

The Houston Riot of 1917, Revisited

C. Calvin Smith

"Behold a stranger at the door,
He gently knocks, has knocked before,
Has waited long, is waiting still,
You treat no other friend so ill."¹

Black Americans, and especially black soldiers, have always been committed to the American creed of freedom and democracy for all. Anytime the nation has found itself threatened by a foreign enemy, black men have been among the first to volunteer their services in its defense. Black soldiers took pride in their military record and the black community accorded them a place in the highest level of social respectability. However, many whites, especially in the South, believed blacks were inferior and should not be allowed to wear the uniform of the armed forces which they held so dear. Whites were also disturbed by the attitude of pride and self-worth exhibited by black soldiers which they interpreted as arrogance and a threat to Jim Crowism. Black soldiers were not wanted in the South because, as Senator James K. Vardman of Mississippi put it, "whites are opposed to putting arrogant, strutting representatives of the black soldiery in every community."²

In 1916, with United States entry into World War I almost a certainty and the induction of large numbers of blacks into the military likely to follow, Vardman and a group of southern congressmen sponsored a bill to prevent the enlistment of blacks in the armed forces or the reenlistment of those

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¹Quoted in Kelley Miller, *The Disgrace of Democracy: An Open Letter to President Woodrow Wilson* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1917), 14. Copies of this publication are located in Record Group 165, War Department General Staff, Military Intelligence Division, 1917-1941, Box 69, Negro File, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

²Quoted in David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 159.

already in uniform. The measure, however, was defeated because of the strong opposition of the Secretary of War, Newton D. Baker, who argued that passage of the statute would be unwise since "black soldiers have performed brave and often conspicuously gallant service for the nation since the American Revolution."³ Baker, more informed than the congressmen, knew the United States was destined to enter the European war and that all available manpower would be needed. Veteran black soldiers serving in the armed forces in 1916 were not unaware of the efforts of white southerners to oust them, but they were men who were proud of their record in the armed forces and were determined to live up to the standards established by their predecessors. They were also aware that the nation, especially white southerners, had little respect for their service and treated "no other friend so ill."

Of all the places where black soldiers served, the documented record of "ill treatment" and lack of respect was greatest in Texas. Perhaps that was because Texas served as one of the border states between the United States, unstable Mexico, and the revolution-racked republics of Central America. In the 1890s and early 1900s, U.S. troops were sometimes dispatched from Texas to wars and hot spots in those countries and a significant number of those soldiers were black. Following the Spanish-American War of 1898, the all-black 10th Cavalry, which had served with distinction during the war, was transferred to Texas for duty. While traveling by train between Huntsville and San Antonio, the soldiers suffered unprovoked sniper fire from resentful white civilians. The frequency and intensity of the attacks were so great that their white commanding officer was forced to request the War Department to provide a military escort for his troops so they could "pass through an area which they were supposed to protect without danger from hidden assassins."⁴

The unwarranted attack upon black soldiers in 1898 was not an isolated incident; in fact, it was part of a recurring pattern of hostility toward black troops in Texas. In 1906, 167 members of the all-black 25th Infantry, stationed at Brownsville, Texas, were dishonorably discharged and imprisoned after being accused of conducting a random and unprovoked raid upon the city. The fact that the raiders were never identified by any investigative body, civilian or military, and that the white commanding officers of the accused testified that a roll call during the incident revealed that all their men were in

³Mary F. Berry and John W. Blassingame, *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 308.

⁴*Ibid.*

camp with clean, unfired weapons made little difference in their fate.⁵ To the local community, justice had been done. Their views were succinctly expressed by a local newspaper editor when he wrote: "Whatever may be the value of black troops in wartime, in peacetime they are a curse to the country."⁶

The attitude of Texans toward black soldiers had changed little when the United States entered World War I in April 1917. Following passage of the Selective Service Act in May of that year, which removed the army's quota system that limited black enlistments to their percentage of the total population and opened the service to the mass enlistment of blacks, military officials recognized the potential for conflict if black recruits were sent into Jim Crow southern communities for training. Initially, army officials decided against sending black recruits into the South for training and tours of duty, especially those from the North, because they feared "embarrassing difficulties will arise in places of public entertainment from the demands of these troops who are associated with white contingents in Northern states, and are accustomed to a situation which they are sure not to find in the neighborhood of Southern camps."⁷ This decision was revoked in early August by Newton D. Baker, who believed it conflicted with established military tradition. However, Baker was cognizant of the potential racial problems that could arise from his decision and ordered commanders of southern camps to "exercise discretion and judgement to prevent any difficulty from arising from this cause."⁸

Hoping to minimize the potential for racial conflict between black troops and local white communities in the South, the War Department ordered the all-black 3rd Battalion, 24th Infantry, United States Army, to Houston, Texas, for a tour of guard duty during the construction of nearby Camp Logan. They arrived July 28, 1917. It was an assignment that neither the black troops nor their white officers wanted, because of the reputation Texans had in regard to their treatment of black soldiers. Colonel William Newman, battalion commander, tried to get the order revoked because:

I had already had an unfortunate experience when I was in command

⁵For detailed accounts of the Brownsville incident see John D. Weaver, *The Brownsville Raid* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970); Ann J. Lane, *The Brownsville Affair: National Crisis and Black Reaction* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1971); and Lewis N. Wynne, "Brownsville: The Reaction of the Negro Press," *Phylon* 33 (Summer 1972): 153-160.

