

The Color Line

The Path to Disfranchisement

Legalizing Segregation

Confronting the Urban Color Line

America's Empire of Color

The Pattern of Violence

Segregation

By 1900 the color line had been drawn so well that many institutions—hotels, theaters, restaurants, railroad trains and depots, schools, parks, and more—had established racial lines that could not be breached. Such lines were supported by state and local legislation. The sign shown here is typical of the period.

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In July 1890 the Louisiana legislature passed Act 111, “An Act to Promote the Comfort of Passengers.” This law mandated racial segregation on railroad travel within the state and supplanted a law of 1868 that stipulated: “All persons shall enjoy equal rights and privileges upon any conveyance of a public character; and all places of business, or of public resort . . . without discrimination or discrimination on account of race or color.” To Louisiana lawmakers in 1890, the earlier law represented yet another distasteful relic of the Reconstruction era. The mood of the South and the nation had changed profoundly in the intervening years, and the egalitarian spirit embodied in the words of the Louisiana law of 1868 and in the Civil Rights Act of 1875 had long since disappeared. Democratic-controlled state governments throughout the South moved steadily toward legalizing the color line, enacting so-called Jim Crow laws to ensure that racial discrimination operated in more than customary or de facto social relations.

The Jim Crow laws gave new meaning and reinforcement to white supremacy, proscribing black access to places and things, to opportunities, and to rights. Perhaps the color line’s most insidious role was the ability to transform the very meaning of “We the people,” despite monumental constitutional changes that had occurred during Reconstruction. But the “New South” of the waning years of the nineteenth century stood poised to usher in its own sweeping changes. Like Louisiana, many southern states perceived the enactment of statutory segregation as part and parcel of social reform. Constitutional conventions more firmly established the color line with new laws that referred to the “public good” and “public comfort” as they placed African Americans outside the voting booth and representative government, outside public accommodations, and even outside the broad meaning of “the public” itself. At the very same time, American and European imperialism had begun to draw a line through much of the world—denoting the relation of white powers to their colonies of darker peoples.

The Path to Disfranchisement

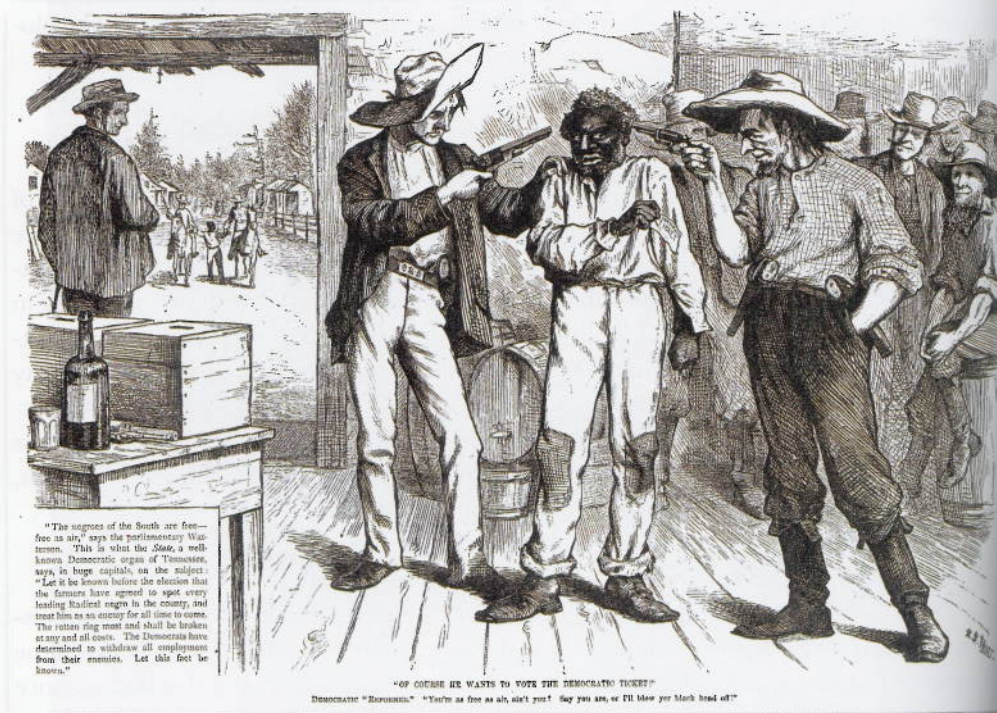
After the Democrats returned to power in the South, they confronted the problem of finding ways to nullify blacks’ political strength or to disfranchise them altogether. Violence remained the surest means for keeping African Americans politically impotent, and in countless communities they were not allowed, on pain of severe reprisals, to show their faces in town on Election Day. However, state officials increasingly looked to more civil and respectable methods to attain the same goal. They were known to both deplore vigilante activity and give a nod to it, when expedient.

In the immediate years following Reconstruction, most of the South’s white leaders identified themselves and their party as Conservative Democrats. Their economic policies, which benefited railroads and industry over agriculture, and their elite status and greater affluence relative to most white farmers and working-class southerners, made it fitting that these Democratic regimes were called “Conservative” as well as “Bourbon” and “Redeemer” administrations. Seeking a probusiness climate of order and stability in the “New South,” the Conservative Democrats did not initially advocate disfranchisement by state legislation, since the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments had become a fundamental part of American constitutional law. In the federal courts, the Fourteenth Amendment had even come to function, with no racial meaning at all, as a way of protecting industry and big business.

Preventing Black Voting Legally

Once white rule was established, the southern Conservatives resorted to a variety of tactics to prevent blacks from voting. Polling places were frequently set up far from black communities, and the diligent blacks who tried to vote failed to reach them, finding roads blocked and ferries conveniently out of repair at election time. Polling places were sometimes changed without notifying black voters; or, if they were notified, election officials thought nothing of making a last-minute decision to change the location again. Election laws were so imperfect that in many communities uniform ballots were not required, and officials winked at Democrats who made up several extra ballots to cast with the one given them. (At that time, secret ballots were not used in most parts of the United States, including the South; instead, voters usually placed a preprinted ballot or token in the box provided for each party.) The stuffing of ballot boxes was widespread. Indeed, Democrats were known to boast that “the white and black Republicans may outvote us, but we can outcount them.”

At times white factions exploited the black vote for their own purposes, actually vying with one another for black voters. In especially contested elections among whites in Black Belt areas, planters brought their black workers to the polls, having already instructed them as to how they should vote in this nonsecret process. Some whites nominated multiple black candidates in order to divide the black vote, while maximizing the white vote by having only one candidate. However, the growing trend among the white supremacist governments was that of state-legislated mechanisms, such as poll taxes, literacy tests, confusing and complicated balloting processes, and highly centralized election codes—all functioning as “legal” schemes for black disfranchisement.



A rural black man “freely” exercises the right to vote
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Gerrymandering election districts also became a popular legal way to render ineffective the voting power of areas with a heavy concentration of African Americans. Virginia legislators, for example, reapportioned, or gerrymandered, the state's voting districts five times in a seventeen-year period in order to nullify black ballots. South Carolina legislators also manipulated the voting process to make it difficult for African Americans. A law of 1882 required that special ballots and boxes be placed at every polling place for each office on the ballot and that voters put their ballots in the correct boxes. No one was allowed to speak to a voter, and if he failed to find the correct box, his vote was thrown out.

South Carolina and Virginia were not alone in devising ingenious schemes to render the black vote ineffective. All the southern states used some device or other. The result appeared so satisfactory on the whole that by 1889 Henry W. Grady, the influential editor of the *Atlanta Constitution* and advocate for the probusiness New South, noted with pleasure that "the Negro as a political force has dropped out of serious consideration."

Strangely enough, however, the near disappearance of blacks from the public sphere of politics created circumstances that called for their reappearance. By the 1880s, the menace of black Republicanism had disappeared, and with it the great cohesive force among southern whites. Almost immediately, sharp **Black Reappearance in Politics** class lines appeared among whites. Once white southern farmers no longer feared "Negro rule," they began to associate their own plight with the policies of the Conservatives. The coalition of classes that had united only to oppose African Americans began to disintegrate, as poor whites came to distrust the Bourbons for substantial economic and political reasons.

