



Unpacking Our History Article Packet



White Supremacy Part 5 White Riots

September 14, 2023

6:30 – 8:00 PM

Zoom ID: 823 648 5349 | Password: 691353

Upcoming Unpacking Our History Programs

October 12, 2023
White Supremacy Part 6
White and Black Feminism

November 9, 2023
White Supremacy Part 7
Carceral Society

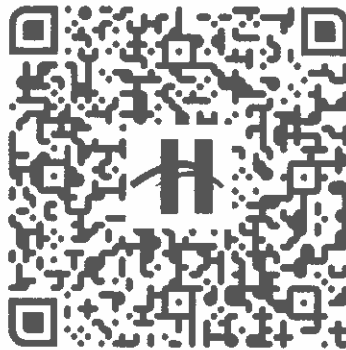
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Cover: Black Wall Street mural depicting the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, OSU Langston campus

Massacres in U.S. History

zinnedproject.org/collection/massacres-us/

Here is a list of some of the countless massacres in the history of the United States. Most of these massacres were designed to suppress voting rights, land ownership, economic advancement, education, freedom of the press, religion, LGBTQ rights, and/or labor rights of African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asians, and immigrants. While often referred to as “race riots,” they were massacres to maintain white supremacy.

May 26, 1637: Pequot Massacre

Hundreds of Pequot villagers were massacred by the Puritans in Mystic, Connecticut.

July 27, 1816: The “Negro Fort” Massacre

The U.S. Army firebombed a fort on the Apalachicola River in Florida.

Aug. 6, 1855: Bloody Monday

On election day, in Louisville, Kentucky, Protestant mobs attacked German and Irish Catholic neighborhoods.

July 13, 1863: New York City Draft Riots and Massacre

The New York City Draft Massacre (“Riots”) were the largest civil insurrection in U.S. history besides the Civil War itself. White mobs attacked the African American community — committing murder and burning homes and institutions (including an orphanage.)

April 12, 1864: Union Soldiers Massacred at Fort Pillow

Confederate troops massacred over 500 surrendering Union soldiers, majority African American, at the Civil War Battle of Fort Pillow.

Nov. 29, 1864: Sand Creek Massacre

A Colorado Cavalry unit, on orders from Colorado’s governor and ignoring a surrender flag, brutally attacked Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes. White abolitionist Silas Soule was assassinated for reporting on the event.

Dec. 9, 1864: Ebenezer Creek Massacre

People who had escaped from slavery and were following the Union Army, were blocked from crossing the Ebenezer Creek, leading to their death.

May 1 – 3, 1866: Memphis Massacre

White civilians and police killed 46 African Americans and injured many more while burning houses, schools, and churches in Memphis, Tennessee.

July 30, 1866: New Orleans Massacre

The New Orleans Massacre occurred when white residents attacked Black marchers near the reconvened Louisiana Constitutional Convention.

Sept. 19, 1868: Camilla Massacre

As African Americans marched peacefully in response to their expulsion from elected office, more than a dozen were massacred near Albany, Georgia.

Sept. 28, 1868: Opelousas Massacre

In response to the promotion of voter registration, a KKK-like group massacred hundreds of people, most of whom were African American.

Oct. 25, 1868: St. Bernard Parish Massacre

The St. Bernard Parish massacre of African Americans was carried out by white men to terrorize the recently emancipated voters in Louisiana.

Dec. 29, 1890: Wounded Knee Massacre

A Lakota encampment on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation was attacked by the U.S. Army and close to 300 Native Americans were murdered near Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota.

Sept. 10, 1897: Lattimer Massacre
Nineteen mineworkers were killed and dozens were wounded in the Lattimer Massacre.

Oct. 12, 1898: Battle of Virden
A small band of striking coal miners in southern Illinois called out Chicago coal barons and stood their ground at Virden.

Nov. 10, 1898: Wilmington Massacre
The elected and interracial Reconstruction era local government was deposed in a coup d'etat in Wilmington, North Carolina.

Aug. 14, 1908: Springfield Massacre
This race riot was committed against African Americans by a mob of about 5,000 white people in Springfield, Illinois.

July 29, 1910: Slocum Massacre in Texas
Citizens in the small, predominately African American town of Slocum, Texas, were massacred.

April 20, 1914: Ludlow Massacre
The National Guard fired on striking miners and their families in Ludlow, Colorado.

Jan. 28, 1918: Porvenir Massacre
Fifteen Mexican-Americans were killed by Texas Rangers during the Porvenir Massacre.

July 19, 1919: White Mobs in Uniform Attack African Americans — Who Fight Back — in Washington, D.C.
White mobs, incited by the media, attacked the African American community in Washington, D.C., and African American soldiers returning from WWI. This was one

of the many violent events that summer and it was distinguished by strong and organized Black resistance to the white violence.

July 27, 1919: Red Summer in Chicago
Sparked by a white police officer's refusal to make an arrest in the murder of a Black teenager, violence in Chicago lasted almost a week. At least 38 people were killed and thousands of Black homes were looted and damaged during Red Summer.

Sept. 30, 1919: Elaine Massacre
Black farmers were massacred in Elaine, Arkansas for their efforts to fight for better pay and higher cotton prices. A white mob shot at them, and the farmers returned fire in self-defense. Estimates range from 100-800 killed, and 67 survivors were indicted for inciting violence.

Nov. 22, 1919: Bogalusa Labor Massacre, Attack on Interracial Solidarity
The Bogalusa Labor Massacre was an attack on interracial labor solidarity in Louisiana.

Nov. 2, 1920: The Ocoee Massacre
More than fifty African Americans killed in the Ocoee Massacre after going to vote in Florida.

Jan. 1, 1923: Rosewood Massacre
White supremacists destroyed the Black town of Rosewood, Florida, and murdered many of its residents. Descendants have fought for reparations and recognition of the history.

July 11, 1947: Anguilla Prison Massacre
A camp warden and guards shot dead seven prisoners being held at the Anguilla Prison in Georgia. The Anguilla Prison Massacre Quilt Project tells that story, drawing on records from the NAACP

1919: Defending Black Lives

BY DAVID F. KRUGLER

Washington History Fall 2022

Protesters swell the streets and avenues of the etatal. The president, preoccupied with a national crisis, delegates authority to a trusted cabinet officer, who rushes in federal forces from outside the city. Heavily armed. they deploy to strategic points. As night falls, the protesters refuse to disperse. They're demanding reform. They want an end to violence against African Americans: they want courts that don't discriminate against people of color; they want the media to stop perpetuating racist stereotypes.

