

**Taking the Stand: Theodore Bilbo's 1946 Senate Hearing and the Complexities
of Mississippi's Post-War Civil Rights Struggle**

by

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Abstract

In the spring of 1946 Theodore Bilbo, campaigning for his second term as United States Senator, called on every “Red-blooded Anglo–Saxon male” in Mississippi to use whatever means necessary to keep African Americans from voting in July’s Democratic Primary. Undeterred, African Americans went to the polls in record numbers only to be met with violence from whites who heeded Bilbo’s call. From December 2-5, 1946, the Senate conducted a hearing on the election at which sixty-nine African American testifiers argued that Bilbo’s speeches had been directly responsible for election day violence. However, Bilbo managed to retain his seat.

No work details the influence of the hearing on President Truman’s domestic policy. Not only does the hearing hold special significance for Truman’s administration and the post-World War II civil rights movement as a whole, but it also allows one to hear the voices of non-veteran civil rights activists, which adds much-needed complexity to the historical understanding of the post-war struggle for civil rights.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
List of Illustrations.....	v
List of Abbreviations.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: An American Siberia for Black People.....	8
Chapter 2: Campaigning on Hate.....	25
Chapter 3: Unseating “The Man”.....	41
Chapter 4: Taking the Stand.....	71
Epilogue.....	103
Bibliography	127
Appendix 1	136

List of Illustrations

Illustration 1 “The Registrar’s Office”	22
Illustration 2 “The Political Hot-Potato”	40
Illustration 3 “Uncle Samson and Delilah”	52
Illustration 4 “Smith County Posse”	54
Illustration 5 “Hunting Season Down South”	66
Illustration 6 “Wash Me Uncle”	69
Illustration 7 “Two-Faced Portrait”	101
Illustration 8 “Only Bilbo Missing”	122

List of Abbreviations

CRC	Civil Rights Congress
MPVL	Mississippi Progressive Voter's League
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NNC	National Negro Council
NNPA	National Negro Publisher's Association

Introduction

The murder of F.A. Fowler received national coverage in the United States press. His death at the hands of Choctaw County Sheriff L.W. Barfield on July 2, 1946, however, was far from being the first lynching of an African American in the South. Surprisingly, Fowler's murder took place in a year when lynchings in the South were at an all-time low and the Tuskegee Institute even claimed that they could discern a noticeable drop in lynchings throughout the past decade. In all likelihood, Fowler's murder would have gone unnoticed by most Americans had it not taken place during Theodore Bilbo's 1946 re-election campaign for United States Senate; which drew national attention for its particularly virulent brand of racist rhetoric, and frequent appeals for whites to use "any means" of violence necessary to keep blacks from voting.¹

Civil rights victories during the war years aided in creating a highly racially-charged atmosphere for Bilbo's campaign. Mississippi witnessed a drastic upsurge in black voter registration weeks before the election. African Americans in the Magnolia State took advantage of the opportunities afforded them by the Supreme Court's *Smith v. Allwright* (1944) decision which outlawed the "white primary" and gave blacks suffrage rights for the first time since 1890. Racial tensions also rose as 66,000 black veterans who represented everything that conservative whites hated- racial progress and equality- returned home in time to register for the Primary. Blacks also believed that the federal government would assist them if trouble surfaced on July 2. Their belief in the federal government was not unwarranted. For years, blacks in Mississippi had benefited from the

¹ Julius Thompson, *Lynchings in Mississippi: A History, 1865-1965* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2007), 119.

New Deal programs of Franklin Roosevelt that brought the education and work, and had no reason to believe that the government would abandon them at this crucial juncture.²

Bilbo intensified his rhetoric in the final weeks before the election and frequently made statements that espoused the inferiority of the black race and hinted at ways to keep blacks from voting. On more than one occasion he told listeners that they were “justified in going to any extreme to keep the nigger away from the polls,” and chided them “if you don’t know what that means, you are just plain dumb.”³ Bilbo implored his crowds to fight with anything they could to maintain their hold on Mississippi’s white supremacist society. As coverage of Bilbo’s hate-filled speeches spread, many blacks who had registered earlier in the spring decided not to vote. However, a handful of blacks showed up on July 2 ready to cast their ballots, determined to secure their rights.

F.A. Fowler arrived at the polling station on the morning of July 2 eager to take advantage of his constitutional right. As Fowler stepped from his car, Sheriff Barfield pulled his firearm, shot, and killed him a mere sixty feet from the voting booth.

Mississippi’s most widely circulated African American newspaper, the *Jackson Advocate*, covered the murder and a statement from Barfield who maintained that Fowler had “started towards him as if attempting to draw a weapon.”⁴ No other reports of murder reached the press immediately following the election. As the weeks progressed, however, observers noticed the gruesome effect Bilbo’s campaign had on race relations in the state.

² See Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

³ “No Incidents of Violence Reported,” *Jackson Advocate*, July 6, 1946; *Time*, July 1, 1946, pg. 23, quoted in Robert Flegler, “Theodore Bilbo and the Decline of Public Racism, 1938-1947,” *Journal of Mississippi History* 68, 1 (March 2006): 1.

⁴ “Choctaw County Negro Shot To Death on Election Day,” *Jackson Advocate*, July 13, 1946.

Various accounts from election day soon filled newspapers throughout the country that emphasized how voter obstruction reigned more supreme than the *Smith* ruling on July 2.

The number of complaints received by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Civil Rights Congress (CRC) on election day atrocities spurred the groups into action, and they each began separate campaigns to unseat Bilbo; both of which drew national support from philanthropic organizations and celebrities. After receiving numerous complaints from civil rights organizers and local people in Mississippi, the Senate announced that it would conduct a hearing on the legality of Bilbo's election in December 1946. Despite what many believed to be a tangible connection between Bilbo's speeches and multiple instances of intimidation, violence, and suffrage obstruction, the Senate decided to allow "The Man" (as he was occasionally referred to) to keep his Senate seat while he travelled to New Orleans for cancer treatment. The Senate also stipulated that Bilbo would receive his salary while he recovered. Bilbo never returned from Louisiana.⁵

Even though the campaign to oust Bilbo did not end with the Senator's impeachment, the movement to have "The Man" removed from the legislative body cannot be considered a failure. Bilbo's election and hearing brought national attention to civil rights issues in a manner different from any previous moment in the nation's history. The experiences of the sixty-nine African Americans who testified at the hearing claimed the front pages of media outlets throughout the country and brought the issue of civil rights into the national foreground. Testimonies from those sixty-nine individuals represent what Charles Payne believes "was probably the most significant mobilization of

⁵ Rather than risk a potential governmental deadlock, the Senate reached an agreement to let Bilbo keep his Senate seat; For more information see the Epilogue; and Steven F. Lawson, *Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South 1944-1969* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 113-114.

Mississippi Blacks in the forties,” an event that should be recognized as “perhaps the most significant act of public defiance from Negroes the state had seen in decades.”⁶ That Bilbo represented the public face of white supremacy supports John Dittmer’s characterization of the hearing as “a significant event in the history of the black struggle for freedom,” in which “black men and women publicly served notice that they would no longer accept the denial of their basic human rights.”⁷

Despite these and other claims that the hearings represented a significant point in the long history of African American defiance to white supremacy, no author has fully explored the hearing’s importance to the national, sustained, and federally involved civil rights movement that was gaining substantial footing in the post-war period. While scholars of President Truman have noted that the President’s assertive stance on civil rights kicked into high-gear between 1947 and 1948, most argue that the rapidly increasing northern black electorate had the most direct effect on the President’s policy. These authors emphasize the mid-term elections of 1946, when the House and Senate both became majority Republican for the first time since 1928, as being the “turning point” at which Truman realized that “the growing political strength of northern Negroes required that something be done about the likelihood of violence in the South.”⁸

Arguments that place the onus of responsibility on the 1946 elections as the sole determinant that influenced Truman’s policy downplay other equally important factors that influenced the President’s civil rights policy such as: Bilbo’s long-career in the

⁶ Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 24-25.

⁷ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 9.

⁸ Garth E. Pauley, *The Modern Presidency and Civil Rights* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2001), 33; William Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1970, ix, 48-58;

nation's capitol as the head of the Committee on the Affairs of Washington, D.C. which made him the *defacto* "mayor" of the city; Bilbo's membership in the Democratic party; Bilbo's status as the nation's foremost racist; and the national and international attention garnered from the 1946 hearing. The correlation between the events in Mississippi and the President's policy on civil rights can be most clearly seen in the fact that Truman created his famed Commission on Civil Rights tasked with making "recommendations with respect to adoption or establishment. . . for protection of civil rights of the people of the United States" on the final day of Bilbo's hearing.⁹ Philadelphia, Pennsylvania's most-circulated African American periodical, the *Afro-American* easily made the connection between Truman's action and Bilbo's hearing, telling its readers, "Truman Tries FDR Timing Trick in Naming Committee."¹⁰

The uptick in federal involvement in southern civil rights issues after Bilbo's hearing highlights how local events and people in Mississippi influenced national and local politics, and further underscores the importance of the hearing to the civil rights narrative. The press surrounding Bilbo and the hearing created a wedge between northern and southern Democrats that would come to fruition in the Dixiecrat Revolt of 1948. The shockingly high black turnout for Bilbo's election and reports that testimony from the hearing had bolstered black spirits and would fuel an even greater tide of black voters in 1947 convinced Mississippi's white officials to enact stricter voting laws and amendments. Such actions mark what Jason Morgan Ward sees as a "shift toward a consciously segregationist backlash" in which "racial conservatives reaffirmed and

⁹ Steven F. Lawson, *To Secure These Rights: The Report of President Harry S. Truman's Committee on Civil Rights* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004), 14.

¹⁰ "Truman Tries FDR Timing Trick in Naming Committee," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, December 14, 1946.

rearticulated their dedication to the segregated status quo.” The actions of Mississippi’s legislators also reaffirm Jane Dailey’s belief that “white supremacy remodeled itself to meet every challenge.”¹¹ Despite the severity of the backlash from conservative whites following Bilbo’s hearing, black civil rights leaders throughout Mississippi felt galvanized by Bilbo’s hearing, and used it to fortify their spirits in the fight for equality in succeeding years. One activist surmised that “perhaps the most crucial factor in this remarkable increase [in black voters] was the stimulation and courage’ provided by the Bilbo hearing.”¹²

The most extensive treatment on Bilbo’s hearing can be found in Steven Lawson’s *Black Ballots* (1976), in which he covers the hearing in substantial detail for nearly twenty pages, recalling some of the most “spectacular” testimony. The majority of Lawson’s work, however, focuses on the political in-fighting between the CRC and the NAACP during their early efforts to unseat Bilbo, and fails to connect the hearing to the civil rights policy of the Truman administration.¹³ Other authors, including John Dittmer, John Egerton, Charles Payne, Patricia Sullivan, and Jennifer Brooks also mention Bilbo’s hearing and campaign to a lesser extent. All maintain, however, that other factors, chief

¹¹ Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Bryant Simon, *Jumping Jim Crow: Southern Politics From Civil War to Civil Rights* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 5; Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 90-91. By the end of 1947, nearly 5,000 blacks had registered to vote in Mississippi; a 150% increase from 1940. Reports from the following year’s election cited Bilbo’s hearings and the involvement of the federal government as main motivations for registering; “Mississippi Sees Negro Votes Rise,” *New York Times*, February 2, 1947; “Negroes Gaining Mississippi Vote,” *New York Times*, February 7, 1947.

