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## 2 Old Demons of the New South

Lynching and other forms of extralegal group violence had a long genealogy in America by the dawn of the twentieth century. As early as the Revolutionary era, bands of “regulators” appeared in rural areas of North Carolina and other states, meting out floggings, tar-and-featherings, and occasionally lethal punishments to thieves, charlatans, drunkards, wife abusers, and others accused of offending communal norms. “Vigilance committees” composed of selected citizens furnished similar surveillance and penalties in some locales, complementing the policing efforts of law enforcement officers during times of social upheaval and uncertainty. Throughout the antebellum period and beyond, the western frontier, with its vast unsettled stretches, underdeveloped or nonexistent legal institutions, and hodgepodge of migrant and native inhabitants, played host to a variety of improvised attempts to impose order on unruly people and their conflicting interests. Haphazard efforts at municipal development spared some areas the worst ravages of lawlessness, but other regions were at the whims of cattle thieves, criminal gangs, avaricious speculators and gold-rushers, and other unsavory types.

In response to these threats and often as a means of advancing their own self-interests, quasi-legal posses, vigilantes, and duly appointed lawmen shot, hanged, dismembered, and whipped people in both targeted and indiscriminate fashion, often publicly displaying their grisly work as a cautionary message to other would-be offenders. The lynch mob, acting either independent of or in tandem with these other groups, appeared frequently in the West and elsewhere, serving a range of purposes. Laying bare class tensions that accompanied white settlement of the frontier, property offenses were often the catalyst for the coalescence of a mob, as well as particularly heinous

crimes that some felt were not punished promptly or severely enough by local authorities. In fact, lynchings sometimes occurred in western areas with relatively well-developed legal systems, which still did not satisfy those who called for "more justice and less law." Aside from punishing specific offenses, western lynchings could engender a broader, terroristic meaning, such as the mass hanging of Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles in 1871, the mob executions of Mexicans in the wake of Anglo expansion, and the ongoing excesses associated with the dispossession of Native Americans. Consequently, the racial terrorism and vigilantism that public officials grappled with at the turn of the twentieth century had long roots in American soil by 1900, and few had made any serious attempts to extirpate these traditions.<sup>1</sup>

In many areas of the South, extralegal executions and mob violence were racially tinged, a distinction that would become much more pronounced by the 1890s. Slavery had entailed far-reaching, draconian methods of policing enslaved African Americans, best symbolized by ubiquitous slave patrols and the overseer's lash. Slave rebellions and suspected conspiracies, though varied in scope and lethality, unfailingly provoked murderous responses from white communities, bringing together county officials, local militia, and private citizens for the single purpose of making gruesome examples of accused rebels and black bystanders alike. As sectional tensions over slavery and states' rights heightened, abolitionists came under harsh scrutiny in the South and Midwest, with a number chased out of town, assaulted, and even murdered. Ironically, the Civil War, while ushering in emancipation, further institutionalized violence as a legitimate means of resolving intergroup conflict and individual grievances. During the war, Union and Confederate authorities summarily executed both enemy combatants and deserters, and guns became much more available in communities in which they were previously uncommon. Presaging a later time, some of the most outrageous atrocities of the war were visited on African Americans, including the massacre of black Union troops at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, after they had surrendered to Confederate attackers. The racial hatred that at least partially motivated such wartime cruelty would lurch into the Reconstruction era, resulting in countless humiliations, injuries, and deaths of freedpeople who dared dispute labor contracts, register to vote, or simply attempt to live with some kind of dignity.

The postbellum racial shift in lynching to an almost solely white-on-black crime was not a sudden development, nor were other groups entirely excused from being victims. As late as the 1890s and early 1900s, Italian immigrants could still be executed in a New Orleans jail, a Jewish factory manager could still be hung from a Georgia tree, and the occasional native-born white man

could still have his life ended by outraged townspeople in Missouri, Montana, and elsewhere. Yet, by this time, the archetypal victim of a lynching had become a black male southerner, usually having died at the hands of white tormentors. While there was nothing inevitable about the development of the South's postwar lynching epidemic, by the last decades of the nineteenth century a confluence of factors made the region particularly susceptible to this most extreme and public form of racial violence. Endemic racism and undercurrents of anti-black repression were carryovers from slavery that outlasted the will of the federal government to counter them after the Civil War. Once conservative forces were reinstalled in state legislatures, much of their time was preoccupied with devising ways to better control black lives, labor, and mobility, which a generation earlier had been under the watchful, authoritarian eye of the slaveholder. Black Codes were an early attempt at accomplishing this purpose, but constitutional amendments and other measures nullified these efforts. In North Carolina and elsewhere, the Populist insurgency of the 1890s made the power of white Bourbon elites more tenuous and occasioned a multi-front strategy to suppress challenges from below by both blacks and whites.<sup>2</sup>

Countering the biracial political alliance that the Populists sought to construct meant capitalizing on fears and hatreds that already existed. The reactionary Democratic Party did not invent dehumanizing racism, economic competition between blacks and whites, or southern notions of honor attuned to the defense of women. Its spokesmen and sympathizers simply crystallized these societal trends and values into political instruments sharp enough to shave away Populist support. One of these instruments was disfranchisement amendments that stripped both Republicans and Populists of voters. As the main political achievement of the 1899 legislature, the North Carolina disfranchisement amendment to the state constitution sought to eliminate black men from electoral politics as well as stunt the voting options of white men. In order to be nominally in compliance with the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, which forbade the denial of the right to vote based on race, the Democrats had to devise a way to accomplish their ends without explicitly using the language of racial proscription in the statute. There were a number of approaches to choose from among southern states that had recently curbed black electoral participation with poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses, and other subterfuges. The North Carolina Democrats, uncertain of whether the violence and intimidation of the 1898 election cycle would be enough to keep blacks and politically wayward whites away from the ballot box, settled on a strong amendment whose centerpiece was a literacy test supplemented by a poll tax and a grandfather clause. Given

its relevance to race relations and the political life of the state, it is worth quoting the most significant portion of the amendment:

(Sec. 4) Every person presenting himself for registration shall be able to read and write any section of the Constitution in the English language; and before he shall be entitled to vote, he shall have paid on or before the first day of May of the year to which he proposes to vote, his poll tax for the previous year as prescribed by Article 5, Sec. 1, of the Constitution. But no male person, who was, in January 1, 1867, or at any time prior thereto, entitled to vote under the laws of any State in the United States wherein he then resided, and no lineal descendant of any such person shall be denied the right to register and vote at any election in this State by reason of his failure to possess the educational qualifications herein prescribed: *Provided*, he shall have registered in accordance with the terms of this Section prior to December 1, 1908.

