

Chairman Cohen, Ranking Member Johnson and Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to share this testimony regarding the adoption of House Resolution 215 “Recognizing the Forthcoming Centennial of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre.”

While I am certainly thankful for the attention the resolution will bring to this reprehensible atrocity, much of the language leads me to suspect the authors have other motives for offering it. In my testimony today, I will express my disappointment that this somber occasion is being hijacked by those who seek to further inflame racial divisions and foment animosity toward law enforcement.

But first, let me focus on the event House Resolution 215 purports to commemorate. What is known today as the Tulsa Race Massacre occurred one hundred years ago, and America should know of the brutality and atrocity of that day.

History, however uncomfortable, should not be censored or, in today’s terms, “cancelled.” History should be taught without political bias and without the intent to make any one group, gender or ethnicity feel responsible for the sins of their ancestors.

I don’t speak of American history as someone who is unfamiliar with our Country’s many struggles. Both of my parents were history teachers. My father retired a history teacher.

I learned not just from textbooks in school, but from my parents’ desire to educate me on a subject they deeply loved. In fact it was my mother who first taught me about the Tulsa Race Riot, which is what it was called back then.

The event as described by my mother didn’t sound like much of a riot—at least not on the part of the Black Community living in the Greenwood District. It sounded more like an invasion.

Yes, she told me about the atrocities this Subcommittee knows well—the looting and burning, the lynching and killing, the utter destruction of an entire community that left hundreds dead and thousands homeless.

She also taught me about the unparalleled prosperity of the Greenwood District. I can’t describe to you how fascinated I was by her stories of countless Black-owned businesses, all thriving in their segregated economic bubble.

It was incredibly rare for me to know of a Black-owned business. And here my mother was telling me about a whole community of booming Black businesses so successful that they called it “Black Wall Street.” I truly marveled at the thought of it, and I still do.

The fact that the Black Community in Greenwood was so successful made their destruction all the more painful for me to imagine. All of that prosperity, not even a full generation removed from slavery, completely wiped out. Hundreds of families mourning the death of someone they loved. Thousands grieving a lost home or destroyed storefront. Many suffered all of those things in one horrible day.

This is the tragedy that should be our focus. Instead, the resolution adopted by the Majority promises to stoke racial tensions by equating White Supremacy with police brutality. It accuses law enforcement of “a pattern of violence against Black people in the United States.”

This language lands like a slap in the face to our honorable law enforcement officers and all who support them. As an American who appreciates the sacrifice and service of police officers across this Country, I reject the false and divisive rhetoric found in parts of this resolution.

Mr. Chairman and Members, House Resolution 215 may mark the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre, but it does not honor the victims of that tragic day by seeking to further inflame racial divisions.

The Resolution does not honor the memory of those who suffered by generating unwarranted animosity toward police officers. The families who grieved loved ones, who lost livelihoods—those families are not honored by divisive rhetoric calculated to appease the opponents of law and order.

If I may, Mr. Chairman and Members, I would like to suggest some things that I believe are appropriate ways to honor the victims of the Tulsa Race Massacre, and their descendants.

The first thing is simply to acknowledge what happened that day in 1921. For far too long, the atrocities of that day were minimized, dismissed, or outright denied. When it was finally acknowledged, the very name given to the tragedy implied a certain guilt. “The Tulsa Race Riot” sounds like a bunch of Black folk went wild and their white neighbors had to subdue them.

At least the name was a step toward acknowledgement. Oklahoma State Representative Don Ross served the Greenwood District for many years, and in 1997 he succeeded in creating a commission to study the tragic event.

Those of us in the Black community throughout Oklahoma knew much about what happened because our elders spoke of it. But Oklahoma as a whole, and the world at large, had never received a full and detailed account of the event. No official report existed. Aside from limited academic interest, and the oral history tradition of my culture, virtually no one knew of the Tulsa Race Massacre.

The world owes a debt of gratitude to Representative Ross for his work on this issue. The commission he created issued their report in 2001, and for the first time, there was an official account of that tragic day. There was recognition.

The details in that report contributed to widespread acknowledgement that what happened that day was not a riot of any kind—it was a massacre. Today, we honor the victims, their families and descendants by calling it what was. We honor them by acknowledging the truth of what happened.

Another way we honor the victims of this horrific attack is by promoting unity among Americans of all colors and creeds.

The Tulsa Race Massacre happened at a time in our history when Blacks and whites were divided in the most literal sense: Segregation. Many of those who were murdered that day were sons and daughters of slaves. The year 1921 was not far removed from the end of the Civil War.

I believe the policy of Segregation contributed in no small part to the violence and killing. The mob was not murdering people they lived next door to, or saw at the grocery store, or worshipped with at church. The literal division of Blacks and whites somehow made the atrocities easier to commit.

The same is true today across racial lines: division somehow makes violence easier to commit. While we don't have legal Segregation, we still have geographic Segregation. But most concerning to me is what I call Ideological Segregation.

Ideological Segregation is the result of social media platforms, web search companies, and other corporations who use our digital data and online habits to constantly reinforce our own views. Their algorithms are designed to show us what we want to see. Once they know what that is, they are programmed to show us more and more of it.

For the most part, Ideological Segregation is voluntary. We like our Twitter feeds just the way they are. We choose our "friends" on Facebook and decided if we want to consume their opinions or not.

If someone says something that others disagree with too strongly, their free speech rights can be revoked. Their families can be harassed. Their job can be taken. In extreme instances, ideological divisions can lead to actual violence. We witnessed a tragic example of that when a radical supporter of a radical politician attempted to murder Republican Congressman on a baseball field not far from this building.

I believe that one of the best ways to honor the victims of the Tulsa Race Massacre is by promoting racial unity. One of the best ways to do that, in my opinion, is by refraining from rhetoric and actions that inflame racial divisions. House Resolution 215 fails in this regard.

And finally, I believe there is no greater way to honor those who suffered and died in Greenwood than by providing a land of opportunity for their descendants. [continue with these theme and then close]

Thank you for allowing me to testify today on this important topic. I will be happy to answer any questions at the appropriate time.