The economic depression that began in 1873 was especially disastrous to agricultural communities. In the years that followed, small farmers lost their land and fell into the ranks of tenant and sharecrop farmers. In their distress, they turned against the financiers who foreclosed their mortgages, the railroads that charged excessive freight rates but received subsidies from state and federal taxes, the corporations that sought higher tariffs and charged higher prices for farm machinery, and the state government that steadily raised taxes. Class divisions had become evident in party politics. Radical farmers, who called for the regulation of railroads, state aid for agriculture, and higher taxes on corporations, organized in opposition to New South proponents of business and industry. The threat of a black balance of power did not seem to frighten hungry white farmers—an alarming prospect for loyal Democrats. Such leaders as Henry Grady condemned the defections across the electoral color line that he saw occurring among whites.

Southern whites doubtless won the battle to purge black voters from their states' election rolls, but complete black disfranchisement unfolded over time and with noteworthy interruptions. In the aftermath of Reconstruction, instances of racial cooperation made striking appearances, but they all proved momentary and fleeting. For example, the Readjuster Party rose to power in Virginia in 1879 from an unlikely coalition of black Republicans and disgruntled white Democrats. They united initially because of the social and economic hardship associated with the commonwealth's payment of its Civil War debt. Placing greater emphasis on mutual economic interests instead of racial difference, Readjusters denounced the Conservative Democrats for reallocating monies originally designated for Virginia's public school system toward the full funding of the debt.

Black Virginians, like disaffected others, similarly protested, but they also justified their opposition with the unique explanation that they were slaves when the debt was acquired. Prompted by the closing of many public schools and the desperate state of economic affairs,

a biracial alliance formed under the leadership of William Mahone, a former slaveholder, Confederate officer, and railroad owner, in order to demand a readjustment of the debt's funding. White Readjusters recognized that only an alliance with the large black Republican constituency could bring about their party's victory over the Democrats.

The unprecedented third-party fusion won Mahone the governorship, sent Readjusters to both houses of the U.S. Congress, and brought black Republicans back into elected and appointed office at various levels of government. The Readjuster Party advocated the protection of black voting rights, free public education, tax relief, a mechanics law that favored workers, and railroad regulation. Historian Jane Dailey describes the Readjuster platform as committed "to an essentially rights-oriented political language and program." Readjusters would go by the official name the Liberal Party in 1881, although at the popular level still called Readjuster. The powerful coalition governed the state for only four years. In 1883, the party lost power to the Conservative Democrats—its interracial coalition unraveling when blacks sought the repeal of antimiscegenation laws, demanded school integration, and ran for election for seats on school boards. Longstanding and implacable white supremacist beliefs undermined the coalition. Despite the Conservative victory, the political strength of black Republican voters was sufficient enough for the narrow, but controversial victory in 1888 of John Mercer Langston, the first black to represent Virginia in the United States Congress. It took eighteen months before the contested election was settled in Langston's favor, thus leaving him only six months of his congressional term.

The radical agrarian movement that led to the creation of the Populist Party also disturbed the drawing of the color line in the late 1880s and early 1890s. By 1889 the Southern Farmers'

The Radical Agrarian Movement

Alliance had branches in every southern state. Although the Alliance did not admit black members, its leaders believed that blacks should organize in a parallel organization. First organized in 1886, the Colored Farmers' National Alliance and Cooperative Union grew rapidly and by 1891 claimed more than a million members in twelve state organizations. Local chapters formed wherever black farmers were sufficiently numerous. As the program of radical agrarianism evolved during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, black and white farmers in the South drifted closer together.

The Populist, or People's, Party became the political agency of the resurgent farmers. In 1892 the Populists sought to win the black vote in most of the southern states and in many instances resorted to desperate means to secure the franchise for blacks in communities where by custom and practice they had been barred from voting for more than a decade. Radical Populist leaders such as Tom Watson of Georgia told poor whites and blacks that they were being deliberately kept apart and fleeced. A few candidates, as did Watson, sought black votes by advocating measures favorable to them even before the rise of Populists as a political party. As early as 1882, when he was running for the Georgia legislature, Tom Watson courted black voters, recognizing that their support was essential to his victory.

Once elected, Watson voted in favor of issues important to blacks, such as tax-supported public schools, the elimination of the convict lease system, and greater fairness and equity for tenant farmers and sharecroppers. He called on them to stand together and work for the common good. At the time, Watson opposed black disfranchisement and looked forward to a coalition of black and white farmers to drive the Bourbons from power in Georgia. Unfortunately, he would later betray blacks by becoming a fanatical Negrophobe and race baiter.

Coalitions of black and white voters were always tenuous, but where they existed they greatly alarmed Conservative Democrats. However, the Conservatives were known to seek

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out blacks, planters rounding up their black workers as herds of cattle and forcing them to vote for the very Democrats who only a few years earlier had dared blacks to attempt such an exercise of the “white man’s prerogative.” In some areas, black men were hauled to towns in wagons and made to vote repeatedly. In Augusta, Georgia, they were even imported across the river from South Carolina to vote for Democrats.

Many blacks, however, stood by the Populist message of political equality. A black advocate of Tom Watson was the young preacher H. S. Doyle, who made sixty-three speeches for Watson in the face of numerous threats. Voting for the Populist ticket proved to have consequences no less violent than did voting for the Republican Party in the South. A black Populist in Dalton, Georgia, was murdered in his home, and it is estimated that fifteen were killed in Georgia during the state elections of 1892. Riots also broke out in Virginia and North Carolina. If black rule meant chaos and disorder to the Democrats, the mere threat of it was enough for them to resort to violence themselves.

In some states, there was a successful fusion between the newly organized Populists and the remnants of old Republican organizations. In 1894 such a coalition dismantled the Democratic election machinery in North Carolina, and voting was opened up once again to a greater number of blacks. Black officeholders **Successful Coalitions** were elected in the eastern black belt of the state. Indeed, three hundred black magistrates were elected in North Carolina in 1895. Several counties had black deputy sheriffs. Wilmington had fourteen black police officers, and New Bern had both black policemen and black aldermen. One prominent black, James H. Young, was made chief fertilizer inspector and a director of the state asylum for the blind; another, John C. Dancy, was appointed collector for the port of Wilmington. George White went to Congress in 1896 and served as a member of the House of Representatives until 1901. It would be more than two decades before another African American, Oscar De Priest from Illinois, would be elected to Congress.

The Democrats deeply resented the reappearance of black voters and officeholders in North Carolina, Georgia, and other southern states, and they perceived this participation as unwelcome, indeed an intrusion into the electoral process and a violation of the color line. Failing to control the black vote for their own purposes, the Conservatives scorned the return of black Republicanism. Ironically, the black vote had become a problem on both sides of the white-voter divide. Neither the Conservatives nor the Populists in the South could get beyond the centuries-old ideology of white supremacy, no matter the economic consequences. What the black scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois called the psychological “wages of whiteness” would eventually lead the white farmers down the familiar path of white supremacy. No matter that whites themselves were divided as to which class should rule; each side believed that the other had the power to manipulate black voters in its favor. Black disfranchisement, both groups agreed, kept politics “honest.”

Scholars note the ambivalent politics of the Populists, many of whom perceived a danger in too close an association with blacks. Some worried that the election laws, as they stood, might actually be turned against poor, illiterate whites if the Democrats became vindictive and sought to disfranchise Populists **Complete Disfranchisement** and blacks alike. It was much better, they reasoned, to have clear-cut constitutional disfranchisement of blacks and to leave white groups to fight elections out among themselves. Where the Populists were unable to control the black vote, as in Georgia in 1894, men such as Tom Watson argued that the Democrats kept sufficient numbers of black voters on the rolls in the event they needed them. Thus the defeated and disappointed Watson supported

a constitutional amendment excluding blacks from the franchise—a complete reversal of his earlier position.

The growing consensus among whites was that blacks made for corruption in politics. By 1896 and the collapse of the agrarian revolt, the answer to this problem had become clear to both white factions: disfranchise black voters altogether. The removal of blacks from electoral politics served to reunite the whites and build the Solid South, meaning the whites-only Democratic Party.