Ratified by the legislature in February 1899, the amendment required the approval of North Carolina voters during the 1900 election before becoming law, a prerequisite that occasioned another massive effort by the Democrats to discourage—often through fraud, intimidation, and violence—dissent at the polls.<sup>3</sup>

Along with disfranchisement, segregationist statutes were another machination for ensuring white (and Democratic) supremacy, providing powerfully symbolic and publicly meaningful ways to stigmatize African Americans as a separate and inferior people. The first such bill, passed in 1899, applied to accommodations in railroad cars, but similar statutes would make de jure segregation applicable to other areas of life. Interestingly enough, the legislators failed to pass a proposed law that would have criminalized the cohabitation of white men and black women, though they endorsed racially segregating cadavers so that black medical students could not dissect white bodies.<sup>4</sup>

A finer, more insidious tool crafted by the Democrats to establish their supremacy was a relentless damnation of black manhood that sought to render inoperative any functional link between African Americans and citizenship. Whether through portraying black men as unfit officeholders and voters, as shiftless workers and dangerous criminals, or as oversexed rapists, bestializing this segment of the population was believed to be essential to guaranteeing conservative dominion in the South. Since only males could vote, it may have seemed natural to the Democrats to appeal to the masculine ideals and racist fears of white men by fabricating an imminent threat that black men posed to white women. Regardless of whether white women wanted to be “championed” in this dubious way and despite the fact that black women were much more susceptible to unpunished sexual assaults by white men, Demo-



Wilmington, North Carolina, ca. 1918 (courtesy of the Library of Congress)

cratic strategists conjured a rape complex that merged with their perceived political interests. In the short term, this ravishment trope was designed both to symbolize the immediate peril that white women allegedly faced and to mobilize white men who were ideally duty bound to respond forcefully to such encroachment on the race's womanhood. In a more abstract but no less evocative sense, the rape imagery was meant to represent the larger, long-term violations that white supremacy had putatively suffered, dramatized by both the divided white male vote that had made Republican-Populist (or "Fusion") political successes possible and the ongoing electoral participation of black men. The diagnosis and remedy that Democrats offered regarding these supposed dilemmas were simple: a vote for them meant protecting white women and white supremacy; a vote for the Republicans and Populists meant black misrule, rape writ large, and social atavism for the entire Southland.

What unfolded in North Carolina in the 1890s had parallels throughout the former Confederate states. Moreover, as white supremacy campaigns accomplished their objective of truncating black electoral strength, their racist, politically expedient vitriol cheapened black life and aspirations in the eyes of many white southerners, resulting in a decisive change in the racial demography and nature of mob violence in the region. In the only instance of a duly elected municipal government being overthrown in the United States, the black community of Wilmington received the full brunt of the violent racism that the Democrats and their allies had so calculat-



One of the more infamous caricatures of African American voters and officeholders that appeared in the North Carolina press during the white supremacy campaigns of 1898 and 1900. The one above was published in the *Raleigh News and Observer* on July 4, 1900.

ingly fomented during the 1898 campaign. People were burned out of their homes, shot dead in the streets, beaten brutally in public, thrown into jail, and forced into exile. Black-owned businesses, which some whites had particularly resented as symbols of African American achievement, were singled out for assault, as were their proprietors. There is no reliable accounting of the number of people murdered by the combined forces of marauding “Red Shirt” paramilitaries, a local vigilante group called the Rough Riders, and the Wilmington Light Infantry that abetted the offensive against African Americans. Estimates of the number of blacks killed range from approximately a dozen to hundreds. What is known is that the Wilmington affair was a white supremacist war with a white supremacist outcome. Furthermore, Republican leaders, from the governor to the president, failed in their most basic responsibility to provide for the safety of the citizenry, vacillating between available options until it was too late to halt the massacre.<sup>5</sup>

Given the multiple forms of violence that African Americans (and others) had faced at the hand of mobs by the early twentieth century, it is difficult to categorize or generalize in any holistic way what caused lynchings or even what this form of murder meant to people living and dying in the midst of it. Problems of definition are immediately complicated by the unique cir-



cumstances, social relations, and local cultures that produced each killing. Thus, the etymology of the word *lynching*, traced by various investigators to individuals and places both bearing the Lynch name and known for arresting displays of retributive brutality, is less important than how the term, as a descriptive device, was given meaning, power, and a history over time. To be sure, attempts to define lynching for legal purposes or to facilitate the sociological and historical study of the phenomenon have merit. Arguably, it is important whether one characterizes a bona fide lynching as requiring a certain number of perpetrators, a corpus delicti, conspirators acting outside of legal authority, or presumed motivations steeped in notions of “service to justice, race, or tradition.” After all, lynchings were not simply murder, but a particular style or performance of killing that its purveyors self-consciously and often publicly sought to distinguish from ordinary homicide or manslaughter. But again, within this observation lies the difficulty of definition.

Lynchings were so individualized in technique, causes, participants, victims, duration, locales, and meanings that few comprehensive conclusions can be reached about the thousands of such episodes that occurred in just the American South, let alone other regions of the country. This genre of murder was distinct from other forms, yet as diverse in its possibilities and methods of perpetration as the human imagination is limitless, though susceptible to the influential variables of place and time. In North Carolina, lynchings were carried out by both very small groups and crowds well into the hundreds. Most commonly, victims met their fates in the stifling embrace of a noose, but were also subjected to gunshots, floggings, dismemberment, sodomy, and a host of other tortures. People were abducted and illegally executed before and after legal proceedings had begun, while in the custody of deputies, during stints in the county jail, and at all times of day and in every month of the year. Felonious crimes, such as murder and rape, were often cited by lynchers as cause for their actions, though the deliberative and punitive phases of a lynching were, by their very nature, always arbitrary, accelerated, and sometimes surreptitious, providing little protection against acting on false accusations.

Many of the mob executions of African Americans were designed to terrorize the larger black community, making the alleged crime—if any crime had been alleged at all—and guilt of the accused less important than the censorious message that was being sent to reinforce racial boundaries. This style of lynching was designed to impress on blacks collectively their general vulnerability to mob violence and the whims of the white community. These murders were necessarily public or accessible to onlookers, sometimes meticulously organized, often well attended, and almost always ritualized. Given that the individual(s) to be killed by the mob symbolically represented the



larger black populace, the handling and usage of the body of the victim(s) by white perpetrators came to represent a site on which racial desires, fears, and prerogatives could be metaphorically enacted. Such lynchings often resulted in sexualized mutilations, military-style volleying, and grotesque distribution of severed body parts, all conducted under the consuming gaze of lynchers and bystanders alike.

Keenly aware of both their performance and their audience, white mobs that publicly murdered blacks as a form of racial terrorism were usually more given to sadistic excesses than perpetrators of other kinds of lynching—or at least their excesses were more widely known and salaciously reported. These executions, like other incarnations of the phenomenon, could be freighted with a range of meanings, methods, and intended outcomes, and it would be wrong to assume that perpetrators were completely unconcerned with imposing what they considered to be communal or popular “justice” on a specific individual accused of a particular crime. Nevertheless, these murderous episodes reverberated far beyond the taking of one life, or several, during the lynching itself, regardless of the articulated or unspoken motives ostensibly animating the culprits. These acts were the ultimate spectacles of racial otherness, made all the more powerful at the turn of the century by disfranchisement, segregation, the black rapist hysteria, and other machinations geared toward devaluing and excluding African Americans. As discussed later, lynchings in Salisbury in 1902 and especially 1906 were representative of this type of collective violence, incorporating public performance of rituals, the attendance of large numbers of participants and observers, and an explicitly hostile and racist subtext directed at the black community. Overall, spectacle lynchings were uncommon in the state, but their infrequency made them all the more horrific, mesmerizing, and inscrutable.