What the occupying troops think of these goals is difficult to discern, and perhaps irrelevant. They have their orders: Prevent trouble. Confrontation, if not inevitable, seems likely.

Welcome to Washington, DC on the night of June 1, 2020, and the night of July 21, 1919, during the Red Summer, so-named by the NAACP'S James Weldon Johnson, when White mobs formed across the country, including in Washington, to attack African Americans in order to maintain the structure and ideology of White supremacy. The Red Summer was the worst wave of anti-Black collective violence in the United States since Reconstruction.

In 2020 multiracial crowds took to Washington's streets to express outrage at the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many other African Americans, and to demand police reform and the dismantling of White supremacy. Given this difference- 2020's mostly peaceful protests seek to end White supremacy, while 1919's violent mob actions upheld White supremacy- comparing the events might not appear apt. Yet a historical comparison shows that in 1919, as in 2020, the attempt to enforce an unjust and undemocratic order was met with determined resistance.

Washington's 1919 anti-Black collective violence began on Saturday. July 19, when an all-White, male mob attacked African Americans living in Southwest DC. The mob included recently discharged World War I veterans as well as active duty servicemen garrisoned in Washington. The night before, a White woman had reported being accosted by two Black men; the mob claimed to be looking for one of these men. The alleged attack followed a series of reported rapes in Washington and its suburbs, with the suspect described by victims as a young Black man. The Metropolitan Police carried out mass arrests, entirely on the basis of race-by July 10, the police had interrogated more than 100 Black men. "Bend every effort to get the brute," Chief of Police Raymond Pullman ordered his officers. Crowds of White men menaced African Americans on the streets. "Negro Fiend Pursued by 1,000 Posse." blared a headline in the Washington Herald. The July 19 mob was an outgrowth of vigilantism sanctioned, even encouraged. by Washington's police and newspapers.

For weeks, the police had aggressively arrested Black men in the name of apprehending a rapist. but now they stood idly by while White mobs raged. Knowing they couldn't rely on the police for protection, African Americans mounted their own vigorous defense. On the next evening, Sun-day. July 20, a large White mob moved north on Seventh Street to attack Shaw (then called Uptown). Black men stopped them, gathering at Seventh and Florida Avenue to protect a neighborhood recently established as a center of Black culture, business, and life. Despite several forays, Whites failed to breach the defensive line formed by more than 100 Black men. Whites failed to breach the defensive line formed by more than 100 Black men.

Monday, July 21, brought more violence-and more armed self-defense. The Washington Post published a veritable mob recruitment message on its front page: "A mobilization of every available service man stationed in or near Washington or on leave here has been ordered the hour of assembly is 9 o'clock and the purpose is a 'clean-up' that will cause the events of the last two evenings to pale into insignificance. President Wilson, engrossed with the Senate fight over the Versailles Treaty, asked Secretary of War Newton Baker to deal with the violence. Baker ordered all-White cavalry units into the District as well as White Marines and White infantry. All told, 1,100 troops deployed."

The mobilization of White troops, from whose ranks the mobs had formed, alarmed local Black leaders. A delegation from the NAACP branch called on Chief of Police Pullman and Louis Brownlow, one of the three presidentially appointed commissioners charged with administering the District, to ask that Black troops be mobilized for peace» keeping duty because Black residents "would not receive a square deal from the White soldiers." Pullman and Brownlow refused and told the delegation to make sure African Americans didn't cause trouble. The delegation responded that the city's Black men had determined not to stand up and be shot down like dogs" and *were prepared to protect their families and themselves and would do so at all hazard.

And so they did. An estimated 2,000 Black residents lined U Street and Florida Avenue from Sixth to Fourteenth Streets, ready to "defy the white mob." as one witness remarked. Many of these self-defenders were veterans. President Wilson had asked the nation to enter the war to make the world safe for democracy, but was the United States safe for African Americans? Black veterans had returned from fighting" as W.E.B. Du Bois succinctly put it in *The Crisis*, alluding to a renewed determination of Black veterans and all African Americans to obtain equal rights and opportunities. Defense against White mobs was a first front in these veterans' fight."

But White mobs weren't the only enemy that night. The city's police, backed by White troops, confronted a defensive cordon at Sixth and T Streets NW and ordered the Black men there to disperse. When they refused, the police and infantrymen advanced, weapons drawn. An exchange of fire--it's not clear who fired first--wounded a police officer.

Uptown then became the site of an intense battle between the neighborhoods defenders and the police and troops Black men were arrested en masse for carrying weapons and then brutalized while in police custody. A Black businessman went to the Eighth Precinct to appeal for the prisoners' humane treatment. As he watched, 30 White officers swarmed a Black man, kicking and beating him. "I rushed through the crowd and standing over the man demanded that these officers treat him as a man and a human being." he later said. He refused to leave until the beating stopped. He may well have saved the man's life.'

On May 25, 2020, bystanders tried to do the same for George Floyd. As Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin pressed his knee to Floyd's neck, observers pleaded with the other three officers present to do something. In both instances, separated by a century-African Americans bore the violent, even deadly, consequences of these failures in policing. In both instances, African Americans mounted resistance.

When police in Louisville, Kentucky, executed a no-knock warrant on March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor and her boyfriend Kenneth Walker were jolted from sleep not knowing who was in their home. In defending himself and Taylor, Walker wounded an officer: Taylor was fatally shot by the police. In Washington on the night of July 21, 1919, 17-year-old Carrie

Johnson and her father Benjamin also faced the terror of armed intruder. A White mob had surrounded their home at 220 G Street NW, yet two White police detectives broke in to arrest the Johnsons. Not knowing who the intruders were, the Johnsons exchanged fire with the detectives. One of the policemen was killed: Carrie and her father both suffered multiple gunshot wounds."

The presidential responses in 1919 and 2020 offer a final comparison. Woodrow Wilson instructed Secretary of War Baker to quell 1919 disorder. In 2020 President Donald Trump gave Attorney General William Barr similar instructions. Delegating authority is a necessary part of being president, but Wilson's and Trump's respective actions and rhetoric made the situations worse in 1919 and 2020. The night after the first mob attacks on African Americans, Wilson went on a river cruise. The president, who firmly opposed Black equality, failed to recognize violent White supremacy as a threat to the democracy he was trying to spread globally. Early on the evening of June 1, 2020, federal forces used tear gas and rubber pellets to disperse protestors from Lafayette Square to clear a path for Trump, who posed for a photograph in front of St. John's Episcopal Church. Rather than denounce the White mobs.

Wilson publicly expressed his concern that news of the riots would make a detrimental impression in countries where heretofore America had been regarded as the foremost exponent of social equality and justice." As citizens peacefully thronged the streets of Washington on June 3, to call for, among other changes, substantial policing reform, Trump tweeted, "I've done more for Black Americans, in fact, than any President in U.S. history with the possible exception of another Republican President, the late, great Abraham Lincoln."