When it became evident that white factions would continue to compete with one another for the black vote, especially in tight races where the black vote proved crucial, it was time, leaders on both sides believed, for the complete disfranchisement of blacks—the Fifteenth Amendment notwithstanding. On this, most southern whites agreed, although they differed over the method of disfranchising blacks. The view prevailed that none but people of property and intelligence were entitled to vote. As one writer put it, white southerners believed that “no person should enjoy the suffrage unless he gives sufficient evidence of his permanent interest in and attachment to the community.” And yet many white southerners, not surprisingly poor whites, opposed such stringent prerequisites, since they potentially disqualified numerous whites. Indeed, some of them had been disfranchised by earlier measures, when competition grew keen between rival white groups and the Conservatives barred some Radical whites from the polls, while seeking black votes.

Sponsors of a stricter suffrage sought to devise a system that would hold up to judicial scrutiny, given the Fifteenth Amendment, but also succeed in the disfranchisement of blacks without disqualifying any portion of the white electorate. The Supreme Court decisions in the *Reese* and *Cruikshank* cases in the mid-1870s had already shown the Court to be amenable to such plans, although no guarantee existed that the Court would view favorably state actions patently designed to disfranchise a group because of its race.

It was in Mississippi, where a majority of the population was black, that the complications of black disfranchisement were first addressed and resolved. As early as 1886, sentiment for constitutional revision began to intensify, and in 1890, a state convention met for the primary purpose of disfranchising blacks. A suffrage amendment was written that imposed a poll tax of \$2 and also excluded voters convicted of bribery, burglary, theft, arson, perjury, murder, or bigamy. Also explicitly barred from voting were persons who could not read any section of the state constitution, understand it when read, or give a “reasonable” interpretation of it.

Only one black delegate participated at the Mississippi convention: Isaiah T. Montgomery. Born a slave on May 21, 1847, on the plantation of Joseph Davis, the brother of Jefferson Davis, Montgomery and his father bought from Joseph Davis the land on which the all-black settlement Mound Bayou in the Mississippi Delta was founded. For many years, Montgomery served as the mayor of Mound Bayou. A close friend of Booker T. Washington, Montgomery advocated self-help and education, establishing technical schools in his town and enforcing puritanical moral codes. As Mississippi lawmakers proposed new suffrage



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proscriptions in 1890, Montgomery was not fooled by the motives behind what became known as the Mississippi Plan. He pointed out that the poll tax and education requirements would disfranchise 123,000 blacks and only 12,000 whites. He nevertheless voted for the proposed amendments, clearly realizing the devastating effect they would have on the black vote.

Before the convention assembled, black delegates from forty Mississippi counties had met and protested their impending disfranchisement all the way to the White House and President Benjamin Harrison. Doubtless they would have fought ratification, but the Conservatives would run no risk of having their handiwork rejected; after the convention approved the constitution, it was promulgated and declared to be in effect. The Mississippi Plan had set the precedent for several other states: South Carolina (1895), Louisiana (1898), North Carolina (1900), Alabama (1901), Virginia (1901), Georgia (1908), and Oklahoma (1910).

The individual who spearheaded South Carolina's disfranchisement effort was familiarly called "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman, who had vaulted to prominence as a white supremacist and leader of the Farmer's Alliance in South Carolina. He won the governorship of the state as the Democratic Party candidate in 1890 and immediately sought a constitutional convention to disfranchise black voters. He gained sufficient support for the idea during his last year as governor in 1894, and by the time the state's constitutional convention was held in 1895, Tillman had already been elected to the U.S. Senate. However, he returned to the convention to serve as chairman of the Committee on Rights of Suffrage, in order to be certain that blacks were effectively disfranchised. The disfranchisement section called for two years' residence; a poll tax of \$1, the ability to read and write any section of the Constitution or to understand it when read aloud, or ownership of property worth \$300; it also disqualified convicts. In 1900 Senator Tillman boasted that "we have done our level best [to prevent blacks from voting] . . . we have scratched our heads to find out how we could eliminate the last one of them. We stuffed ballot boxes. We shot them. We are not ashamed of it."

The few black delegates at the South Carolina constitutional convention bitterly denounced the racist disfranchisement amendments. In answer to Tillman's charge that members of their race had done nothing to demonstrate their capacity to govern, former black congressman Thomas E. Miller, who served in the U.S. **The Black Response** House of Representatives between 1889 and 1891, replied that blacks on the state legislature during Reconstruction were primarily responsible for "the laws relative to finance, the building of penal and charitable institutions, and, greatest of all, the establishment of the public school system." He also declared that numerous reform laws "touching every department of state, county, municipal and town governments . . . stand as living witnesses [on the statute books of South Carolina] of the Negro's fitness to vote and legislate on the rights of mankind."

A black delegate to the convention, James Wigg of Beaufort County, also voiced his profound resentment to Tillman's words: "You charge that the Negro is too ignorant to be trusted with the suffrage. I answer that you have not, nor dare you, make a purely educational test of the right to vote. You say that he is a figurehead, an encumbrance to the state, that he pays little or no taxes. I answer you, you have not, nor dare you make a purely property test of the right to vote. . . . We submit our cause to the judgment of an enlightened public opinion and to the arbitrament of a Christian civilization." Unfortunately, Wigg's argument met with minuscule enlightened white support. Only two whites joined the six blacks present at the convention in voting against the South Carolina constitution of 1895.

The story was essentially the same in Louisiana in 1898 when a new device, the

“grandfather clause,” was written into the constitution. This clause called for an addition to the permanent registration list of the names of all male persons whose fathers and grandfathers were qualified to vote on January 1, 1867. At that time, of course, no blacks were qualified to vote in Louisiana. If any blacks were able to vote, educational and property restrictions served to eliminate them. Blacks led by such men as businessman and former state senator T. B. Stamps appeared before the suffrage committee. He did not denounce a qualified suffrage but rather pleaded that its restrictions be honestly administered.

By 1898 the pattern for constitutional disfranchisement of blacks was clearly established. In subsequent years, other states followed the lead of Mississippi, South Carolina, and Louisiana. By 1910 blacks had been effectively disfranchised by constitutional provisions in North Carolina, Alabama, Virginia, Georgia, and Oklahoma. The tension arising from campaigns for white suffrage sometimes flared up into violent race wars. In Wilmington, North Carolina, three white men were wounded and eleven blacks killed and twenty-five wounded in a riot in 1898. In Atlanta, there were four days of rioting after an election in 1906 in which disfranchisement was the main issue. During this period, robbery, murder, and brutality were not uncommon.

For the cause of white supremacy, the effect was most salutary. In 1896 there were 130,344 blacks registered to vote in Louisiana, constituting a majority in twenty-six parishes (counties). In 1900 two years after the adoption of the new constitution, only 5,320 blacks were on the registration books, and in no parish did they make up a majority of voters. Of 181,471 black males of voting age in Alabama in 1900, only 3,000 registered after the new constitutional provisions went into effect. On the floor of the Virginia convention, Carter Glass had said that the delegates were elected “to discriminate to the very extremity of permissible action under the limitations of the Federal Constitution, with a view to the elimination of every Negro voter who can be gotten rid of, legally, without materially impairing the numerical strength of the white electorate.” This goal was accomplished not only in Virginia but in every state in which whites resorted to such means. W.E.B. Du Bois offered a terse explanation of the events that eradicated all vestiges of Radical Reconstruction: “The slave went free, stood a brief moment in the sun, then moved back again toward slavery.”

The South universally hailed the disfranchisement of blacks as a constructive act of statesmanship. African Americans were viewed as outside the body politic and stereotyped as ignorant, poor, and innately inferior to all whites—qualities incompatible with logical and orderly processes of government. The southern white accusation that blacks

had done nothing to warrant suffrage defied the reality of what Mississippi congressman John R. Lynch would call “the facts of Reconstruction,” the title of a book he wrote. But such racist accusations also defied the visible progress that blacks were making in many walks of life.

Back to Slavery

Given the rising black literacy, the numbers of blacks in schools of higher learning and in the professions, as well as black property owners, it was certainly impossible to prove that blacks were by nature inherently shiftless and incapable of advancement. But the framers of the new suffrage laws did not trouble themselves over these inconsistencies, when customs, laws, science, and popular culture all reaffirmed the ideology of America as “the white man’s nation.”