Lynchings in North Carolina, even when inflamed by racial animosity, usually followed an alleged offense against the law and/or community standards, however interpreted. Thus, vengeance was a primary motivation for many lynchers, though other considerations were also involved. Specific allegations of wrongdoing against an individual personalized the offense, as did the identification of a specific victim. Especially in cases where murder or rape were charged, the decision to lynch was sometimes characterized as being predicated on estimations of whether the accused would receive a timely and befitting punishment if allowed a legal proceeding. While many extralegal executions took place in areas known for speedy legal trials and quick dispatch of individuals charged with capital offenses, the lynching mania illuminated the ongoing existence of conflicting ideas about justice in various quarters.

In a time when criminal justice in North Carolina and elsewhere in the South was still a local affair, abstract principles regarding due process, equal protection of the law, and presumed innocence were often at odds with traditional, rural, and working-class notions of justice that insisted on a face-to-face confrontation between the offender and the wronged, along with immediate and discernible sanctions and recompense. The centralization and bureaucratization of criminal justice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as represented by the establishment of Central Prison in Raleigh, the ending of public executions, and the gradual professionalization of municipal law enforcement did little to displace beliefs in the legitimacy and efficacy of local retribution. If anything, some considered these modernizing changes to be problematic, since they seemingly divorced the people from the practice of justice by allowing faraway judges, prison facilities, and governors to have more influence over local matters. Taken to the extreme, some critics and apologists of lynching criticized alleged government inefficiency and misplaced leniency as causes of mob violence, with gubernatorial pardons and clemency practices coming under particular attack. While it is hard to pinpoint a time when the North Carolina criminal justice system revealed an unwillingness or incapacity to impose harsh punishments on African Americans accused of assorted offenses, some, including a state supreme court justice, did portray a supposed lack of public faith in the judicial process as a reason for lynchings.

Notwithstanding motivations related to assumptions about the legal system, retributive lynchings that targeted specific culprits to punish particular crimes or offenses tended not to require widespread public participation, elaborate rituals, or significant planning. Perpetrators assumed, based on a real or imagined communal outcry, that action had to be taken to enforce the public will and subsequently tasked themselves with seeing “justice” done in the wake of a violation. Similar to other kinds of lynchings, retributive killings could take on a number of shapes and sizes, involving few people or several, employing various means of torture and execution, or suddenly taking place at almost any point between the time of the alleged crime and the start or conclusion of legal proceedings against the accused. More so than the racially terrorizing, spectacle lynching, the explicitly retributive variety was typically concerned with ritual only so far as it seemed related to the personal nature of both the offense committed and the penalty being inflicted. In style and motive, most North Carolina lynchings resembled this type, though vicissitudes in the meaning, aesthetics, and demography of extralegal executions in the state do not allow for neat categories or taxonomies for characterizing or understanding the violence in all of its diversity.

Whatever the style of lynching or the motives behind it, participants in such murders, particularly the smaller, retributive affairs, sometimes insisted on a "good lynching." Such a killing might include disposing of the presumed offender at or near the scene of the crime, a very deliberate course of action that supposedly demonstrated respect for the victim and the cool-headedness of the lynchers who bothered to escort their victim to the site. Confessions, however obtained, were nearly essential to a good lynching, since they served to further justify the killing and exonerated the lynchers of murder, at least in their own minds. Since the perpetrators felt themselves to be acting out of a sense of honor and duty to family and community, a good lynching did not revel in unnecessary suffering, and participants were usually satisfied with a quick death following the confession and last words of the victim. Additionally, drinking, random shooting, loud talking, and other irreverent displays were avoided, as were particularly gratuitous excesses performed for the pleasure of the typically small number of onlookers. The alleged victim of the accused or relatives might be invited to view the work of the lynchers, a putative act of closure and vindication for both the avenged and the community.

The spectacle lynching, with its reverberating racist overtones and public demonstrations, and the smaller, more private white-on-black murders could both be socially utilitarian events. They could dramatically express a pure, socially uncomplicated version of whiteness and white privilege that cut across every demographic, thus submerging and subverting gender, class, and ethnic differences that ordinarily added complexity and tension to everyday life. Although the lynch mob and its entourage of curious observers have been traditionally construed as consisting of the rabble of the community, such public happenings typically attracted a variety of people.

Working-class whites who competed with blacks for employment and social status participated in and gawked at lynchings, as did white politicians, businessmen, clergy, and other elites and professionals whose complicity and acquiescence allowed publicly orchestrated murders to occur in the first place. Sheriffs and jailers who did not fend off lynchers; prosecutors who would not prosecute them; juries that would not convict; coroners who proclaimed ignorance of the identity of mob members; and editors who superficially reported, ignored, or even applauded the bloody proceedings were all guilty of being parties to the crime. Unquestioningly, whites of different class backgrounds and social networks participated in lynchings in different ways and for different reasons. The county commissioner might see a lynching as an opportunity to warn blacks away from the registrar's office or the polls, whereas a plantation owner might find it useful for cowering black sharecroppers who might otherwise demand more favorable contractual

terms. Similarly, the poor white farmer might construe a lynching as checking envied advances by local blacks, and an unemployed man might view the same event as a validation of his last claim to relevance: his whiteness and that of his wife and daughters. Thus, a single lynching might temporarily massage differences and disparities among whites, but it would do less to obliterate them than to reflect the self-interests and opportunism that was often enmeshed in such public, communal events.<sup>6</sup>

If there was an economics of lynching, North Carolina serves as an ambiguous case study at best, complicated by factors such as geography, demographics, municipal development, and timing. As in other states, lynchings tended to occur in more rural, agricultural regions in contrast to their rarity in mountainous or relatively urbanized areas. During the period between 1883 and 1930, when the rise and fall of the lynching trend was best documented, approximately half (49) of North Carolina counties were the sites of lynchings (see appendix). Only the western, Appalachian, overwhelmingly white part of the state was underrepresented as a staging ground for such murders. Of the nine counties in which at least three lynchings took place between 1883 and 1910, all had African American populations in 1900 that ranged from 25 to 53 percent of the total populace, with a median figure of 43 percent for the nine districts. Most or all of the lynchings in each county—with the exception of Beaufort—involved black victims. The rurality of these counties warrants special note, given that none of the districts had cities or towns with more than seven thousand residents in 1900. Salisbury, the county seat and largest municipality of Rowan, had 6,277 residents in that year, while Washington (Beaufort County) had 4,842 inhabitants, and Oxford (Granville County) counted 2,059. These towns, with fourteen lynchings between them for the period from 1883 to 1906, were each in different regions of the state, indicating the geographic breadth of the phenomenon.

The countryside character of lynchings in the state is suggestive but by no means conclusive regarding the possible causes of this kind of collective violence. For some, “lynching bees” conceivably added excitement and variety to the otherwise monotonous grind of rural, agrarian life. Aside from how people may have felt about the adequacy of the criminal justice system of the county or state, lynchings were a communal happening like no other. Such events evoked passionate emotions, accentuated family and social relationships, and provided, depending on the style of the lynching and one’s appetite for the macabre, much sought-after diversions from the doldrums of rustic life. Though not wholly unreasonable, it seems simplistic to assume that such public murders served in the place of the theater, the circus, or other innocuous amusements that penurious country folk had limited access to,

since lynchings did not occur in all, or even most, North Carolina counties and rural districts. Still, geography and urban development, along with the racial composition of the population, were relevant considerations regarding the likelihood of a lynching in any given locale.