In tracing the parallels between 1919 and 2020, it's important we resist the temptation to think history is repeating itself.

Did history ever stop?

Looking from 1919 to 2020 requires us to acknowledge that whatever progress the nation has made toward unbiased policing and racial equality, it's not enough. This year, like 1919, once again finds Washingtonians and people across the country fighting to make America safe for democracy.

Wilmington 1898: When white supremacists overthrew a US government

By Toby Luckhurst
BBC News

A violent mob, whipped into a frenzy by politicians, tearing apart a town to overthrow the elected government.

Following state elections in 1898, white supremacists moved into the US port of Wilmington, North Carolina, then the largest city in the state. They destroyed black-owned businesses, murdered black residents, and forced the elected local government - a coalition of white and black politicians - to resign en masse.

Historians have described it as the only coup in US history. Its ringleaders took power the same day as the insurrection and swiftly brought in laws to strip voting and civil rights from the state's black population. They faced no consequences.

Wilmington's story has been thrust into the spotlight after a violent mob assaulted the US Capitol on 6 January, seeking to stop the certification of November's presidential election result. More than 120 years after its insurrection, the city is still grappling with its violent past.

After the end of the US Civil War in 1865 - which pitted the northern Unionist states against the southern Confederacy - slavery was abolished throughout the newly-reunited country. Politicians in Washington DC passed a number of constitutional amendments granting freedom and rights to former slaves, and sent the army to enforce their policies. But many southerners resented these changes. In the decades that followed the civil war there were growing efforts to reverse many of the efforts aimed at integrating the freed black population into society.

Wilmington in 1898 was a large and prosperous port, with a growing and successful black middle class. Undoubtedly, African Americans still faced daily prejudice and discrimination - banks for instance would refuse to lend to black people or would impose punishing interest rates. But in the 30 years after the civil war, African Americans in former Confederate states like North Carolina were slowly setting up businesses, buying homes, and exercising their freedom. Wilmington was even home to what was thought to be the only black daily newspaper in the country at that time, the Wilmington Daily Record.

"African Americans were becoming quite successful," Yale University history professor Glenda Gilmore told the BBC. "They were going to universities, had rising literacy rates, and had rising property ownership."

This growing success was true across the state of North Carolina, not just socially but politically. In the 1890s a black and white political coalition known as the Fusionists - which sought free education, debt relief, and equal rights for African Americans - won every state-wide office in 1896, including the governorship. By 1898 a mix of black and white Fusionist politicians had been elected to lead the local city government in Wilmington.

But this sparked a huge backlash, including from the Democratic Party. In the 1890s the Democrats and Republicans were very different to what they are today. Republicans - the party of President Abraham Lincoln - favoured racial integration after the US Civil War, and strong government from Washington DC to unify the states.

But Democrats were against many of the changes to the US. They openly demanded racial segregation and stronger rights for individual states. "Think of the Democratic party of 1898 as the party of white supremacy," LeRae Umfleet, state archivist and author of *A Day of Blood*, a book about the Wilmington insurrection, told the BBC.

Democratic politicians feared that the Fusionists - which included black Republicans as well as poor white farmers - would dominate the elections of 1898. Party leaders decided to launch an election campaign based explicitly on white supremacy, and to use everything in their power to defeat the Fusionists. "It was a concerted, co-ordinated effort to use the newspapers, speechmakers and intimidation tactics to make sure the white supremacy platform won election in November 1898," Ms Umfleet said.

White militias - including a group known as the Red Shirts, so named for their uniforms - rode around on horseback attacking black people and intimidating would-be voters. When black people in Wilmington tried to buy guns to protect their property, they were refused by white shopkeepers, who then kept a list of those who sought weapons and ammo.

Newspapers meanwhile spread claims that African Americans wanted political power so they could sleep with white women, and made up lies about a rape epidemic. When Alexander Manly, owner and editor of the *Wilmington Daily Record*, published an editorial questioning the rape allegations and suggesting that white women slept with black men of their own free will, it enraged the Democratic party and made him the target of a hate campaign.

The day before the state-wide election in 1898, Democratic politician Alfred Moore Waddell gave a speech demanding that white men "do your duty" and look for black people voting.

And if you find one, he said, "tell him to leave the polls and if he refuses kill, shoot him down in his tracks. We shall win tomorrow if we have to do it with guns."

The Democratic party swept to victory in the state elections. Many voters were forced away from polling stations at gunpoint or refused to even try to vote, for fear of violence.

But the Fusionist politicians remained in power in Wilmington, with the municipal election not due until the next year. Two days after the state election Waddell and hundreds of white men, armed with rifles and a Gatling gun, rode into the town and set the *Wilmington Daily Record* building alight. They then spread through the town killing black people and destroying their businesses. The mob swelled with more white people as the day went on.

As black residents fled into the woods outside the town, Waddell and his band marched to the city hall and forced the resignation of the local government at gunpoint. Waddell was declared mayor that same afternoon.

"It [was] a full-blown rebellion, a full-blown insurrection against the state government and the local government," Prof Gilmore said.

Within two years, white supremacists in North Carolina imposed new segregation laws and effectively stripped black people of the vote through a combination of literacy tests and poll taxes. The number of registered African American voters reportedly dropped from 125,000 in 1896 to about 6,000 in 1902.

"Black people in Wilmington didn't think that something like this would ever happen," Prof Gilmore said. "There was a Republican governor in the state, their congressman was a black man. They thought that things were actually getting better. But part of the lesson about it was as things got better, white people fought harder."

Deborah Dicks Maxwell is president of the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP] in Wilmington. Born and raised in the town, she didn't learn about the attack until she was in her thirties.

"It was something that those who are here [in Wilmington] knew but it was not widely talked about," she told the BBC. "It's not in the school curriculum like it should be - no one wants to admit this happened."

It was not until the 1990s that the city began to discuss its past. In 1998 local authorities commemorated the 100th anniversary of the attack, and two years later set up a commission to establish the facts. Since then the city has erected plaques at key points to commemorate the events, and has created the 1898 Monument and Memorial Park - something Ms Dicks Maxwell described as "small but significant".

Given what the city has gone through, it's no surprise that its residents and historians who have covered its past drew parallels between the 1898 insurrection and the attack on the US Capitol this month. Ms Dicks Maxwell and her NAACP branch had for months after the US election been highlighting what they saw as the similarities between what happened in Wilmington and how politicians today in the US were trying to undermine the election results.