Effective Disfranchisement

The tension arising from campaigns for white suffrage sometimes flared up into violent race wars. In Wilmington, North Carolina, three white men were wounded and eleven blacks killed and twenty-five wounded in a riot in 1898. In Atlanta, there were four days of rioting after an election in 1906 in which disfranchisement was the main issue. During this period, robbery, murder, and brutality were not uncommon.



Black men fought unsuccessfully to defend themselves in the Wilmington, North Carolina, riot in November 1898

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Drawing, *The Union as It Was*, by Thomas Nast, *Harper's Weekly*, October 24, 1874

The artist Nast deplored Klan violence and terror.

This viewpoint was best captured by the white supremacist Senator J. K. Vardaman of Mississippi: "I am just as opposed to Booker Washington as a voter, with all his Anglo-Saxon re-enforcements, as I am to the coconut-headed, chocolate-colored, typical little coon, Andy Dotson, who blacks my shoes every morning. Neither is fit to perform the supreme function of citizenship." Whites would go to great lengths to undermine the rules of voter qualifications, since many blacks had already met even the most stringent constitutional qualifications.

The rise of the "white primary," from which all blacks were excluded by party rules, had the effect of transforming the Democratic party itself into a racially exclusive club—a political caucus for white men only. But more than this, the white primary functioned as the government of the white Solid South. With no political clout, blacks had no access to representative government and no power to thwart the passage of new state laws that would mandate segregation. Jim Crow became the catchword for the color line as a legal, *de jure* entity in the South.

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Supreme Court of the United States,

No. 210, October Term, 1896.

Homer Adolph Plessy,
Plaintiff in Error,
vs.

J. A. Ferguson, Judge of Section A,
Criminal District Court for the Parish
of Orleans.

An Error to the Supreme Court of the State of
Louisiana

This cause came on to be heard on the transcript of the
record from the Supreme Court of the State of Louisiana,
and was argued by counsel.

On consideration whereof, it is now here ordered and
adjudged by this Court that the judgment of the said Supreme
Court, in this cause, be, and the same is hereby, affirmed
with costs.

For Mr. Justice Brown,
May 18, 1896.

Dissenting:
Mr. Justice Harlan

Legalizing Segregation

Prior to the 1890s, custom more than law operated to divide the races, especially during the years when the Civil Rights Act of 1875 was considered to be the law of the land. But those who were determined to defy the law constantly challenged this act, which represented the last-ditch effort of the Radical Republicans to rid the South and the nation of many of the daily and customary practices of racial discrimination on trains, in depots, and on wharves. Indeed, the five cases that came before the Supreme Court in 1883 under the title the *Civil Rights Cases* were brought by black litigants whose rights had been abridged not only in the South but across the nation—in Kansas, Missouri, California, New York, and Tennessee. They had been excluded from a variety of establishments—inns, theaters, and the “ladies’ car” of a train. The majority of the Supreme Court did not decide in favor of the black litigants; instead, they declared unconstitutional the Civil Rights Acts of 1875. Individual proprietors’ acts of discrimination, the Court ruled, fell under the rubric of state, not the federal government. With the adoption of new state constitutions in the 1890s, African Americans filed legal suits to challenge state-mandated segregation. In 1896 the Supreme Court upheld segregation and the doctrine of “separate but equal” set forth in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

It is not commonly known that *Plessy* was a test case brought to the courts by the black community in New Orleans. Within days of the passage of Louisiana’s separate-car law in 1890, the black citizens of New Orleans presented a written protest to the legislature and then commenced to form a committee to test the new law’s constitutionality. Led by creole of color Louis Martinet, a physician, lawyer and journalist, the Citizens Committee retained the northern lawyer Albion Tourgee and, to work with him, a

Plessy v. Ferguson New Orleans-based criminal lawyer named James Walker. Martinet alerted the readers of his newspaper, *The Crusader*: “We’ll make a case, a test case and bring it before the Federal Court on the grounds of invasion of the right [of] a person to travel through the States unmolested.” The group debated but eventually agreed with Tourgee’s strategy of finding a “nearly white Negro” to test the legislation. Early opponents of the plan noted the possibility that a person of “tolerably fair complexion” might be treated courteously and not be asked to leave the white section. They also feared that darker-skinned African Americans might perceive the test case as simply the efforts of a “nearly white” to pass for white.

Tourgee’s strategy prevailed, and on June 7, 1892, Homer Plessy, a man described in the court record as seven-eighths white, became the test-case passenger when he purchased

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Handwritten decision, *Plessy v. Ferguson*

a first-class ticket and took his seat in the white section of a train going from New Orleans to Covington, Louisiana. It is not clear whether the appearance of the detective who arrested Plessy was also scripted as part of the test case. In any event, the detective removed Plessy from the train after he refused the conductor's order to move to the "colored section." Plessy was jailed in the jurisdiction of the lower court judge John H. Ferguson, and thus the case *Plessy v. Ferguson* took its name.

In 1892 the Louisiana Supreme Court decided against Plessy and upheld the separate-car law based on its belief in the existence of a "natural, legal and customary difference between the white and black races in this state which made their separation as passengers in a public conveyance the subject of a sound regulation to secure order, promote comfort, preserve the peace and maintain the rights, both of carriers and passengers." Plessy's lawyers took the case to the highest court in the nation in 1895. The Supreme Court Justices, with one exception, upheld the legality of "separate but equal" and the "reasonableness" of state-mandated segregation laws. The majority opinion ruled: "Every exercise of the [state] police power must be reasonable, and extend only to such laws as are enacted in good faith for the promotion for the public good." The lone dissenting Supreme Court justice, John Harlan, questioned this logic, asking that if the state could separate black people from white people in this way, could not the state also separate people along a variety of other characteristics—on the basis of their hair color, their religion, or their national origin.

The *Plessy* decision sanctioned existing segregation laws and encouraged a plethora of new laws that denied African Americans access to state colleges, voting booths, jury boxes, parks, libraries, neighborhoods, and many other public sites and conveyances. Not only did signs that read "for whites" or "for colored" provide the visual demarcators that prescribed the "Negro's place," they also revealed quite vividly the disparities in resources available to each racial group. Separate facilities were never equal.

In the segregated South, the meaning of "we the people" as the polity and citizenry did not include African Americans. Indeed, white southerners frequently referred to America itself as the "white man's country." For them, the rights of citizens and the spaces citizens inhabit meant simply "for whites only"—**White Man's Country**—thus belonging to whites as if private property. The state's enactment of segregation laws and the complicit role of the courts in upholding such laws served to transform public spaces into private ones. The legal process had not only facilitated the inversion by which public space was perceived to be white private property, but it also created "insider" and "outsider" statuses based on racial identity.

The color line sought to obliterate any semblance of equality. A white identity was perceived and treated as synonymous and commensurate with the broader public (thus laws for public comfort), while a black identity was defined in terms of the "Negro's place" and thus officially perceived as trespassing and intrusion if outside it. The only permissible exception for blacks in whites-only areas was that of the black servant. State law permitted what was called the "nurses exemption" on trains and boats for black servants who accompanied white adults or children for the purpose of caring for them. Louisiana journalist George W. Cable was one of very few native whites who openly challenged the abridgement of blacks' civil rights. Speaking specifically to the servant issue, Cable commented in his book of essays *The Negro Question* (1890): "Any colored man gains unquestioned admission into innumerable places the moment he appears as the menial attendant of some white person, where he could not cross the threshold in his own right as well-dressed and well-behaved master of himself."

Window in Time

Ida B. Wells Ejected from Segregated Train Car

When the train started and the conductor came along to collect tickets, he took my ticket, then handed it back to me and told me that he couldn't take my ticket there. I thought that if he didn't want the ticket I wouldn't bother about it so went on reading. In a little while when he finished taking tickets, he came back and told me I would have to go in the other car. I refused, saying that the forward car was a smoker, and as I was in the ladies' car I proposed to stay. He tried to drag me out of the seat, but the moment he caught hold of my arm I fastened my teeth in the back of his hand.