⁶Quoted in Berry and Blassingame, 311. In 1972, more than 60 years after the incident, the army cleared the records of those accused of raiding Brownsville and declared their original conviction a gross injustice.

⁷Newton D. Baker, Secretary of War, to President Woodrow Wilson, August 17, 1917, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 43 (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1955), 506.

⁸*Ibid.*

of two companies of the 24th Infantry at Del Rio, Texas, in April 1916, when a colored soldier was killed by a [Texas] ranger for no other reason than that he was a colored man; that it angered Texans to see colored men in the uniform of a soldier.⁹

Newman's view was shared by many of his officers. "Every time we have been in Texas we have had trouble," commented Captain Lindsey Silvester, commanding officer of Company K of the 24th.¹⁰ And Cecil Green, a black sergeant with the battalion, said the troops "expected trouble in Houston from [white] mobs" from the very beginning.¹¹ Newman's superiors attempted to allay his fears and those of his men by informing them that the Houston Chamber of Commerce had assured the War Department that black troops would be received by the citizens of Houston "in a spirit of patriotism."¹²

When the 3rd Battalion, 24th Infantry, arrived in Houston it entered a community that was already rife with racial tension caused by the strict enforcement of Jim Crow laws, police brutality, and white civilian resentment of the troops because they were replacing a detachment of the all-white Texas National Guard. Black citizens in Houston, in all walks of life, had little to say that was positive about race relations in the city. "Having a home [in Houston] is all right," a black Houston physician told a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) reporter, "but not when you never know when you leave it in the morning if you will really be able to get back to it at night." Similar sentiments were expressed by Elijah C. Branch, a black Houston minister, who said, "law abiding citizens feared the police in getting over the city at night more than they feared the highwayman."¹³ The soldiers

⁹The comments of Colonel William Newman are included in an investigative report on the Houston incident of 1917 by Colonel G. O. Cress entitled "Investigation into the disciplinary conditions in 3rd Battalion, 24th Infantry, while on duty in Houston, Texas, July 26 to August 25, 1917." The report is dated October 5, 1917. See Record Group 407, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1917-1925, Box 1277, Folder 4, National Archives. Cress and a number of other military officials filed multiple reports on the Houston incident, hereafter cited by name of correspondent, date, and record group number.

¹⁰Quoted in Robert V. Haynes, *A Night of Violence: The Houston Riot of 1917* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1976), 53.

¹¹Statement of Sergeant Cecil Green to Colonel G. O. Cress, August 30, 1917, in an investigative report by Colonel Cress entitled "Investigation of the Trouble at Houston, Texas, Between the Third Battalion, 24th Infantry, and the Citizens of Houston, August 23, 1917," Record Group 393, United States Army, Southern Department, Box 364, File 370.61, National Archives.

¹²See Newman's statement in Cress Report, October 5, 1917, RG 407.

¹³Martha Gruening, "Houston: An N.A.A.C.P. Investigation," *The Crisis* 15 (November 1917): 19; Haynes, *A Night of Violence*, 85.

of the 24th were not welcomed and were expected, by local authorities and civilians, to behave in the same fashion as local blacks, accepting brutality, harassment, and insulting racial epithets without retaliation or comment. According to the battalion's commander, the general attitude among local police and white civilians was that the men's status as soldiers was negated by their race. He reported that white construction workers at Camp Logan "lost no opportunity to refer to the 24th Infantry as 'niggers;' the city police and people generally did the same...and no efforts were made in any respect to discourage the use of this appellation."¹⁴

The common use of the word "nigger" by local civilians and police was particularly offensive to the men of the 24th, the majority of whom had spent the previous two years in the Philippine Islands (Manila) and in Cheyenne and Columbus, New Mexico, areas where they faced little or no racial discrimination. Colonel Newman knew his men would have a difficult time in Houston since "the Texan's idea of how a colored man should be treated was just the opposite of what these 24th Infantrymen had been used to."¹⁵ News from Waco, Texas, of an almost violent confrontation between black soldiers and white civilians in that city on July 29, the day after the 24th arrived in Houston, did little to reduce growing racial tension. In an effort to reduce white hostility toward his troop, Newman ordered all of his men disarmed, including the battalion's military police, and stored the arms under lock and key. He believed the unarmed troops would be viewed as less of a threat to local whites and reduce the possibility of retaliation on the part of the soldiers for acts of injustice and humiliation. The only members of the 24th allowed to carry weapons were the guards on duty around the outskirts of Camp Logan, and they were allowed only their rifles and five rounds of ammunition.¹⁶ Newman's early efforts to reduce white hostility toward his troops did little good. Captain David E. Van Natta, one of the troops' white officers, wrote: "At different times since August 17, the date of my arrival at Camp Logan [the troops had arrived on July 28], I have heard various people talking about the colored troops being here. The sentiment was very strongly against them or any more colored troops being sent here for any purpose."¹⁷ Less than a

¹⁴Cress Report, October 5, 1917, RG 407.