¹² Earl Lewis, “The Negro Voter in Mississippi,” *Journal of Negro Education* 26 (Summer 1957): 334-335, quoted in Payne, 25.

¹³ Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 101-103.

among them the media coverage of lynchings, had the greatest role in forcing President Truman's hand on civil rights issues between 1946 and 1948.¹⁴

A careful examination of Bilbo's election and hearing underscores the connection between the events surrounding Bilbo and the evolving civil rights policy of Harry Truman. It also brings forth the voices of some of the often overlooked actors in the post-war civil rights movement. As previously stated, sixty-nine African Americans from Mississippi testified at Bilbo's hearing, and while a majority of them were World War II veterans, over forty percent of the testifiers were non-veterans who exhibited equal willingness to defy the southern caste system.¹⁵ Analyzing non-veteran as well as a few previously discarded veterans' testimonies allows one to view deeper complexities of Mississippi's post-war civil rights movement. These complexities not only refine the already rich narrative of the civil rights movement, but most importantly, allow the voices of long-forgotten civil rights actors to finally be heard.

¹⁴ Payne, 24-25; Jennifer E. Brooks, *Defining The Peace: World War II Veterans, Race and the Remaking of Southern Political Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 32; John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 401-403; Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The New Press, 2009), 317-318, 326-328; Christopher S. Parker, *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Postwar South* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009)1-2, 3-4, 178; 428 n6, Gilbert Jonas, *Freedom's Sword: The NAACP and the Struggle Against Racism in America, 1909-1969* (NY: Routledge Press, 2005), 154.

¹⁵ Twenty-eight non-veterans testified at Bilbo's hearing. This number was obtained through a cross-examination of Senate hearing testimony and World War II enlistment records; Office of Records Services – Washington, World War II Army Enlistment Records, Record Group 64, in the National Archives and Records Administration, <http://aad.archives.gov/aad/series-description.jsp?s=3360&bc=.sl> [accessed December 21, 2011-March 2, 2012].

Chapter 1:

An American Siberia for Black People

Even though Reconstruction promised political equality to African Americans throughout the South, white supremacists maintained control through Democratic machines that held sway across the region. As political and social restrictions against blacks tightened in the wake of the ugly Civil War, Mississippi gained recognition as the “pioneer” of various forms of suffrage restriction that effectively limited the votes of blacks and poor whites and perpetuated the political power of a select few. Each generation brought further perversion to Mississippi’s legal and political system, which created such a dichotomous caste system in the state that it became known as an “American Siberia for black people,” and “the heartland of American apartheid.”¹

According to Neil McMillen, “the first imperative of white supremacy was disfranchisement” and after the Civil War, Mississippi politicians sought to retain as much of their traditional white supremacist culture as possible.² To the consternation of many Mississippi whites, the 15th Amendment allowed blacks to participate widely in state politics. Blacks felt the familiar shackles of slave society beginning to reappear, however, by the late 1870s. Southern whites, cognizant that the federal government would no longer continue to monitor the region’s progress under federal Reconstruction, began to obstruct black access to suffrage through intimidation and fraud. The federal government’s “blind eye” toward voting in the South and monumental Supreme Court decisions such as the *Slaughterhouse Cases* (1873) which “denied blacks the protection

¹ Thompson, *Black Life in Mississippi*, xxi; McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 11.

² McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 71.

of federal civil rights law,” signaled the beginning of the end for the black population’s honeymoon with enfranchisement.³ In 1890, the Mississippi state legislature sought to forever limit the black electorate, solidify the state’s racial code, and block federal intervention in state elections by ratifying a new state constitution. The new document—an extension of an 1875 bill that reapportioned the state legislature to benefit predominantly white counties—introduced the understanding clause, the poll-tax, and required registrants to adhere to stringent residency and criminal background qualifications in order to vote.⁴

The new statutes all but obliterated Mississippi’s eligible black electorate, and according to Neil McMillen, many blacks “apparently chose not to challenge the new arrangement.” Without opposition, whites continued to solidify their newly legalized supremacy by telling blacks that “voting was ‘white folks business’” and blacks understood that “those who insisted overmuch on their rights of citizenship, risked white hostility and worse.”⁵ The new constitution, known as the Mississippi Plan, effectively dropped the total number of registered blacks from over 18,000 (out of an eligible population of over 180,000) in 1899 to 2,000 by 1904. The number of eligible black voters would remain constant at that number until 1947.⁶ One man remarked that the new constitution was so effective that it had “practically remove[d] the negro from the state as absolutely as if the Negroes had been deported to Liberia.”⁷

Early in the twentieth century, the state’s white supremacist government continued to strengthen its grip on the black population, and it became the first southern

³ McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 8,36.

⁴ Michael Perman, *Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888-1908* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 81; McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 42.

⁵ McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 85.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 36; Perman, 89.

⁷ James W. Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (NY: Harcourt, Brace, World Inc. Publishers, 1963), 19.

state to adopt the direct primary system. Rather than a direct election in which electors only voted for their candidates in one election, the direct primary eschewed the possibility of black political participation by requiring all voters to have “voted Democratic during the previous two years” and required all registrants to be white.⁸ The white primary, as it came to be known, summarily put the nail in the coffin for blacks who maintained any hope of having a voice in their government. The effectiveness of the primary as a disfranchisement tool can be traced to the state’s Democratic majority. The victor of the white primary, a Democrat, would almost certainly be named the victor in the race for office.⁹ James Silver notes that with regulations such as these, white Mississippi politicians had transformed the state into “an inefficient and even corrupt government in the hands of white men... [instead of] a perfect government in which there was a danger of Negro control.”¹⁰

Theodore Gilmore Bilbo came of age in this political climate. Born in 1877, Bilbo’s early years have been described as “average” for any poor white child growing up in the south-central Mississippi town of Poplarville. “The Man” did not attend school until the age of fifteen, and directly entered the local high school. After completing his education in Mississippi’s public school system, Bilbo entered the George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville, Tennessee in 1897 and never officially graduated; leaving school to teach in small rural schools because he possessed more qualifications than most. Soon after his first couple years teaching, Bilbo became the principal of a newly built high school, and in 1905 he enrolled at Vanderbilt University’s Law School. Bilbo attended Vanderbilt until the summer of 1906 when he passed from junior classes

⁸ Ibid., 306.

⁹ Silver, 13.

¹⁰ Ibid., 18.

into senior classes, but again did not graduate, leaving to enter politics instead.¹¹ In 1907, Bilbo began his career as a politician and ran for governor on the “Redneck” ticket against “Bourbon” Democrat E.L. Dent.¹²

During these early years, Bilbo developed the fiery brand of political oratory with which he would become synonymously associated and molded his image as the champion of racial separation, anti-federal intervention, and “The Man” of lower class whites. In one of his first speeches he outlined his views on African American voting, telling his crowd, “This is a white man’s country, the Negro has never been and never will be the equal of the white man.” He further claimed that “The right to vote is not a natural right...but a political privilege” granted by the state.¹³

After his freshman success in the state Senate, Bilbo’s political career took off and spanned nearly forty years in which he became only the third man in Mississippi history ever elected governor twice.¹⁴ During his political career, Bilbo held seemingly every position imaginable. From 1912-1916 he maintained a post as Lieutenant Governor and then parlayed his success in that position into a governorship from 1916-1920. Bilbo lost the race for Senate in 1920 and returned home to Poplarville for a period of several years where he remained active in local politics, and opened a law practice in which he specialized in defending poor whites. In 1928, Bilbo re-launched his political career

¹¹ Larry T. Balsamo, “Theodore G. Bilbo and Mississippi Politics, 1877-1932,” (PhD diss., University of Missouri, 1967), 1-12.

¹² Balsamo describes the Bourbons as being the “well-to do cotton planters of the Delta counties and small, but influential business interests and the Rednecks as being made up of “small white farmers” who lived in the north, ease, and piney woods of the South. For more on the split between these two factions see Balsamo, 15-22; and C. Vann Woodward, *The Origins of the New South 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971).

¹³ Balsamo, 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Introduction.

winning re-election as governor from 1928-1932.¹⁵ Bilbo or “The Man” as he came to be colloquially known, took a hiatus from politics for a two year term and reappeared in 1934 when he claimed the first of a three term seat in the United States Senate. All told during his forty-year political career, Bilbo had only been absent from office for eight years.¹⁶

Even though Bilbo used his finely tuned oratorical skills to split poor whites and the few African Americans that remained on the rolls from organizing an oppositional voting bloc, blacks in Mississippi began to organize in hopes of achieving some measure of equality. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) arrived in Mississippi in the 1920s. Since its 1909 beginnings, the organization had made important political and social in-roads into many northern industrial hubs including New York and Boston. The NAACP responded to an interest on the part of southern blacks to obtain their rights that coincided with the rise of the Second Klan and the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and sent organizers south. The NAACP met stiff opposition from southern legislators throughout the South, some of whom attempted to ban the organization from their states.¹⁷

The NAACP made its first foray into Mississippi during this period, setting up shop in the state’s capital and recruiting new members from the city’s inhabitants. Mississippi’s branch of the organization grew at a slow pace until 1940 when letters from across the state poured into headquarters asking for materials and information on how to

¹⁵ Ibid., 160-161.

¹⁶ For extended histories on Bilbo’s political career see also Chester Morgan, *Redneck Liberal: Theodore G. Bilbo and the New Deal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985); and Charles Pope Smith, “Theodore G. Bilbo’s Senatorial Career, The Final Years: 1941-1947,” (PhD diss., University of Southern Mississippi, 1983); A. Wigfall Green, *The Man Bilbo* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963), 98-99; Balsamo, Introduction.

