

Chapter 9

THE AFTERMATH

Despite Mayor Waddell's assertion of "no intimidation," martial celebrations seemed in order. On Nov. 11, a military parade of five companies marched throughout Wilmington, displaying two rapid-fire guns and the Hotchkiss gun of the Naval Reserves. It was not merely a celebration of white supremacy but an assurance that the new regime was firmly in charge. The Morning Star called the parade "a formidable demonstration of the resources for the maintenance of order."

Three days later, the statewide Democratic Party flung a huge street party in Raleigh after nightfall. More than 2,000 torches illuminated the cheering throngs, and 500 barrels of burning tar along the parade route filled the air with plumes of colored smoke, creating a carnival atmosphere. The victorious Democrats assembled a booklet, "North Carolina's Glorious Victory, 1898," that trumpeted the white supremacy campaign and highlighted its leaders.

On Sunday, Nov. 13, the white Christians of Wilmington filed into their churches and heard celebrations of the slaughter. The Rev. J.W. Kramer declared that the mobs in the streets had been "doing God's service." At First Baptist Church, congregants heard the Rev. Calvin S. Blackwell compare the victory of white supremacy to the triumph of the Lord and his heavenly hosts over Satan and his "black robed angels." He dismissed the killings as "a mere incident" and observed, without much originality, that "you cannot make an omelet without breaking a few eggs. The primary purpose was not to kill but to educate."

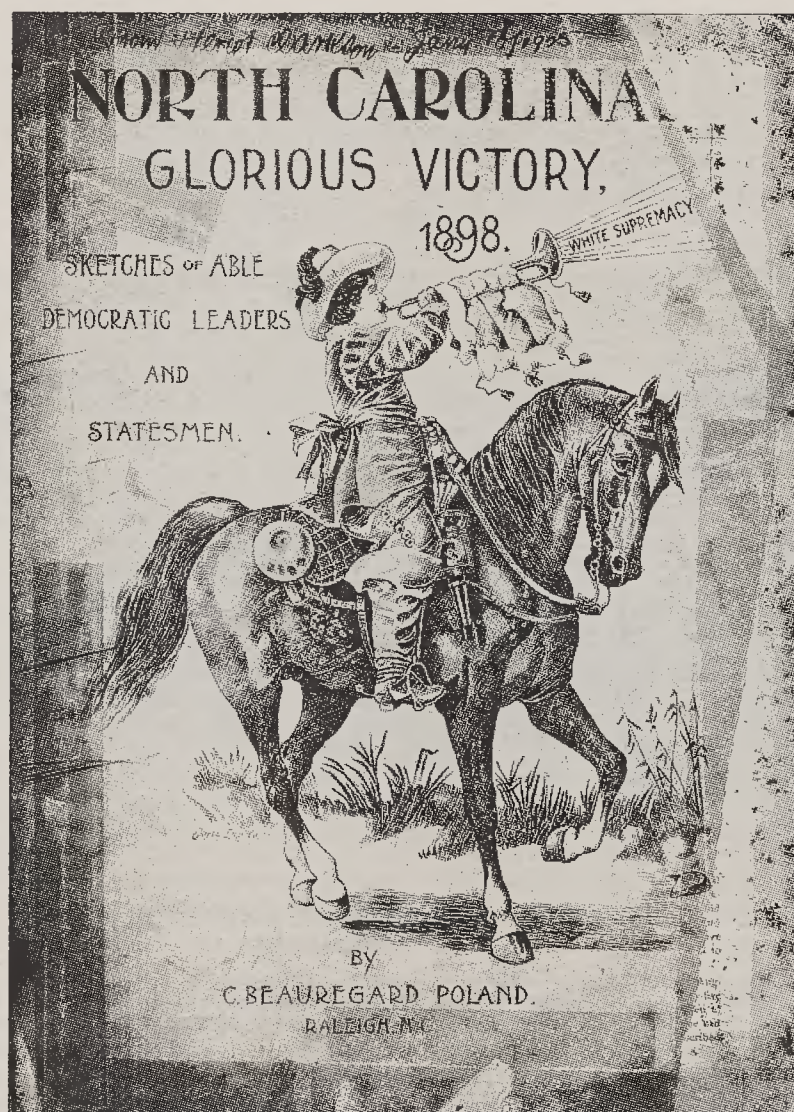
In his own defense of mass murder, the Rev. Payton H. Hoge at First Presbyterian Church parsed a passage from Proverbs: "He that ruleth his spirit is better than he that taketh a city." The author of Proverbs plainly was endorsing self-control, as opposed to the taking of cities, but Hoge had his own interpretation. "Since last we met in these walls, we have taken a city," crowed Hoge. "To God be the praise."

The public silence of those who opposed the massacre said as much as the celebrations of those who supported it. Though besieged by visitors and telegrams begging for help for black North Carolinians, Republican President William McKinley said nothing. The lack

of federal response sent the unmistakable signal that conservative white Southerners ruled at their own whim and the nation would no longer quibble about who killed whom.

The following year, the bloody hands that welcomed Red Shirt terror in 1898 moved to take the ballot away from black North Carolinians forever. The first order of business in 1899 was to disfranchise blacks and many poor whites, making certain that an alliance of "low-born scum and quondam slaves," as a News and Observer editorial put it, would never again threaten elite white rule.

The Democrats introduced a constitutional amendment that cre-



This Democratic Party booklet trumpeted the white supremacy campaign and highlighted its leaders.

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ated literacy tests for voting and placed a poll tax on aspiring voters. The "grandfather clause" protected illiterate whites for a time; any lineal descendant of a man eligible to vote before 1867 — a white man — need not prove his literacy. Even so, the suffrage amendment eventually removed voting rights from nearly all blacks and many whites. In 1896, 85.4 percent of North Carolina's electorate had cast a ballot. By 1904, less than 50 percent would vote.

It was not only in the South that democratic horizons narrowed. In a 1900 editorial about the disfranchisement campaign, The New York Times stated: "Northern men no longer denounce the suppression of the Negro vote in the South as it used to be denounced in Reconstruction days. The necessity of it under the supreme law of self-preservation is candidly recognized."

Its "necessity" seems less evident to most of us today, but the Wilmington race riot of 1898 stands among the most important events in the history of North Carolina and is a pivotal moment in the history of the United States. It was nothing less than a counter-revolution against interracial democracy, and it reverberated far beyond the state. Its aftermath witnessed the birth of the Jim Crow social order, the end of black voting rights and the rise of a one-party political system in the South that strangled the aspirations of generations of blacks and whites.



A militia unit in Wilmington. Immediately after the election of 1898, military might showed that the new regime was firmly in charge.

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