Along with the factor of place, lynchings in North Carolina also reveal a seasonality that implied causes and motivations. Similar to other violent crimes, extralegal executions tended to take place in warmer months. Between 1883 and 1930, 56 percent of the 97 documented lynchings in the state occurred between May and September, with a plurality (18) taking place during the latter month. The greater interaction between individuals and groups during the summer undoubtedly increased the chances for interpersonal conflict, thus elevating the incidence of violent crimes and various other offenses for which accused individuals were commonly lynched. Additionally, the seasonality of lynchings may also be related to the agricultural cycle, correlating the phenomenon, in some cases, to efforts to control labor. That is, an escalation of illegal executions in the summer months would have coincided with higher demands on workers on the part of land owners. To be sure, a range of measures would have been available to many employers seeking to pressure blacks into working longer hours, settling for inequitable compensation, and limiting their mobility during the harvesting season. The county chain gang and convict lease systems served these purposes, as did the debt peonage that enthralled many tenants throughout the South. However, a well-publicized lynching would have been one of the more devastating ways of compelling black workers to comply with the demands of white employers.

Based on the available data and the constellation of variables behind each lynching, any assertions maintaining that indisputable linkages existed between economic conditions, geography, rural life, and lynchings are tenuous at best and unfounded in at least some instances. One still would have to account for numerous exceptions to the rule, such as the relatively high incidence of lynchings of black North Carolinians in January, the occasional mob murder in or near one of the larger cities, and the unique local conditions at work in each case. Nonetheless, these murderous episodes still shared performance scripts and a lexicon, both of which were publicized and institutionalized by print media, political discourse, apologists, and critics. By the turn of the century, readers in many places had become accustomed to graphic accounts of “brutes” and “fiends” murdering, ravishing, or otherwise “outraging” unoffending members of local “prominent” families. The conventional denouement of these stories often involved “determined men,” assumed to be “from out of town” or otherwise unfamiliar, taking the suspect from the “overwhelmed” sheriff or jailer and executing them. Perhaps the “best people”

of the area quietly expressed disapproval, or maybe they said nothing at all, deferring to the local newspaper editor or the coroner, who could be relied on to exonerate the local community with his official pronouncement that the lynched person had died “at the hands of parties unknown.” Whatever the specifics, lynchings were reported commonly enough in North Carolina by the early 1900s to produce a cultural script, or a genre of “folk pornography,” that was loaded with historically contingent meanings, recognizable narrative tropes, and a social logic grounded in its very performance.<sup>7</sup>

If the state’s experience with extralegal executions does not allow for many hard conclusions regarding the exact nature of the phenomenon across time and locales, a composite assessment does provide a glimpse of how lynching, both the term and the practice, evolved and changed. Ultimately, such murders were possible and their existence so prolonged due to a patent unwillingness of local and state officials to seek out and punish culprits. On the most fundamental level, lynching reflected an appalling absence of regard for the life of the victim and the universal knowledge that perpetrators would not be forced to account for their actions. It was primarily the damage that extralegal executions did to state authority that most troubled white southern politicians. They were generally less concerned with the well-being and lives of the mostly African American victims who had been fodder for the white supremacy campaigns that swept many such officials into office at the turn of the century.

The dilemma that lynching posed for these politicians and other white elites was both multilayered and potentially disastrous to their hold on power. Many of them viewed the problem from the perspective of their own efforts to realize a New South vision in the shadows of Old South traditions. Ideologues of both major parties envisaged bringing the region into a modernity that they believed would rescue it from the mire of poverty, ignorance, and racial conflict that had characterized its history. During the 1890s, Democrats and Republicans proposed different routes toward these ends, with the former aggressively closing the doors to popular participation in the political process while the latter countenanced at least the limited inclusion of marginalized groups. In the wake of electoral victories that presaged a reactionary future, Democrats such as Charles Aycock and Furnifold Simmons still imagined a New South version of North Carolina with features that would distinguish it from its antebellum roots but would not forsake the spirit of its heritage.

Under this New South model, the protection of capital and the tight control of labor would remain priorities. However, sustaining industrial and commercial growth would putatively require the emergence of a strong, centralized state that could reassure investors and corporate interests that they would be

avored with preferential tax policies and unobtrusive regulations. Necessarily this meant reducing the power of the planter aristocracy that had historically controlled the state's affairs, but only to the extent that these traditional powerbrokers were obstacles to "scientific," diversified agribusiness or threatened the Democratic (and Republican) alliance with capital and industry. Ideally, the stewards of the state would be able to select from a menu of options for controlling labor and creating an environment amenable to the interests of employers. These assorted measures would include a convict lease system that secured inmate workers for construction projects, the strident enforcement of tenant contracts, and policies that discouraged the formation of unions. With the legislative pen at their fingertips, the administrators of the new North Carolina would be able to demonstrate that they had learned well the lessons of the Civil War. They would know that the conflict was not a morality tale to fix one's ambitions upon to reinvent a bygone world. Thus, theirs was not the melancholy song of a Southland clinging to a transcendent belief in the rectitude of a lost cause. Instead, they would march to the anthem of a new future made possible by a quick understanding of the South's failings and a ready acknowledgment that true redemption was only possible through inexorable material progress.

Along with a demonstrable devotion to capital and commerce, the disciples of the New South believed that the state needed at least the veneer of cosmopolitanism and cultural refinement to combat the region's image of insularity and backwardness. If only rhetorically, appeals for white immigration as a means of supplying manpower for factories and mills could serve this purpose. Similarly, well-reported tours of governors through various states suggested a new openness, as did well-fertilized networks cultivated by the state's business magnates with northeastern capitalists. The literal fruits of this new cosmopolitanism would be proudly displayed in agricultural and industrial expositions that showcased the region's abandonment of the slavery-driven monoculture that was believed to have contributed to its underdevelopment. In a complementary fashion, grudging investments in public education—including a university system—were aimed at building a bridge over the abyss of illiteracy that had swallowed whole generations of North Carolinians. Although still highly politicized and wanting in professionalism, the print media promoted a lettered, collective North Carolina identity as technological advancements allowed for more rapid dissemination of news.

As was the case with the Old South, the New South that some Democrats fantasized about did not require or advocate equity in race relations, only stability. If such peace required black disfranchisement or a broader class-based initiative that purged the body politic of most African Americans and



some whites, this outcome was acceptable in the name of progress and the mastery of the region's resources by the "better classes." Politically, the New South state was self-consciously conservative in outlook and agenda, but not extreme in either. Further, it was inherently the project of white men, who were believed to best represent its intelligence, interests, and future. Thus, a competitive party system was an unnecessary flirtation with potential "Negro domination" or rule by misinformed whites of lesser capacities. Above all, the New South state was conceived as a modern entity. From its burgeoning textile industries and railroad connectivity to its adoption of public education and the electric chair, its architects saw themselves as shepherding North Carolina into a new, better phase of development, even as they tipped their hats in homage to their fathers.<sup>8</sup>

For those men who dreamed New South dreams, the core of the lynching dilemma was that the practice was neither modern nor conducive to the kind of progress that they so desired. While under certain circumstances North Carolina politicians and others had indulged the mob for their own purposes, once in office they generally characterized lynching as an atavistic remnant of a less civilized age. The practice challenged the rule of law in a manner that promised to damage the legal foundations of government institutions and the legitimacy of the state itself. Furthermore, lynchings dramatized turmoil in race relations that could potentially scare away capital. Such violence also tended to spark migrations that destabilized the labor supply and evinced a racist parochialism that was anything but cosmopolitan and cultured. If nothing else, each instance of unpunished mob murder disclosed an inability or unwillingness of the state to project its power to protect both life and property. Accordingly, the greatest difficulty that lynching posed for New South statesmen was in finding a way to stop the extralegal violence that was harmful to their exercise of authority while not alienating whites who had voted for the Democratic Party at least partially due to its venomously racist politics and willingness to destroy Republican-Populist administrations. Lynchers were, after all, voters, churchgoers, consumers, and neighbors, which posed a delicate challenge to state officials, clergymen, and businesspeople who entertained thoughts of condemning mob violence.

