

Bill Kaplan: Johnson's comments on Biden's Tulsa speech ignorant, racist

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On June 1, President Biden went to Tulsa, Oklahoma to commemorate the 100th anniversary of a White massacre of Black residents in the city: “(In) less than 24 hours, 1,100 Black homes and businesses were lost. Insurance companies ... rejected claims of damage. Ten thousand people were left destitute and homeless, placed in internment camps. ... Yet ... no arrests of the mob were made. ... No proper accounting of the dead. The death toll ... by local officials said there were 36 people. ... But based on studies, records and accounts, ... the likely number is much more, in the multiple of hundreds. Untold bodies dumped into mass graves.”

Preeminent Black historian John Hope Franklin grew up in Tulsa. His father, an attorney, was there during the pogrom. He fought the racist complicity of the insurance companies and sued the city successfully for attempting to forbid Blacks from rebuilding. Franklin said: “Throughout my years in Tulsa, the legacy of the race riot remained a constant presence Here was damning evidence of just how far White America would go to quarantine the United States from the ‘virus’ of racial equality, all the while mouthing platitudes about saving the world for democracy.”

However, Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson denounced Biden's Tulsa speech as “awful and so incredibly divisive.” Johnson, ignoring landmark civil rights laws passed during the 1960s, said: “The federal government is incapable of solving these problems and this administration is doing the exact opposite of what President Biden promised, which is to heal this nation.” Johnson's accusations were ahistorical, ignorant and racist.

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Biden's remarks completely rebut Johnson: "We can't just choose to learn what we want to know and not what we should know. We should know the good, the bad, everything. That's what great nations do. They come to terms with their dark sides. And we're a great nation. The only way to build a common ground is to truly repair and to rebuild. I come here to help fill the silence, because in silence, wounds deepen. And only - as painful as it is, only in remembrance do wounds heal."

Johnson's ignorance and racism is tragically not new. In 2017, when Trump defended White Nazis in Charlottesville, Virginia as including "some very fine people", Johnson said: "It'd be nice to move that issue behind us." Compare to then Wisconsin GOP Representative Jim Sensenbrenner: "What happened in Charlottesville goes against the principles of this nation and everything I've worked for The freedoms given in this country should never be abused to incite violence or spread hate and prejudice."

Then there's the January 6 Capitol assault. The U.S. military Joint Chiefs of Staff called it a "violent riot ... a direct assault on the U.S. Congress, the Capitol building and our Constitutional process." Not Johnson. He said he "might have been a little concerned" if instead of Trump supporters who "love this country" there had been Black Lives Matter protesters. GOP silence deafening. Textbook racism.

Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.