"Earlier that day we had a press conference denouncing our local congressman for supporting Trump, [saying] that there would be a possible coup and that we did not want another coup to ever occur in this country," she said. Just hours later the mob marched on the US Capitol.

Christopher Everett is a documentary maker who made a film about the 1898 insurrection, *Wilmington on Fire*. When Mr Everett saw the attack on the Capitol he thought of Wilmington.

"No one was held accountable for the 1898 insurrection. Therefore it opened up the floodgates, especially in the south, for them to... strip African Americans' civil rights," he told the BBC. "That's the first thing that came to my mind after the DC insurrection - you're opening the door for something else to happen, or even worse."

The 1898 attack was not covered up. University buildings, schools and public buildings throughout the state were all named after the instigators of the insurrection. Men would later claim to have taken part in the attack to boost their stature in the Democratic Party. As the decades passed, history books started to claim the attack was in fact a race riot started by the black population and put down by white citizens.

"Even after the massacre, a lot of these folks who participated in and orchestrated the insurrection became immortalised - statues, buildings named after them, throughout the country, especially in North Carolina," Mr Everett said.

Charles Aycock - one of the organisers of the white supremacy electoral campaign - became governor of North Carolina in 1901. His statue now stands in the US Capitol, which rioters entered on 6 January.

Mr Everett is now filming a sequel to his documentary to examine how Wilmington is grappling with its past. He said many local leaders are working to "bring the city of Wilmington back to the spirit of 1897, when you had this Fusion movement of white folks and black folks working together and making Wilmington an example of what the new south could have been after the civil war."

"Wilmington was a model for the white supremacy movement with the insurrection," he said. "But now Wilmington could also be a model to show how we can work together and overcome the stain of white supremacy as well."

Red Summer: When Racist Mobs Ruled

pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/t-town-red-summer-racist-mobs/

February 4, 2021 | DeNeen L. Brown

From the Collection: The African American Experience

On September 27, 1919, a mob of at least 10,000 white people stormed the courthouse in Omaha, Nebraska, demanding the sheriff turn over Will Brown, a 40-year-old Black man. They raided the building, scaled walls and smashed windows. When the mob's initial demands were refused, they set fire to the courthouse, turning it into a seething furnace. Omaha Mayor Ed Smith tried to intervene, but the mob tried to lynch him. Smith escaped badly injured.

From inside the courthouse, terrified white inmates threw down a note surrendering to the mob: "THE JUDGE SAYS HE WILL GIVE UP NEGRO. BROWN. HE IS IN THE DUNGEON. THERE ARE TEN WHITE PRISONERS ON THE ROOF. SAVE THEM."

The frenzied horde finally broke into the jail and dragged Brown out. They tortured him, dismembered him, tied a rope around his neck and hoisted him up on a pole on the south side of the courthouse. As his body dangled in agony, they shot him more than 100 times. After they were sure he was dead, they sliced the rope and Brown's body dropped to the pavement. Then the frenzied mob, which the local newspaper referred to as a "lynching committee," cursed, kicked and spat on the body of the Black man.

Still, the mob of thousands of white men and women was not finished with the lynching. Someone found a new three-quarters-inch rope and tied Brown's body to a car. Then they dragged his corpse slowly through the crowd, over glass and stones, through the streets to the edge of Omaha's Black neighborhood, as a symbol of their rage. There, the "lynching committee" poured kerosene on Will Brown.

And lit his body with fire.

As they witnessed burning flesh, hundreds of the well-dressed men stood back and grinned.

They watched the contorted body of Brown, a 40-year-old innocent meatpacker, burn. A newspaper photographer snapped a photo of the petrified corpse, capturing one of the most horrific photos of racial lynching in U.S. history.

That night, the horde "also murdered at least one other African American who was walking on the streets and caught by the throng," according to *North Omaha History*. The rioters "wounded at least 20 policemen; and demolished at least 10 homes in the Near North Side neighborhood."

That year, Omaha would become one of at least 26 cities across the country where barbaric white mobs attacked Black people and Black communities during a reign of racial terror that author James Weldon Johnson labeled "Red Summer."

The massacres and lynchings that occurred during “Red Summer,” a term used to describe the blood that flowed in the streets of America, were sparked by disparate events, but the common denominator was racial hatred against a people who had recently risen out of enslavement and prospered. In Omaha, Will Brown was falsely accused of assaulting a white woman as she walked with her boyfriend. In East St. Louis, it was Black men working factory jobs that white people wanted for themselves. In Longview, Texas, it was a Black man writing a newspaper story about a love affair between a Black man and a white woman. In Washington, D.C., it was an accusation that Black men tried to take a white woman’s umbrella. In Chicago, it was a Black teenager swimming in Lake Michigan and accidentally floating over an invisible color line. In Elaine, Arkansas, it was Black sharecroppers trying to get better payment for their cotton crops. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, it was a Black teenager allegedly bumping into a white woman on an elevator.

During “Red Summer,” thousands of Black people were fatally shot, lynched and burned alive. Hundreds of Black-owned businesses and homes in Black communities were obliterated in fires fueled by racism and hatred. Millions of dollars of Black businesses and generational wealth were stolen.

Some historians claim that the racial terror connected with “Red Summer” began as early as 1917 during the bloody massacre that occurred in East St. Louis, Illinois, a barbaric pogrom that would eventually set the stage for the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, one of the worst episodes of post-Civil War racial violence ever committed against Black Americans. The Tulsa Massacre left as many as 300 Black people dead and destroyed more than 35 square blocks of Greenwood, an all-Black community so wealthy, the philosopher Booker T. Washington called it “Negro Wall Street.”

Survivors of the Tulsa Massacre witnessed white men and women descending on Greenwood, killing Black people indiscriminately in what appeared to be ethnic cleansing. Occupied houses of Black people were set on fire. When the occupants ran out, members of the white mob shot them. Elderly Black people were shot as they kneeled in prayer. Black women and children were killed in the streets. Black men, with their hands held up in surrender, were shot dead by whites.

Survivors reported that bodies of Black people were thrown into the Arkansas River, loaded on flatbeds of trucks and dumped into mass graves. In October 2019, the City of Tulsa re-opened an investigation into the search for mass graves. A year later, teams of archeologists and forensic anthropologists found a mass grave in the city-owned cemetery, which could be connected to the massacre. This spring, the City of Tulsa plans to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the massacre, as descendants of survivors demand reparations for what was lost, and protest against current oppression and racism.