¹⁵Report of Colonel William Newman to Inspector General of the Army, September 20, 1917, Record Group 407, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1917-1925, Box 1277, National Archives.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷Report of Captain David E. Van Natta, 2nd Illinois Infantry, to Inspector General of the Army, September 25, 1917, Record Group 393, U.S. Army, Southern Department, Records of the Judge Advocates General, Box 364, File 370.61, National Archives.

month after their arrival in Houston, the incident most feared by the War Department and the officers and men of the 24th Infantry occurred. On the night of August 23, 1917, soldiers from the 24th clashed with white police and civilians in Houston, a confrontation that resulted in the death of twenty people: two black soldiers, five white police officers, and thirteen white civilians.

Professional historians have devoted little time to analyzing the causes and consequences of the Houston incident. The first published accounts were written by biased and emotionally charged journalists and other individuals who were more interested in presenting their interpretation of the incident rather than a balanced account.¹⁸ In recent years more balanced accounts have been written. Arthur E. Barbeau and Florette Henri's *The Unknown Soldiers: Black American Troops in World War I* (1974) is one of the more interesting historical treatments of the incident. However, the most definitive studies published to date are "The Houston Mutiny and Riot of 1917" (1973) and *A Night of Violence: The Houston Riot of 1917* (1976), both by Robert V. Haynes.¹⁹

All studies of the Houston incident agree on most of the basic facts: a small group of soldiers from the 24th were involved in a violent confrontation with white police and civilians of Houston, sparked by police brutality and the use of the term "niggers." However, Haynes accepts the military authorities' conclusion that the violence grew out of a planned conspiracy, carefully concealed by a manufactured fear of a white mob attack, of revenge against the police on the part of experienced soldiers.²⁰ Haynes argues that the cry heard in the soldiers' compound, "They are coming! The mob is coming," moments before the outburst of gunfire from the camp was a signal for the attack upon Houston to begin. He also argues that Sergeant Vida Henry, who apparently committed suicide after the attack on Houston, was the plotter and leader of the conspiracy. His arguments depend on his acceptance as fact the testimony given during the trials: testimony from white civilians, police, white officers of the battalion, and from black soldiers who were alleged participants in the affair and served as witnesses for the prosecution in return for immunity. A careful reading and analysis of the official documents relative to the Houston incident clearly shows both bias on the part of many of the

¹⁸See *The Outlook*, September 5, 1917; *Literary Digest*, September 29, 1917; Gruening, 14-15.

¹⁹Robert V. Haynes, "The Houston Mutiny and Riot of 1917," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 76 (1973); Haynes, *A Night of Violence*.

²⁰Haynes, "The Houston Mutiny," 430 n53.

witnesses and distortion of the testimony on the part of the military. Reexamination of the circumstances and the conflicting stories of those involved suggests instead that the conspiracy theory was a convenient measure to place exclusive blame on the soldiers and not actual fact.

The night of August 23, 1917, was indeed one of violence but it did not grow out of a planned attack on the white police of Houston by angry, revenge-seeking black soldiers; rather, it was a spontaneous outburst triggered by weeks of having to endure insulting racial epithets, by police brutality, and by the fear in the camp of an imminent mass mob attack by angry white Houstonians and the belief that such an attack had been launched. The fuse that ignited the explosion of that tragic night was lit at approximately 2:35 P.M. when Corporal Charles W. Baltimore, a black military policeman, approached two city policemen, Lee Sparks and Rufus Daniels, and inquired about the brutal arrest of a black soldier earlier that day. According to Baltimore, he asked, "in what I thought to be a respectful tone of voice what had been the trouble with the [black] soldier they had just arrested."²¹ Patrolman Sparks, who had a reputation as a bully and "Negro Baiter," answered Baltimore's inquiry by shouting, "Don't you like it?" Before the startled soldier could explain, Sparks attacked him with his service revolver. In an attempt to escape the rain of blows, Baltimore ran, was fired at, pursued, caught, and severely pistol-whipped. Sparks later justified his actions on the grounds that the victimized soldier had approached him roughly and was using profanity. However, Rufus Daniels, Sparks's partner, refused, in sworn testimony, to confirm Sparks's story. He said that he had not heard any profanity while Baltimore was talking to his partner.²²

Following the Baltimore incident, rumors quickly spread that the soldier had been killed and that a white mob was planning an attack upon Camp Logan. The rumors of Baltimore's death and the resulting tension in Camp Logan attracted the attention of Major Kneeland S. Snow who had assumed command of the 24th Battalion on August 20. According to Snow, he and his white officers immediately "realized we were sitting on a powder-keg" and began "doing everything in our power to keep it from being touched off." Snow, accompanied by Captain Haig Shekerjian, who was in charge of military police, proceeded to police headquarters to investigate the Baltimore affair. There they found Baltimore severely beaten, but alive. Subsequently, they were able to secure his release by convincing Chief of Police Clarence

²¹For the sworn statements of Lee Sparks and Charles Baltimore, see Cress Report, September 13, 1917, RG 393.

