



The Lost History of an American Coup D'État

Republicans and Democrats in North Carolina are locked in a battle over which party inherits the shame of Jim Crow.

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By the time the fire started, Alexander Manly had vanished. That didn't stop the mob of 400 people who'd reached his newsroom from making good on their promise. The crowd, led by a former congressman, had given the editor-in-chief an ultimatum: Destroy your newspaper and leave town forever, or we will wreck it for you.

They burned *The Daily Record* to the ground.

It was the morning of November 10, 1898, in Wilmington, North Carolina, and the fire was the beginning of an assault that took place seven blocks east of the Cape Fear River, about 10 miles inland from the Atlantic Ocean. By sundown, Manly's newspaper had been torched, as many as 60 people had been murdered, and the local government that was elected two days prior had been overthrown and replaced by white supremacists.

For all the violent moments in United States history, the mob's gruesome attack was unique: It was the only coup d'état ever to take place on American soil.

What happened that day was nearly lost to history. For decades, the perpetrators were cast as heroes in American history textbooks. The black victims were wrongly described as instigators. It took nearly a century for the truth of what had really happened to begin to creep back into public awareness. Today, the old site of *The Daily Record* is a nondescript church parking lot—an ordinary-looking square of matted grass on a tree-lined street in historic Wilmington. The *Wilmington Journal*, a successor of sorts to the old *Daily Record*, stands in a white clapboard house across the street. But there's no evidence of what happened there in 1898.

Conservatives in North Carolina don't often bring up the Wilmington Massacre. Even many of those North Carolinians who are now aware of it are still reluctant to talk about it. Those who do sometimes stumble over words like "insurrection" and "riot"—loaded terms, and imprecise ones.

Not only was it a coup, though, the massacre was arguably the nadir of post-slavery racial politics.

That's why it was so shocking when, on Monday, the state's GOP executive director, Dallas Woodhouse, openly acknowledged the massacre on Twitter. In response to a tweet from the North Carolina Democratic Party about the Voting Rights Act, Woodhouse [criticized what he saw as hypocrisy](#). "The events of Nov. 10, 1898 were a result of the long-range campaign strategy by Democratic Party leaders to regain political control of Wilmington," he wrote, "at that time (the) state's most populous city – and North Carolina in the name of white supremacy."

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Woodhouse may have been more interested in gaining political points than actually probing a painful memory in North Carolinian history. (He didn't respond to a request for an interview.) But Woodhouse's version is actually much closer to the truth of what transpired than many other accounts.

[A capsule biography of Alfred Moore Waddell](#)—the former member of Congress who led the massacre—from the website of the Cape Fear Historical Institute in Wilmington exemplifies what some students were long taught:

The Democrats and most white citizens of the State feared a return to the corrupt and financially devastating rule of Republicans as had been experienced during reconstruction in the late 1860s. Waddell led white Wilmingtonians in their effort to shut down a racially inflammatory black newspaper, and then became mayor of Wilmington after the unpopular Republican regime had resigned. As mayor, 'Waddell quickly restored sobriety and peace, demonstrating his capacity to act with courage in critical times.' He continued in this office until 1905, leading a responsible and honest government.

That passage was written by Bernhard Thuersam, who is a former chair both of the Cape Fear Museum board, and of the state chapter of the [League of the South](#). While Thuersam's account diverges sharply from the documentary record, it is instructive in one regard: Thuersam clearly identifies 19th-century Republicans as liberals or "radicals," and [in his writing](#) often identifies 19th-century Democrats simply as "Conservatives."

According to the historian David S. Cecelski, presenting Waddell as a righteous campaigner for "sobriety and peace" was standard in Wilmington until the 1990s. "I grew up in a small town in eastern North Carolina 90 miles from Wilmington," Cecelski says. "I had a book in my middle-school classroom

that listed the 12 greatest North Carolinians ever. It included the Wright brothers, Virginia Dare, and then it included three of the people who were the leaders of the white supremacy campaign.”

“For something like Wilmington in 1898,” Cecelski continues, “it’s hard to describe the level of indoctrination. In the 1910s, 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, they bragged about [the coup]. After that, they backed off but it stayed in the history books and they talked about it as an unfortunate but necessary event.”

In fact, part of how historians have pieced together the real story of the Wilmington massacre is by looking back at newspaper archives—from towns all across North Carolina, not just Wilmington—where similar violence was coordinated that day. “They burned down black newspapers all over the state,” Cecelski says. “They shut down entry to the city from blacks and Republicans... It’s important not to forget that this was a planned thing. This wasn’t two people getting in a fight in a street corner and sparking underlying racial tensions or something like that.”

But state officials solidified their grip on power by promoting that very fiction: They originally called the 1898 incident the “[Wilmington Race Riot](#),” with the implication that the event was instigated by a riot from blacks and quelled by Waddell’s fighters.