Perhaps more than anyone, Charles Aycock understood this conundrum well. Having ascended to the governor's mansion in 1901 in the midst of shameless race-baiting, Aycock would owe much to the virulent white supremacy campaign waged by the Democratic press, thuggish Red Shirts, and other forces of reaction. Indeed, if the political turmoil and repression of the time cannot be traced to a single individual, perhaps no one benefited more from the outcome—or worked harder to realize it—than he. Nonethe-

less, over the course of his four years in office Aycock would be repeatedly reminded of just how much his past actions and alliances had compromised his ability to maintain public order and the rule of law in North Carolina.

Charles B. Aycock was born in Wayne County in 1859, the eve of southern secession. He was raised in a family quite familiar with the politics of North Carolina, which undoubtedly influenced his own political style and ideological commitments. His father, Benjamin Aycock, had been a prosperous farmer prior to the Civil War and owned thirteen slaves as late as 1863. Parallel to his economic pursuits, Benjamin served as the county's clerk of court for eight years and sat in the North Carolina Senate from 1863 to 1866. Similar to many white men of his day, he was a votary of white supremacy. The Confederate surrender in 1865 left him crestfallen, and Reconstruction's experiments in racial equality appalled him. While in the legislature, he supported a Black Code aimed at constricting African American freedom and citizenship. He also opposed black male suffrage and helped defeat a proposal to provide state support for a college to train black ministers and teachers. Although his son Charles would not share identical views with him on all matters, Benjamin Aycock's politics and values arguably influenced the arc of the younger man's career in public life.

Benjamin Aycock died in 1875, leaving Charles almost 150 acres of land. While the source of his funds for tuition is not known, it is entirely possible that he was able to leverage this inheritance in a way that allowed him to attend the University of North Carolina from 1877 to 1880. After graduating, Charles received his law license and established a practice with Franklin Arthur Daniels in Goldsboro. Like his father, Charles gravitated toward politics and would serve in a number of offices over the next twenty years. In 1881, he was elected superintendent of public instruction of Wayne County. Five years later, he served as a delegate to the Democratic State Convention, which allowed him a view of the party's statewide operations, as did his service as a presidential elector in 1888. Aycock's first real taste of electoral politics came in 1890, when he pursued the Democratic nomination for a U.S. congressional seat. Unsuccessful in this contest, he was rewarded for this work for the party with an appointment as a U.S. district attorney in September 1893.

Aycock's political ambitions were hardly doused by his failed bid for a U.S. House seat. If anything, the Republican-Populist challenge stoked his enthusiasm for partisan brawling, and his years of involvement in Democratic politics and resultant name recognition placed him at the forefront of the party's counteroffensive against the Fusionist uprising. Eager to renew white conservative rule of the state, Aycock was a proactive standard bearer for



Charles B. Aycock, governor of North Carolina, 1901–5 (courtesy of the North Carolina Collection, UNC–Chapel Hill)

the white supremacy campaigns of 1898 and 1900. At every opportunity, he disparaged Reconstruction as folly and lambasted all black office holding, despite how inconsequential, as “Negro domination.” He deployed the black rapist trope freely, stating in the midst of the racially charged 1898 campaign, “I cannot tell you how many thousands of wives and daughters of white farmers in eastern North Carolina are afraid to go along the public roads of today.” When a Wilmington telegram reached Goldsboro in November 1898 calling for white volunteers, Aycock reportedly grabbed his gun and hurried to the train station, along with five hundred others. Before the armed mob could embark, a second telegram arrived, intimating that the Wilmington crisis had been resolved to the satisfaction of local whites.

The immediate and long-term impact of the political violence and other extralegal measures that were crucial to the white supremacy campaign should

not be understated. The coup in Wilmington demonstrated to Aycock and others the effect that widespread, calculated intimidation and terror could have on electoral politics. During the 1900 campaign, Democratic politicians exploited the climate of fear and vigilantism that had marked the previous election cycle, further institutionalizing this atmosphere as it clouded the political culture of the state. Red Shirts served as the honor guards of aspiring politicians such as Furnifold Simmons, Robert Glenn, and gubernatorial candidate Aycock, following them from county to county as they preached against racial equality, glorified white womanhood, and encouraged a fusion of the Populists and the Democrats in the name of white supremacy. Odd election results from majority-black and typically Republican counties, which now fell into the Democratic column, certainly cast a shadow of fraudulence over the 1900 elections, the disfranchisement amendment, and Aycock's ascent to the governor's mansion. Although he may not have fully appreciated it at the time, the Democrats' all-out effort to seize power in the state would do more to damage the electoral process, the rule of law, and race relations than could ever be redressed by his subsequent attempts as chief executive to curb lawlessness and mob violence.<sup>9</sup>

Compared to the crass standard set by his party's recent electoral campaigns, the paternalist racism that Aycock frequently articulated as governor would have passed for racial moderation in the New South of the early twentieth century. This style of statecraft and racial discourse was rooted in an idealized version of the master-slave dialectic of the antebellum era, when some slaveholders imagined themselves as beneficent lords over their white families and enslaved dependents. In exchange for sustenance and limited indulgences, these patresfamilias expected (and coerced) loyalty and deference, as well as labor and other assumed obligations. Whether initially learned from the household role that his slaveholding father modeled or the daily performances of white domination and black subordination that southern racial etiquette required, Aycock, as governor, often spoke in conciliatory, if condescending and disingenuous, terms to African Americans. Certainly, both blacks and some whites were quick to contrast his newfound racial "moderation" with his campaign spewings. Still, many would have understood his less combative language as characteristic of the transformation of an earnest candidate into a conflict-adverse administrator, anxious to govern with as little controversy and resistance as possible.

Having just succeeded in stripping blacks of basic rights and protections, in his inaugural address Aycock promised "universal education" that would benefit both African Americans and whites, though schools would be strictly segregated and inequitably funded. Further, the disfranchisement amend-

ment, in his estimate, would facilitate “good government” for all, removing “clannish” blacks from the electorate who had clustered around the Republican Party. Whites, freed from concerns over blacks as voters and officeholders, would ideally turn to the more productive endeavor of developing the state’s economic and intellectual resources. African Americans, relegated to the political fringes, would no longer be viewed as a threat to white supremacy, and thus race relations would supposedly improve. Against such a contrived backdrop, the governor could then carry out the Democratic agenda that he had campaigned on, minus its attendant racial animosities and incitement of mob rule, which could impair his capacity to govern.