²²*Ibid.*

Brock that the injured soldier had been carrying out his duties as a military policeman when he questioned the arrest of another soldier. Brock also promised the officers that Patrolman Sparks would be suspended for his unwarranted attack upon Baltimore, and that he would order his men to refrain from referring to the soldiers as "niggers" since that appeared to be the source of most of the friction.²³

During their return to Camp Logan, Snow informed Baltimore of Brock's promise and requested that he relay the information to the men. Snow also informed his white officers of Brock's promise. To prevent an accidental clash between his men and white Houstonians, Snow canceled all passes for the evening and posted extra guards to make sure that no one left camp without authorization. After taking these precautions, Snow and his officers believed they had defused the explosive situation and that the camp would be back to normal the next day.²⁴ Tension, however, remained high in the camp since many of the inexperienced soldiers and their black officers feared that they had been disarmed so that they could not defend themselves from the white mob attack they believed would occur at any moment.

The cause of widespread fear in Camp Logan of a white mob attack has never been fully explained. Haynes has argued that this fear was part of a planned conspiracy and was manufactured by those involved in planning the attack upon Houston, in order to create panic and give their plans a reasonable chance for success. He draws this conclusion from conflicting testimony given to the Houston Civilian Board of Inquiry, which was organized after the incident to investigate its causes, and to military courts by frightened black youths, revenge-seeking white police and civilians, and military officials who were trying to clear themselves of any and all responsibility for the incident.²⁵ It was upon these highly questionable sources that Haynes constructed his conspiracy theory. These people, by Haynes's own admission, and according to the report of one of the army's chief investigators of the incident, Colonel G. O. Cress, were asked leading questions with suggested answers by prosecutors who wanted to prove the incident was premeditated and not a spontaneous reaction to weeks of humiliation and an

²³Cress Report, October 5, 1917, RG 407.

²⁴Major Snow's account of events leading up to the confrontation on the night of August 23 is located in Cress Report, September 13, 1917, RG 393.

²⁵See testimony of Chief of Police Clarence E. Brock in Newman Report, September 20, 1917, RG 407; and the testimony of Cleo Lockhart, age 15, Edna Topper, age 13, and Flassy and Bessie Chancey, ages 15 and 16 respectively, Record Group 153, Records of the Judge Advocate, NNG-73-543, General Court Martials, Federal Records Center (Microfilm), Suitland, Maryland.

imminent fear of physical violence.²⁶

A careful analysis of the official report by military investigators reveals that the soldiers' fear of a white mob attack was genuine and that there was no conclusive proof the fear was deliberately created by alleged conspirators against the city of Houston to mask their plans. From the moment the 24th arrived in Houston, the soldiers were under immense pressure because, according to Colonel Newman, "there was a disposition on the part of the citizens not to respect a uniform [when worn by a black soldier] and that the situation was much more trying than they had ever been made to face."²⁷ Newman's views were shared by Colonel Cress who reported that "the attitude among...the white citizens generally is, in substance, that a nigger is a nigger, and that his status is not effected by the uniform he wears."²⁸ These attitudes often resulted in acts of brutality against the defenseless soldiers by police and civilians when, according to Colonel Newman, "it was clearly not the soldier's fault."²⁹

To understand the fear of attack felt by the men of the 24th on the night of August 23, an examination of the events surrounding the suspension of Patrolman Sparks and his reaction is necessary. Long before the arrival of the 24th in Houston, Sparks had developed a reputation as a "brutal bully" and a "Negro Baiter" who was not satisfied with the socioeconomic advantages whites enjoyed over blacks. He was a man who missed no opportunity to use brutality to put those he viewed as "uppity" blacks in their proper place. This sadistic conduct was apparently endorsed by Sparks's superiors since there is no evidence to indicate any effort was made to alter his behavior.³⁰ Since Sparks had never been disciplined for his treatment of blacks, he was shocked when informed by Chief Brock that he was being suspended due to the Baltimore incident and he angrily accused Brock of being a Negrophile. "Any man that sticks up for a nigger," Sparks yelled at his supervisor, "is no better than a nigger."³¹

Sparks's suspension was not only a blow to his ego, it also threatened him economically. He had only recently returned to duty after a 10-day suspension, without pay, for "improper remarks made to a white woman," and could

²⁶Cress Report, October 5, 1917, RG 407.

²⁷Newman Report, September 20, 1917, RG 407.

²⁸Cress Report, September 13, 1917, RG 393.

