

Warren G. Harding: The Forgotten Advocate For Racial Equality

Former President Warren G. Harding is an unlikely choice for someone who has demonstrated political courage. He is one of the nation's "Top Ten Forgettable Presidents" and is considered to have led an extremely boring campaign (James, 2009). Yet, this is a drastically incomplete narrative.

From a young age, authority was thrust upon Harding, who was the eldest child with seven siblings. Harding "looked like a leader" as a handsome, robust man (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020). While he is often described as more politically mellow and difficult to categorize, he was in fact dedicated to improving racial equality within the United States despite the time period.

On May 30, 1921, Dick Rowland, a Black man from Greenwood county in Tulsa, Oklahoma, was accused of assaulting a white elevator operator named Sarah Page. While there was little evidence, "rumors spread, and the story quickly morphed into a rape allegation" (Equal Justice Initiative [EJI] Staff, 2019). The following day, Rowland was arrested and the *Tulsa Tribune* printed an article calling for a lynching.

That night, over two thousand white men gathered outside of the courthouse. Black community members of Greenwood also arrived to protect Rowland. An altercation broke out when a white man attempted to forcibly disarm a Black veteran, leading to shooting. Over the next two days, the white mob looted, burned, and even firebombed buildings in Greenwood. The Tulsa Police, "took no action to prevent the massacre," thereby condoning the horrendous violence produced by blatant racism (Heath, 2020). Estimates suggest the rampage of the white mob displaced 10,000 Black residents and left around 300 dead. Yet, the damage was intentionally overlooked and blamed on the Black residents in following reports.

In the wake of this massacre, Harding worried for days about how to respond. Eventually, he accepted a commencement invitation from the nation's first degree-granting historically Black institution, Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. Harding's speech praised the service of Black veterans while they were being scapegoated for the destruction in Greenwood. He then spoke to the importance of education in resolving racial inequality, challenging students to "shoulder their shared responsibility to advance freedom" (Robenalt, 2020). Although Harding only articulated a brief prayer to acknowledge the Tulsa Massacre, his choice of a historically Black University to "make his only comments about the catastrophe spoke volumes about his intentions" (Robenalt, 2020). These actions, as much as his speech, foreshadowed a much more radical declaration to come.

That fall, Harding ventured into the Deep South with expectations that he would give a speech honoring the city of Birmingham, Alabama. On the day of his speech, he stood before a crowd of 100,000 white and Black people divided by a fence, all waiting to hear his speech celebrating the city's semicentennial. Instead, he made a shocking and passionate case for full political, education, and economic rights for African-Americans, even asserting that "democracy is a lie" without such equal rights (qtd. in Herr, 2015). Half the audience burst out with cheers,

thundering with joy. The other half was dead silent, save for those who “openly booed and hissed” (Robenalt, 2020).

The response Harding’s speech received is epitomized by John F. Kennedy’s description of the courage of life as “a less dramatic spectacle than the courage of a final moment” but “no less a magnificent mixture of triumph and tragedy” (1956, p. 246). The fact that Harding’s speech was unprecedented makes it a bittersweet moment when reflecting upon how long injustice has been ingrained within this nation. As the first president to travel to the Deep South since the Civil War, it was shocking that Harding would publicly declare such a controversial yet powerful stance. White people wielded the most political power as many Black voters were disenfranchised through discriminatory practices, such as hefty poll taxes and bogus literary tests. Harding offended many white voters and made enemies of those he had to work with in government. After hearing Harding’s speech, a Mississippi Congressman expressed horror at the drastic implication that Black men could “strive to become president of the United States” (qtd. in A. Radosh and R. Radosh, 2015). After the destruction of Greenwood, Harding’s speech echoed African-Americans’ drive and resilience during a time of heightened racial tensions. Harding possessed great privilege, like the majority of the nation’s government officials, in that being white provided him with ample opportunity and protections. He was unique in using this privilege to condemn and dismantle racist systems, regardless of losing political power. Such political courage was rare at the time, especially as white elected officials benefited from racist policies.

Harding’s speech was a crucial act of political courage due to his boldness in supporting controversial equal rights as the whole nation watched. However, Harding’s support towards racial equality was not limited to these moments. His administration worked to undo much of the segregation earlier implemented within the U.S. Post Office during Woodrow Wilson’s tenure. Under Wilson, “some Railway Mail Service officials adopted the policy of segregating work crews” and restrooms had become segregated (United States Postal Service [USPS] Historian, 2012). Harding’s administration reversed the majority of this and was the beginning of widespread change in general postal policy, particularly the opportunities for African-American postal workers.

Furthermore, Harding backed the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill. Unfortunately, filibusters by the Southern Democratic bloc blocked voting on the bill in 1922, 1923, and 1924 (2019, U.S., Cong., House). It would take 96 more years for federal Anti-Lynching legislation to be implemented. At last, the Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act, inspired by the earlier bill, passed in 2020.

It remains unsurprising that Harding’s work towards racial equality is forgotten. To discuss it would require acknowledging the extensive history of racism within the United States, particularly such horrendous violence and cover-ups like that of the Tulsa Massacre. Despite Harding’s lack of recognition, it is impossible to deny his revolutionary impact on civil rights during times of racial turmoil.

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