most obvious means of securing the liberties afforded to blacks by their citizenship status (however unequal). Blacks' appreciation for the blessings of citizenship and the determination to defend them with their lives set the stage for the bloody racial confrontations throughout the United States that took place during the first decades of the twentieth century. Faced with an intractable enemy bent on maintaining the oppressive status quo, blacks brought the fight to save democracy home – and paid dearly for it in lives and property lost.

The Chicago riot of 27 July – 8 August 1919 was distinctly northern and urban in context. Though the riot featured a substantial amount of racial violence, the black community was not destroyed. Empowered and armed, blacks successfully defended themselves and their territory against white mobs. Whites were only able to encroach upon Chicago's "Black Belt" behind the wheel of speeding cars as they shot randomly at buildings and people. Mob violence was largely against individuals, and did not involve large numbers of both groups engaged in virtual
warfare. Chicago possessed a large, organized municipal police force that acted to disperse both black and white mobs. The state militia was largely impartial and worked quickly and effectively to restore order to the city. Though there were more black victims of the Chicago riot, it was nonetheless characterized primarily by back-and-forth skirmishes on the border between black and white communities on the South Side.

The aftermath of the Chicago riot underscored the elevated citizenship status of its black community. It enjoyed a near-equal citizenship status with Chicago’s white community. Its high economic status, political equality, wealth of social institutions and activist press mitigated much of the deleterious effects of the riot. Without a doubt, Chicago was home to one of America’s most powerful black communities. The task of neighborhood recovery was performed by dozens of religious, community and civic organizations. Additionally, in the wake of the riot, Chicago’s black citizens were not scattered about the region. Many black workers not only received their wages during the week of the riot, but they returned to work the day after the riot ended. Chicago’s mill owners, who experienced an unwanted disruption in output as a result of the riot, worked to allow for the quick return of black and white rioters to their jobs. Public castigation of the riot by each race was immediate, and prominent members of Chicago’s black and white communities came together in an attempt to both garner lessons from the outbreak of violence and repair Chicago’s damaged public image. The formation of the Chicago Commission on Race Relations was a result of such interracial cooperation. Although the findings and suggestions of the Commission were not immediately applied, they served as a blueprint for future enlightened race-based policy in Chicago.

Though the riot in and around the town of Elaine in Phillips County, Arkansas occurred only two months after the Chicago riot, its location within the American South engendered a completely different set of circumstances for its community of black sharecroppers and farmers. Suffering under the effects of de jure racial discrimination, segregation and debt peonage,
blacks were forced into the lowest rung of Phillips County’s racial caste system. Their existence as a community was secure only in the fact that their (coerced) labor was sorely needed by the wealthy owners of the Arkansas Delta’s cotton plantations and lumber mills. Unlike their Chicago brethren, they exercised their rights of citizenship under the constant threat of retaliatory violence. There was no parallel to the Chicago Defender in Phillips County because the blacks there did not enjoy the same freedom of the press. Throughout the South, several states, most notably Mississippi, attempted to ban the distribution of the Defender because of its attacks against the South’s oppressive racial caste system. The dictates of racial paternalism, which still defined the relationship between blacks and whites in the South far after the end of forced slavery, demanded that blacks remain in a subservient social, economic and political position to their white counterparts. The sharecroppers were under the control of their plantation owners, who monitored what they consumed, how they lived, what crops they grew, where they went from day to day and (most importantly) what they earned. The black sharecroppers were not allowed to have any public disagreements with their “employers,” who always “knew” what was best for their sharecroppers and tenants. As such, they could countermand their employers’ control over their lives only under the risk of violent retaliation.

The whites of Phillips County, holding strong to their racist, paternalistic ideology, underestimated the rapid social, economic and political development of the blacks around them at the dawn of the twentieth century. They also underestimated the resolve of a black community determined to defend the promises of democracy for itself in the wake of World War I. Given the incredibly oppressive environment and constant threat of barbaric, inhuman acts of violence in retaliation for perceived breaches of the racial status quo, it is nothing short of remarkable that the black communities of Phillips County maintained a high sense of morale and a determination to pursue greater equality. In addition, though the blacks were
outnumbered and outgunned by their white counterparts, they still pursued a policy of armed self-defense to protect their lives and property.