²⁹Colonel Newman's comments are quoted in Cress Report, October 5, 1917, RG 407.

³⁰Haynes, *A Night of Violence*, 93.

³¹*Ibid.*, 102.

not afford another one.³² Sparks was clearly not a man who hid his feelings and he faulted the black soldiers for his fate, publicly berated his chief, and talked of getting even. In a city where public hostility toward black troops was at an all-time high, the angry explanations of his position which Sparks undoubtedly would have made to white civilian associates to garner their support could easily have led to rumors of retaliation among them. Since whites often disregarded the presence of black onlookers, such as servants, when discussing racial issues or airing hostility towards other blacks, it is quite possible that black civilians informed the men of the 24th about the threats of revenge against them: thus accounting, in part, for the soldiers' heightened fear of attack.

The intense fear of an attack by a mob of white Houstonians engulfing Camp Logan on the night of August 23 cannot be dismissed, as it is by Haynes and some military investigators, as something generated by a small group of revenge-seeking black soldiers to conceal their plans for an attack upon the city. Nor can the charge that the cry, "They are coming! The mob is coming," be interpreted as a covert, coded signal to the men to begin such an attack. "That those who went out of camp employed this alarm, 'the mob is coming,' as a means of starting the riot," reported Colonel G. O. Cress, "could not be ascertained, but all circumstances point to the fact that the men left back in camp...were obsessed with the idea that a mob of citizens from Houston would attack them."³³ The cry was followed by gunfire and by a mad scramble for weapons and a mass exodus from camp by approximately 150 frightened and inexperienced soldiers, but the evidence indicates that the camp was indeed fired upon by outside forces.

The men left in camp, after the first shots were fired, clearly believed they were under attack and seized their weapons and began to return fire indiscriminately. According to one of their white officers, "the only way to get the men to stop shooting was to shake them and make them realize that they were actually shooting at each other and not some mythical mob of white

³²Testimony of Chief Clarence C. Brock before the Houston Civilian Board of Inquiry, August 24, 1917, p. 217 of transcript, Record Group 393, United States Army, Southern Department, Box 364, File 370.61, National Archives. Haynes has argued that Sparks was suspended for using abusive language in front of a black housewife while arresting her teenage son. This appears very unlikely in view of the record of unrestrained police brutality blacks endured in Houston. By Haynes's own admission, Sparks's supervisors had made no effort to control his abusive behavior prior to the Baltimore incident (*A Night of Violence*, 93.) Furthermore, Sparks apparently continued his career of brutality toward blacks. Three days after the Camp Logan tragedy, Sparks shot and killed a black Houstonian. Although indicted for murder, Sparks was quickly acquitted by the jury (Haynes, "The Houston Mutiny and Riot of 1917," 478 n76).

citizens."³⁴ The soldiers had only army rifles at their disposal but the initial shots fired near Camp Logan, testified L. E. Gentry, a local white policeman, "didn't sound like rifles to me." An examination of those wounded in and near Camp Logan also revealed that "these wounds resulted from gun shot [weapons of nonmilitary issue] and not rifle fire."³⁵ An examination of bullets fired into homes near Camp Logan on the night of the "alleged riot" also revealed that they had been fired from nonmilitary weapons.³⁶ This, combined with the examination of bullets in the camp and Gentry's testimony, substantiates the statement by soldiers left in the camp that those who disobeyed orders and left the camp did so in order to form a skirmish line around the camp to meet their attackers.

The conspiracy theory is further weakened by the testimony of R. E. Lewis before the Houston Civilian Board of Inquiry. According to Lewis, a local attorney who lived near Camp Logan, a small group of men passed his home after the initial shooting and he inquired of them "What was going on?" One of them replied, "Oh we are shooting up the whites; we haven't but a little time to stay here; (but) we are no negroes." Lewis then testified that "one of the men raised his rifle and said, 'You know how far and how fast one of these magazine rifles can shoot?'"³⁷ Lewis did not identify the men he talked to on that dark and rainy night as black or white. However, the fact that they left Lewis unharmed clearly indicates that they were not an angry group of black soldiers on a mission of revenge against whites. Were these men, armed with rifles, members of the Texas National Guard, which the 24th replaced, along with other whites (Haynes's "mythical" white mob)? Was the attack upon Camp Logan an attempt to duplicate the Brownsville incident of 1906? The evidence is clear that Camp Logan had been fired into by outside forces and that the frightened soldiers panicked, seized their weapons, and left camp to meet their assailants. It was not an organized or planned exit since the soldiers left camp "hollering and yelling like a mob."³⁸ Such an exit does not indicate that it was one planned by experienced or veteran black soldiers.

Haynes has argued that Sergeant Vida Henry and a small group of

³³Cress Report, September 13, 1917, (5), RG 393.

³⁴Haynes, *A Night of Violence*, 125.

³⁵Testimony of Patrolman L. E. Gentry before the Houston Civilian Board of Inquiry, p. 25 of transcript; Major K. S. Snow to Brigadier General John A. Hulien, "Report on Circumstances Attending the Mutiny," August 24, 1917, Record Group 393, United States Army, Southern Department, Box 364, National Archives.