I braced my feet against the seat in front and was holding to the back, and as he had already been badly bitten he didn't try it again by himself. He went forward and got the baggage-man and another man to help him and of course they succeeded in dragging me out. They were encouraged to do this by the attitude of the white ladies and gentlemen in the car; some of them even stood on the seats so that they could get a good view and continued applauding the conductor for his brave stand.

By this time the train had stopped at the first station. When I saw that they were determined to drag me into the smoker, which was already filled with colored people and those who were smoking, I said I would get off the train rather than go in—which I did. Strangely, I held on to my ticket all this time, and although the sleeves of my linen duster had been torn out and I had been pretty roughly handled, I had not been hurt physically.

I went back to Memphis and engaged a colored lawyer to bring suit against the railroad for me. After months of delay I found he had been bought off by the road [railroad company], and as he was the only colored lawyer in town I had to get a white one. This man, Judge Greer, kept his pledge with me and the case was finally brought to trial in the circuit court. Judge Pierce, who was an ex-union soldier from Minnesota, awarded me damages of five hundred dollars. I can see to this day the headlines in the *Memphis Appeal* announcing DARKY DAMSEL GETS DAMAGES.

Source: Wells, Ida B.; Duster, Alfreda M. *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1991. Footnote: The *Memphis Daily Appeal*, Thursday, 25 December 1884, p. 4. The complete headline read: *A Darky Damsel Obtains a Verdict for Damages against the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad—What It Cost to Put a Colored School Teacher in a Smoking Car—Verdict for \$500*

In the late nineteenth century, segregated transportation evoked the most notable challenge to Jim Crow. Court records reveal the large number of cases involving black litigants on trains and boats. Black communities also mobilized to resist the inauguration of separate seating policies in streetcars in southern cities. Women were prominent, if not the majority of black litigants who sued railroads and steamboats. Before Ida B. Wells became known as an antilynching crusader, she made news when she sued a Tennessee railroad company after being literally thrown out of the “ladies’ car,” the first-class car designated for whites—the



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women and gentlemen accompanying them, or ladies with children. Such segregation laws deemed Ida B. Wells neither white nor a lady. Numerous cases reveal the discourteous, even violent acts perpetrated on middle-class black men and women, who purchased tickets and attempted to ride in first-class accommodations. For example, William H. Council, a minister and head of the State Colored Normal and Industrial School in Huntsville, Alabama, was severely beaten for sitting in the first-class section of a train.

Confronting the Urban Color Line

The introduction of segregation laws and the rise in acts of violence were coterminous with the rapid growth in the number of blacks who moved into southern cities during the 1890s. The African American populations of Baltimore, New Orleans, Atlanta, and Louisville increased tremendously. Blacks outnumbered whites in Charleston, Savannah, Montgomery, Jacksonville, Shreveport, Vicksburg, Baton Rouge, and several other southern cities. More than half the black population of Missouri lived in towns and cities, while one-third of the black population of Kentucky lived in urban areas. Although African Americans found more economic and social opportunities in urban areas, they also found the color line.

Employment opportunities were fewer than the number of people migrating to cities, and African Americans met with great difficulty in securing anything except the more onerous and less attractive jobs. They continued to exist around the “ragged edge of industry” with both white workers generally and organized

Employment and Unions



Hod carriers

Black workers had few opportunities to move up the occupational ladder. In Philadelphia, the hod carriers were black, but the bricklayers were white.

to the United States grew steadily. In 1898, after some maneuvering on the islands and on the mainland, Congress annexed the Hawaiian Islands by a joint resolution. Likewise, the United States made arrangements to secure Tutuila when the Samoan Islands were divided between Britain and Germany. Meanwhile, the United States was acquiring jurisdiction over many other small islands in the Pacific, including Wake, Midway, Palmyra, and Howland. Before the end of the century, the United States was well on its way toward acquiring an empire composed primarily of darker-skinned peoples.

However, it was in the Americas that the United States pursued its new imperialistic policy most vigorously. Thus, as the United States focused on South America and the Caribbean islands, it brought into its orbit millions of people of African or mixed descent.

The United States wielded its influence most dramatically and effectively in the Caribbean. A U.S. attraction to the Spanish colony of Cuba dated back to well before the Civil War. By the end of the 1860s, Spain's steady decline as a major imperial power had left only two islands, Cuba and Puerto Rico, as remnants of its once vast New World empire. Repression and rigid control of every aspect of life in Cuba had inspired numerous revolts against Spain, and those revolts had become more frequent and more intense by the middle of the nineteenth century. Toward the end of the century, Cubans were determined to win their independence. This determination coincided with the increasing interest in the island on the part of citizens of the United States, who had already made sizable investments in Cuba.

By 1890 Americans had invested more than \$50 million in Cuban plantations and sugar refineries. When, therefore, the Cubans revolted again in 1895, the United States became alarmed over the damage that the fighting was doing to American-owned fields and factories on the island. Their material interest was broadened into a humanitarian interest in the following year when Spain sent General Valeriano Weyler to put down the insurrection. With more determination than wisdom, Weyler ordered much of the rural population placed in concentration camps, since it was extremely difficult to separate loyalists from insurgents. The starvation and disease that followed took such a toll of Cuban lives that the American press dubbed the Spanish leader "Butcher" Weyler. In the province of Havana alone, for example, more than 50,000 people died.

The American press featured stories of the brutal coercion in Cuba—an island that most Americans thought should be a U.S. "sphere of influence." For the moment, an outraged America even focused a bit less on the heated presidential campaign of 1896 and on the campaign to disfranchise blacks in the South. The so-called yellow journals—cheap, sensational popular newspapers—fanned the flames of indignation in America to the point where Congress finally recognized the Cubans' determination to gain their independence. Only the firmness of President Grover Cleveland prevented the country from going further. Meanwhile, under the leadership of the Afro-Cuban general Antonio Maceo and Quintin Bandera, known as "The Black Thunderbolt," the insurgents carried on a campaign of systematic devastation that won greater support among the Americans.

In January 1898, the American battleship *Maine* was ordered to Havana to protect American life and property and to impress on the Spaniards that the government of the United States was willing to take energetic action. On February 15, 1898, an explosion sank the *Maine* in Havana harbor with a loss of more than 250 officers and enlisted men. The incident set off a train of events that culminated in war between the United States and Spain two months later. It was America's first international conflict in more than fifty years,

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From the beginning, African Americans were involved in the war against Spain. Indeed, there were at least thirty blacks on the *Maine* when it exploded; twenty-two were killed, four were injured, and four others escaped injury. African Americans had already been inspired by the soldiers of Maceo and Bandera and regarded "Weylerism as the synonym of barbarous warfare." The majority of African Americans were anxious to vindicate the honor of the United States and help bring independence and freedom to Cubans, whom they regarded as blacks and mulattoes. When, therefore, President William McKinley called for 200,000 volunteers to supplement the inadequate regular army, blacks enthusiastically enlisted.

The Spanish American War

Some African Americans, however, were vocal anti-imperialists and argued that the United States' acquisition of colonies only boded ill for current and potential nonwhite members of the American community. These dissenters, most of whom identified with the Cuban rebels (especially those who were blacks), stressed repeatedly that Spain, though cruel and undemocratic, had not imposed a racial caste system on Cuba. They refused to be a part of a war in which African Americans, themselves victims of discriminatory laws and racist practices, were used to subject nonwhite colonials to that same system.

Among the regular army, which numbered only 28,000 troops in 1898, there were four African American outfits, all of which had been used in actions against the Indians in the West. The Ninth Cavalry had its headquarters in the Department of the Platte, and the Tenth Cavalry was stationed at Assiniboine, Montana. The Twenty-Fourth Infantry was at Fort Douglas, near Salt Lake City, Utah, and the Twenty-Fifth Infantry was in Missoula, Montana. These units had been activated shortly after the close of the Civil War and had performed numerous duties in the Indian wars and in border service. The Ninth Cavalry, for example, had served at Fort Lancaster, Texas; at Santa Fe, New Mexico; at Fort Riley, Kansas; and at Fort McKinney, Wyoming. These troops were often referred to as the "Buffalo Soldiers," a name given them by the Kiowa, Cheyenne, and Apache tribes they encountered.