¹⁷ Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 61-100.

organize branches in their local communities.¹⁸ The 1940 push by the NAACP to establish a Fair Employment Practices Bill (FEPC) spurred the jump in membership. NAACP leaders including Walter White, had long-realized the racial exclusion inherent in defense industries and with the world on a collision-course with entry into a Second World War, African American civil rights organizations were particularly concerned about equalizing job opportunities in defense plants.¹⁹

As the NAACP spread throughout the Magnolia state during the early 1940s, blacks praised it as "a God sent organization for us Black folks" and sent encouraging letters to headquarters stating that "I am trying to gain joiners everyday on my job."²⁰ During these "boom" years the number of trained NAACP field staff in Mississippi doubled and the organization witnessed some of its first successful expansions into Mississippi's rural regions where white supremacy remained fiercest.²¹ The increased presence of civil rights organizations and participation in them by Mississippi's black community provided the wick for a powder keg of racial tension that would be ignited by Theodor Bilbo's racist rhetoric in the years that followed.

The expansion of the NAACP throughout the South was met with swift violence from the white community. In Greenville, South Carolina, a race riot erupted between the Ku Klux Klan and the NAACP after African Americans attempted to register in the state's Democratic Primary. Police arrested none of the Klan members associated with the attack. The ends to which whites were willing to go to defend their segregated

¹⁸ Letter to Ella Baker from Carsie Hall, September 13, 1944, NAACP Branch Department Files, Part 26, Series A, Reel 14.

¹⁹ Sullivan, 254.

²⁰ Letter from C.H. Thompson to Mary White, July 27, 1944, NAACP Branch Department Files, Part 26, Series A, Reel 14.

²¹ Sullivan, 244.

primary led leaders of the NAACP to believe that blacks would never obtain social or political equality without destroying the white primary. From this point on-ward, the NAACP's attention began to focus on tearing down the primary, and leaders believed that they would receive federal help in their endeavor.²²

In 1940, blacks believed that the federal government would come to their aid in matters of civil rights. African Americans throughout the country were continuing to benefit from Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies including the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps, which helped them receive education and gainful employment during one of the worst economic downturns in history. Garth Pauley believes that FDR's policies created strong bonds between African Americans and the President that "set a precedent" for how future Presidents dealt with civil rights issues.²³

However, with the war in Europe consuming a majority of Roosevelt's attention during his third administration, whites carried out numerous acts of violence against blacks that created a climate of fear for Mississippi's black population. However, Roosevelt responded to pressure on civil rights issues by creating a civil rights section of the Justice Department and signing the FEPC into law in 1941.²⁴ In January 1940, Roosevelt intervened directly on behalf of two black inmates held in a Prentiss, Mississippi prison. Roosevelt ordered the National Guard to the state to help protect the men from a posse of armed whites that wanted to lynch the two black men after they

²² Ibid., 245.

²³ Garth E. Pauley, *The Modern Presidency and Civil Rights* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2001), 18-30.

²⁴ Ibid., 22.

allegedly killed the town's marshal.²⁵ Roosevelt's token involvement in civil rights kept the growing African American electorate firmly in his pocket for the remainder of his term and set up the expectation amongst black voters that the Democratic Party would be the "new" party of Lincoln.²⁶

Congress also appeared to be leaning progressively toward the left by passing bills that directly referenced civil rights issues. The same month as the attempted lynching in Prentiss, the House passed the Cavagan Anti-Lynching Bill that aimed at curbing southern lynchings. The bill would impose fines on "county or State officials who were negligent in protecting persons within their custody" and held law enforcement officials responsible if they allowed blacks "to be seized by mobs and killed or injured." Under the bill, federal courts had the power to file suits against counties that employed officials who failed to comply with the order.²⁷ Despite the fact that the House passed the bill with little opposition, members of the Senate, under the direction of Bilbo, filibustered the legislation to death.

As blacks became more assertive, joining the NAACP and other civil rights organizations throughout the 1940s, the federal government began to take more notice of southern social issues. In response, reactionary whites increased their campaigns of fear and intimidation. Throughout the fall of 1942, violence escalated in Mississippi. In mid-October a white mob lynched two teenagers from Shubuta, Mississippi for allegedly attacking a white woman. On the same evening, tragedy also befell Howard Wash of Laurel, Mississippi as he returned home from work and was grabbed by a mob of angry

²⁵ "Guardsmen on Duty in Mississippi," *New York Times*, January 11, 1940.

²⁶ Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), xiii.

²⁷ "Anti-Lynching Bill Is Passed By House," *New York Times*, January 11, 1940.

whites who alleged that Wash had committed a similar transgression against the South's racialized sexual code.²⁸ Civil rights organizations such as the National Negro Council (NNC) and the NAACP used the lynchings to pressure Roosevelt to enforce martial law in the state in hopes of bringing "an end to the reign of terror."²⁹ Acts of violence throughout the South continued to draw national attention on civil rights issues and simultaneously heightened racial tension to dangerously high levels.

By the spring of 1943, America's full-engagement in the European and Pacific theaters of World War II began to take its toll on African American lives and morale. None, especially the black press, could ignore the striking hypocrisy of fighting a war to end racial and ethnic cleansing abroad while segregation and escalating violence against blacks persisted at home. At every opportunity, reporters used acts of violence to signal parallels between Nazism and the southern way of life in hopes of coaxing the patriotic side of some white supremacists into preventing them or others from lynching or harming blacks. One columnist remarked on the Shubuta and Laurel lynchings that "Adolf Hitler's agents were not active last week in the State of Mississippi, but Hitler's work was being done there."³⁰

Southern acts of violence also provided ample fuel for the fire in congress over effective civil rights legislation. Once again, the House successfully passed a bill that outlawed the poll-tax, but like the anti-lynching bill several years before, southern politicians, led by Bilbo, filibustered the bill to death. When Bilbo left the legislative

²⁸ "2 Negro Boys Lynched," *New York Times*, October 13, 1942; "Mississippi Mob Lynches a Slayer," *New York Times*, October 18, 1942.

²⁹ "Protest Sent to President," *New York Times*, October, 18, 1942.

³⁰ "Hitler in Mississippi," *New York Times*, October 21, 1942.

chambers on the day of the debate, he told one reporter after that he was “ready to talk until Christmas.”³¹

The federal government, however, found other ways to mollify black discontent over southern racial violence. In April, the Justice Department indicted four white men for the October lynching of Laurel resident Howard Wash. Many northern and southern reporters saw the indictment as a victory for blacks and were quick to point out that the case marked “the first federal action taken against white men in a Southern lynching case in forty years.”³² Even though the four men charged with Wash’s death received acquittals from all-white juries, the appearance that the federal government wanted to be involved in fighting for black civil rights placated the black community’s growing discontent over the federal government’s previous lack of involvement in civil rights issues.

With national attention on the South at a record high, the NAACP announced its plans for a nation-wide membership drive that would begin in 1944 and coincide with the organization’s re-prosecution of the *Smith v. Allwright* case that began in 1943, which attacked Texas’s white primary. Through the heavy campaign efforts of local activists and from interest garnered by blacks who believed the government’s interest in civil rights issues to be on the rise, the organization steadily gained members. The NAACP also benefited from the press surrounding the National Negro Press Association’s (NNPA) “Double V Campaign” that urged blacks not to accept victory abroad without civil and social equality at home.³³ By April, the NAACP boasted a nation-wide membership between 250,000-300,000 members; a six fold increase in four years, and

³¹ “Senate Group Begins Filibuster Against Poll Tax Repeal Bill,” *New York Times*, November 14, 1942.

³² “Jury Frees 3 Men in Lynching Trial,” *New York Times*, April 25, 1942.

³³ Ward, 69.

Mississippi proudly housed fifty branches of the association with growing letters of interest received daily.³⁴

Two developments at mid-decade signaled profound successes for national recognition of civil rights issues, and aided in awakening black political consciousness in Mississippi and throughout the nation. In the spring of 1944, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Lonnie Smith in *Smith v. Allwright*. The case, argued by NAACP attorneys Thurgood Marshall and William Hastie was predicated on the fact that “the primary was an integral part of the election machinery in Texas and therefore subject to federal enforcement of the Fifteenth Amendment, barring voter discrimination based on race.”³⁵ The court ruled that “Negroes cannot be legally barred from voting in the Texas Democratic primaries.”³⁶

Mississippi politicians, realized that the federal ruling could and most likely would be used as a legal precedent to gain suffrage for blacks in the state, and began to use the ruling to drum-up political support for their own election campaigns. Whites cited the *Smith* decision as an example of federal intervention in state’s affairs; an egregious affront to southern autonomy and “state’s rights.” Bilbo ardently told reporters “we still have a few state’s rights left, and one of our rights is to have Democratic primaries....The Supreme Court or no one else can control a Democratic Primary in Mississippi.”³⁷

Republicans capitalized on the increasingly racial rhetoric and open defiance of the federal government by southern Democrats. Republicans throughout the country

³⁴ Letter from Ella Baker to T.B. Wilson, April 27, 1944, Branch Department Files, Part 26, Series A, Reel 14; Letter from L.C. Wilcher to Gloster Current, November 18, 1946, Part 26, Series A, Reel 14; Thompson, *Lynchings in Mississippi*, 118 n27

³⁵ Sullivan, 282.

³⁶ Charles L. Zelden, *The Battle for Black Ballots: Smith v. Allwright and the Defeat of the Texas All-White Primary* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005); “High Court Rules Negroes Can Vote in Texas Primary,” *New York Times*, April 4, 1944.

³⁷“Southern Leaders Prepare to Resist,” *New York Times*, April 4, 1944.

reshaped their political platforms to detail the party's rich heritage of emancipation and equality exemplified by their most revered alumnus Abraham Lincoln.³⁸ The *Smith* decision became a fracturing point for the Democratic Party, and can be seen as an early antecedent of the later Dixiecrat revolt of 1948.³⁹ Northern Democrats could not support their southern counterparts who advocated using extra-legal means to nullify the *Smith* decision without risking the loss of their black constituents. Northern Democrats began to subtly distance themselves from their radical southern brethren such as Bilbo who declared that primaries would be run "as we believe, in the best interest of our people."⁴⁰

Civil rights efforts and organizations also benefited from the end of the Second World War and the subsequent influx of African American veterans back into the South. To civil rights organizers, black veterans provided an unparalleled opportunity to gain ground in the growing civil rights struggle. F. D. Patterson of the Tuskegee institute told the *New York Times* that he "hoped that the suffering, sacrifices and bloodshed...on the battlefronts and at home have induced a solemn and enduring understanding and appreciation of the independence of people and nations." Reverend John W. Martin also stated that "the whole world should thank God because the war is over...But if we are to hope for a better tomorrow we must fight on to see that the benefits of democracy shall be meted out to all men without regard to race creed or color."⁴¹

Female civil rights organizers also voiced their hope that black veterans could provide them with the symbolism needed to gain continued recognition and involvement

³⁸ "South's Devices Run Thin," *New York Times*, April 5, 1944; Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Rape and Resistance- A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to Black Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 55-56;

³⁹ Kari Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 47-49.