³⁶Haynes, "The Houston Mutiny," 429 n49.

³⁷Testimony of R. E. Lewis before the Houston Civilian Board of Inquiry, p. 97 of transcript, August 24, 1917, RG 393.

³⁸Haynes, *A Night of Violence*, 136-139.

supporters planned and organized the attack upon Houston. This view was first advanced by military authorities who, Haynes admits, deliberately distorted the sworn testimony of the two chief officers of the 24th Battalion, Commander Snow and Chief of Military Police Captain Shekerjian, in order to produce a conspiracy theory. Both men testified that Sergeant Henry was the one who warned them of possible trouble on the night of August 23, but in order to identify Henry as the organizer of the incident and leader of the rebellious men, top army officials concluded that the officers had made a mistake and that someone else had given the warning. Accepting the distorted military view, Haynes goes on to argue that Henry was indeed the principal conspirator, that he deliberately deceived his superiors, tricking them into seizing all weapons in camp in order to create fear among the men, arranged for the cry "the mob is coming" to be shouted in camp as a signal for action on the part of his followers, and planned to use his position as a first sergeant to lead more men from the camp into Houston on a mission of revenge.³⁹

The argument that Sergeant Henry led the men in such a conspiracy is unsupported either by reliable, documented evidence or by Henry's character and attitudes. Based upon his military record prior to the incident, Henry was one of the few members of the 24th who was enjoying his stay in Houston. According to Colonel William Newman, who was in command of the 24th until August 20, Henry told him that he was fond of the city because "he had met more high-class colored people in Houston than he had ever seen before."⁴⁰ Newman described Henry as a man of unquestioned loyalty who had been given responsibilities that were beyond his capabilities. "I thought he was unoffensive and not forceful enough to be a First Sergeant of a company," said Newman. Major Snow, Newman's successor, held similar views of Henry, whom he described as illiterate but courteous. Snow also testified that it was Henry who first warned him of trouble.⁴¹ In light of the sworn opinions of Colonel Newman and Major Snow, it is inconceivable that Sergeant Henry had the desire, courage, or ability to organize a full-fledged rebellion against military authority and the city of Houston.

All who identified Sergeant Henry as the leader of the soldiers' attack upon Houston were frightened men who testified under grants of immunity from prosecution or promises of leniency from military prosecutors. The witnesses responded to questions that were worded to elicit a preconceived response.⁴²

³⁹ Haynes, *A Night of Violence*, 136-139.

⁴⁰ Statement by Newman, October 1, 1917, in Cress Report, October 5, 1917, RG 407.

⁴¹ Testimony of Major K. S. Snow, September 27, 1917, Record Group 407, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Box 1277, Folder 4, National Archives.

⁴² Haynes, *A Night of Violence*, 258.

It is beyond question that Henry participated in the incident. However, his decision to do so was made after failing to prevent the troops from seizing weapons and from disobeying orders to remain in camp. According to Colonel Cress's investigation and report on the incident, the soldiers who bolted the camp after the initial shooting "were not in any formation when they left but appear to have halted and, at least partially, organized on the street just east of camp."⁴³

In all probability Henry was among the men who panicked and, once outside the camp, realized that a serious military offense had taken place that would bring the severest of punishments. He, therefore, decided to make the crime fit the harsh punishment that surely awaited the men when the camp returned to normal and made the decision to direct their actions. This was a spur-of-the-moment decision rather than a coldly premeditated plot. Once the decision had been made Henry realized its gravity, which explains why he took his own life on the streets of Houston rather than give the army the pleasure of dictating his execution.

The other soldiers who participated in the Houston confrontation were not as fortunate as Henry. In the aftermath of the disturbance the entire 3rd Battalion, 24th Infantry, was immediately transferred to Camp Furlong in Columbus, New Mexico, where 118 men were arrested, charged with murder and mutiny, and held for trial by General Court Martial. The purpose of a military court martial, as the history of such events has shown, is to convict—and 110 of the accused were ultimately convicted. The men were tried in three groups: 63 on November 1, 1917; 15 on December 17, 1917; and the last 40 on February 18, 1918. The trials resulted in 28 death sentences, 13 of which were secretly carried out on December 11, 1917, before the cases could be reviewed and without notification to the respective families. President Woodrow Wilson reluctantly commuted 10 of the remaining death sentences to life imprisonment after his office was flooded with letters protesting the earlier executions and requesting leniency for those who remained on death row. Those not given the death penalty were sentenced to the federal prison in Leavenworth, Kansas, to serve terms that ranged from two years to life.

When the fate of those soldiers sentenced to death because of their alleged involvement in the Houston affair became public knowledge, the black community reacted with fury. Blacks on the street openly talked of revenge and the nation's black press refused to condemn what the white press described as "one of the most disgraceful mutinies of American troops in our history."⁴⁴ Instead, black newspapers angrily attacked what they believed to be

⁴³Cress Report, September 13, 1917, RG 393.