Results of Red Summer

Nearly a century after the Tulsa Race Massacre, the country would again see another white mob attack. On January 6, 2021, pro-Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol. People watched in shock as insurrectionists scaled the Capitol building, encouraged by the 45th president of the United States. The insurgents—including military veterans, police officers and elected officials—broke through police barricades and poured into the Capitol rotunda. They

walked through the labyrinth of the Capitol hunting for members of Congress and threatening to kill then-Vice President Mike Pence and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

“It is just the beginning,” said Kevin Seefried, a white man from Wilmington, Delaware, carrying a Confederate flag into the Capitol.

Historians say that in order to understand the country’s racial divide and the attack on the Capitol, one must understand the racial tensions that led to “Red Summer.” “What we are facing within the racial tension that revealed itself in 2020, coupled with the pandemic, is sadly, ironically and tragically the result of what happened 100 years ago during ‘Red Summer,’ when there was a slew of race riots in American cities,” said Christopher Haley, a historian, writer, filmmaker and producer of the movie *Unmarked: African American Cemeteries*.

“Many of these riots erupted from tensions expressed between Blacks and whites over Black people’s growing economic and social status.”

Haley said there is a correlation between the Jan. 6, 2021 storming of the U.S. Capitol and the events that led to Red Summer. “I think the correlation is that the people rioting were white supremacists, Nazis or anti-Semitic. They carried Confederate flags. That certainly links itself to those persons during Red Summer who hated the progress of African Americans and politicians. It would be stretching it to say there is no correlation.”

White Backlash

Red Summer’s reign of racial terror coincided with the end of World War I, an economic recession and the rising of the “New Negro,” Black people with a determined defiance, no longer willing to subjugate themselves to racism. Black veterans who had fought for democracy abroad in Europe returned to the United States demanding the country’s constitutional promise of equality.

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

“Make way for Democracy,” Du Bois added. “We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States, or know the reason why.”

Longview, Texas

One of the first recorded racial conflicts of Red Summer began in Texas in May 1919. “Comparatively few people know of the race riot which was a precursor of the more serious outbreaks in Washington, Chicago and Knoxville,” the NAACP’s *Crisis Magazine* reported in 1919. “Last June, at Longview, in the state of Texas of ill-fame, a colored man, Lemuel Walters, was arrested and jailed on the charge of having been found in a white woman’s room.”

Samuel L. Jones, a professor and local leader, stopped at the jail where Walters had been detained. Jones, who was delivering *The Chicago Defender*, one of the country's most prominent Black-owned newspapers, was told by three Black inmates and one white inmate that Walters had been taken from the jail by a gang of white men.

Days later, the local white-owned newspaper, *The Longview Leader*, reported that an unidentified Black man had been found fatally shot near the railroad. Professor Jones began asking questions about what may have happened to Walters. The inmates who had earlier told Jones that a gang of whites had taken Walters away were disappeared.

"At this point *The Chicago Defender* stepped in and on July 5 published a statement that the white woman whose name had been originally connected with Walters was really in love with him, would have been glad to become his wife and was deeply stricken by his death," according to a 1919 *Crisis Magazine* article, explaining what *The Chicago Defender* reported. "The *Defender* also declared that the sheriff had seen the mob pass into the jail and was, therefore, an accessory before the fact." The *Defender* accused the sheriff of releasing Walters to the white mob, which murdered him on June 17, 1919.

The accusations of the love affair printed in the *Defender* angered some of the local white men in Texas. Five days after the *Defender* story, Professor Jones was attacked, "horribly beaten, struck and cut over the head with a wrench and otherwise badly injured," *The Crisis* reported in 1919. "Even then, he defended himself and managed to break away from his assailants—three white men—but he tripped, fell headlong and while still on the ground was beaten even more violently."

Professor Jones was told that he was attacked because of the statement published in the *Defender*. He denied that he was responsible, then broke away from his attackers and ran. The local sheriff sent word that Professor Jones "would be lynched before midnight unless he had already left town," *The Crisis* reported in 1919.

On the morning of July 11, 1919, a white gang drove to Jones's house, according to the Texas State Historical Association. "Four white men mounted the back porch and called for Jones to come out," according to *The Crisis*. Someone fired at the larger group of white men in the yard. "In the violent scrimmage which followed, no colored men were killed, but it is reported that the manager of the Kelly Plow Works admitted the death of eleven white men," *The Crisis* reported.

The whites withdrew. But at daybreak, they gathered again. "This time arson was the weapon," setting fire to the house of Calvin Davis, a Black doctor, according to *The Crisis*. The mob also burned the homes of other Black people. "Professor Jones' house – from which he had already escaped – and that of Dr. Davis was burned to the ground. The family of Dr. Davis was permitted to escape. But an innocent householder and his wife who lived opposite Professor Jones lost not only their house, but were themselves shot and seriously injured."

The white mob burned the houses in the Black neighborhoods. In their rage they would establish a pattern followed by other white mobs in Black communities across the country. In each community, the racial violence was often prompted by a false accusation that a Black man had assaulted a white woman. "That was all that needed to be said," L.C. Menyweather-

Woods, a professor in the Department of Black Studies at the University of Nebraska, said in the documentary "The Race Riot of 1919 in Omaha: The Lynching of Will Brown."

Fanning the Flames

The spark for such false accusations could be traced back to the movie *Birth of a Nation*, a racist blockbuster by D.W. Griffiths, which was inspired by the novel *The Clansman*. The 1915 classic portrayed a racist and stereotypical portrait of Black people, while glorifying the brutality of the Ku Klux Klan. The movie depicted the Klan as the protector for the South and of white women during the Reconstruction period after the Civil War. But, in reality, the Klan was a terrorist organization that murdered thousands of Black people and raped and assaulted Black women.

Still, President Woodrow Wilson, who held a special screening of the movie at the White House, was said to have raved, "It is like writing history with lightning," after seeing the film. The film also prompted a reemergence of the Klan. After the film's release, hordes of white people poured into the streets of some major U.S. cities, openly assaulting Black people. A white man in Indiana killed a Black teenager after watching the movie.

Racial lynchings of Black men, women and children increased during this period, which historians called the "Nadir"—a dark, low period in history. Hundreds of Black people were lynched, their tortured bodies dangling from trees.

"Strange Fruit," sang Billie Holiday, the jazz singer who grew up during this period.

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the Poplar trees.
Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of the magnolia sweet and fresh*

Slowly, the jazz singer sang, "Then the sudden smell of burning flesh."

The beauty in her face seemed to recede, as she sang in a tone echoing the agony of lynching victims. During her performances, audiences could hear a pin drop. Holiday slowed the song, enunciating each word, painting a vivid picture of lynchings and making white audiences twist in discomfort.

*Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot for the tree to drop*

She would tilt her head back and wail—her voice crescendoing, the lyrics a haunting echo.