Besides the four black outfits in the regular army and the four outfits that were recruited under a special act of the Congress, numerous other African American groups served in the war against Spain. Several states permitted African Americans to organize outfits and enter the service, among them the Third Alabama Infantry of Volunteers, the Third North Carolina Infantry, the Sixth Virginia Infantry, the Ninth Ohio Infantry, the Twenty-Third Kansas Infantry, the Eighth Illinois Infantry, two companies of the Indiana Infantry, and several smaller groups. Company L of the Sixth Massachusetts Infantry was the only black company that was mustered in as an integral part of a white regiment. It had African American officers and, having been created during the War for Independence as the "Bucks of America," boasted that it was the oldest African American military organization in America.

The shabby treatment of black troops throughout the war reflected the extent to which African Americans were trapped in a Jim Crow society, no matter how vital or brave their service. Wherever they were stationed, black regiments excited hostility from whites who were opposed to armed blacks wearing the uniform of their country. Blacks were subject to racial insults and to exclusion from the places of public accommodation that were open to their white counterparts. African American soldiers vigorously protested these and other insults to their officers and, through letters to newspapers, to the American public. Some blacks, when traveling in groups while armed and in uniform, felt emboldened to challenge

Jim Crow practices or to use violence to punish their detractors. Most exercised restraint, however, enduring insults and mistreatment in the belief that by demonstrating an indifference to racism, as well as by showing their patriotism, they would strengthen their race's claims to equal treatment. But their additional, and ultimately less successful, war against racism took its toll in disillusionment and bitterness.

In the swift and decisive action that brought victory to the United States, the only African Americans who saw considerable service were in the four regular outfits. In June 1898, these groups sailed from various southern ports for Cuba. The Twenty-Fifth Infantry, for example, sailed on June 7 from Tampa, Florida, on a government transport. During the week that the men were delayed at Tampa they were not allowed to go ashore to bathe and exercise unless an officer escorted the entire company. Upon embarkation, the Twenty-Fifth was assigned to the bottom deck where there was no light, except that which came through the small portholes, and very little air. Blacks and whites were not permitted to mingle on board ship. When they disembarked at Daiquiri in Guantánamo Bay on June 22, the campaign for the reduction of the Spanish forces in Cuba began.

The African American contingents saw action principally at El Caney, Las Guasimas, and San Juan Hill. On June 24, two battalions of the First Volunteer Cavalry (Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders) moved up the Santiago Road toward Las Guasimas, where they met the enemy. At a crucial moment in the fighting, several blacks from the Ninth and Tenth Cavalries came up, knocked down the enemy's improvised fort, cut the barbed wire, and made an opening for the Rough Riders, who then routed the Spaniards. On June 30,



The Tenth Cavalry

Created following the Civil War, this cavalry saw action on the frontier and, more notably, in the Spanish-American War in 1898.

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following an unsuccessful attack on the town of Tayabacoe, Dennis Bell, Fitz Lee, William H. Tompkins, and George H. Wanton, members of the Tenth Cavalry, volunteered to rescue six wounded Cuban soldiers "left to die in enemy territory," despite the failure of an earlier attempt. They successfully completed the mission, and all four received the Medal of Honor.

At El Caney, on June 30, the Twenty-Fifth was ordered up to reinforce the Rough Riders. In this decisive action, many of the African American troops were under fire for the better part of the day, with strict orders not to return the enemy fire. In three days of fighting, most of the black regulars in Cuba saw action and won the praise of practically all their officers.

It has been claimed by many that the Ninth and Tenth Cavalries saved the Rough Riders from complete annihilation at Las Guasimas. One southern white officer said: "If it had not been for the Negro cavalry the Rough Riders would have been exterminated. I am not a Negro lover. My father fought with Mosby's Rangers, and I was born in the South, but the Negroes saved that fight, and the day will come when General Shafter will give them credit for the bravery." Said another: "I am a Southerner by birth, and I never thought much of the colored man. But, somehow, now I feel very differently toward them. . . . I never saw such fighting as those Tenth Cavalry men did. They didn't seem to know what fear was, and their battle hymn was 'There'll be a hot time in the old town tonight.'" Even among those who did not claim that the African Americans saved the Rough Riders, the praise was generous. Lt. Thomas Roberts said: "I have naught but the highest praise for the swarthy warriors on the field of carnage. Led by brave men, they will go into the thickest of the fight, even to the wicked mouths of deadly cannon, unflinchingly." The *New York Mail and Express* wrote:

All honor to the black troops of the gallant Tenth: No more striking example of bravery and coolness has been shown since the destruction of the Maine than by the colored veterans of the Tenth Cavalry during the attack upon Caney on Saturday. By the side of the Rough Riders they followed their leader up the terrible hill from whose crest the desperate Spaniards poured down a deadly fire of shell and musketry. They never faltered. . . . Firing as they marched, their aim was splendid, their coolness was superb, and their courage aroused the admiration of their comrades. . . . The war has not shown greater heroism.

The reaction of Theodore Roosevelt to the performance of the African American troops was varied, depending on occasion. When he made his farewell address to the rather incongruous group of Indians, ranchers, cowboys, college athletes, and African Americans who served under him as Rough Riders, Roosevelt had words of unqualified praise for the black soldiers. "The Spaniards called them 'Smoked Yankees,'" he said, "but we found them to be an excellent breed of Yankees. I am sure that I speak the sentiments of officers and men in the assemblage when I say that between you and the other cavalry regiments there exists a tie which we trust will never be broken." When campaigning for the office of governor of New York in October 1898, Roosevelt said: "As I heard one of the Rough Riders say after the charge at San Juan: 'Well, the Ninth and Tenth men are all right. They can drink out of our canteens.'" Roosevelt expressed the highest praise for the African Americans who charged up San Juan with his Rough Riders and concluded: "I don't think that any Rough Rider will ever forget the tie that binds us to the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry."

Writing in *Scribner's Magazine* in April of the following year, however, Roosevelt offered a more tentative reflection, stating that the blacks behaved well, but "they are, of course, peculiarly dependent on their white officers. . . . None of the white regulars of Rough Riders showed the slightest sign of weakening; but under the strain the colored infantrymen . . . began to get a little uneasy and to drift to the rear."

African American soldiers served as occupation troops at the close of the war. Some African American troops, including the Third North Carolina, served in the Pacific. The Twenty-Third Kansas Infantry did garrison duty in Cuba, and the Eighth Illinois, which did not arrive in Cuba until August 1898, did garrison duty in the province of Santiago. When an editorial appeared in the *Washington Post* discrediting black troops with black officers, Major Charles Douglass, writing in the *Colored American* on August 17, 1898, pointed out that the Eighth Illinois had been selected to replace a disorderly white regiment. He said in conclusion that "the generals at the front know the value of Negro troops, whether the quill-drivers in the rear do or not." During this tour of duty, Colonel John R. Marshall served for a while as governor of San Luis, while Major R. R. Jackson acted as mayor of El Paso, Cuba.

Garrison Duty and Pacific Service

Citizens of the United States did not view with complete favor the arming of African Americans to fight in the war and to serve as troops of occupation. As troops passed through the South en route to ports of embarkation, they were frequently treated with contempt by white southerners. At the end of the war, when the Third North Carolina Volunteers were moved from Macon, Georgia, the *Atlanta Journal* carried an editorial entitled "A Happy Ride-dance." Among other things, the editor said that the army and the country were to be congratulated on mustering out the North Carolina blacks, for "a tougher and more turbulent set of Negroes were probably never gotten together before. . . . While stationed in Macon several of its members were killed either by their own comrades in drunken brawls or by citizens in self-defense."

However, Charles F. Meserve, the white president of black Shaw University, visited the North Carolinians at their camp and had nothing but praise for them. He described Col. James H. Young as possessing in "a marked degree a quality of leadership as important as it is rare" and said that the men were well disciplined on and off the post.