After open celebration of white supremacist violence lost favor, a sort of bland sanitizing of history dominated recollections. That lasted until around the time of the centennial of the massacre, in 1998, when scholars and the descendants of the Wilmington black community that had been nearly destroyed in 1898 [began to push for recognition](#) of what really happened. The state’s acknowledgement of its 70-year reign of white supremacy during the “Solid South” period followed the same pattern. Men like Charles B. Aycock, an agitator of the Wilmington riots who three years later was elected governor on a platform of white supremacy, were revered in the state until recently—and, in some cases, still are.

Glenda Gilmore, a North Carolina native and a professor of history at Yale, refers to the whitewashed period as a “a 50-year black hole of information.” According to Gilmore, the bloody history of white supremacy was largely unacknowledged in the state’s educational system. “Someone like me, I had never heard the word ‘lynching’ until I was 21,” she says. “This history was totally hidden from white children. And that was deliberate.”

But now that history is being uncovered and spread. Aycock’s legacy has been reconsidered, and the collection of [buildings and landmarks](#) named after him in the state has dwindled. The Wilmington Massacre is widely acknowledged as a coup and as a foundational moment in creating a white-supremacist state.

North Carolina Republicans have helped uncover that history as well, although some of their acknowledgments of the legacy of white supremacy have come with partisan strings attached. In 2007, back when he was a first-term state General Assembly representative, Senator Thom Tillis blocked [a state resolution](#) formally apologizing for the massacre. He’d supported the nonpartisan resolution [with the caveat](#) that it include an amendment from him that “would have acknowledged the historical fact that the white Republican government joined with black citizens to oppose the rioters.” When that amendment failed, the resolution died with it.

Nationally, conservatives have often taken a similar tack; embracing long-suppressed bits of historical knowledge about the full scope of white supremacy, [so long as they can use them to attack Democrats](#). The conservative American Civil Rights Union, which is run by members of President Donald Trump’s voter-fraud commission, released a report in 2014 on “[The Truth About Jim Crow](#).” While the report is a cogent and relatively un glossed look at an era in which “we proved ourselves to be as capable of committing great evil as any nation on earth,” the titular “truth” appears not to be the legacy of the era,

but “that a great American political party is capable of subordinating the good of the nation and of humanity to its own selfish interest.”

Of course, this kind of weaponization of history is most effective if the Republican and Democratic parties are viewed as unbroken ideological identities dating back to the days of Abraham Lincoln. North Carolina’s own history obliterates that view. Like the rest of the South, the state experienced mass party realignment after the 1960s civil-rights movement, when southern whites began to abandon the Democratic Party.

Former Senator Jesse Helms, another Carolinian folk hero whose legacy [is the subject of an ongoing controversy](#), was central to that realignment. Born and raised a Democrat in the Solid South, Helms switched parties in 1970, two years before his first Senate run. In 1974, Helms remarked of his decision:

The party veered so far to the left nationally, and was taken over by the people whom I'd describe as substantially left of center in North Carolina. And I think I felt, as many other Democrats felt and feel, that really I had no real faith in the party. But I didn't do anything about it. Changing parties, changing party registration, is like moving from a church. But President Nixon's speech at Kansas State, I think it was, persuaded me that maybe the Republican party in North Carolina and in the nation had a chance to restore the two party system.

After the New Deal, the Supreme Court’s desegregation ruling in *Brown v. Board* in 1954, and the civil-rights movement, Helms shepherded white conservatives of the Solid South to the Republican Party, but continued [the old Democratic Party’s hard line against civil-rights reforms](#). And his legacy still reverberates within the North Carolina GOP that he helped build.

Partisanship didn’t quite move along the exact same ideological lines in the past, and both parties’ histories indicate a push and pull between North and South, social conservatism and liberalism, economic orientations, populism and authoritarianism, big government and states’ rights, and races. And across those spectra, politicians of all stripes have contributed to enduring racial inequalities. But white social conservatism was undoubtedly the driving force of Democratic white-supremacist regimes in the South, and its reaction to the loss of the hegemony is part of what precipitated the rise of the modern Republican Party.

Whether he intends it or not, Woodhouse’s acknowledgement of the Wilmington massacre is also acknowledgment of how that hegemony was created, and that the political movement to which he belongs can trace its roots back to the murder of black citizens and the violent overthrow of a government they elected. Lost in the fire that destroyed *The Daily Record* were the lives of black citizens and the spirit of a thriving black community, and also the most promising effort in the South to build racial solidarity. In wielding the memory of the massacre in an attack against the Democrats, Woodhouse runs the risk of implicating his own party in those losses.

But history serves higher purposes than blame. It can be employed in understanding the remnants of that white-supremacist regime today, and learning how to truly defeat the ills of Jim Crow. In honoring the past and the victims of Wilmington, history places the responsibility of racial equality at the feet of all political parties, and all Americans.