In the absence of any appreciable political or social equality, the organization of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America was an attempt by the blacks of Phillips County to seek greater economic citizenship. The fact that their labor was constantly in demand by their employers empowered them in an unprecedented manner. They would not face annihilation because their cheap labor provided much of the value in the Arkansas Delta's great agribusiness infrastructure. As free people, they could wield a considerable amount of economic influence over their employers. The earnings realized during the wartime production of cotton and lumber would have been enough to affect a rise from effective peonage for many sharecroppers, who by this time realized that a higher economic status offered true freedom and the chance for a better life for themselves (even in the South).

What the black union members who met in the church in Hoop Spur, Arkansas on the night of 30 September failed to remember was that they were not truly free people. Their lives from the cradle to the grave were ruthlessly controlled by their local white ruling elites. To the whites of Phillips County, the blacks that organized that night to seek legal redress for employer malfeasance were attempting to subvert the delicate racial caste system that existed there. Since the social structure of the South depended upon the control and coercion of black bodies and minds, any disruption to the racial status quo, to the whites, was tantamount to social revolution. Additionally, since the empowered black population was both armed and determined to defend itself, whites interpreted the actions of the blacks as an attempt at a violent revolution. Determined to put down this “insurrection,” the response of the whites of Phillips County was both quick and overwhelming in terms of destruction of lives and property. The overwhelmed blacks could do little but flee for their lives as their neighborhoods were ransacked and destroyed.
Unlike Chicago and Tulsa, federal troops were deployed instead of the state militia to put down the “insurrection.” They mobilized with their destructive weaponry for war. Joining in with the random, brutal violence, their engagement in the region increased the still-undetermined number of dead. Again, as blacks had no voice in terms of the press, their version of the riot was only able to be broadcast to the world as a result of the intervention of outside investigators such as Walter White and Ida B. Wells. The twelve black men condemned to death as a result of the riot were saved only because of the determined participation of outside legal help and intensified public scrutiny.

The black communities in and around the town of Elaine, Arkansas managed to achieve a modicum of economic progress in the midst of a heavily-oppressive social system. Although they paid the price for attempting to assert rights of citizenship they weren’t allowed to possess, they enjoyed the support of blacks all over the country in their pursuit of justice after the riot ended. Unlike Chicago or even Tulsa, the blacks in Phillips County were largely isolated from the rest of the world during and after the riot. No great relief efforts were allowed to take place in rebuilding what was lost. No comprehensive, reliable accounting of the dead was ever executed. Scattered about the region, many blacks who successfully fled the violence never returned. Those who were imprisoned or did return came back to an environment even more oppressive than before the riot. Because the story of the Elaine riot was quickly suppressed and erased from regional history, a great deal of questions concerning it remains unresolved. Largely as a result of its geography, it has served as an almost complete counterpoint to the Chicago riot.

The 31 May – 2 June 1921 Tulsa riot incorporated elements of both the Chicago and Elaine riots. The famously prosperous and powerful black community of Greenwood was completely destroyed by mobs of white Tulsans. Though Greenwood incorporated many social, political and economic infrastructural elements of Chicago’s black community, it was subject to
the same race-based legal framework and rules of social etiquette that circumscribed the lives of Elaine's black residents. Tulsa was a burgeoning, wealthy urban area financed by massive petroleum revenues. Blacks, however, were purposefully excluded from most of the occupations related to the petroleum industry. Nevertheless, the city's newfound wealth found its way into Greenwood. The blacks of Greenwood followed the racial ideology of Booker T. Washington, who urged them to take their focus away from integration. To that end, the residents of Greenwood achieved an impressive level of self-sufficiency. Washington's promise to them that such action would lead to greater respect by the whites was, in the end, proven dreadfully wrong.

After the arrest of Dick Rowland, the blacks of Tulsa were determined to protect him from the very real threat of a lynch mob. As in Chicago and Elaine, the blacks of Tulsa were imbued with a new spirit of (armed) self-defense in the protection of their rights, their lives and their property. During the early twentieth century, many lives in and around Tulsa had been lost to "mob justice." Weeks before the incarceration of Dick Rowland, a white man was taken from the county jail and lynched by a mob of whites. Importantly, no black person up to that point had been lynched in Tulsa. As a scuffle between an armed group of blacks and whites in front of the county courthouse turned violent and started the riot, rumor spread quickly amongst Tulsa's black and white communities. Like Chicago and Elaine, the early spread of rumors exacerbated an already deplorable situation. As a result, the mobs increased in both size and armaments.

