

SELF-DEFENSE, SUBVERSION AND THE STATUS QUO: FOUR TENNESSEE  
NEWSPAPERS ASSESS THE COLUMBIA RACE RIOT OF 1946

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ABSTRACT

The period immediately following World War II in the United States saw an uptick in racially charged violence, as increasingly empowered black veterans came into conflict back home with white Americans content with the continuation of the Jim Crow system. Columbia, Tenn., about 40 miles south of Nashville, became the site of one such incident in 1946, when an altercation between a black mother and son and a white clerk erupted into a full-scale invasion of the town's African-American business district by Tennessee state troopers. Numerous black Columbians were beaten and arrested.

By looking at how four different newspapers in Tennessee covered the Columbia riot story, this study hoped to discover the ways in which race and civil rights were presented to local readers at the time. What assumptions did reporters make about culpability in the riot? How did discussion of the riot mirror discussion of other political matters in 1946 America? How did white and black newspapers differ in their coverage? These were some of the questions asked.

The study found vast differences in how the papers covered the riot story, the most profound of which revolved around two issues: attention paid to the historical context surrounding perceived threats of racial violence and empathy shown to black citizens.