

Biden honors victims of ‘forgotten’ Tulsa race massacre, on the 100-year anniversary

President Joe Biden led emotional commemorations on Tuesday to honor victims of the 1921 race massacre in Tulsa, Oklahoma, saying the United States must learn from one of the worst episodes of racist violence in the country’s history.

The Democratic leader marked the centenary of the massacre by meeting survivors in the city, after the White House announced new initiatives including billions of dollars in grants to address racial disparities in wealth, home ownership and small business ownership.

“This was not a riot, this was a massacre,” Biden said to loud applause. “(It was) among the worst in our history — but not the only one and, for too long, forgotten by our history.

“As soon as it happened, there was a clear effort to erase it from our collective memories... for a long time the schools in Tulsa didn’t even teach it, let alone schools elsewhere.”

100 years ago, the thriving Black community of Greenwood in Tulsa, Oklahoma was ruthlessly attacked by a white supremacist mob—as many as 300 Black Americans were killed and 10,000 were left homeless. Today, I’m visiting the Greenwood Cultural Center and meeting with survivors.

— President Biden (@POTUS) [June 1, 2021](#)

Image source: Twitter

On May 31, 1921, a group of Black men went to the Tulsa courthouse to defend a young African American man accused of assaulting a white woman. They found themselves facing a mob of hundreds of furious white people.

Tensions spiked and shots were fired, and the African Americans retreated to their neighborhood, Greenwood.

The next day, at dawn, white men looted and burned the neighborhood, at the time so prosperous it was called Black Wall Street.

In 2001, a commission created to study the tragedy concluded that Tulsa authorities themselves had armed some of the white rioters.

The mayor of Tulsa formally apologized this week for the city government’s failure to protect the community.

Fill the silence

Historians say that as many as 300 African American residents lost their lives, and nearly 10,000 people were left homeless.

“I come here to help fill the silence because in silence, wounds deepen,” Biden said.

“As painful as it is, only in remembrance do the wounds heal. We just have to choose to remember (and) memorialize what happened here in Tulsa, so it can’t be erased... We simply can’t bury pain and trauma forever.

We can’t build back better without tackling the systemic racism and disparities that have plagued our nation for far too long. That’s why today, we’re taking additional steps to advance racial equity, narrow the racial wealth gap, and build Black wealth. <https://t.co/7mP3mvhSgc>

— President Biden (@POTUS) [June 1, 2021](#)

Image source: Twitter

“At some point there’ll be a reckoning, an inflection point, like we are facing right now as a nation.”

The United States has been embroiled in debate over racism in recent years, fuelled by the killing in 2020 of African American George Floyd, who suffocated under the knee of white Minneapolis officer Derek Chauvin.

The killing sparked nationwide protests, and Chauvin’s recent conviction for murder was hailed as an milestone against police impunity, but many allege racial injustice and police brutality remain widespread.

The president — who is popular with Black Americans voters — also used his speech to slam efforts to undermine voting rights among Black people.

There was “an unprecedented assault on our democracy,” he said, vowing to fight for voters’ rights. “This sacred right is under assault with incredible intensity like I’ve never seen.”

Stark inequalities

In April, some of the last survivors of the Tulsa massacre testified before US Congress and asked that the country recognize their suffering.

The 2001 commission recommended that Greenwood residents receive compensation, but reparations have not been paid, and Biden did not address the subject directly.

Beyond financial compensation, city residents were counting on Biden’s visit to bring more attention to a tragedy that long remained taboo.

Tulsa has also begun to excavate mass graves, where many Black victims of the massacre are buried, in an effort to shed more light on the city’s dark past.

Tune in as I deliver remarks to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre. <https://t.co/JLAHnyeyhH>

— President Biden (@POTUS) [June 1, 2021](#)

Image source: Twitter

“Some injustices are so heinous, so horrific, so grievous they can’t be buried no matter how hard people try,” Biden, who was the first US president to commemorate the massacre, said.

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, once a slave-owning state and a stronghold of the Ku Klux Klan, racial disparities remain stark.

There are marked inequalities between the northern part of Tulsa, which is predominantly Black, and the south, which is mostly white.

Local activist Kristi Williams, who is descended from some of the massacre victims, told AFP she wanted Biden to “do us right.”

“It’s been 100 years, and we have been impacted negatively, from housing, economic

development, our land has been taken," she said. "This country, right now has an opportunity to right this wrong."

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