Here is a strange and bitter crop.

No Escape

It was that "bitter crop," dangling during "Red Summer" that fueled "The Great Migration," the journey of millions of Black people escaping racial terror in the South. They walked, caught trains and buses heading to cities in the North where many found more disappointment and a different kind of racism. They found poverty, crowded housing, redlining, racial and economic tensions prompted by white people who viewed the Black migrants as a threat to their jobs.

“Historians would come to call it the Great Migration. It would become perhaps the biggest underreported story of the twentieth century. It was vast. It was leaderless. It crept along so many thousands of currents over so long a stretch of time as to be difficult for the press truly to capture while it was under way,” author Isabel Wilkerson wrote in *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration*.

“Over the course of six decades, some six million black southerners left the land of their forefathers and fanned out across the country for an uncertain existence in nearly every other corner of America. The Great Migration would become a turning point in history. It would transform urban America and recast the social and political order of every city it touched.” As they fled, the racial terror tagged behind. For some, racial terror met them in the North with a seething animosity.

“The blood lust which World War I was too short to satiate made the year 1919 one of almost unmitigated horror,” Walter White, a field secretary for the NAACP, wrote in his autobiography, *A Man Called White*.

White, a Black man who looked white—with blond hair and blue eyes—became one of the most fearless and tenacious race investigators in history. In 1919, the NAACP sent White to Chicago to investigate the race riot there.

The Chicago Race Riot of 1919

The racial violence in Chicago began on Sunday, July 27, 1919, one of the hottest days in that city’s history. Eugene Williams, a Black teenager, walked to South Side Beach. Eugene, who was 17 at the time, put his make-shift raft into Lake Michigan and began floating in the cool waters.

As he waded, Eugene’s raft mistakenly crossed an invisible color line drawn in the waters of Lake Michigan. Suddenly, a white man trying to protect that invisible color line, began to throw stones at the Black teenager.

The barrage of stones hit Eugene, knocking him off his raft. Eugene fell, sinking into the cold waters. The Black teenager drowned.

His murder would spark one of the worst episodes of racial violence in the city’s history, setting off seven days of clashes. White people climbed into cars and raced through the Black Belt of the city, shooting at Black people, burning and looting Black people’s homes. “After seven days of shootings, arson and beatings, the Race Riot resulted in the deaths of 15 whites and 23 blacks with an additional 537 injured (195 white, 342 black),” according to the Chicago History Museum. “Since then, a century of African American activism has challenged the racism and social hypocrisy that allowed those responsible for Eugene Williams’s death to elude justice.”

The NAACP investigator Walter White concluded: “The Chicago riot taught me that there could be as much peril in a Northern city when the mob is loose as in a Southern town such as Estill Springs. I was constantly made aware in white areas, especially the Halsted Street area near the stockyards, that eternal alertness was the price of an uncracked skull. I naively

believed that I was well enough known in Negro Chicago, despite my white skin, to wander about at will without danger. This fallacy nearly cost me my life.”

As bad as the riot was in Chicago, White would discover that a more violent massacre would occur only weeks later. It would erupt after Black sharecroppers planning to form a union to fight for better crop wages and escape a system of Southern peonage were killed in the muddy fields of rural Arkansas.

“The bloody summer of 1919 was climaxed by an explosion of violence in Phillips County, Arkansas, growing out of the sharecropping system of the South. The incident was fated to affect materially the legal rights of both Negro and white Americans,” White wrote. “Throughout the nation newspapers published alarming stories of Negroes plotting to massacre whites and take over the government of the state. The vicious conspiracy, so the stories ran, had been nipped in the bud, but it had been necessary to kill a number of ‘black revolutionists’ to restore law and order.” Walter White took the first train South, heading from Chicago for Arkansas.

Elaine, Arkansas

The massacre in Elaine, Arkansas, began on the night of September 30, 1919, when white men fired on a church in Hoop Spur, Arkansas. Inside the church, Black men, women and children had gathered to discuss forming a union to address the peonage debt spiral created by white landowners, who continued to cheat Black farmers out of profits from growing cotton. Inside the church, the Progressive Farmers and Household Union met. Black veterans inside the church returned fire, killing a white man.

And again, all hell broke loose. Rumors spread that the Black people were rising up in Hoop Spur. Thousands of white rioters from as far away as Mississippi, Tennessee, Texas and Louisiana descended on the rural Black community in Phillips County, hunting and killing hundreds of Black people.

“The press dispatches of October 1, 1919, heralded the news that another race riot had taken place the night before in Elaine, Ark., and that it was started by negroes who had killed some white officers in an altercation,” Ida B. Wells-Barnett wrote in her book *The Arkansas Race Riot*. Some historians believe as many as 800 Black people may have been killed in Elaine.

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

More than 285 Black people were arrested in Elaine and surrounding areas.

The men were taken to court in Helena, Arkansas, chained and forbidden to meet with an attorney. At least 12 of the Black men arrested were tortured and beaten, according to records. The white jailers soaked rags with formaldehyde and pushed them into their noses. They also used electrical shocks against the Black men’s genitals to try to coerce confessions for starting the massacre. After a six-minute trial, 12 Black men were sentenced to die in the electric chair. Seventy-five Black people were sent to prison on sentences from 5 to 21 years.

The Chicago Defender published a letter by Wells-Barnett appealing to Black people across the country to raise money for the Black men condemned to death row in Arkansas. One of the Black men in jail wrote to Wells-Barnett, thanking her for her help. "We are innercent [sic] men," he wrote. "We was not handled with justice at all Phillips county Court. It is prejudice that the white people had agence we Negroes. So I thank God that thro you, our Negroes are looking into this trouble, and thank the city of Chicago for what it did to start things and hope to hear from you all soon."

Moved by the letter, Wells-Barnett took the train to Arkansas, where she talked with some of the wives of the 12 condemned. Then Wells-Barnett, a fearless anti-lynching crusader and journalist, slipped into the jail and spent the day interviewing the Black men.

"They had been beaten many times and left for dead while there, given electric shocks, suffocated with drugs and suffered every cruelty and torment at the hands of their jailers to make them confess to a conspiracy to kill white people," Wells wrote. "Besides this a mob from outside tried to lynch them."

After the NAACP took the case, the fate of the men, who became known as the "Elaine Twelve," made national news. NAACP attorney Scipio Jones took their case to the U.S. Supreme Court and ultimately won their release off of death row.

The Tulsa Race Massacre

The bloody reign of racial terror did not end in Arkansas, nor did the horrible season called "Red Summer" end in 1919. In its aftermath, white mobs continued to mobilize, fueled by incomprehensible hatred of Black people, and determined to destroy Black social and economic progress.

