History of the Present: State-Sanctioned Anti-Black Violence

Violence is part of the foundation on which the American nation is built. Colonization, in itself, was a violent act that involved the near genocide of the indigenous peoples (Native Americans), and the forceful appropriation of the land on which they lived.

American history is peppered with violence against non-European peoples. Native Americans, Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, Filipinos, and Latinos have all suffered at the hands of white Americans. In no way am I minimizing or trivializing that history. However, I’m here to talk about violence against black people. Not just random violence but systemic anti-black violence sanctified by law.

One of the enduring features of American history is that the rule of law is integrally tied to slavery and its legacy, from bondage through emancipation, segregation, civil rights, to the present moment when state-sanctioned violence against blacks continues and the cry that “Black Lives Matter” is a contentious issue in the nation.

My talk will give an overview of the development of state-sanctioned violence against blacks during slavery, the post-emancipation period, and the civil rights and black power eras, which form the backdrop to the present.

Slavery: 1619-1865
Over the first 100 years of this period, a system of racialized chattel slavery was put in place. A series of laws were enacted that enslaved African peoples shipped to America and their descendants and stripped them of virtually all their rights as human beings. Most importantly, for the purposes of this talk, they were deemed as property in the eyes of the law. In a society in which private property was sacrosanct, this gave slaveowners the right to treat and mistreat slaves in any way they saw fit.

Violence was central to this. A few examples:
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- 1669 the Virginia General Assembly passed a law stating that if a master happened to kill a slave who was being “corrected,” it was not a crime.
- 1696 South Carolina passed a law that stated that slaves “barbarous, wild, savage natures” had to be restrained.
- When slaves were declared runaways, it was lawful for any person to kill and destroy them by such ways and means as he saw fit.
- Short of killing, dismemberment was approved: toes and ears were cut off, and the Achilles tendons on habitual runaways severed.
- Whippings were everyday occurrences.

Other kinds of violence:

- Slaves were forbidden to learn how to read and write.

Emancipation & Post Emancipation Period

January 1865 - Emancipation Proclamation: 4 million enslaved African Americans freed

December 1865 – 13th Amendment abolished slavery and involuntary servitude except as punishment for crime.

Black Codes: In the years immediately after emancipation, the former Confederate states enacted a series of laws. Referred to collectively as the Black Codes, these laws sought to ensure the availability of a subservient agricultural labor supply controlled by white people. The laws imposed severe restrictions on freed people who, among other things, were required to sign annual labor contracts with white landowners.

The codes also made loitering or vagrancy illegal – helping to put in place the convict lease system.

A true story: In 1908, a young black man, Green Cottenham, was sold to the Tennessee Coal & Iron Railroad Company and sent to work in the coal mines. Cottenham had violated an Alabama vagrancy law, which essentially made it a crime to be unemployed. Arrested and unable to pay the court fees, Cottenham was conveyed to the company, which paid the money he owed to the
court while he served his time at hard labor. Conditions in these labor camps were beyond terrible. Many prisoners did not survive.

The convict lease system exists today (albeit in modified form). The state leases prisoners’ time to private companies. The companies make a profit and the state benefits economically.

The 1870s saw the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and formation of other white supremacist groups as they acted violently to “take back” the South – put black people back in their “proper place,” subservient – socially, economically, and politically. This initiated a reign of terror.

1. Lynching of men, women, and children – officers of the law turned a blind eye.
   - Between 1889 and 1932 over 3,700 black people lynched
   - Most often accused of sexual assault, but also because of economic competition - Sam Hose (Sen. Rand Paul – didn’t tell the whole story. He was lynched because he owned a store that was successfully competing against a white-owned store in the town).
   - Most were men but women also lynched (Laura Nelson, lynched for stealing a cow. Her body hung from a bridge).

2. Blacks were physically assaulted and murdered to prevent them exercising their right to vote -- a right granted to African American men in 1870 by the 15th Amendment.
   - Phoenix, South Carolina
   - Wilmington, North Carolina – at least 12 black men murdered, and many black women injured.

Post-World War I: Race Riots

- East St. Louis 1917 - Angry white mobs invaded the black section of the city in retaliation for the killing of two undercover police officers. Black people were mutilated and killed, and their bodies thrown into the river. Black homes were burned. Hundreds of black people were left homeless. The police joined the rioters. 35 black people were killed.
- Chicago 1919
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- Elaine 1919
- Tulsa 1921
- Rosewood 1923

Tulsa recently in the news – Trump will hold a campaign event on June 20.

Tulsa riot of 1921 – one of the worst episodes of racial violence in American history

- Black man accused of raping a white woman (he was exonerated)
- Taken to jail
- Shoot out between white men and black men at the jail
- Blacks retreated to Greenwood – black section of town – to protect their families
- Governor dispatched the National Guard
- Blacks sought refuge in church
- Whites attacked the church and set it on fire
- As black fled the burning building they were shot by whites
- Whites used aircraft for reconnaissance and to drop incendiary devices on Greenwood
- More than 1,000 Greenwood homes, churches, and schools burned
- 300 + blacks and 20 whites killed

Civil Rights and Black Power eras 1950s-1970s

Who can forget the many acts of state-sanctioned violence against blacks as they struggled for civil rights? Here are a few names of victims – most of which you probably never heard of – and the dates on which they were murdered:

- May 7, 1955 Rev. George Lee killed for leading voter registration drive in Belzoni, Mississippi
- August 28, 1955 Emmett Till murdered for speaking to white woman in Money, Mississippi
- January 23, 1957 Willie Edwards, Jr., killed by the KKK in Montgomery Alabama
• April 27, 1959 Mack Charles Parker taken from jail and lynched, Poplarville, Mississippi
• February 26, 1963 Jimmie Lee Jackson, civil right marcher, killed by state trooper, Marion, Alabama
• April 23, 1963 William Lewis Moore slain during one-man March against segregation, Atalla, Alabama
• May 1963 Sherriff Bull Connors setting his vicious dogs and turning fire hoses on children as they marched in Selma
• June 12, 1963, Medgar Evers assassinated, Jackson Mississippi
• September 15, 1963 Schoolgirls Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley killed in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama
• Fall 1964 black and white protestors on the Freedom Rides mission to register black voters in the South beaten by whites as state police stood by.
• February 21, 1965 Malcolm X assassinated (FBI suspected)
• February 2, 1967, Wharlest Jackson, civil rights leader, killed when police fire on protestors, Jackson, Mississippi
• February 8, 1968, Students Samuel Hammond Jr., Delano Middleton and Henry Smith killed with highway patrolmen fire on protestors, Orangeburg, SC
• April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., assassinated, Memphis Tennessee (FBI suspected)
• December 4, 1969, Fred Hampton, national spokesman for the Black Panther Party assassinated by members of the Chicago Police Department as part of a Cointelpro operation (FBI directed).

I’d like to close with a quote that I think perfectly encapsulates the themes of anti-black violence, love, and protest. It’s from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.

“In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass.

Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off
and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you! And no, they ain't in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No, they don't love your mouth. You got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. and all your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver--love it, love it and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.”