⁴⁴*The Outlook* (September 5, 1917), 10; *Literary Digest* (September 29, 1917), 4-5.

military injustice. *The Crisis*, the journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People which served as the organization's national voice, described the executed soldiers as "martyrs for the cause of democracy."⁴⁵ Similar views were expressed by the *Baltimore Crusader*, the *Messenger*, a socialist publication in New York City edited by Asa P. Randolph and Chandler Owen, and the *New York Age*, a publication founded by the well-respected T. Thomas Fortune. Fortune was a strong supporter of the philosophy of Booker T. Washington and counted among his supporters prominent politicians such as Senator Thomas C. Platt of New York and former president Theodore Roosevelt. An editorial in the *Age* angrily declared that "strict justice has been done, but full justice has not been done. And so sure as there is a God in heaven, at some time and some way full justice will be done."⁴⁶

All of the 110 men sentenced to death or imprisonment by the military courts-martial proclaimed their innocence. The night of the incident was dark and rainy, making it impossible for the white officers of the 24th to identify individual participants.⁴⁷ Nor did the courts-martial produce any evidence to identify individuals. Subsequently, the accused were convicted upon military speculation and the conflicting testimony of seven frightened black soldiers, one of whom was so scared that he "defecated in his breeches" on the night of the incident.⁴⁸ These men were pressured to admit that they were participants in the affair and were promised leniency in return for their testimony against other suspected participants. The goal of army prosecutors was to prove that the Houston incident was unprovoked, premeditated, and that the white officers of the 24th bore no blame. With the aid of the seven black soldiers, the prosecution was able to ensure that all the white officers of the battalion were officially relieved of any responsibility for the incident.

If the white officers bear no responsibility, who was responsible for the Houston incident? The easy answer is that the soldiers were responsible since they disobeyed orders and took up arms against civilians. This was the official position taken by the War Department. In his studies of the incident, Haynes accepts the War Department's position but also broadens the responsibility. He argues that local business leaders and public officials shared some of the responsibility due to economic greed (the profits to be made from the

⁴⁵*The Crisis* (October 17, 1917), 284-285.

⁴⁶These papers are quoted in John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Knopf, 1980), 330.

⁴⁷Cress Report, September 13, 1917, RG 393.

⁴⁸Haynes, *A Night of Violence*, 261-262, 277, 304.

construction of Camp Logan) and an unwillingness to sacrifice political popularity to guarantee fair treatment to soldiers. Haynes also criticizes Chief of Police Brock for his inability to control his men and eliminate police brutality. But Haynes's hardest indictment is reserved for the soldiers, whom he denounces for their decision to fight violence with violence. The urge to defend oneself when under attack, a natural urge propelled by intense fear, is not a factor in Haynes's analysis, since he dismisses their reactions to the attack of their encampment by an irate mob in favor of a conspiracy theory. There is no question that some of the inexperienced soldiers from the 24th, reacting to what the evidence indicates was a mob attack, panicked and reacted with violence toward their attackers. That, however, was a reaction to violence and not its cause. The ultimate responsibility, therefore, rests with those who deliberately set in motion the forces that ended in violent confrontation.

The War Department and the white officers of the 24th bear much of the responsibility for the bloodshed in Houston. The Secretary of War, Newton D. Baker, reversed a decision made by army officials not to send black troops into the South for military training and tours of duty, in full recognition of the potential problems. Top army officials and lesser officers then failed to carry out his directive that they "exercise judgement and discretion" to prevent clashes between their men and the local white population. Conflict between black soldiers and whites in Houston was assured when the War Department decided to send 65 experienced, noncommissioned officers from the 24th to commission officer training school at Fort Des Moines, Iowa. According to Brigadier General J. L. Chamberlain, these men were "the very best material among the non-commissioned officers of the regiment and included the Regimental Sergeant Major, the Battalion Sergeant Major, the First Sergeant, and three other Sergeants from Company I, the company in which the mutiny started." Subsequently, "many of the non-commissioned officers and many of the men left with the regiment were new men," not experienced soldiers as Haynes and others have charged.⁴⁹ Those elite noncommissioned officers from the 24th who were attending officer training school believed that if they had been with their men, the Houston incident would never have occurred. They even volunteered to "give up their prospects for commissions so as to return to the regiment and redeem its reputation."⁵⁰

⁴⁹Brigadier General J. L. Chamberlain, Inspector General, U.S. Army, to Adjutant General, September 26, 1917, Record Group 407, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Box 1277, National Archives.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

The War Department was also responsible for transferring command of the 24th from Colonel William Newman, an officer with experience in commanding black troops, to Major Kneeland S. Snow, an inexperienced officer, who, according to Haynes, was more concerned about his golf game and Houston's nightlife than he was with the welfare of his men.⁵¹ Snow took command of the 24th two days before the tragedy of August 23 and miserably failed to execute Baker's directive to use "judgement and discretion" to prevent trouble between black troops and the local white population. Due to these actions, significant responsibility for the Houston tragedy must fall on the shoulders of the War Department which, blinded by military tradition and racism, ignored an excellent opportunity to play a major role as an agency of model race relations and progressive social change.