In 1921, in Tulsa, that hatred would erupt into one of the worst racial massacres against Black people in U.S. history, following the pattern of the "Red Summer" massacres.

On May 30, 1921, a Black teenager who went by the name "Diamond" Dick Rowland went to the Drexel Building in downtown Tulsa, the only building in the area that allowed Black people to use the restroom. Rowland, according to historical accounts, stepped on an elevator operated by a young white woman named Sarah Page. When the elevator doors opened on the third floor, she screamed. Rowland ran. Historians believe that Rowland may have bumped into Page, stepped on her foot or tripped.

Rowland, who lived in Greenwood, the Black section of North Tulsa, was later arrested and charged with assaulting a white woman.

The Tulsa Tribune published a story calling for the lynching of Rowland. "Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in an Elevator," blared the headline published on May 31, 1921.

A white mob answered the call and began amassing at the county courthouse. The attack on the Black community of Greenwood lasted 48 hours. When it was over, the city took surviving Black people to makeshift concentration camps. More than 1,200 businesses were destroyed, including a Black hospital, school, library, theatres, and savings and loans. The frenzied throng of white people burned churches.

“At best, Tulsa Police took no action to prevent the massacre,” Human Rights Watch concluded in a June 2021 report. “Reports indicate that some police actively participated in the violence and looting.”

White civilians were deputized by the city to shoot Black people. “Hundreds of whites they deputized, participated in the violence—at times providing firearms and ammunition to people, all of them white—who looted, killed and destroyed property,” according to Human Rights Watch. “No one was ever prosecuted or punished for the violent criminal acts.”

After the massacre, Black people went to the courthouse to file claims for their losses, which “amounted to tens of millions in today’s dollars,” the Human Rights Watch reported. “The massacre’s devastating toll, in terms of lives lost and harms in various ways, can never be fully repaired.”

After the massacre, city officials failed to help Greenwood rebuild and furthermore tried to keep Black people from rebuilding in Greenwood by implementing restrictive building codes. “Efforts to secure justice in the courts have failed due to the statute of limitations,” Human Rights Watch reported. “Ongoing racial segregation, discriminatory policies, and structural racism have left black Tulsans, particularly those living in North Tulsa, with a lower quality of life and fewer opportunities.”

As the city approaches the race massacre’s 100th anniversary, Human Rights Watch added support for reparations. “A movement is growing to urge state and local officials to do what should have been done a long time ago,” Human Rights Watch reported, “act to repair the harm, including by providing reparations to the survivors and their descendants and those feeling the impacts today.”

Governments are obligated to address human rights violations, Human Rights Watch reminded. “The fact that a government abdicated its responsibility nearly 100 years ago and continued to do so in subsequent years does not absolve it of that responsibility today—especially when failure to address the harm and related action and inaction results in further harm, as it has in Tulsa.”

Tulsa Lawsuit for Reparations

In September 2020, survivors of the massacre and their descendants filed a lawsuit seeking reparations and demanding the City of Tulsa “repair the damage” left in the legacy of the horrific massacre.

“The massacre was one of the most heinous acts of racial terrorism committed in the U.S. by those in power against Black people since slavery,” said Damario Solomon Simmons, a Tulsa lawyer and one of the lead attorneys working on the lawsuit. “White elected and business leaders not only failed to repair the injuries they caused, they engaged in conduct to deepen the injury and block repair.”

The lawsuit identifies seven defendants who contributed to the “public nuisance” and “unjustly enriched themselves at the expense of the Black citizens of Tulsa and the survivors and descendants of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre.”

The survivors claim that five of the defendants—the City of Tulsa; Tulsa County; the then-serving Sheriff of Tulsa County; the State National Guard, which is a branch of the

Oklahoma Military Department; and Tulsa Regional Chamber, also known as the Chamber of Commerce—were responsible for the massacre.

The Race Massacre still troubles Tulsa nearly 100 years later, as Black people there continue to call for justice.

Each week, before Wednesday night Bible study, the Rev. Robert Turner goes to Tulsa's City Hall. In front of the teeming glass structure, which towers over the city, Turner raises a bullhorn and shouts, reminding people passing by that the city was the site of one of the most gruesome racial massacres in the U.S.

Turner is senior pastor of Vernon AME, which sits on the main street in Greenwood. The church was burned by white mobs during the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. Black people fleeing the raging white mobs hid in the church's basement, which is one of the few remaining original structures that survived the massacre.

"Black people were murdered in this city, killed by mass racial terror," Turner shouts into a bullhorn. "Innocent lives were taken. Babies burned. Women burned. Mothers burned. Grandmothers burned. Grandfathers burned. Husbands burned. Houses burned. Schools burned. Hospitals burned. Our sanctuary burned. The blood of those you killed in Tulsa still cries out."

White people walk by. The traffic pauses at the light. A small crowd gathers at the corner; some carry signs demanding reparations.

Turner, in a white straw hat, continues preaching: "These Black people asked for nothing from this city, state or country. These former veterans from World War I came here and wanted to live out the American dream."
Turner cries out.

"Tulsa, how did you repay them? You, out of jealousy, out of racism, you went down to Greenwood and looted and killed innocent people and you dumped their bodies into mass graves."
His voice rises.

"You know the first time bombs were dropped on American soil?" Turner demands. "The first time bombs were dropped on American soil was not during Pearl Harbor. The first time bombs were dropped on American soil was right here in Tulsa. You burned it to the ground and to this day, not one perpetrator has been charged with one crime.

"Until this day, the bodies of those who were slain are lying in unmarked graves."
"You made laws to prevent them from building homes and businesses back. What kind of civilized society burns churches?"

Turner turns the bull horn to the building.
"The blood of those you killed, the blood of those you killed in cold blood, in broad daylight. Their blood is on your hands."

White Mob Violence and the Capitol Insurrection

By Meredith Warden

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On January 6th, a mob of thousands of people—consisting of white supremacists, Trump supporters, neo-Nazis, neo-Confederates, and many more people with similar views—violently invaded the U.S. Capitol building. Undoubtedly a historic moment, it was the first time since the War of 1812 that the Capitol building had been breached.

At the same time, however, white mob violence is not new—as many before me have pointed out, the storming of the Capitol building continues a long historical arc of white violence in the U.S. in response to perceived threats against white supremacy. Tulsa, Oklahoma; Rosewood, Florida; East St. Louis Illinois; Little Rock, Arkansas; countrywide sites of over 4,000 lynchings; 46, 300 plantations—all of these sites (among many others) were places where whites terrorized Black people in an effort to maintain the social, political, and ideological system of white supremacy.