To encourage such a peaceful progression of developments, the governor counseled that blacks needed to “learn that crimes which lead to mob law must cease and then mob law shall curse our State no more.” This statement, of course, amounted to both a shifting of the blame for mob violence from white perpetrators to black victims and a seeming repudiation of the state’s obligation to suppress such collective violations of the law. Ultimately, Aycock’s advice was an exercise in wishful and deceptive thinking, based on the false assumption that African Americans alone could stay the hand of a lawless throng of whites inspired by racial hatred, partisan politics, or the desire to summarily avenge some alleged offense. This logic had prevailed in neither Wilmington in 1898 nor in 1900 when three black men were lynched in North Carolina in separate instances.

Notwithstanding these realities, at least one black editor “breathe[d] a sigh of relief” after the inaugural address. “Mr. Aycock is really reassuring in his references of good will, and intentions to maintain law and order,” John C. Dancy of the Charlotte-published *A.M.E. Zion Quarterly Review* waxed. No doubt hoping that Aycock could, in fact, surmount his demagogic, race-baiting reputation, Dancy and other black North Carolinians waited intently to see how the new governor would deal with the twin demons of mob violence and racial animosity that he and the Democrats had purposefully unleashed during the past decade. While Dancy could not have been pleased to see the state’s African American population disfranchised by the anti-black crusade so ruthlessly led by Aycock and others, he chose to stress the most promising part of the inaugural address, a nod to the politics of racial etiquette.<sup>10</sup>

As governor, Aycock’s first encounter with the issue of mob violence would occur within two months of his January 15 inauguration. On March 8, Silas Martindale, a white man jailed for rape in Moore County, was taken from his cell and hanged on “one of the principal streets” of the county seat of Carthage. Martindale had been charged with sexually assaulting a local schoolteacher in January and was initially incarcerated in Raleigh to avoid an untimely

death at the hands of vengeful townspeople. The sheriff retrieved him after a month's stay in the capital, assuming that the outrage of the community had evaporated to the point that Martindale could reside safely in the Moore County jail until his trial in April. The lawman's assumption turned out to be unfounded. While the sheriff was out of town collecting taxes, a group of men abducted Martindale from the jail and lynched him under cover of night. The body remained suspended from the killing tree until the next day.

As atypical as the public lynching of a white man had become by the early twentieth century, no one was charged with the killing of Silas Martindale. In its reportage of the crime four days later, the *Raleigh News and Observer* even opined, "It is not thought any effort will be made to prosecute the lynchers." Undoubtedly, there were a number of reasons why local and state officials did not pursue the culprits. The nature of Martindale's alleged crime, along with perhaps the reputation and profession of the victim, immediately made him appear to be a villain worthy of severe punishment. In a time when many public figures heralded the sanctity of white womanhood in their efforts to win public office and denigrate the reputations of erstwhile enfranchised black men, an accused rapist, even in white skin, could hardly find a sympathetic audience. Moreover, no precedent existed for successfully prosecuting members of a lynch mob in North Carolina, and thus a culture of permissiveness regarding certain forms of vigilante violence was the norm, which in turn made prosecutions even more unlikely. When the second lynching of Governor Aycock's term occurred on June 18 in La Grange (Lenoir County), there was probably less incentive for local and state authorities to act, given the political tenor of the period. In this instance, the mob's victim was D. B. Jones, a black man accused of sexual assault, a crime that Aycock and other white supremacists had identified as a racial proclivity of African American males that could only be suppressed by the prompt application of lethal violence. Unsurprisingly, this lynching attracted very little attention in the largely Democratic-leaning press, which had heretofore specialized in evoking the image of the black beast rapist for political purposes.<sup>11</sup>

On August 21, the third lynching of the year occurred in North Carolina. According to a news report, a black man named Luke Hough entered the Anson County home of Lena Keith uninvited. Finding her asleep, the intruder allegedly struck her several times with a chair before sexually assailing her and leaving the premises. Although she had been reportedly left for dead, Keith managed to notify neighbors of her situation, who then immediately paid Hough a visit, bloodhound in tow. The group, having supposedly spotted Keith's blood and hair on Hough's clothes, seized the suspect and compelled him to accompany them to the woman's home. While it is not clear what

kind of prodding was necessary, Hough was said to have made a confession once Keith identified him as her assailant. Satisfied with its adjudication process, the crowd escorted their captive to a nearby tree, suspended him by the neck with a rope, and fired a volley of bullets into his swaying body. The coroner's inquest of the following day concluded that Luke Hough had "died from strangulation at the hands of parties unknown," a common pronouncement of lawmen and other officials in the aftermath of lynchings that did not arouse either a local outcry or further state interest. Similar to the two mob killings earlier in the year, the charge of rape likely stayed the hand of the authorities, as did the interracial nature of the alleged crime. Nonetheless, by this time, the new governor was under increasing pressure to act against lynchers, having now learned of three such instances of mob murder in his first seven months in office.<sup>12</sup>

Prior to the killing of Luke Hough, Aycock had already made motions toward improvising an anti-lynching policy. In the most favorable light, his efforts were perhaps sincere, but still halting and reactive. In July, Aycock received a message from the International Council of the World (ICW), a Seattle-based organization devoted to ending lynchings. In response to the June killing of D. B. Jones at La Grange, the ICW offered a five-hundred-dollar reward for each person arrested for participating in a lynching. The governor responded defensively to the ICW missive, telling a *News and Observer* reporter, "I do not care for outside aid in securing law and order in North Carolina." Despite his initial sensitivity, Aycock did feel compelled to act, given the frequency of mob murder in the state and the image of ineffectiveness that such flagrant and unpunished killings projected on his executive authority. Ironically, his plan of action was identical to that of the Seattle organization, which assumed that reward money would encourage informants and thus discourage prospective lynchers. "Hereafter, no matter what the crime may be, I will offer [a] \$400 reward, which is the limit under the law, for each and every participant," he announced. "I recognize that there is a crime for which the punishment is certain death, but criminals must be hanged by the law and not by the mob." Aycock further called on the press and clergy to denounce lynching, which he deemed "a great blot on the State."

In the wake of the lynching of Luke Hough, the ICW sent letters to the governor, the Anson County sheriff, and the local postmaster asserting its intent to offer five hundred dollars for each person implicated in the crime. Put on the spot, Aycock offered a two-hundred-dollar reward for each individual charged with participating in the violence. The Hough lynching was supported by at least some Anson residents, though there were certainly those who were either indifferent or too intimidated to speak out against it.