⁴⁰ "Democrats Watch Mississippi Moves," *New York Times*, June 4, 1944.

⁴¹ "Feel War Sacrifices in Vain without Opportunity, Equality," *Jackson Advocate*, August 25, 1945

from the federal government on behalf of black civil rights. A. B. DeMent, president of the National Association of Colored Women, told a crowd in Chicago that even though the war had ended, and that the contributions of black veterans should not go unrecognized, blacks “must continue to fight against evil and oppression whenever and wherever it is found.” College students also voiced their excitement over post-war possibilities for equality. Delta Sigma Theta sorority president Mae Wright Downs told the same Chicago crowd that “the Negro race with their allies...intend to hold fast to the gains they have already achieved and to press ever forward for complete equality, which...they shall win.” The message of the “Double V” even carried to Mississippi where the *Jackson Advocate* proclaimed that “National V-J celebrations hailing the end of the world’s bloodiest and greatest melodrama will mean nothing unless there is equality of opportunity for all.”⁴²

Southern politicians believed that African American veterans would assuredly fight for their rights, and encourage others to do so once they returned home. Whites attempted to discredit black veterans in hopes of making them seem “unfit” to participate in a democratic society. In a speech before the Senate at the end of June 1945, Bilbo’s colleague in the Senate James Eastland declared that “Negro troops were an utter and abysmal failure,” who had, according to military officials present in Normandy, “assaulted members of the families of French farmers.”⁴³ James C. Evans of Tennessee also warned southern politicians that “the problem of compressing the Negro soldier who

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ “Negro Troops Fail, Eastland Asserts,” *New York Times*, June 30, 1945.

has seen action in Burma, China, Egypt, and Germany back into the limited local channels will require our best efforts.”⁴⁴

Try as they might, southern demagogues could not stem the tide of African American unrest in post-war years and would be forced to face a flood of returning black veterans in the coming months. In addition, these “smear campaigns” only enticed more African Americans to support organizations such as the NAACP, which received “hundreds of protest letters” from Eastland’s comments alone.⁴⁵ Eastland’s tirade and the discontent of other southern politicians were picked up on by media outlets across the country and garnered further support for civil rights efforts from various people who came to the defense of the GIs. In New York, Senator Robert Wagner proclaimed that Eastland should have consulted with the War Department before making such claims, and Undersecretary of War Robert P. Patterson told reporters that “the War Department is proud of its troops and that includes Negroes as well as other groups.”⁴⁶

In the summer of 1945, Mississippi interestingly passed House Bill 107 which exonerated all veterans, regardless of race, from paying poll-taxes or showing a receipt of poll-tax payment for years 1941-1945. This decision importantly impacted the choice of many veterans to seek suffrage rights in the post-war period and left southern politicians, including Bilbo, with more ammunition for their race-centered campaigns for Senate.⁴⁷

Blacks in Mississippi witnessed a plethora of civil rights opportunities afforded them in the post-war period that placed them in an exceptional position to utilize their

⁴⁴ “‘Returning Soldiers to be a Problem,’ Says Civilian Aide,” *Jackson Advocate*, July 28, 1945.

⁴⁵ “‘Embittered GIs Protest Eastland Racial Smear and Nazi Tactics,’” *Jackson Advocate*, August 4, 1945.

⁴⁶ “‘Defends Negro GI’s,’” *New York Times*, July 13, 1945; “‘Army ‘Proud’ of Negroes,’” *New York Times*, July 6, 1945; “‘Hits Report on Negroes,’” *New York Times*, July 1, 1945.

⁴⁷ “‘Poll Taxes Ruled Uncollectible,’” *McComb Enterprise Journal*, September 22, 1945; House Bill 107, General Acts of the Regular Legislative Session, 1946, Mississippi Legislature, p. 17-19.

suffrage rights for the first time in nearly fifty years: the *Smith* decision of 1944 legally abolished the white primary; the federal government's interest in civil rights issues appeared to be the highest it had ever been; and the passage of House Bill 107 provided blacks with substantially better chances of casting their vote than in previous years. However, Theodore Bilbo did not intend to simply let blacks upset the political and social order of his home state. Campaigning as the defender of Mississippi's "traditions," Bilbo began a whirlwind tour of stump speeches in the spring of 1945 that set the state ablaze with racial animosity. Even in its earliest stages, Blacks realized that Bilbo's campaign would fuel voting obstructions from whites as the months continued, and many began to register in droves. The NAACP also began to take steps to seek federal redress if Bilbo attempted to block blacks from the polls.⁴⁸

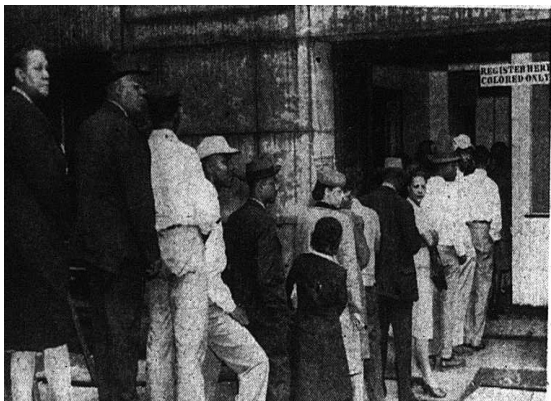


Illustration 1. "The Registrar's Office"
Thousands line up at the courthouse in Fulton County to register for the July 2 primary. (*Philadelphia Afro-American* April 27, 1946)

The earliest signs that Bilbo's campaign and election could enflame racial tensions in Mississippi appeared in April when Thad Dickerson a white night watchman

⁴⁸ Letter from Carsie Hall to Thurgood Marshall, August 27, 1945, NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950, part4 reel 9.

at a natural gas plant in Pickens, Mississippi shot and killed sixteen year old Chenley Dennis in what many residents of the sleepy Mississippi town dubbed “the most cold-blooded murder in the town’s history.”⁴⁹ Dickerson shot Dennis in broad daylight as the young African American walked with a group of friends to play basketball at the local park. Witnesses recalled that Dickerson pretended to be drunk and

Blocked him [Dennis] and with gun in hand asked, ‘Don’t you believe I’ll kill you?’ ...the youth looked up into the white man’s face momentarily, then turned and ran. As he ran across the street, the white man shot him in the back...walking across the street to where the youth fell, held him up by his collar, pressed the pistol to his breast and shot him through the heart.⁵⁰

Dennis’s murder and what assuredly appeared to be a taste of the violence to come as Bilbo continued his speeches, did not stifle NAACP organizers in Mississippi from educating and encouraging blacks to vote. Following Dennis’s murder, Field Secretary Daisy Lampkin told members of the Associated Press that “colored people formed a line...registering to vote in ever increasing numbers and southern members of congress are gravely concerned.”⁵¹ However, leaders in both the NAACP and the Mississippi Progressive Voter’s League (MPVL) did not completely discount the potential for election day violence. As the number of registered African Americans continued to rise, members from both organizations wrote to the federal government and implored President Harry Truman, to send troops to the state in an effort to secure the safety of African American voters. Pleas for troops fell on deaf ears as both the Truman administration and his attorneys general rebuffed the requests with reassuring letters that

⁴⁹ “Killing of Youth at Pickens Called Most Cold Blooded Murder in Town’s History,” *Jackson Advocate*, April 27, 1946.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ “NAACP Field Secretary Tells of Registration,” *Jackson Advocate*, April 27, 1946.

told civil rights activists that “any infraction” of the laws of the United States would be enforced.⁵²

⁵² “Negroes Ask Troops Guard Vote,” *New York Times*, April 28, 1946.

Chapter 2: Campaigning on Hate

Early in his campaign, Bilbo used the threat of black voters and the increased presence of northern-based civil rights and labor organizations to heighten white racial fears. A failure to return him to the Senate, Bilbo told his constituents, would be “an endorsement of the CIO and other northern groups favoring the FEPC.”¹ Bilbo even went as far as declaring that he would withhold African American voting totals from authorities in Washington on election-day stating that if he did not, “the Negro would then be in power in the capital.”² In his campaign speeches, Bilbo spouted allegations that centered on northern involvement in southern activities, and at one point even charged Eleanor Roosevelt with putting southern white women’s honor in jeopardy by alleging that she made African Americans “bureau chiefs” who held positions of authority over white women.³

Bilbo directly commented on the work of the NAACP and the MPVL in several of his speeches before the election, and encouraged whites to use violence against members of the organizations. He told a crowd in mid-May that “the leader or leaders of the Mississippi Progressive Voter’s League...should be automatically bombed and exterminated from the face of the earth” and that anyone who aided blacks should “be horse-whipped, tarred and feathered and chased out of the state.”⁴ The NNC under the direction of Edgar Brown, urged President Truman at the end of May to send troops to

¹ “The Southeast: Revival of Klan is Linked to Negro Voting, Labor Drive,” *New York Times*, May 19, 1946.

² “Bilbo Promises to ‘Protect’ Washington,” *Jackson Advocate*, May 18, 1946.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ “Bilbo Would Bomb State Negro Leaders,” *Jackson Advocate*, May 25, 1946.

Mississippi to protect African American voters. With no response from the oval office, it became increasingly evident that blacks would have to defend themselves or not show up on July 2 in order to avoid violence.⁵ However, blacks were not deterred by Bilbo's appeals to white masculinity and manhood, nor did they heed the threats of angry whites. T.B. Wilson, head of the MPVL declared that "we regard it as a threat; but it has made us more determined than ever to make an attempt."⁶ Later that month in Jackson, blacks gathered at Pearl Street A.M.E. church for a state-wide meeting sponsored by the MPVL to discuss and "consider...the necessary steps to be taken in order to vote in the present senatorial campaign."⁷

While African Americans fortified their courage for the coming election, violence throughout the state increased with every speech the Senator made. Bilbo told a crowd in Pontotoc, Mississippi that "if something isn't done to solve the race question in America the proper way...the white race and our civilization are headed for bankruptcy." Bilbo played upon the fears of his white audience members when he stated that "there are 18 out of 48 states where intermarriage of blacks and whites is permitted."⁸ While Bilbo preached on the horrors of racial equality to his crowd in Pontotoc, Alonzo Rush of Indianola was lynched at the hands of whites in that city using what newspapers described as a "home-made electric chair." Rush's murder was not covered in the press until months later, but his death exemplified the heightened level of racial from Bilbo's campaign.⁹

⁵ "Negroes Ask Vote Guard," *New York Times*, May 19, 1946.