At the end of the Spanish-American War the United States could regard itself as one of the great powers of the world. The victory over Spain was so quick and decisive that it was only natural for many to expect that the United States would supplant Spain as a leading imperial power. The Treaty of Paris between the two powers left little doubt as to the direction in which the United States was moving. It provided that Spain was to relinquish all claim to sovereignty over Cuba, which became nominally independent but in fact a U.S. protectorate. In lieu of a war indemnity, Spain ceded to the United States the island of Puerto Rico and the other remaining Spanish insular possessions in the West Indies. On payment of \$20 million by the United States, Spain was also to relinquish the Philippines to the victor.

The United States as a Great Power

Although it was not immediately clear just what disposition the United States would make of Cuba, it was quite evident that the island would remain under the political and economic domination of the United States for an indefinite period. Puerto Rico was, from the outset, to become a part of America's growing empire. The Philippines gave the United States the foothold it needed in East Asia if it was to compete in that region with Great Britain, France, Russia, and Japan.

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It is ironic that African American soldiers, themselves subject to Jim Crow restrictions and viewed as inferiors by most white Americans, should have played a part in bringing extensive numbers of other nonwhites under U.S. domination. For Howard University professor Kelly Miller and journalist John W. Cromwell—both imperialists and prominent members of the African American community—America's victory over Spain provided opportunities for blacks to help uplift members of the “weaker races.” Miller urged that Howard be employed by the federal government to educate and Americanize Cuban, Philippine, and Puerto Rican youth. He also called on enterprising African Americans to exploit the economic opportunities in these places, “where the field is not preempted, as in America, and where race proscription is not so discouraging.” Although Cromwell expressed similar sentiments, he did concede to the inhabitants of Spain's former colonies one advanced trait, a history of “fraternity between the races.” The most negative black reaction to America's new imperialist policies came from black soldiers stationed in the Philippines, where from 1899 to 1902 United States military forces were engaged in crushing the independence movement led by Emilio Aguinaldo. There, as Willard Gatewood has shown, “an unusually large number of Negro troops deserted” to join the Filipino Insurrectos, “whose struggle they interpreted as the struggle of all colored people.”

One of the most salient features of the American imperial problem was that the United States, unlike the other imperial powers, had a color problem at home and therefore had to pursue a policy with regard to race that would not upset the racial equilibrium within the United States. In Puerto Rico, for example, a portion of the population was of distinctly African descent, and many so-called white Puerto Ricans had sufficient black blood in their veins to qualify as black, according to America's “one-drop” rule. In 1900, when the first organic act of Puerto Rico was passed by Congress, the southern members of that body—and some northern members, too—were concerned not only with the fact that Puerto Ricans should be carefully supervised in the operation of their government but also that the blacks of the island should not enjoy political liberties that would inspire the African Americans to fight for greater political opportunities.

The Puerto Rican governor and all important officials were to be appointed by the president of the United States, and Americans were to outnumber Puerto Ricans on the important Executive Council. The second organic act of 1917 remodeled the local government to resemble one of the states of the United States. Two legislative houses were established, with their members elected by universal male suffrage, and all Puerto Ricans were to enjoy American citizenship. The power of appointing all the major officials of the island, however, was reserved for the president of the United States.

The major efforts of the United States in Puerto Rico were directed toward the improvement of health, education, and public works and toward the Americanization of the Puerto Rican people. In all these areas, there were notable successes, but the low economic level of the population, largely the result of the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, prevented greater improvement and caused hundreds of thousands to migrate to the mainland. Since American investors on the island reaped considerable profits, especially in the cultivation of sugar, cursory observers tended to view the period of American control as very successful. The high mortality rate, the abject poverty of the masses, and the cultural and social debility of the people seemed to indicate the need for a new imperial outlook that would foster greater improvement for the inhabitants of the island. Puerto Ricans' efforts to

break up the large plantations in order to redistribute the land, to which American investors reacted negatively, suggested that any improvements would be slow indeed in coming.

A significant expansion encompassing additional nonwhites came with the purchase of the Danish West Indies in 1917, culminating a half-century of effort to acquire the islands largely because of their military and strategic value in the Caribbean. In August 1916, a treaty for the purchase of the islands for \$25 million was negotiated, and in January of the following year, the ratifications of the two countries were exchanged. American Marines landed shortly after the purchase, and a military government was established that lasted until 1931, when President Hoover signed an order creating a civil government for the Virgin Islands.

The Virgin Islands

African Americans themselves played an important part in extending the empire of the United States. From the end of Reconstruction up until the beginning of World War I, American ministers to Haiti were largely blacks, and they manifested a keen interest in the extension of American influence. John M. Langston, for example, went to Haiti as the official representative of the government of the United States in 1877 and interested himself in the political and economic conditions of the island. He was quite disturbed about the unsettled political scene and made many suggestions to his government about how commercial relations could be improved.

Haiti

Both J. E. W. Thompson, who went to Haiti in 1885, and Frederick Douglass, who became the American minister there in 1889, were very much concerned over the treatment of American vessels in Haitian ports. William F. Powell, the minister in 1897, vigorously fought discriminating taxes against foreign merchants, while Henry W. Furness, a later minister, concerned himself primarily with seeking advantages for American merchants in the matters of tariffs and customs duties.

From 1871 until the present, most American ministers to Liberia have been blacks. Beginning in 1871, J. Milton Turner helped to establish closer commercial relations between Liberia and the United States. Several others, including John Henry Smyth, E. E. Smith, and Ernest W. Lyon, praised the resources of the country and sought to encourage Americans to help develop the commercial and economic life of Liberia. Lyon, for example, is credited with having had a great deal to do with the organization of the New York Liberia Steamship Line in 1905.

Liberia

African Americans would pay increasing attention to the world's color problems. Thus Du Bois was not speaking only of black-white relations in the United States when in 1903 he predicted that the problem of the "color line" would be the defining issue of the twentieth century. Du Bois understood the color line to include "the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea."

The Pattern of Violence

Violence in the form of lynching and riots worked to solidify the color line. In the last sixteen years of the nineteenth century, more than 2,500 lynchings occurred. The great majority of the victims of lynch mobs were African Americans. In the year of the Spanish-American War, when Wilmington, North Carolina erupted in rioting and bloodshed, some blacks considered this riot the dying gasp of a reign of terror. They were mistaken, for racial violence would continue with a vengeance into the new century. In 1900 alone, more than



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Lynching

100 African Americans were lynched, and before the outbreak of World War I, the number for the century had soared to more than 1,100.

The South was far ahead of the rest of the country, with Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana leading the nation. Lynch law also operated in several Northern states, notably those in the Midwest. Although the impression was widely held that most of the blacks lynched had been accused of raping white women, the records do not sustain this impression. In the first fourteen years of the twentieth century, only 315 lynch victims were accused of rape or attempted rape, whereas more than 500 were accused of homicide and the others were accused of robbery, insulting white people, and numerous other “offenses.” Regardless of the alleged crime of the victim, lynching in the twentieth century continued to be an important if illegal part of the system of punishment in the United States.

Lynch Law

Early in the twentieth century, an epidemic of race riots swept the country as well, arousing great anxiety and discomfort among the African American population. Although lynchings were decreasing slightly after 1900, riots were perceptibly on the increase. In August 1904, the state of Georgia was rocked by riots in the small town of Statesboro, after two African Americans were accused of the brutal murder of a white farmer, his wife, and three children. The men were brought to trial in Statesboro and found guilty. The court ordered them to be executed by hanging. In the meantime, the white citizens outside had worked themselves into a frenzy of race hatred, inflamed by talk of blacks, in general, becoming insolent.

Race Riots

The mob had no patience for a legal execution and angrily forced its way into the courtroom after overpowering a company of Savannah militia whose rifles were not loaded “in tender consideration for the feelings of the mob.” They dragged the convicted blacks into the street and burned them alive. This incident was the signal for wholesale terrorism against

African Americans in the town. One black citizen was severely whipped for riding a bicycle on the sidewalk, while another was lashed "on general principles." The black mother of a three-day-old infant was beaten and kicked, and her husband was killed. Houses were wrecked, and countless terrified blacks left the county. Although there was talk of punishing the leaders of the mob, nothing was ever done.