Some local people were reportedly so irritated by the governor's support for monetary compensation for those willing to identify lynchers that a number made threats and even planned to send a delegation to meet with Aycock. One reporter noted that a number of blacks witnessed and "endorsed" the vigilante execution, though this account did not take into consideration that such a public killing of a black man accused of brutally raping a white woman would have occasioned a certain degree of dissembling among African Americans while in the presence of a sanguinary group of white men. In the end, no one in the crowd of appropriately 250 people who attended the hanging of Luke Hough was held accountable. Consequently, both the ICW and the state of North Carolina kept their reward money, though the governor forecasted that "some day lynchers would be betrayed by persons who had a grudge against them and then the matter would go before juries."<sup>13</sup>

While reward offerings made for good public theater in some quarters, Aycock struggled with mob violence in ways that most were not privy to. As chief executive, the governor was charged with protecting the citizenry and enforcing the law. To these ends, the martial forces of North Carolina, over which he served as commander in chief, were theoretically at his disposal. On at least three occasions during his first year in office, Aycock had to call on the state's military and civilian authorities to ready themselves to respond to potential civil disturbances. In February 1901, he ordered two military companies to report to Sheriff R. F. Lee of Buncombe County, commanding the lawman to "Omit no effort to keep the peace." In August, he placed military personnel under the authority of the sheriff of Mecklenburg County, requesting that he "Uphold the laws at all hazards." Two days after Christmas, a similar telegram was sent to Sheriff N. G. Grandy of Pasquotank County, placing local naval reserves under his command. It is possible that these actions either prevented lynchings or some other collective lawlessness, though the circumstances of these delegations of authority are not completely detailed in the extant records. In any event, such behind-the-scenes measures failed to cure North Carolina of its lynching mania, nor did Aycock's adversaries allow him to forget the role that he had previously played in spreading the disease.<sup>14</sup>

Criticism of Aycock on the lynching issue came from various constituencies and locales around the state. Editorial broadsides were perhaps the most scathing in that they were well articulated and reached a range of readers. The *Union Republican* of Winston-Salem charged that Democratic rhetoric that demonized the "black brute," along with the party's tolerance of mob action during the recent political campaigns, impaired respect for the law. Writing for the *A.M.E. Zion Quarterly Review* in 1902, Bishop James W. Hood

claimed that “radicals are now in the saddle” and that even “many of the best white people have their misgivings” about the Democratic establishment of the state. Hood went on to claim that the white supremacy campaign and disfranchisement “came upon the Negro like the shock of an earthquake,” and many were contemplating leaving the state. A month after the La Grange lynching, the *Caucasian*, a Raleigh weekly, was particularly direct in its condemnation of Aycock and his allies:

We opine that the Governor might have made the task of stopping the crimes [of lynching] . . . a little easier if he had commenced earlier to reform the state. But was he not made the leader last year of the mob law gang? Did he not endorse mob law when he was being escorted around the state by armed red shirts who seemed ready to commit any crime in the “name of democracy?” It is an easy matter Governor to start rioting and mob law, but it is a hard thing to stop it. You endorsed mob law last year (or seemingly did so,) did you not Governor? Now you say it must be stopped. Your red shirt followers are too well drilled in violence and crime to listen now to reason. They think you are joking Governor, and we fear it will take several decades to get them to be good law abiding citizens again.

If the *Caucasian's* characterization of Aycock's dilemma was the most damning and arguably the most accurate, the contribution of the *Charlotte Observer* to the discussion was easily the most mocking. In September 1901, the paper reported that the governor had received a letter from a writer claiming to have been a member of the mob that killed Luke Hough a month earlier. The author resolved to “attend and participate in all lynchings,” signing the correspondence as “one of the boys.” While the newspaper's editor expressed skepticism regarding the writer's involvement in the lynching, the defiance expressed in the letter suggested how laughable some believed the governor's anti-lynching stance to be.<sup>15</sup>

To a large extent, the susceptibility of Aycock to this sort of criticism was, of course, self-inflicted. During the election campaigns of 1898 and 1900 he had stirred racial hatred with frequent resorts to the black rapist trope and exaggerated portrayals of African American suffrage and office holding as “Negro domination.” Red-Shirt hoodlums had served as his personal paramilitary, brandishing guns at rallies and warning blacks and others to stay away from the polls on election day. At best, Aycock was a deeply flawed messenger when it came to counseling North Carolinians to abandon the ways of the mob. At worst, he was a consummate hypocrite who had conspired to place personal and partisan interests above the safety of the citizenry and the laws of the state, but now, as governor, pointed the accusatory finger at

the lynch mob when it exacted its hideous brand of justice in Anson, Lenoir, and Moore counties. It seems unlikely that Aycock would have been unaware of the causal relationship between Democratic campaign strategy—infused with his own inflammatory style—and the persistence of lynching and other forms of extralegal group violence. He never conceded the point publicly, though it was certainly brought to his attention by the editor of the local *Caucasian* and other commentators. Ultimately, the tragedy was less a personal one for Aycock than a more generalized social malady affecting the well-being and humanity of the people of North Carolina, as well as the quality of their democratic and law enforcement institutions. When other governors refused to extradite wanted suspects to the state for fear they might be lynched, Aycock was rightfully chagrined. However, this humiliation did not mitigate his own role in perpetuating the image of North Carolina as a mob-spirited state plagued by lynchers.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond the culpability of Aycock and other individuals in nurturing a political and social climate conducive to certain forms of lawless behavior, lynching reflected the native weakness of state power and authority in turn-of-the-century North Carolina. Many counties did not have trained police forces until after the Civil War, and even then the older and less professional county sheriff model of law enforcement prevailed. The concentration of significant power in the hands of county commissioners and other local officials—even the power to impose capital punishment—strengthened public understanding of the administration of justice as town- and county-based endeavors. Moreover, the state-run penitentiary model of correction, as represented by the establishment of Central Prison in Raleigh in 1884, was a recent invention, which did not substantially influence local law enforcement practices and customs until well into the twentieth century.

As outgrowths of these localized conceptions of law enforcement, government officials in North Carolina and elsewhere sometimes found themselves competing with privately formed bodies seeking to exert control over matters that theoretically fell within the legal purview of the state. The Regulator movement that appeared in selected counties on the eve of the American Revolution was such a formation, even though its goals of attaining social justice for farmers and better political representation for common people were admired by many. Certainly, the Democratic-inspired KKK insurgency that sought to overturn Reconstruction falls into this category, along with its more recent successor, the Red Shirts. These incarnations of informal communal “authorities,” whether one chooses to label them as terrorist groups, (counter)revolutionaries, political vigilantes, or some other moniker, would enjoy varying degrees of approval and influence among North Carolinians. The

important point here is that they all challenged constituted state authorities and their ability to legitimately monopolize and exercise sovereign power.<sup>17</sup>

The North Carolina state was weak in other ways that did little to bolster public confidence or hamper the lynching phenomenon. While fraud and irregularities had always characterized local and statewide elections, the campaigning and balloting of the 1890s were particularly remarkable for the widespread manipulation of and disregard for the democratic process. The Wilmington coup and the disfranchisement amendment—along with the corruption, intimidation, and violence that made them possible—surely represented low points in the history of North Carolina politics. But these episodes were part of a continuum of degeneracy of the body politic, which eventually became beholden to men unabashedly preoccupied with vilifying black male voters, protecting corporate interests, rigging county governance, and squashing agrarian protests with whatever means necessary. Even Aycock's campaign pledge to support "universal education" disclosed the fragility and inadequacy of the state's commitment in this area, aside from the fact that the promise itself was initially motivated by a need to assure illiterate white men that they would not be stripped of the vote by supporting the disfranchisement amendment of 1900. Beyond the use and abuse of state power for often parochial interests, a relatively strong state governed by honorable stewards would still have faced the geographical and technological challenge of projecting power and authority over long distances in a timely matter. In the hands of a governor and a party that many found difficult to take seriously regarding their denunciations of the use of extralegal means to ensure political conformity and social control, the state of North Carolina, at its various levels, faced enormous obstacles in its gradual efforts to assert its authority on the lynching problem.

