

Race Riots and Individual Merit

PUBLIC sentiment of Georgia eventually rallied to attempt some correction of the peonage evils that were disclosed by murders in that State a few weeks ago. Public sentiment in Oklahoma is already rallying to undertake the making of amends for the terrible injustice that came to a head in the battle of whites and Negroes in the outskirts of Tulsa. But when will public sentiment be aroused to the need of preventing these racial outbreaks, instead of merely trying to atone for them? Race riots have about the same value, in the direction of bettering the condition of either of the participating races, as a fit of anger has for improving the status of an individual. Riots always disclose the weaknesses of those who engage in them. Never, of themselves, do riots have any constructive effect. The best that can ever be said of them is that only as they become horrible examples of what ought not to be do they bring about better conditions and improved relations. But there have been enough, already, of such frenzied conflicts as this at Tulsa, between whites and Negroes, to teach the lesson. It is time for the emergence of some policy or understanding, on the part of the majority portion of both races, that shall make such frenzies impossible. The better conditions and relations should be developed as a matter of nation-wide policy and practice, before lurking injustice or rancor could produce such outbursts.

One source of difficulty in reaching the heart of the matter is discernible in the very term that describes the culmination of the trouble. The term "race riot" deals too much at wholesale to be a fair description of what usually takes place. However truly it may apply to the final aspects of a conflict, it usually is a mere cover and false color for the activities which initiate hostilities. Probably no progress can be made toward obviating such terrible disorders until there comes a general appreciation of the fact that the acts of individuals are at the root of the trouble. Mobs grow out of the play of emotions following individual acts. The reported insulting of some white woman by some Negro is widely advertised as the reason why hundreds of white and Negro residents of Tulsa found themselves pitted against one another in mortal combat that died down only after many on both sides had been killed or wounded and something like a square mile of stores and dwellings in the Negro quarter had been laid low by fire. Yet the insult, if ever it was offered, was the act of an individual. It should have been dealt with as such. Merely because the charge was against a Negro is no excuse for the rising of mobs, and the temporary overthrow of all law. The law is the same for whites and Negroes alike. Public sentiment will have to become appreciative of that fact if the community method of life, idealized in the United States, is not to be allowed to break down.

Take the Negro question all through, one finds its solution hampered by the tendency of all thinking in relation to it to be of the wholesale kind. The merits or defects of either race are weighed, within that race, in terms of their expression in individuals. It is the individual who is put on trial, not the race. Hundreds of white men insult white women and no mobs form. But let a Negro be merely charged with such an insult, and the Negroes of his entire community are accused, whilst a mob of whites straightway brushes aside its own laws and the officers of enforcement, obsessed with the notion of a duty to reach and punish the offender by sheer force. There is no willingness to judge the case on its merits. Yet how else can any case, or any individual, be fairly judged? Or by what other form of procedure can men and women of diverse races ever hope to live together in communities? Every white man or woman, every Negro man or woman, is good or bad, decent or indecent, law-abiding or lawless, as an individual. A whole race cannot forever be judged and condemned for the wrong done by a single member of it. Each individual must be dealt with on his merits. If he does well, he must be credited by the whole community and by all races with his well-doing. If he does ill, his wrong must be recognized and abjured by all. His own race may not shield him in his wrongdoing any more than another race may refuse to recognize his expression of good. It is the quality and not the person that counts. Only when the good that is expressed by an individual takes precedence over the facts of his person in the common thought, will race questions begin to disappear.

Even before that time, however, the decent citizenship of the United States should be able to prevent outbursts like this one at Tulsa from masking any effort by men of one race to take forcible possession of the labor or property of men of another race. The case is bad enough when the races are set against one another by their own uncontrolled emotions. It is far worse when those emotions are played upon, and deliberately excited, by crafty groups waiting to seize a private profit from the public disorder.