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Roundtable: The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre; The Quest for Accountability

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ROUNDTABLE: THE 1921 TULSA RACE MASSACRE; THE QUEST FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

ROBERT TURNER*

I am from Tuskegee, Alabama. In Tuskegee, Booker T. Washington started a school, now called the Tuskegee University, and was a leader of the Black community, whom he encouraged to help themselves. Washington later hired George Washington Carver, a famous inventor who discovered over three hundred inventions from peanuts, to teach at the school. Rosa Parks, a civil rights icon, is also from Tuskegee, along with civil rights attorney Fred Gray, who represented Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders.

I was born in John A. Andrew Memorial Hospital on the campus of Tuskegee University where, from 1932–1972, the U.S. government observed the effects of syphilis on 399 Black men without their consent. When penicillin became a widely available treatment in 1943, the government refused to give it to those men. The Tuskegee Syphilis Study demonstrates what people do when there are no consequences for their horrific behavior, similar to what happened, and did *not* happen, in Tulsa.

I first learned about the tragic events of the Tulsa Race Massacre from Professor Al Brophy, who was an attorney in the 2002 reparations lawsuit with Professor Charles Ogletree at Harvard. Professor Brophy knew that, even as a college student, I was passionate about reparations. Later, when I was contemplating leaving law school for seminary training,

* This personal essay reflects remarks made by Rev. Dr. Robert Turner at the 30th Annual Ira C. Rothgerber Conference during the roundtable discussion, *The Tulsa Race Massacre; The Quest for Accountability*. The full discussion is available online. Colorado Law, *Roundtable: The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre; The Quest for Accountability*, YOUTUBE (Apr. 12, 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJms7jBejSA&t=4063s> [<https://perma.cc/62JE-7NY4>]. Rev. Dr. Robert Turner is the former pastor of Historic African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Tulsa. He sits on the National African American Reparations Commission, Board of Trustees for the American Village, and the Advisory Board of the Blackburn Institute of the University of Alabama and is the Chairperson of the Board for the Turner Ministry Association 501(c)3.

Professor Brophy told me that I could help advance the cause of reparations as a lawyer. Never in a million years did I think I would be able to advance the cause of reparations as a pastor in Tulsa. Professor Suzette Malveaux taught with Professor Al Brophy at the University of Alabama School of Law. It was there that I first became familiar with her greatness, and I was honored to be invited to speak with her at the University of Colorado School of Law.

From May 31 through June 1, 1921, the Tulsa Race Massacre resulted in 37 square blocks destroyed, over 20 churches destroyed, over 300 people killed, 10,000 people made homeless, bodies dumped in mass graves, and 1,256 homes and 600 businesses destroyed in less than 18 hours. The racist, White mob took out an entire community. This was not done in pre-statehood Oklahoma—this was in civilized society, where we had a functioning police department, a sheriff, a district attorney, and a municipal office. What the Sheriff's department did—deputizing members of the racist, White mob—was criminal; and what city officials have not done—provide reparations—is criminal. The fire department's dereliction of duty did not put out one fire, and police did not make one arrest of the White perpetrators. As recently as 2017, these horrors were commonly referred to as a "riot," but the City of Tulsa and the State of Oklahoma need to recognize what it was—a massacre—and need to repent.

True repentance is more than saying "I am sorry." We have had a whole lot of ceremonies where people say "I am sorry" or give their apologies. An apology is not repentance. Repentance is when you truly turn from what you are apologizing for doing and give restitution for the harm you have caused. Frankly, I am sick and tired of hearing apologies and not seeing people do, as the Bible says, acts meet of repentance. I have grown frustrated with people. In Tulsa, we have not seen true repentance. We have seen a lot of apologies—the police department has apologized and mayors have apologized, but none have *done* repentance. The police department in Tulsa has yet to do an investigation. The City of Tulsa's legal stance is the same as it was in 1921, saying they are not culpable and, "It's not our fault."

Now as I have pressed and will continue to press, we were recently informed by a retired judge at one of our Mass Graves Investigation: Public Oversight Committee meetings that you cannot criminally charge a city, nor the government. You can

try, but you simply cannot put the City of Tulsa in jail. Instead, you can look at ways for them to be convicted as conspirators and have fines levied against them. Never mind the fact that the City of Tulsa was complicit at best, or a co-conspirator at worst, in the worst race massacre in American history. Unfortunately, the whole notion that the government cannot do wrong criminally is something that we only apply within America, but we do not shy away from criminally condemning other countries' governments.

The 1921 Race Riot Commission had eleven people on it, and it was not some ultra-liberal commission. Six of them were appointed by Governor Keating, a Republican, and three were appointed by Mayor Savage, a Democrat. These nine came up with five recommendations: (1) direct payments to the survivors, (2) in the absence of the survivors, direct payment to descendants, (3) scholarships for the children of the survivors, (4) the Business Incubator of Greenwood, and (5) a memorial where the remains will be interned. Now, nearly twenty years after that report, zero of those recommendations have been done. The Commission was paid for by the state legislature, and when they originally submitted their report, Governor Keating said that he supported it. But after receiving pressure from the press, he changed course. The legislature has yet to do anything about it. The same for the courts.

According to the Commission's report, the American business, Sinclair Oil, owned the airplanes that were used to drop bombs on Greenwood. This is significant because it was the first time America was attacked by aerial assault. As of today, Sinclair Oil has not had to answer to anyone. September 11, 2001 was not the first time the United States was attacked by air. Pearl Harbor was not either. It was in Tulsa, Oklahoma. After September 11, we went to Afghanistan and killed Osama Bin Laden and his sons. After Pearl Harbor, we went to Japan and dropped the atomic bomb at Hiroshima. But after the first time airplanes were used to terrorize Americans, not one person even goes to jail? Not one person even gets arrested? You all are notorious! It shows you that America does not mind domestic terrorism if it is done by White people! And every day we allow that to happen, we put a stain on our Constitution and look like hypocrites to the rest of the world.

Anybody—Democratic, Republican, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, young, or old—ought to be offended by the gross

miscarriage of justice in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Every day that goes by without an investigation is a day in which we spit on our Constitution. Recently at Vernon, we had the U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland come in, his first public appearance since he was sworn in. I have great faith that America's best days are ahead. I would not be doing what I do if I did not believe so. First, I have faith in God. And secondly, I do not subscribe to the belief, as some of my friends do, that America is broken. I just believe America is not finished. I believe our Constitution is what we make it. It is a living document, and we must bring life to it. We have not finished reconstruction after the Civil War. We have not finished the last leg of the civil rights movement. We have to finish the job. We are not broken, but unfinished. It is incumbent on every generation to make us that much more of a perfect union. Our parents did their job; the Greatest Generation did their job after World Wars I and II. The mantle has been passed to us; the baton is ours. We determine if America is a hypocrite or not. We determine if the Constitution is a lie. We determine if we are a country of law and order or recklessness and racism.

In paraphrasing the words of Joshua as recorded in the Holy Bible, Joshua 24:14–15:

Now therefore, fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and faithfulness. Put away the gods (of greed and hate) that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt (Tulsa), and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose you this day, which God ye will serve, whether the gods (of the idolatry of White supremacy) which your fathers served But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

Choose ye this day, America: Whom do you serve, what do you believe in, and are you serious about being, “one nation under God”? If so, which god are you under? The choice is yours today, but the consequences will be experienced by our children tomorrow.