Unlike Chicago but similar to Elaine, Tulsa's lack of a large, impartial, professionally-trained police force directly contributed to the loss of order in the early stages of the riot. At the start of the riot, hundreds of white men were armed and deputized by the local authorities. Officially ordered to protect the lives of white citizens and to detain every black person found, they either defended the border between Greenwood and its neighboring white neighborhoods or followed the uniformed police and state militia into Greenwood where they committed
appalling acts of kidnapping, robbery, arson and murder. According to eyewitness accounts, the police and the local detachment of the state militia joined with these deputized mobs in committing the various criminal acts.

Because the authorities in Tulsa defined the rioting as an “insurrection” by the residents of Greenwood, blatantly unjust and unconstitutional actions were taken against blacks during the riot which doomed their community to destruction. Although the residents of Greenwood were defending their lives and property with armed resistance from invading white mobs, they were accused of being the aggressors. Under the false guise of protecting the black population, every resident of Greenwood was rounded up by police, white mobs and militia units and detained at various makeshift detention camps around the city where they were forced to stay for weeks.

As in Elaine, in order to appease inconvenienced white employers, the detainees that were vouched for by a white person were supplied with passes that were to be in their possession at all times. All others in the detention camps, including women and children, were put to work on various other jobs. With Greenwood empty, the mobs of whites ransacked it and razed it to the ground. An indeterminate number of lives were extinguished in the process. Tulsa was no different from Chicago or Elaine in terms of the occupation of its black community. Again, however, unlike Chicago but similar to Elaine, the unlawful arrest and subsequent detention of nearly the entire community allowed the white mobs to pillage and destroy it.

Though blacks in Tulsa enjoyed greater prosperity and freedom than their sharecropper counterparts in Elaine, their fate was similar due to Tulsa’s geography. Tulsa, by any account, was a southern city. It possessed a racial caste system and a system of de jure racial discrimination. Due to its urban nature, blacks enjoyed somewhat greater social, economic and political mobility, but the threat of retaliatory racial violence was omnipresent. In the end, the residents of Greenwood had little legal recourse within a state that recognized few, if any, of the
claims to equal citizenship proclaimed by its black population. Faced with an imminent threat to their paternalistic social order, the white residents of Tulsa destroyed Greenwood, committed innumerable murders, and scattered a significant portion of the black population elsewhere around the region. Again, as in Elaine and Chicago, since the police and armed troops focused their activities within the black neighborhood, those arrested and charged with crimes related to the riot were mostly black. However, faced with the truth of the appalling violence committed by its white residents and fearing economic backlash for the perceived lawlessness, Tulsa's city fathers worked quickly to both broadcast their version of the riot (which cast blame on the residents of Greenwood) and exclude it from local history. The destroyed black press in Greenwood could not counter with the black perspective. Thankfully, the black press outside of Tulsa was able to give a voice to the refugees and save their story from being omitted from the pages of history.

In the end, the blacks of Tulsa paid a heavy price for attempting to assert their right to self-defense and equal status. Their community destroyed, the former residents of Greenwood found considerable disaster relief through the activities of the American Red Cross and other civic organizations. As with Chicago and Elaine, blacks across the country both protested the racial violence associated with the riot and contributed aid to the victims. Though they had external support, the former residents of Greenwood still had to fight a local government that had little respect for its rights. Seeking redress, the former residents were denied insurance compensation or monetary damages from the city. Adding insult to injury, the city re-zoned Greenwood in an attempt to reclaim the now valuable property bordering downtown Tulsa. Despite a concerted attempt by many former residents to hold on to their homes, the Greenwood community was effectively lost.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, black communities across the United States were imbibed with a sense of empowerment and self-determination as the forces of rapid
Industrialization and capitalism allowed for greater socioeconomic mobility. The greater socioeconomic mobility allowed for an unprecedented opportunity for blacks to break free of the racial caste designations that plagued their lives. The democratic ideals that thousands of young black men were called upon to defend in World War I were not lost upon them when they returned home. Hoping to realize the unfulfilled promises of Reconstruction, black Americans seized upon the opportunity to assert their claim to equal citizenship.

Although American society was progressing rapidly at the time, racial attitudes were slow to change. As a result, racial clashes in the North and South claimed hundreds of lives and cost untold millions in property loss. These violent precursors to the more organized Civil Rights Movement of the following generation brought a renewed appreciation of equal citizenship as worthwhile goal for black America. The riots during this early period also clearly communicated the inevitability of a change in race relations to the American public. The fight for full, equal black citizenship would either fulfill the ideals of American democracy and make society whole, or lead to its undoing.
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