⁶ Letter from T.B. Wilson to Walter White, May 27, 1946, NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950, part 4, reel 9.

⁷ "State-Wide Mass Meeting On Negro Voting May 16-17 Here," *Jackson Advocate*, May 4, 1946.

⁸ "Bilbo Launches Third Term Try," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, May 5, 1946.

⁹ "Lynchings Reported Earlier This Year," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, August 2, 1946.

In early June, T.B. Wilson sent an editorial to the *Jackson Advocate* with the hope of fostering increased national attention before next month's election and appealed to white senses of patriotism in the burgeoning Cold War, warning whites that "The eyes of the world are on America."¹⁰ However, the appeal went unnoticed by a wide-majority of the white population. Apprehension amongst Mississippi's black community abated somewhat on June 8 after New Orleans, Louisiana and Pass Christian, Mississippi held their Democratic Primary elections without incident. Newspapers covering the elections boasted that eighty African Americans voted in Pass Christian- a regional record- and that no voters reported any instances of assault or abuse.¹¹ The northern press immediately seized on the elections as a means of predicting Bilbo's defeat and stated that "The Man's" loss would be "the best news from Dixie since Lee's surrender."¹²

Instead of seeing the peaceful elections as a defeat for his white supremacy-based campaign, Bilbo used the elections to further stir-up racial animosity in the state. Throughout the rest of June, Bilbo made a point of commenting on the elections and what they portended for the future of Mississippi if whites did not oppose black voter registration more fervently. In a June 5 speech, Bilbo harped on a "wedge of a CIO-PAC carpet-bagger invasion from the North" that appeared to be opening in central Mississippi, which, he believed made many Mississippi whites "go soft."¹³

Bilbo's speeches appeared to be hitting a sour note with many whites in the magnolia state, however, and even prompted a group of white women from Greenville to

¹⁰ "As is Mississippi So Will the Rest of the World Judge the Entire Nation," *Jackson Advocate*, June 1, 1946.

¹¹ "The Deep South," *New York Times*, June 9, 1946; "Negroes Vote in Election at Pass Christian," *Jackson Advocate*, June 8, 1946.

¹² "Bilbo Faces Primary Defeat," *Jackson Advocate*, June 8, 1946.

¹³ "'The Man' from Mississippi - Bilbo," *New York Times*, June 30, 1946; "Bilbo Says Coast Vote Opening Wedge," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 6, 1946.

organize themselves into a committee that signed a resolution condemning “profanity, obscene humor, and appeals to religious and racial prejudices” used by candidates during their campaigns. Other, more liberally-leaning whites in the state including the editor of the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, also encouraged white voters to consider how their choice on July 2 might set a “low standard in the type of officials elected,” and therefore would set a bad precedent for their offspring who would not “have a high standard about other matters.”¹⁴

To the astonishment of many, Bilbo took a brief break from campaigning in mid-June, returning to Washington to “weigh-in on legislative issues.” Bilbo returned after several days with a renewed vigor for strengthening the racial dichotomy and animosity already festering in his state.¹⁵ Upon his return Bilbo found, much to his dismay, that African Americans were reported to be registering by the hundreds. The *Clarion-Ledger* stated that in Prentiss, Mississippi alone over 200 African Americans had registered since January 1.¹⁶ Other reports indicated that African Americans seemed to be turning out “daily” to register. The perceived rapidity with which African American political power seemed to be increasing, heightened the already existent racial animosity in the state, and undoubtedly grabbed the attention of Bilbo who used the reports to further his own political aspirations.

Perhaps due to the salient threat of black voter turn-out, Bilbo carried out an aggressive speaking campaign through the rest of June, in which he spoke at no less than sixteen venues in fourteen days; each speech given topping the last in racial rhetoric and appeals to violence. On June 16 Bilbo delivered a speech in Brandon, Mississippi—a site

¹⁴ “Greenville Women’s Clubs Ask Decency in Senatorial Race,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 11, 1946.

¹⁵ “Hammond Taking Over for Bilbo,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 11, 1946.

¹⁶ “Over 200 Negroes Register at Prentiss,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 15, 1946.

that would become synonymous with brutality after the election- and told his crowd that civil rights organizations were liars and that “these groups will learn that the cause for which we are fighting cannot be dimmed by malicious, limicolous, and vicious lies.” Bilbo reassured his crowd that he would oppose such organizations and “all measures which would force on the people of our state certain un-southern policies that would take away constitutional rights and privileges.”¹⁷

Bilbo’s speeches such as that given on May 5 and others that attacked white southern manhood in the month leading up to the election sought to inspire whites to defend their homes and families from the black horde that sat poised to attack their loved ones. Whites responded to these chastisements on June 16 when police in Clarksdale searched for an African American man who allegedly raped a white woman. Details of the case revealed that the evidence against the suspect was highly circumstantial, but in Mississippi even circumstantial evidence against a black man in a crime such as rape against a white woman could, and often did garner a death sentence.¹⁸ The day after news of the alleged rape reached the press Bilbo wrote letters to the other candidates and asked them to “join me and other white people of the state in every effort to prevent this first step- to destroy white control and white supremacy in the state of Mississippi.”¹⁹

Blacks remained unfettered by Bilbo’s statements, and fought back against the demagogue. Under the direction of the NNC, a group of black veterans told newspapers that they would send petitions to the Senate calling for Bilbo’s impeachment when the

¹⁷ “Senatorial Itineraries,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 16, 1946; “Bilbo Predicts Own Victory,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 16, 1946.

¹⁸ For more on black on white rape in the South see McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*; and Alex Heard, *The Eyes of Willie McGee: A Tragedy of Race, Sex and Secrets in the Jim Crow South* (NY: Harper Perennial, 2010). “Search for Negro Rapist Continues,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 16, 1946.

¹⁹ “Bilbo asks Opponents to Join in asking Negroes not to Vote,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 17, 1946.

legislative body reconvened in January. In the interim, the group sent a petition to President Truman asking him to send troops to Mississippi to insure the protection of black suffrage rights.²⁰ The amount of media coverage black pleas for protection received angered many whites in Mississippi who blamed Bilbo's racially-charged campaign for the increased national attention and possibility of federal involvement (a prospect that white southerners abhorred above all-else). Opposing candidates in the senatorial election capitalized on the anti-Bilbo sentiment brewing in pockets throughout the state and printed broadsides alleging that "the question of negro voting in the Democratic primary was a minor matter until Senator Bilbo started airing it all over the state."²¹

National attention and violence in Mississippi reached new heights a week before the election when reports on the beating of Etoy Fletcher, an African American Army veteran reached the press. Fletcher told the NAACP in a sworn affidavit, later printed in every major newspaper in the country, that when he arrived to register for the July primary at the Rankin County courthouse, the registrar instantly told him that "Niggers are not allowed to vote in Rankin County, and if you don't want to get into serious trouble, get out of this building and don't mention voting anymore."²² Fletcher left the courthouse, but as he walked down the steps, a group of whites grabbed him and carried him to a wooded area nearby. The men asked him to strip and while in the woods, the men took turns whipping Fletcher with a metal cable. When they had finished what they

²⁰ "Million Veterans Plan for Sen. Bilbo's Impeachment," *Jackson Advocate*, June 22, 1946.

²¹ "Report Bilbo is Harming Himself," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 23, 1946.

²² Affidavit of Etoy Fletcher, NAACP Files, Voting Rights Campaign 1916-1950, part 4 reel 8 pg. 1

deemed a sufficient beating, the men told Fletcher that if he ever came back to Brandon, they would kill him.²³

It quickly became evident that Bilbo's race-centered campaign had directly fueled the attack on Fletcher and many blacks feared what the last of week of Bilbo's campaign and election-day held in store for them. Bilbo brushed aside reports of Fletcher's beating, and took the defensive when questioned on the incident telling reporters,

For four years, slick, long-range social equality advocates have combed the state in an effort to stir up trouble...I have exposed them in the closing days of this campaign. As a result they are crying out that Bilbo started it all...I have led the fight against their nefarious schemes...the people and Bilbo will put a stop to the efforts of people from outside Mississippi to change our whole social system.²⁴

Articles and editorials began to appear in newspapers that discouraged blacks from voting. One such statement declared "our best piece of advice to Negroes...is this: Don't attempt to participate in the Democratic primaries anywhere in Mississippi on July 2nd. Staying away from the polls...will be the best way to prevent unhealthy and unhappy results."²⁵

Despite the harshness of Fletcher's beating and warnings from whites that participation on July 2 would only end in violence, blacks continued to register for the election. Percy Greene, editor of the *Jackson Advocate*, encouraged blacks to register and educated them on the best way to handle election day obstructions. Greene told his readers that "in such an atmosphere that has been created by the appeals to bigotry and prejudice...Negroes... must avoid every indication of resentment...and with pockets empty...with clean hands, but without fear go to the polls and make whatever sacrifice

²³ "Bilbo Urges Mississippi Men to Employ 'Any Means' to Bar Negroes From Voting," *New York Times*, June 23, 1946.

²⁴ "Bilbo Hits Back at Foe's Charges," *New Orleans Times Picayune*, June 30, 1946.

²⁵ "Don't Try it," *Unknown Origin*, June 1946, NAACP Files Voting Rights Campaign 1916-1950, part 4 reel 8.

that may be demanded...that democracy might live in Mississippi.”²⁶ Others pushed blacks in the state to vote for the national and international implications if “The Man” were defeated. Editors believed that Bilbo’s defeat would serve not only as a triumph for Mississippi, but for the entire nation against hatred and “fascism.”²⁷

Acts of violence in Mississippi continued to fan the flames of racial hatred as Bilbo’s campaign entered its final leg. On June 24, Matilda Pickney walked home from her evening church service in Brandon, Mississippi. As Pickney walked down the dark stretch of Mississippi asphalt, she was approached by a group of white men who told her that “niggers in Rankin County weren’t allowed on the street after dark.” Before Pickney could respond, the men knocked her to the ground and mercilessly beat her causing permanent damage to her eyes, one of which had to be removed. It was posited by African American news organizations that Pickney had been beaten in connection with voter registration since her mother worked at the Rankin County courthouse.²⁸

On the same day of Pickney’s beating, six year old Betty-Jo Johnson sat on the front porch of her parent’s house in Jackson idly passing away the hot Mississippi afternoon when Curtis Williams, the owner of a grocery store adjacent to the Johnson’s house arrived home. Williams, enraged by an argument he had earlier in the day with his wife, “fired his pistol at random” which coincidentally went through the side of Betty Jo Johnson. Williams fled the scene, an interesting thing to do in an accidental shooting, and Johnson’s family rushed her to the hospital in time to save the little girl’s life. Police

²⁶ “Go to the Polls on July 2 in the Name of Democracy,” *Jackson Advocate*, June 22, 1946.