In its own way, the Capitol insurrection continued this white American tradition of mob violence. Throughout history, the white mob has, in the words of Victor Luckerson, viewed “itself as an extension of the law, not a repudiation of it.”

For example, Reconstruction and post Reconstruction lynching mobs and spectators saw themselves as upholding the law and white supremacy by extrajudicially murdering a Black man or woman who had supposedly committed a crime. These mobs often posed gleefully for cameras, as the hundreds if not thousands of spectacle lynching photos show. They did not hide because they saw themselves as upholding justice, upholding the law; “members of white mobs do not have to mask their faces” because “being part of a white mob has rarely been a crime” even if lynching someone—or breaking into the U.S. Capitol—was technically illegal

As Ida B. Wells wrote about one lynching, the white mob “met with no resistance [during the lynching]...The grand jury refused to indict the lynchers though the names of over twenty persons who were leaders in the mob were well known” and, ultimately, “not one of the dozens of men prominent in that murder have suffered a whit more inconvenience for the butchery of that man, than they would have suffered for shooting a dog.”

The Capitol attack was saturated with similar claims that the mostly white crowd was ‘upholding the law.’ Spurred on by Trump’s claims of fraudulent election results, thousands of people converged on the Capitol building convinced (or just claiming) that they were fighting to correct an illegal election result. They referred to themselves as “patriots,” chanted “U.S.A! U.S.A!,” and repeatedly compared themselves to American Revolutionaries (“1776-it’s now or never”; “Our Founding Fathers would get in the streets, and they would take this country back by force if necessary. And that is what we must be prepared to do.”)

Just as white lynch mobs justified their murders by claiming that they were achieving justice, the Capitol insurrectionists believed that “this was [their] country” and that they were righting a wrong. They were and are white in America; they knew they would likely not face consequences for their riotous and violent actions. And this concept hits at the core of the Capitol insurrection and the history it echoes: beneath the facade of American white mobs ‘upholding justice’ is white supremacy.

The ‘fear of being replaced’—which, put plainly, is the white fear of becoming a racial minority and being treated like whites have treated non-white people throughout history—has been embedded in arguably every instance of white mob violence in this country. The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, in which white mobs looted and destroyed Greenwood District, was a thinly veiled reaction to Black economic success in a district that was known as “Black Wall Street.”

Likewise, lynchings increased after the end of the Civil War, when whites felt threatened by the mere beginnings of Black freedom and pushes for equality; many white people “felt that the freed blacks were getting away with too much freedom and felt they needed to be controlled.”

The ideology on display before and during January 6, 2021 was strikingly similar. In November 2020, a well-known far right figure, Nicholas Fuentes, warned of the “Great Replacement,” the white supremacist belief that “Europe and the United States are under siege from nonwhites and non-Christians” and that the “ultimate outcome of the Great Replacement will be ‘white genocide.’”

This fear of ‘being replaced’ played a role not only in older historical examples of white violence but also more recent examples, such as Charlottesville, when white supremacist and anti-Semites chanted “Jews will not replace us,” and the Christchurch, New Zealand mosque massacre, when the white perpetrator cited the ‘Great Replacement’ in his manifesto.

The Great Replacement theory is a radical and overtly white supremacist idea, but it speaks to more widespread white fears that were present at the Capitol. One of the core tenets of white supremacy is fear. Whether that fear is of “losing status, wealth and most importantly, political power, in the face of mass Black voter turnout,” people of color immigrating from other countries (often for reasons that the U.S. brought about), the general increasing racial diversity of the U.S., or something else, white fear has “always been part of what animated racial violence in this country, from riots to lynchings to police brutality.”

So—like many historical and everyday examples too numerous to list here—the white mob that invaded the U.S. Capitol did so to push down this fear and to instead provoke fear in Black, Indigenous, Asian, Hispanic, Latino, other people of color, Jewish people, people part of the LGBTQIA+ community, and many more. To put it simply, the mob entered the Capitol to reassert white supremacy and try to prove to other people and themselves that they still had power.

They carried and displayed symbols of white supremacy—Confederate flags, abhorrent references to the Holocaust and the Auschwitz, a noose, the ‘O.K.’ hand gesture to mean ‘white power,’ references to QAnon. Like other examples of white mob violence throughout history, they smiled gleefully for cameras.

They repeatedly hurled slurs at Black police officers, and numerous Congresspeople of color and Black staffers stated that they feared for their lives and were “terrorized” by the Capitol invasion. As a reporter among the crowd writes, “for right-wing protesters, the occupation of restricted government sanctums was an affirmation of dominance so emotionally satisfying that it was an end in itself—proof to elected officials, to Biden voters, and also to themselves that they were still in charge.”

In this way, the Capitol invasion and insurrection was both a product and display of white supremacy—it was, after all, because of their white identity that this mob was able to invade the Capitol building at all. As many immediately pointed out, the differences between the government and police response to the Capitol riot versus Black Lives Matter protests is stark. Whereas police often commit “widespread and systemic violence toward civilian protesters, journalists, medics, and legal observers” at Black Lives Matter marches that protest this very type of racialized police brutality, the white mob on January 6th was met not only with little preparation from the Capitol police but often police actively condoning their violence, whether by saying “Appreciate you being peaceful” to members of the mob or participating in the insurrection itself.

Similarly, “DC police arrested more than five times as many people at the height of the Black Lives Matter protests last summer than they did during the day of insurrection at the Capitol,” and as of mid-April 2021, only 400 people out of the thousands involved in the insurrection have been charged.

In short, the Capitol insurrection is steeped in white supremacy, from the fact that it happened in the first place to its ultimate goal of displaying and reinforcing the power of white supremacy and power in America. What happened on January 6th, 2021 is certainly historic, but it is not new. The Capitol insurrection is only another example of the white mob violence that is embedded in—indeed, forms the very core of—America since its white supremacist beginnings. The footage and photos of the Capitol insurrection echo the archive of white mob violence throughout history, because these events, although in different contexts with different details, are all manifestations of the same white supremacy.

When I saw the footage and photos of the white mob at the Capitol, I saw at the same time the violent images of white mobs in lynching postcards, in photos of school integration during the Civil Rights Movement, in the images of destroyed Black Wall Street, in the primary sources detailing the genocide of Indigenous nations and the system of chattel slavery, in the seemingly infinite historical archive of white mob violence throughout America’s history.

This is not new. As historians begin collecting artifacts from the Capitol insurrection and the public in general continues to grapple with the events of January 6th, we must remember and emphasize the Capitol insurrection’s place in the ongoing historical legacy of white supremacy and white mob violence in America