As the Aycock administration stood perplexed by a mob-violence quandary that it had hoped to fix with disfranchisement and other racial proscriptions, the federal response to lynching and the stifling of black political power was characteristically muted and insufficient. President William McKinley, a Republican, whipped up a jingoistic fervor among the white audiences that he addressed during his tours of the South, hoping to solidify support for imperialistic ventures in the Caribbean and the Pacific. Before predominantly African American crowds, he was more subdued and dry. Like many white moderates of his day, McKinley admired the ostensibly nonconfrontational, self-help approach to black uplift advocated by Alabama educator Booker T. Washington. Illustratively, during a visit to Tuskegee in late 1898, he counseled blacks that "Patience, moderation, self-control, knowledge, [and] character" were more pertinent to their advancement than agitation for political and

civil rights, or as the president put it, “attempting the unattainable.” McKinley publicly had little to say about disfranchisement and racist terrorism in the South, apparently willing to acquiesce to the loss of black votes and lives for the sake of “national unity” and southern white support. Even the bloodshed at Wilmington in late 1898 did not provoke a decisive federal response, despite letters from black refugees pleading for McKinley’s aid. Predictably, the president’s reticence on these issues drew criticism from many African Americans, Republicans, and nonpartisans alike, who wondered why the government was so concerned about Spanish oppression in places such as Cuba and the Philippines, but less visibly disturbed by savagery within American borders.<sup>18</sup>

The assassination of William McKinley in March 1901 brought to the White House a former governor of New York whose past statements and actions revealed a tendency toward relative moderation on the issue of race. Although a believer in white supremacy and above all a political pragmatist, Theodore Roosevelt initially seemed no worse than McKinley regarding the plight of blacks and at times appeared to be somewhat of a liberal president by comparison. Like his predecessor, Roosevelt was thoroughly convinced that Booker T. Washington’s putatively apolitical, vocational approach to the problems of African Americans was best for both races and would eventually lead to harmonious relations in all regions of the country. However, unlike McKinley, Roosevelt early on allowed moral inclinations to occasionally dictate his actions on racial matters, such as in the case of his White House dinner with Washington in 1901 that would soon after lead to a political crucifixion of the president in southern newspapers. For the first two years of his term, Roosevelt was usually defiant when whites accused him of violating southern racial etiquette, often promising that he would continue “appointing decent men to office” regardless of race. In speeches and letters, the president even acknowledged his “fullest recognition of the horror” of mob violence and condemned it. Despite his initial progressive overtures, Roosevelt’s public sympathy with the black condition in the South had largely dissipated by the end of 1903, and his moralism gave way to the exigencies of campaign politics. Elected president in his own right in 1904, Roosevelt subsequently devoted much of his time to cultivating the support of “lily-white” Republicans and disaffected southern Democrats, activities that alienated many African Americans who had earlier praised him for not entirely neglecting their aspirations.<sup>19</sup>

In general, the United States Congress, controlled by Republicans, avoided overt involvement in southern race relations and did not enact any legislation directed at either reversing racially motivated election laws or decreasing the incidence of mob violence. Insofar as southern votes could easily be the

deciding factor in federal elections, the vast majority of congressmen avoided publicly criticizing white southerners and their methods, even when they lapsed into sadism. Republican patron-client relations with minor black political appointees continued during the early twentieth century, but African American concerns were not a priority for any branch of the national government at the close of the Gilded Age. The Supreme Court was especially unhelpful in relieving the oppression of southern blacks, delivering a segregationist friendly ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and upholding southern disfranchisement machinations in *Williams v. Mississippi* (1898). Exceptions to this pattern of federal neglect of black interests were few, yet the infrequent demurs tended to be notable ones.<sup>20</sup>

As the lone black congressman in Washington between 1897 and 1901, Republican Representative George H. White of North Carolina was unquestionably among the most consistent supporters of civil rights for African Americans at the turn of the century. Born in Bladen County in 1852, White viewed his role in Congress as a somewhat ambassadorial one in the tradition of earlier black federal officials. From his standpoint, he represented not only the predominantly African American second congressional district of North Carolina, but also a sort of separate black nation comprising “one eighth of the entire population of the United States.” Accordingly, White tended to devote much of his time in Congress to matters of national and regional importance, such as proposed federal intervention in the southern disfranchisement movement, increased public funding for education, and monetary compensation for blacks who had lost their savings in the collapse of the Freedmen’s Bank. The political tone of the times made much of White’s work a struggle against worsening odds, and the North Carolina disfranchisement amendment of 1900 would largely remove his black constituents from the voter rolls. Still, he entered the new century defiant in the face of implacable foes in Washington and at home, quite aware of his status as the last African American official left on the federal stage.

During his second term in Congress, one of White’s most notable projects was an anti-lynching bill. The first of its kind, the proposed legislation was designed to bring federal authority to bear upon the mob murders that routinely went unpunished at the state and local levels. Introduced to the House Judiciary Committee in 1900, the bill asserted that all U.S. citizens “are entitled to and shall receive protection in their lives from being murdered, tortured, burned to death by any and all organized mobs commonly known as ‘lynching bees.’” Those arrested for participating in such group killings would be charged with treason against the federal government “and tried for that offense in the United States courts.” The prescribed punishment for



George H. White, U.S. congressman from North Carolina, 1897–1901 (courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration)

those convicted would be the same as that imposed for treasonable crimes. White's eloquent presentation of the proposed legislation aroused "prolonged applause" among sympathetic colleagues in the U.S. House. However, too few of them were willing to take the political risk of supporting such a bill that would surely offend southern congressmen and others who would have construed it as an infringement on states' rights and unnecessary federal meddling in local affairs.

Back home in North Carolina, there was virtually no support among the ruling Democratic establishment for a federal anti-lynching act and even less tolerance for White as a national representative of the state. "It is bad enough that North Carolina should have the only nigger Congressman," the *News and Observer* scoffed, particularly one bold enough to introduce a federal law that treated lynching as treason. The Raleigh paper likely spoke for many who believed that White had gone too far, especially in this era of ascendant white supremacy and when the Civil War and Reconstruction were still fresh, living memories. Rather predictably, the bill languished in committee and never received the full consideration of the House prior to White's departure from national politics in 1901.<sup>21</sup>



The disappearance of the African American from the national government and many state and local bodies at the turn of the century represented the fulfillment of the southern disfranchisement campaign. With the alignment of most southern whites with the Democratic Party or the lily-white Republicans, black electoral strength in the North and Midwest was too nascent to compensate for the loss of black congressional seats in the South. Not since 1871, with the exception of the Fiftieth Congress (1887–89), had African Americans been so utterly absent from both the U.S. Senate and House, and not until 1928 would another make an appearance in those halls of power. Consequently, at a time when patterns of debt peonage, segregation, lynching (at least 105 blacks were lynched in 1901), and race riots failed to arouse discernible federal responses, black exclusion from politics simply amplified their lack of real control over their day-to-day affairs. For Charles Aycock and his allies who had helped engineer such a repressive state of affairs in North Carolina, the exit of George White from Congress did, indeed, symbolize the realization of an important political goal. Nonetheless, unbeknownst to the governor at the time, his second year in office would be marked by more lynchings than the state had witnessed in almost a decade, and his efforts to quell mob violence would be seriously complicated by events in the small town of Salisbury during the spring of 1902.<sup>22</sup>