²⁷ “Defeat of Bilbo Declared Nation’s Victory,” *Jackson Advocate*, June 29, 1946.

²⁸ “Rankin County Woman Severely Beaten By Group of White Men,” *Jackson Advocate*, June 29, 1946.

arrested Williams, but the judge swept the attempted murder sentence under the table after Williams agreed to pay Johnson's medical bills.²⁹

Following these acts of violence and others that went unreported out of fear, CIO president Sidney Hillman sent a telegram to President Truman imploring him to take quick action in order to "halt the violation of the Constitutional rights of American citizens" and also asked the Federal Communications Commission to stop broadcasting speeches over the radio made by Bilbo that encouraged whites to use violence against blacks.³⁰

In a last-ditch effort to discourage blacks from voting, Bilbo hurled his most egregious racial epithets during the last week of his campaign and made it painfully clear that he wanted whites to use violence to keep blacks from the polls. In his most notorious speech given in Jackson on June 23, the same day of Etoy Fletcher's beating, Bilbo told whites that they sat on the edge of apocalyptic ruin. Bilbo shouted that "white Mississippians...are sleeping on a volcano and it is up to red-blooded men to do something about it...resort to any means at their command to stop it."³¹ In Tishomingo City the following day, Bilbo challenged United States Attorney General Tom Clark and the FBI to "try to keep the white people of the state from running the white Democratic primaries as we think they should be run." Bilbo insinuated to his crowd that he would help them if they were charged with violence on election day. Bilbo told his audience he

²⁹ "Six Year Old Girl Shot by Neighborhood 'Grocer'," *Jackson Advocate*, June 29, 1946.

³⁰ Press Release from C.I.O.Political Action Committee, June 24, 1946 in NAACP Files Voting Rights Campaign 1916-1950, part 4, reel 8; "Pres. Truman U.S. Atty. Gen'l Tom Clark Urged to Take Action in Miss Following Etoy Fletcher Case Here," *Jackson Advocate*, June 29, 1946.

³¹ "Bilbo Urges Mississippi Men to Employ 'Any Means' to Bar Negroes from Voting," *New York Times*, June 23, 1946.

was a “damn good lawyer” who had successfully defended eleven white Mississippians in murder cases without a conviction.³²

In his final speech before the election on June 30, Bilbo explicitly told his audience to go to any extreme on July 2. Bilbo declared:

Nevertheless, the Negro is likely to try to register...There are remedies for that. They say that they can bring court action against any registrar of voters...How many registrars do you think can get convicted here in the state of Mississippi for refusing to register a nigger? But you know and I know what’s the best way to keep the nigger from voting. You do it the night before the election. I don’t have to tell you any more than that. Red-blooded men know what I mean.³³

Despite earlier predictions from media outlets in the North and South that Bilbo might lose his seat, racially moderate Democrat, author and liberal newspaper contributor Hodding Carter predicted that Bilbo’s position as a “symbol of opposition” to northern interference would easily secure him the Senate seat. Carter posited that many Mississippi whites opposed civil rights and northern efforts at labor organization “as strongly as their fathers feared and hated the occupying Federal bayonets of Reconstruction.”³⁴

Black and white civic leaders made a flurry of attempts in the last days before the election to stem the rising tide of racial violence. Percy Greene tried to assuage growing racial animosity through a series of editorials in the *Jackson Advocate*, asking whites to behave appropriately on election day. Greene hoped to appeal to white sensibilities and patriotism, telling his readers that “those who would bring up their children...need look closely at what we have developed in our state lest our future generation become as the generation of young Germans under the spell of the Nazi ideology and...become the

³² “Bilbo Optimistic of Landslide,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 25, 1946.

³³ “‘The Man’ from Mississippi - Bilbo,” *New York Times*, June 30, 1946.

³⁴ Ibid.

victims of disease of the mind,” who Greene believed were “minions of hate, terror and violence.”³⁵ The white editor of the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* published an editorial the same week that denounced Bilbo’s speeches as stirring up racial hatred which he claimed had fostered “more racial friction than Mississippi has known in half a century.” The editor further attempted mollify the fears of white readers by assuring them that not many African Americans had in fact registered for the election, and charged that Bilbo’s statements on a supposed “Negro revolution” were baseless since “only about 800 negroes in all Mississippi” would vote on July 2.³⁶

T.B. Wilson’s assessment that “the eyes of the world would be on Mississippi” rang true on the day before the election as reporters from across the country flooded into Mississippi to capture what promised to be an explosive day. The *Clarion-Ledger* declared that “out-of-state newspaper men, magazine writers, and photographers” had “poured” into Mississippi and set up “special telephoto apparatus” to cover the day’s events. The palpable anticipation of what would happen on election day permeated newspaper accounts of the pre-election atmosphere as one reporter ominously declared, “the nation waits.”³⁷

Understanding the gravity of the situation and that the eyes of the nation sat fixed on Mississippi’s election, Bilbo back-pedaled from previous statements in which he encouraged whites to use of violence to keep blacks away from the polls. In a private interview the night before the election, he told a reporter for the *Gulfport Herald* that he only meant to advocate “taking any steps *within the law* to prevent their [negro] voting,”

³⁵ “Violence, Terrorism and Hate,” *Jackson Advocate*, June 29, 1946.

³⁶ “Mississippi Has Always Run Her Primaries Without Interference,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 30, 1946.

³⁷ “200,000 Voters Ready Tuesday as Runoff Now Certain,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 30, 1946.

and claimed that he had always been “the best friend the negroes had.”³⁸ White Mississippians, however, understood Bilbo’s message loud and clear, and believed, as Bilbo had told them, that they sat on a volcano of apocalyptic ruin. As election day approached whites sought to defend their way of life by whatever means necessary.

As newspapermen filed into Mississippi to cover the election, Senator Glen Taylor (D-Idaho) and Emmanuel Bloch of the Civil Rights Congress (CRC) sent telegrams to Truman and Attorney General Tom Clark asking them to send troops to protect black voters in Mississippi. The government refused to take military action, and Attorney General Tom Clark assured blacks through a syndicated press release that he would use “every force” at his command to “see to it that...no American citizen will be deprived of his vote because of his race or color.” Clark told blacks in Mississippi that all “necessary steps” (short of sending troops) were being taken to ensure a safe election in the state.³⁹

Taylor did not give up his battle against Bilbo, and on the day of the election, sent a resolution to the Senate asking that a special investigative committee be formed to examine Bilbo’s campaign. The Senate refused Taylor’s request stating that “no complaint against Mr. Bilbo had been received from any Mississippi candidate or voter...and the committee would not consider action in the future unless and until there are complaints from Mississippi sources.”⁴⁰ More than likely, the legislative body hoped that Bilbo’s campaign and election would hurry onward without violence or further

³⁸ “Bilbo Promises Aid to State Oyster Industry,” *Gulfport Herald*, July 1, 1946.

³⁹ Telegram from NAACP to Tom Clark, July 1, 1946 in NAACP Files part 4, reel 9; “Even Chance is Conceded to Bilbo in Mississippi Contest for Senate,” *New York Times*, July 2, 1946.

⁴⁰ “Senators Refuse Inquiry On Bilbo,” *New York Times*, July 2, 1946.

mention since they realized that a violent election for Bilbo would require federal action that could pose serious problems when the Senate reconvened in January.

The morning of July 2 lurked like a storm cloud over the heads of African Americans as they readied themselves for their first opportunity to vote in Mississippi's primary in over fifty years. Given the centrality of race to the campaign and the many instances of violence in the preceding weeks, blacks expected to be greeted by mobs when they went to vote. To the astonishment of many, no reports of violence surfaced on election day. Periodicals throughout the country optimistically hailed the election as one of the most peaceful in the state's history. The *Jackson Advocate* described the day as a success in which "between 300 and 500 Negroes had voted in the before-noon hours of the balloting...and there was not a single reported incident of violence." The paper also stated that "reports from all sections of the state at a late hour Tuesday indicated that there had been no incidents involving Negroes, either on the 'night before the election' or on...election day."⁴¹ The *Clarion-Ledger* also pointed out that "any instances of intimidation or violence...were quickly overturned by city officials."⁴²

Mississippians, however, did not fail to notice that their predictions of an election day turnout of nearly 10,000 black balloters had been substantially off the mark. It appeared evident that Bilbo's campaign of terror had definitely kept scores of blacks away from the polls, and as vote tallies arrived at the capitol, it became clear that Bilbo would hold onto his seat with a 4,000 vote victory over his closest opponent.⁴³

⁴¹ "No Incidents of Violence Reported," *Jackson Advocate*, July 2, 1946; "Negroes In All Sections of State Vote For First Time in Democratic Primary," *Jackson Advocate*, July 6, 1946.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ For voting registration numbers see Memorandum from Palmer Weber to Walter White, Roy Wilkins, Willie Moon, and Thurgood Marshall, "Citizenship in the South," November 8, 1948, NAACP Files part 18, series c, reel 18; "Bilbo Vote Tops Opponents By 4,102," *New York Times*, July 4, 1946.

Across the nation, the election took center stage as Bilbo's campaign rhetoric had earned him the ire of many on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line. While many news outlets chose to focus on the bravery of veterans on election day such as those who cast their votes on Bilbo's front porch, the *Philadelphia Afro-American* also reported on non-veterans who turned out to the polls right alongside veterans and encouraged them to vote.⁴⁴ The Southern Negro Youth Conference along with Mississippi's clerical leaders helped galvanize veterans by passing out pamphlets that catered to veterans which read,

You who laid Hitler low,
Don't be scared of Old Bilbo;
Just like Hitler's friend Tojo,
Bilbo, too, has got to Go.⁴⁵

For Bilbo, the handful of blacks who voted on July 2 foreshadowed a frightening new era for Mississippi whites. Only days after the election, Bilbo moved to implement tighter voting restrictions and called on the state legislature to convene a special session in order to change the state's election laws in regard to the "amount of Negro voting in the primary." Bilbo hoped that he could ratify some manner of restrictive legislation against black voters that would take effect before Mississippi's local elections the following summer.⁴⁶

For those who believed that the violence Mississippi blacks experienced during Bilbo's campaign would end with Bilbo's election or remained optimistic that reports of peace on election day evidenced a bright progressive future for Mississippi, they would be sorely mistaken in weeks after the election. Only a week after the election, reports began to flood into newspapers about beatings, intimidation, fraud and even murder that

⁴⁴ "Vets Cast Vote on Bilbo's Front Porch," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, July 6, 1946.