In view of the economic importance of Camp Logan to the Houston economy, Baker and army officials could have forced local officials to treat the men of the 24th with dignity and respect, even within the confines of a Jim Crow community. However, the War Department did not believe that its duty was to work for improved race relations in the civilian community or the army. This was clearly communicated to Emmett J. Scott, Baker's black assistant for minority affairs, in the aftermath of the Houston incident when he asked Baker to implement more humane racial policies in the army. "There is no intention on the part of the War Department," Baker replied, "to undertake at this time a settlement of the so-called race question."⁵² Despite the War Department's lack of concern and poor decision-making, however, the ultimate responsibility for the Houston incident rests on the shoulders of local police, the business community, and political leaders.

It was the Houston business community that successfully lobbied the War Department for Camp Logan and it was the construction of the camp that ultimately brought the all-black 24th Infantry to the city. Camp Logan was an economic boon for Houston, contributing approximately \$60,000 weekly to the local economy.⁵³ Local leaders wanted more and were negotiating with the War Department for an aviation school. In fact, the announcement that the city had been awarded the school was made on August 21, 1917, one day before the incident. During the negotiations business leaders were aware of growing problems between white civilians, police, and the black troops at

⁵¹Haynes, *A Night of Violence*, 91.

⁵²Newton D. Baker, Secretary of War, to Emmett J. Scott, September 30, 1917, quoted in Kennedy, 159.

⁵³Edgar A. Schuler, "The Houston Race Riot, 1917," *The Journal of Negro History* (July 1944): 304.

Camp Logan but refused to report them to the War Department for fear of losing the aviation school and having the operations of the camp severely restricted.⁵⁴ This was clearly revealed in an unsigned editorial in the *Houston Post* following the explosion at Camp Logan. According to the editorial, "The only explanation of toleration of this insolent and disorderly conduct [any display of pride and independence by blacks was viewed as insolent and disorderly conduct by many local whites] is that those who knew of it thought it best to endure patiently rather than run the risk of losing the camp by flooding the War Department with complaints."⁵⁵

The Houston business community, represented by the local Chamber of Commerce (which had assured the War Department that the black soldiers would be treated with respect by local whites), allowed the pursuit of profits from government wartime expenditures to override its civic responsibility. Treating black soldiers with respect would not have seriously challenged the local Jim Crow laws, which the white community cherished. Had business and political leaders pressured local police authorities into reining in a brutal, out-of-control police force, clashes might have been minimized and violence averted. Instead, business leaders not only failed to intervene but refused to report problems with the 24th to the War Department in order to protect their profits. It was this failure of courage and political leadership, fueled by greed, that paved the way for what is commonly known as the Houston Riot of 1917.

In 1921, Congressman D. R. Anthony of Leavenworth, Kansas, introduced a resolution into the U.S. House of Representatives requesting Secretary of War John W. Weeks to review the cases of the 63 soldiers still imprisoned as a result of the Houston tragedy to determine if they were eligible for pardons or clemency. Weeks reported that the cases of the imprisoned soldiers had been reviewed in the spring of 1920 by the Department of Psychiatry and Sociology at the U.S. Disciplinary Barracks, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and that the prison psychiatrists had issued a negative report. According to the report:

Practically all of these prisoners deny participation in the mutiny or events occurring in the city of Houston on August 23, 1917. It seems to us that the conspiracy continues among these men. In view of the serious nature of the offenses of which these men were convicted, it is believed that it would be distinctly prejudicial to discipline and the

⁵⁴Edgar A. Schuler, "The Houston Race Riot, 1917," *The Journal of Negro History* (July 1944): 304.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

interest of the services to grant any clemency at this time.⁵⁶

In denying clemency, the army refused to consider the fact that the accused had not been positively identified by anyone as actual participants in the Houston affair. The protests of innocence might have been truth, rather than an obstinate conspiracy. Nor did the army consider the mitigating circumstances that led to the incident.

In the aftermath of World War I, the war fought to "make the world safe for democracy," the vast majority of black Americans readily agreed with Emmett Scott, Baker's Assistant Secretary of War for Black Affairs, when he commented in 1933: "as one who recalls the assurances of 1917 and 1918...I confess personally a deep sense of disappointment, of poignant pain that a great country in time of need should promise so much and afterward perform so little."⁵⁷ And the remnants of the 24th who bravely fought and died in the war while their brothers languished in prison could say to America with conviction that "you treat no other friend so ill."

⁵⁶John W. Weeks, Secretary of War, to the Honorable Julius Kahn, U.S. House of Representatives, December 6, 1921, Record Group 233, House Committee on Military Affairs, 67th Congress, Houston Riot Cases, HR67A-F28.1, National Archives.

⁵⁷Quoted in Kennedy, 284.