As events in Statesboro made clear, African Americans of both genders and all ages were victims of racial violence. When Marie Thompson, a black woman in Lebanon Junction, Kentucky, killed a white man during an argument, her claims of self-defense did not deter the lynch mob that took her from the jail and strung her up on a tree in the jail yard. The *Louisville Courier-Journal* reported that Thompson fought her murderers to the end:

The woman was struggling and fighting like a tiger all the time, but the mob was too much for her, and a minute later she was swinging in the air, with her feet several inches from the ground. All of a sudden she twisted around and grabbed a man by the collar, jerked a knife from his hands and cut the rope that was choking the life out of her.

Once on the ground, Thompson attempted to force her way through the lynch mob but was "shot down in a hail of gunfire."

The South's most sensational riot occurred in Atlanta in September 1906. For months the city had been seething in a fury of race hatred related to rumor and to the movement to disfranchise African Americans. White newspapers intensified the feeling against blacks. One editor called for the revival of the Ku Klux Klan, while another went so far as to offer a reward for a "lynching bee" in Atlanta. On Saturday, September 22, newspapers told of four successive assaults on white women by blacks. The country people, in town for the day, joined with the urban element in creating an outraged, panic-stricken mob. Whites began to attack every black person they saw.

The Atlanta Riot

The following day was quiet, but the rioting broke out again on Monday in Brownsville, a suburb of Atlanta. African Americans there had heard that members of their race in Atlanta were being slaughtered en masse. Some sought asylum in two black institutions in the neighborhood, Clark University and Gammon Theological Seminary. Others, who were determined to defend themselves to the end, collected arms. When officers of the law came out, they began rounding up blacks and arresting them for being armed. One officer shot into a crowd of blacks. The fire was returned, killing one officer and wounding another. The whites then threw discretion aside and set out on a general destruction of black property and lives. Four African Americans, all of whom were substantial citizens, were killed, and many were injured. J. W. E. Bowen, the president of Gammon, was beaten over the head with a rifle butt by a police official. Houses of blacks were looted and burned.

For several days, the city was paralyzed: factories were closed and all transportation stopped. Numerous blacks sold their property and left. The city's white leaders confessed their shame and condemned the rioters. A group of responsible black and white citizens came together and organized the Atlanta Civic League to work for the improvement of social conditions and to prevent other riots. Nothing was done to the rioters, however. Despairing African Americans loudly protested, but no one listened.

President Roosevelt's handling of a riot in Brownsville, Texas, convinced many African Americans that he had no genuine interest in their plight. In August 1906, three companies

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of the Twenty-Fifth Regiment, composed of African Americans, were involved in a riot in Brownsville, Texas; one citizen was killed, another wounded, and the chief of police injured. Whites reported that blacks had “shot up the town,” and race passion was stirred to a fever pitch. Only the firm stand of the commander at Fort Brown prevented the riot from reaching a more desperate level. In November, on the basis of the report of an inspector who had said that blacks had murdered and maimed the citizens of Brownsville, President Roosevelt dismissed the entire battalion without honor and disqualified its members for service in either the military or the civil service of the United States. African Americans, who had always taken pride in the service of their soldiers, were outraged. Many whites protested, among them John Milholland, who through the Constitution League carried on a relentless fight for the soldiers. Even Senator Tillman, doubtless in order to embarrass the president, called it an “executive lynching.”

Brownsville, Texas

When Congress met in December, Sen. Joseph B. Foraker of Ohio insisted that a full and fair trial should have preceded such drastic punishment. On January 22, the Senate authorized a general investigation of the whole matter, the president having revoked the civil disability of the discharged soldiers a week earlier. After several months of study, the majority of the Senate committee upheld the president's handling of the affair. A stinging minority report by Senator Foraker denounced the findings of the majority.

The Ohio senator did not give up the fight. In 1909 he succeeded in forcing through an act of Congress establishing a court of inquiry to pass on the cases of the discharged soldiers. It provided that all the discharged soldiers who were found to be qualified for reenlistment were to be deemed eligible and that if they reenlisted they were to be considered as having enlisted immediately after their discharge more than two years earlier. Any such soldier was to receive the “pay, allowances, and other rights and benefits that he would have been entitled to receive according to his rank from said date of discharge as if he had been honorably discharged . . . and had reenlisted immediately.”

While some regarded the establishment of the court of inquiry as the “most pointed and signal defeat of Roosevelt's administration,” most African Americans looked on the Brownsville incident as one more piece of evidence of the helplessness of a minority in a hostile land. Not until 1972, some sixty-six years after the incident, did Congress rescind the dishonorable discharge and restore the black members of the regiment, most of whom were dead, to good standing in the army.

The South was not the only area of America that was hostile to African Americans in the early years of the new century. Crowds of white hoodlums frequently attacked blacks in large Northern cities. On several occasions, whites dragged blacks off the streetcars of Philadelphia with cries of “Lynch him! Kill him!” As the migration of African Americans to the North increased, hostility toward them grew. Springfield, Ohio, had two riots within a few years. The one in 1904 conformed perfectly to the pattern of violence that had characterized rioting in the South. In an altercation, an African American shot and killed a white officer. A mob gathered and broke into the jail where the black was being held. The citizens murdered the black in the doorway of the jail, hung him on a telegraph pole, and riddled his body with bullets. They then proceeded to wreak destruction on the black section of the town. When they had finished, eight buildings had been burned, many blacks had been beaten, and others had fled, never to return. Two years later, in Greensburg, Indiana, a portion of the act was repeated. A developmentally disabled black was

Violence in the North

convicted for criminally assaulting his employer, a white widow. The mob that gathered did not succeed in taking the black from the authorities, but it was not daunted. Many homes of African Americans were damaged, several innocent persons were beaten, and some were driven out of town.

The Northern riot that shook the entire country was the one that occurred in Springfield, Illinois, in August 1908. The wife of a streetcar conductor claimed that she had been dragged from her bed and raped by someone whom she identified as an African American, George Richardson, who had been working in the neighborhood. Richardson was arrested and jailed. Before a special grand jury, the woman admitted that she had been severely beaten by a white man whose identity she refused to disclose and that Richardson had had no connection with the incident. By this time, however, feeling was running high against Richardson. As a precautionary measure, the officials took him and another black, held in connection with the murder of a white man, to a nearby town where they boarded the train for Bloomington. When the mob that was gathering learned that the blacks had been removed, they were furious. They wrecked the restaurant of a person whose car had been used to transport the blacks and began to surge through the town.

The town officials saw that the mob was becoming unruly, and several unsuccessful efforts were made to disperse it. Finally the governor called out the militia. The mob, oblivious to the appeals of high state officials, raided secondhand stores, secured guns, axes, and other weapons, and began to destroy African American businesses and to drive blacks from their homes. They set fire to a building in which a black owned a barbershop. The barber was lynched in the yard behind his shop, and the mob, after dragging his body through the streets, was preparing to burn it when the militia from Decatur dispersed the crowd by firing into it. On the following night, an eighty-four-year-old African American, who had been married to a white woman for more than thirty years, was lynched within a block of the statehouse.

Before order was restored, more than 5,000 militiamen were patrolling the streets. In the final count, two blacks had been lynched, four white men had been killed, and more than seventy persons had been injured. More than one hundred arrests were made, and approximately fifty indictments were returned. The alleged leaders of the mob went unpunished. The news of the riot was almost more than African Americans could bear. The lynchings had occurred within half a mile of the only home Abraham Lincoln ever owned and within two miles of his final resting place. It seemed to black Americans a perverse manner in which to approach the centennial of the birth of the man immortalized as the Great Emancipator.

At the turn of the twentieth century, peace had not yet come to the South, and the world itself seemed to be divided along an axis of color—powerful white nations versus darker colonial subjects. Where could blacks find redress? American blacks could not look for protection in their nation's laws or in its courts. The American legal process had helped to draw the color line, but it had not acted alone. There was rampant violence in the form of lynching and race riots. A mass consumer culture advertised stereotypical images of black inferiority. And popular and scholarly studies reinforced notions of white supremacy. African Americans confronted all the constitutive elements of Jim Crow as they looked for, indeed prayed for redress. They discussed and openly disagreed with one another on how to best advance themselves individually and collectively as a race. But on one thing they agreed: blacks would have to depend primarily upon their own people, communities, and institutions.