⁴⁵ "Group Takes Fight to Bigot," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, July 6, 1946.

⁴⁶ "Bilbo Pushes Vote Curb," *New York Times*, July 6, 1946.

blacks experienced at the hands of whites on July 2. Newspapers ran stories of election day atrocities including the murder of Choctaw county resident F.A. Fowler by county sheriff F.W. Barfield, which earned a front page spot on many nationally syndicated newspapers. Reports of a widely published, but unconfirmed murder in Gulfport aroused further ire and suspicion from others who became enraged that the federal government refused to do more to help black voters in the weeks leading up to the election.⁴⁷

Other abuses found their way onto the pages of newspapers in both the North and the South such as the actions of Canton officials who deputized a local farmer who apparently had often been “deputized for law enforcement duties when anything happens involving Negroes.” Canton officials stationed the man at a polling station “armed with a heavy club and when the first Negro appeared to vote...he began beating him with the heavy club.”⁴⁸ One report listed the tactics used to prevent blacks from voting and cited such acts as moving polling booths, segregating black votes, and arresting blacks who showed up at the polls as the primary means of suffrage restriction.⁴⁹ The atmosphere in Mississippi continued to remain tense weeks after the last ballots had been tallied and the first reports of violence leaked out. One reporter observed that “negro citizens still live under a deep cloud of fear and apprehension in many sections of the state.”⁵⁰

Even though election day violence stunned the nation, the *Afro-American* reported that what seemed more striking were the lingering effects of Bilbo’s racially-charged campaign. The *Afro-American* pointed to Bilbo’s campaign as the source of violent acts

⁴⁷ “Violence Marks Election in Miss,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, July 12, 1946.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ “Wide-Spread, Apprehension Among Negro Citizens as Reports of Election Incidents Grow,” *Jackson Advocate*, July 13, 1946.

committed against blacks “the day following election day and almost daily since.”⁵¹ The extensive coverage of tactics used by Mississippi whites on election day and the residual hangover of racial violence spawned by the demagogue’s campaign continued to receive national recognition in the media for months.

African Americans did not take these obstructions of justice lying down. Immediately following the election, civil rights organizations including the CRC and NAACP implemented plans to bar Bilbo from taking his Senate seat. The combined effect of Bilbo’s campaign coverage; the violence that followed; and the campaign to unseat him would make national headlines in the months to come, and would add fuel to the growing nation-wide movement for civil rights that forced the federal government to directly address the issue of black equality before the year ended.

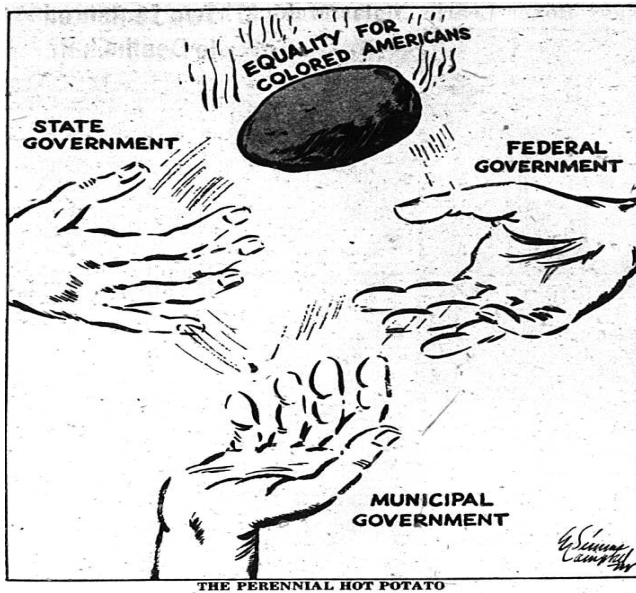


Illustration 2. “The Political Hot-Potato”
The post-war predicament Bilbo’s election forced on the government. (*Philadelphia Afro-American* July 20, 1946)

⁵¹ “Violence Marks Election in Miss.,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, July 12, 1946.

Chapter 3:
Unseating “The Man”

Even though Mississippi’s primary had ended, its effects on race-relations in the state could still be seen throughout the rest of the summer as acts of violence intensified to frighteningly high levels. The intensified racial tension brought on by Bilbo’s campaign incited Mississippi’s white community to commit such acts of violence that northern civil rights organizations began to throw their full support behind efforts to unseat Bilbo. The support from such heavily black cities such as New York and Philadelphia forced the President to become directly involved in southern civil rights issues in a manner different from previous office holders. Garth Pauley points out that the political demands of the period dictated that Truman could not side-step the issue of civil rights as other Presidents had done before him.¹

Civil rights groups hoped that the federal government’s increasingly liberal stance toward civil rights, aided in no small part by the President’s desire to maintain the appearance of a free society in the midst of the burgeoning Cold War with the Soviet Union, provided a possibility for unseating Bilbo if the Senate could be forced to investigate him. Getting the Senate to agree to investigate “The Man” would prove more difficult than either the NAACP or the CRC anticipated.

Even though the Justice Department promised the NAACP to “thoroughly prosecute any attempts to prevent Negroes from voting,” the agency refused to investigate Bilbo’s election stating that affidavits sent to them “disclosed insufficient

¹ Pauley, 32-41.

evidence to warrant prosecution under the Civil Rights Statutes.”² The Justice Department had no qualms telling blacks who sent them complaints that their affidavits did not contain sufficient evidence, while simultaneously telling NAACP leaders that “this Department will give careful attention to all complaints that qualified Negroes were discriminated against.”³ Letters from Mississippians continued to pour into the NAACP and the Justice Department weeks after Bilbo’s election, pleading with the government to get involved, but the Department simply suggested that the complainants address their grievances “to the authorities of that state.”⁴

Days passed without any action, and the NAACP’s letters to the Justice Department became aggressive. Legal secretary Robert Carter wrote the Department in mid-July chastising the Department’s inaction, stating that “the Justice Department has been given sufficient basis to warrant a thorough investigation of this reported situation...the Department of Justice can hardly dismiss the affidavits in the manner in which your letter has indicated.” Affidavits from African American would-be voters, Carter argued, “certainly allege a prima facia[sic] showing of a violation of the civil rights statute which the Justice Department is supposed to enforce....Your office was certainly under a duty to follow up this situation.” He closed his letter with a statement of revulsion at the Department’s lack of concern with Bilbo’s election stating that the

² Letter from Robert Carter to Walter White, June 18, 1946, NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950, part 4, reel 9; Letter from Theron Caudle to Robert Carter, July 17, 1946, NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950, part 4, reel 9.

³ Letter from Theron Caudle to Walter White, July 9, 1946, NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950, part 4, reel 9.

⁴ Letter from Theron Caudle to Reverend George Strype, July 17, 1946; NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950; part 4, reel 9.

NAACP “strongly protests and deplors the action of the Department of Justice in this case and urges that the Department thoroughly investigate this matter.”⁵

Other civil rights organizations did not waste time waiting for the government’s involvement. After receiving numerous reports from African Americans on election day violence, CRC director Emmanuel Bloch immediately flew to the state to collect testimony in hopes of building a case to bar Bilbo from the Senate. Bloch returned to New York a week later and sent letters to Attorney General Tom Clark, the Department of Justice, and the Senate Committee on Campaign Expenditures asking them all to conduct investigations of Bilbo’s election which Bloch described as “permeated by fraud.” Bloch further declared that “the techniques used to intimidate Negro voters...consisted of actual assaults on Negro Veterans, admonition to leading Negro citizens... and continuous threats by public officials and private citizens...Investigation will confirm...that state and federal laws were willfully violated.”⁶

Anger in the black community continued to build at federal inaction. In one letter to the NAACP, one citizen observed, “It appears to me that the Department of Justice is double dealing...it seems that the Department is not willing...to accept [sic] the obligation of enforcing the Constitution, but instead suggests that the matter be referred to the courts of Mississippi, where...it is impossible to get any action.”⁷ Even though the federal government dragged its feet on investigating Bilbo, the Senator’s campaign had thrown the state into such a racially-charged frenzy in which violence reigned supreme

⁵ Letter from Robert Carter to Theron Caudle, August 6, 1946, NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950, part 4, reel 9.

⁶ “Calls Bilbo Election A Fraud,” *Jackson Advocate*, July 13, 1946.

⁷ Letter from Ellis to Robert Carter, July 30, 1946, NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950, part 4, reel 9.

and drew the eye of the federal government; forcing them to act on behalf of blacks in the state.

Bilbo whipped up fears of racial mixing as a consequence of black suffrage. His statements had a profound effect on post-election violence against blacks even suspected of having relations with white women. On July 21, authorities in Charleston, South Carolina announced the electrocution of a black from Biloxi for allegedly raping a white woman, and on the same day in Mississippi authorities arrested Jack McGowan, an African American farmer, for the alleged rape and murder of a young white woman in Hinds County. Even though McGowan found the girl's body and reported her murder to police, authorities arrested McGowan as the most likely suspect since police claimed that McGowan changed his story when questioned by authorities. Police failed to charge the girl's two white companions who had been seen accompanying her earlier in the day with any crime.⁸ Even though evidence for her murder pointed away from McGowan, white desires to reinforce their tenuous hold on political and social power made the arrest of McGowan a necessity in Mississippi's post-election atmosphere.

Blacks fought back against the suspicion and violence perpetrated against them. Many voiced their complaints to the NAACP and local news affiliates in hopes of reaching the federal government, and those who read the accounts could not ignore the government's weak position on the growing violence in the region. One man told the editor of the *Advocate* that he had read Tom Clark's letter before Bilbo's election "[concerning] the result [if] a voter was intimidated or barred from voting" and believed that part of Clark's statements "met the challenge" but also pointed out that since then,

⁸ "Biloxi Negro Dies in S.C. Electric Char," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 21, 1946; "Suspect in Rossie Murder Contradicts Early Statement," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 21, 1946.

“it seems like the government have backed down. What is wrong wit [sic] the Government?”⁹

In late July, one of the most notorious lynchings in southern history occurred in Monroe, Georgia, which helped push the President to recognize civil rights issues in the South. Four African Americans, two male and two female, traveled home on a backwoods Georgia road after bailing one of the males out of jail for stabbing a white man. A posse of whites led by what the *New York Times* described as a “tall, dignified looking white man” intercepted the African Americans’ vehicle, and ordered all of the passengers out of the car. The mob “lined up both couples . . . and summarily executed them.” Police reports indicated that “All four bodies were riddled with bullets and maimed beyond recognition.”¹⁰ The grisly execution-style murders sparked outrage and protest from blacks and whites throughout the country. When coupled with the election-day atrocities in Mississippi, the government had little option but to respond directly to acts of terrorism in the South, or risk losing the already discontented black electorate in the North.

