

# HBO's *Watchmen*: Alternative history that ignores the meaning of the 1921 Tulsa massacre

Tim Avery  
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HBO's *Watchmen* (directed by Damon Lindelof) is a sequel to the comic book of the same name written by Alan Moore, illustrated by Dave Gibbons and published in twelve issues from 1986 to 1987. In the alternate history established by the comic, the publication of the first *Superman* comic in 1938 inspired a wave of real-life costumed vigilantes.

Three decades later, we learn that the administration of former US president Richard Nixon was able to win the Vietnam War with the aid of superheroes. Instead of resigning after a chain of events flowing from popular hostility to the war, Nixon abolished presidential term limits. By 2019, Vietnam has been incorporated as an American state, and actor Robert Redford has been president for seven terms.

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, a militant white-supremacist group called the Seventh Cavalry has declared war on the local police force. After the Cavalry murders nearly every police officer in Tulsa in an incident known as the "White Night," new police are recruited on the basis that they will be allowed to wear masks or adopt costumed personas to protect their identities.

The Cavalry, apparently incensed by decades of "liberal" rule under the Redford administration, was formed in response to the administration's promise of reparations to the descendants of victims of the Tulsa massacre in 1921.

The massacre, which the series depicts but does not explain, stemmed from allegations of sexual assault against a white female elevator operator by a young black man, Dick Rowland. Although charges were later dropped, a white mob assembled at the courthouse. On rumors that Rowland was about to be lynched, blacks also arrived, some of them armed and determined to prevent a lynching. Shots were fired and two blacks and ten whites

were killed.

African Americans in Tulsa had good reason to fear that a murder of Rowland was being prepared. Lynching was a staple of the Jim Crow system in the South, and the summer of 1919 had seen the outbreak of racist violence against blacks throughout the country, often with the participation of local police, and in one case, in Arkansas, with the participation of the military.

The period before and after the First World War saw some of the most militant and left-wing activity by workers and small farmers in US history. Black veterans had returned from the war in 1918 with ideas of social equality, and many were determined to fight for equal rights. The authorities were equally determined to maintain racial segregation.

The events in the US were part of an upsurge of working class struggle around the world in the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution. The US witnessed a general strike in Seattle and mass strikes by steel workers and coal miners, as well as many other battles, which posed the question of the unity of black and white workers in common struggle.

Oklahoma itself participated in this broader radicalization of workers and farmers in this period. In 1914, the Socialist Party in the state had roughly 12,000 dues-paying members. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was also very active. During the Green Corn Rebellion in August 1917, hundreds of socialist-minded Oklahomans—black, white and Native American tenant farmers determined to resist conscription—gathered with the intention of marching to Washington D.C. and overthrowing the government, before they met violent resistance from their neighbors.

The Tulsa pogrom of 1921 was a response to the growing radicalization and the danger of united black-

white opposition to capitalism, an effort to whip up the most backward layers on a racist and nationalist basis and implicate them in terrible crimes. The 1921 massacre turned out to be the most violent single action against blacks in US history after the Civil War. It destroyed over 35 blocks of Tulsa's wealthy Greenwood District and left as many as 300 people dead. The district, which had been known as America's "Black Wall Street," was lit ablaze by firebombs dropped from private aircraft.

The fictional United States of *Watchmen*'s 2019 ignores the reasons for and meaning of the Tulsa massacre. In this alternative history, the US suffers from no apparent crisis of capitalist rule, thanks to the all-surpassing benevolence of the Redford administration. Unlike the immediate pre- and post-World War I periods, there is no working-class opposition to account for the rise of a fascistic mass movement like the Seventh Cavalry. Instead, we are led to believe that the meager prospect of reparations has produced violent racism in Tulsa's white population.

There is a definite racist outlook beneath all this absurdity. Policewoman and main protagonist Angela Abar, alias Sister Night (Regina King), claims she can identify a white supremacist because he "smells like bleach," implying that racism is an inherent condition of "whiteness."

There is nothing progressive in this outlook, which uses a one-sided version of Tulsa's history to portray it as the flashpoint for an inevitable race war. That the series portrays the police as the vanguard against the racists reveals something of the disorientation of the artists involved.

Speaking of disorientation, it must be said that *Watchmen* the comic book is not especially promising material for a sequel. The comic makes heroes out of violent, fascistic vigilantes, and despite initial pretensions to realistically depicting the superhero genre, it ultimately descends into an empty-headed, contrived plot.

*Watchmen* the television series attempts to distance itself from fascistic vigilantes. The signature inkblot mask and the fascistic rhetoric of the vigilante Rorschach, one of the main protagonists of the comic book, have been adopted by the Seventh Cavalry, rather than the protagonists of the series.

Contrived plot, on the other hand, returns in full force. At the end of the comic, the "smartest man in the world," Adrian Veidt, convinces the world that a hostile alien threat exists by killing half the population of New York City with a *bio-engineered, giant, psychic squid*. This, the reader is to believe, is the only way to prevent nuclear war

between the United States and the Soviet Union!

The series doubles down on this ridiculous premise, insisting that baby squid raining from the sky have since become a regular aspect of life. Machines controlled by Veidt (Jeremy Irons) drop them at random intervals... to what end? One of the series' protagonists, Wade Tillman, alias Looking Glass (Tim Blake Nelson), was present during the attack, and suffers from post-traumatic stress. It really couldn't get much more foolish.

Other characters from the comic return. In a technically impressive flashback sequence that juxtaposes black-and-white and full-color objects to represent different periods in time, one of the first costumed crime-fighters is revealed to have hidden that he was African American. This is a somewhat clever interpretation of scattered details in the comic, but the series doesn't make much of it: "White men in masks are heroes," a character summarizes, "but black men in masks are scary."

Dr. Manhattan (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II and Darrell Snedeger), who acquired god-like powers in a laboratory accident, returns as well. A sequence in which he demonstrates simultaneous awareness of the past, present and future while romancing a lover has a certain charm, but it is difficult to really admire a character who almost single-handedly conquered Vietnam for US imperialism.

Laurie Blake (Jean Smart) returns as an FBI agent. She has at least one redeeming moment in the final episode of the series, when she says to an antagonist, "I'm tired, Joe. I'm tired of all the silliness." By that point especially, one is inclined to agree with her.



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