Reporters who covered the murder indicated that when the President got word of the killings, he expressed “horror at the crime,” and immediately sent the FBI to investigate.¹¹ Even with his proclamation of horror and his commitment of the FBI, it still appeared that Truman did not wish to take substantive steps in the realm of civil rights.

William Berman notes a similar pattern of behavior exhibited by FDR in regards to civil

⁹ “Letter to the Editor,” *Jackson Advocate*, July 27, 1946.

¹⁰ Brooks, 22-23; “Truman Orders Lynchers Found; Voices Horror at Georgia Crime,” *New York Times*, July 31, 1946.

¹¹ “Truman Orders Lynchers Found; Voices Horror at Georgia Crime,” *New York Times*, July 31, 1946.

rights throughout the majority of his term in office.¹² Even though Truman and the federal government appeared to be taking the first steps into African American civil rights, the President still exhibited fear at the prospect of losing his southern constituency. In attempt to placate the discontent from southern politicians over federal involvement, Truman ordered all evidence obtained during the investigation to be turned over to Georgia investigators to prosecute suspected offenders.¹³

In the midst of all the violence, the NAACP and the CRC set about their plans to unseat Bilbo. By mid-July the NAACP began to compile testimonies from people “who heard Bilbo issue these threats over the radio or in any public meetings,” and collected newspaper clippings of Bilbo’s speeches that they believed would help them “present a strong petition” to the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections. The NAACP also began to gather financial and moral support from other organizations such as the National Negro Publisher’s Association (NNPA).¹⁴

When the two organizations convened in Chicago at the end of the month, problems immediately arose over how to fund the investigation and exactly what avenue the groups would pursue to unseat Bilbo. Possibilities suggested by attendees ranged from filing a civil suit on behalf of the disfranchised voters and “joining the unsuccessful candidates” in a protest of the election to directly lobbying the Department of Justice for an indictment of Bilbo. Some wanted to avoid federal involvement at all costs and though that bringing suits against the registrars who obstructed black voters would be a suitable

¹² William Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1970), x; see also Michael Garnder, *Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risks* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002).

¹³ “Massacre of 4 Georgia Negroes,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 27, 1946.

¹⁴ Letter from Daniel Byrd to Father George T.J. Strype, July 15, 1946, NAACP Files Unseating Bilbo, part 18, series b, reel 4.

course of action. In the end, the groups determined that they would directly petition the Senate Committee on Elections. Once again, however, the groups reached an impasse on funding. The NAACP wanted the two organizations to join resources while the NNPA maintained that “the financing of such matters were particularly and peculiarly the sole responsibility of the Association [the NAACP].”¹⁵ The split on funding did not alienate the two organizations as they became close allies in the fight against, Bilbo, but in late July their disagreement slowed down the progress of investigations.

National attention had become so transfixed on Mississippi, Bilbo and the South by the end of July that Bilbo received a phone call from prominent Hollywood producer Bryan Foy who asked Bilbo if he would be willing to act in a movie that paralleled the Senator’s life. Foy told Bilbo that he wanted him to play a character titled Senator “The Man” Leeds, a southern, race-baiting politician who “perpetuated himself in office,” but was defeated by a young upstart named “Claghorn.” Bilbo declined the offer, but the film went on with production and finally came out in 1947 under the title *It’s a Joke Son!* with Jimmy Conlin starring as Leeds. Even though Bilbo did not star in the Hollywood picture audiences across the country could not help make the connection between Leeds and Bilbo. Bilbo’s name reached an even wider audience with the production of another 1947 film that became the highest grossing film of the decade and tackled racism head-on: *A Gentleman’s Agreement*.¹⁶

¹⁵ Letter from Walter White to Frank Stanley, July 22, 1946, NAACP Files Unseating Bilbo, part 18, series b, reel 4; Memorandum from Robert Carter to Walter White, July 29, 1946, NAACP Files Unseating Bilbo, part 18, reel 4.

¹⁶ “Bilbo Gets Offer to Suffer Defeat At \$500 a Week,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 29, 1946; Interestingly enough the Warner Brothers cartoon character of Foghorn Leghorn is supposedly taken from the character of Claghorn who was based on Bilbo and regularly featured on the “Allen’s Alley” radio show before *It’s a Joke Son!*; see imdb, “*It’s a Joke Son!*” By Les Adams, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0039503/>; “A Study of Anti-Semitism,” *New York Times*, November 12, 1947.

Violence continued in rural Mississippi throughout the rest of the month. On July 30, police arrested six white men in connection with the brutal lynching of Leon Mcatie, a black sharecropper from Lexington, Mississippi. Reports stated that the men whipped Mcatie to death with “a buggy whip and leather strap” and then threw his body into a bayou in neighboring Sunflower County where it was later discovered by police. Police could not determine, however, whether the men threw Mcatie’s body into the swamp after the beating or they had killed Mcatie before they threw him in.¹⁷ The men maintained that they merely beat Mcatie for stealing a saddle, and after Mcatie agreed never to steal again, they allowed him to walk home. As if the prosecution would not already be an open and shut case, the uncertain nature of the crime made it even easier for the men to escape conviction. Racial hatred also claimed the life of Buddy Wolf, a local African American general store owner in Hattiesburg. John Lewis, the town’s sheriff, told reporters that he shot Wolf in self-defense after Wolf tried to attack him. Needless to say, the sheriff escaped conviction for Wolf’s murder.¹⁸

Even in the face of such random and terrifying violence, African Americans in Mississippi continued to celebrate racial pride just as they had done for centuries under slavery. Residents of the all-black community of Mound Bayou celebrated the town’s 59th Founder’s Day, which commemorated the founding of the community shortly following Reconstruction. When questioned why they still held this celebration while blacks were being lynched on an almost daily basis in their state, Mound Bayou residents triumphantly told reporters that they were determined to maintain the gains in civil rights they had obtained over the past half-century. One observer remarked that even if blacks

¹⁷ “6 White Planters Held for Murder in Holmes County,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 31, 1946.

¹⁸ “Negro Death Laid to Mississippians,” *New York Times*, July 31, 1946.

had to “raise themselves by their bootstraps, they will do it...no amount of outside opposition will ever be able to hold them down.”¹⁹

August ushered in further national attention on Mississippi as the nation’s most anti-black state. On August 3, a mob of whites attacked policemen at a jail in Meridian, Mississippi and attempted to kidnap R.C. Barlow, a black man, who had been arrested for allegedly striking a white woman. Despite the woman’s positive identification of the black man as her assailant, reporters indicated that “no motive for the attack has been indicated.”²⁰ Similar to previous accusations against other black men in preceding weeks, the white woman’s accusation against Barlow demonstrated the increased anger of whites who sought an outlet for their anger in the Bilbo-created atmosphere of post-election Mississippi.

Blacks did not take the violence lying down, and used acts of violence in Mississippi to renew the fight for a federal anti-lynching law. In early August, the National Association of Colored Women marched on the nation’s capitol protesting the rising tide of racial violence in the South. The women confronted members of congress about passing anti-poll tax and anti-lynching bills, but met staunch opposition from southern congressmen who refused to meet with the women claiming that they were “busy.”²¹ The campaign to oust Bilbo built on the momentum and attention received by protests and editorials such as these, which exhibited a national support for black civil rights. After the NACW march on Washington one reporter declared that the impetus behind unseating Bilbo had strong roots in the North, claiming that “Philadelphia and

¹⁹ “Founders Day Celebration,” *Jackson Advocate*, July 27, 1946.

²⁰ “Citizens Attempt to Take Negro Man from Police,” *Jackson Advocate*, August 3, 1946.

²¹ “Women March on Capitol Hill Urge Anti-Poll Tax Bill,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, August 3, 1946.

Baltimore...lead...in the ‘Bilbo Must Go’ nationwide petition campaign for a million signatures.”²²

Bilbo worried about the amount of press his election was receiving in and outside of the South. His insecurity grabbed media headlines in early August when he threatened to pass a Senate bill that would bar publication of the *Miami Herald* if it kept printing “malicious articles” about denying Bilbo his Senate seat.²³ Momentum to oust Bilbo continued to build, and in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania African Americans banded together in mid-August to pay homage to the victims of southern violence and denounce the lack of federal intervention in Mississippi and Georgia. Blacks in the city staged a “Memorial Day” march of nearly 500,000 people through the city’s business district which stressed the reality that even though southern acts of violence against blacks physically took place hundreds of miles away from their homes, African Americans in the North felt a painfully close connection with blacks in the South.²⁴

Violence continued to worsen as the summer wore on, but sometimes the southern justice system could surprise residents and observers alike. On August 15, a policeman in Centreville shot and killed a twenty-four year old white veteran who was part of a gang of youths who had been gang-beating an African-American man in a downtown department store. Witnesses who described the shooting confirmed the sheriff’s report that when the officer attempted to stop the attack, “the three brothers...turned on the policeman who drew his pistol and fired.”²⁵

²² “Baltimore, Philly Lead ‘Bilbo Must Go’ Drive,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, August 3, 1946.

²³ “Bilbo Won’t Try to Suppress Paper,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, August 1, 1946.

²⁴ “500,000 Pay Homage to Ga. Lynching Victims,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, August 10, 1946.

²⁵ “Policeman Kills Vet at Centreville,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, August 15, 1946.

A few days after the Centerville shooting, Bilbo gave a speech on “Meet the Press,” over nationally syndicated radio station WOR out of Washington, D.C., the transcript of which was later published in other periodicals throughout the country. In the interview, Bilbo told interviewers Bert Andrews and Lawrence Spivak that

BILBO: I am a member of the Ku Klux Klan No. 40, called Bilbo Klan No. 40, Poplarville.

ANDREWS: You never left the Klan, in effect?

BILBO: No man can leave the Klan. He takes an oath to do that. He is- once a Ku Klux, always a Ku Klux.

SPIVAK: How can you take an oath to uphold the laws of your state and your country and be a member of an organization that secretly undermines those laws, as the Klan does?

BILBO: I am not informed that the Ku Klux Klan...is seeking to undermine the Government....It is only the Communist Party that is seeking to do that by force.²⁶

Interviewers continued to catch Bilbo in contradiction and asked him how he could be part of an organization that advocated lynch law, tell his constituents that they “should visit niggers the night before an election,” and simultaneously claim to uphold the Constitution of the United States. Bilbo smugly answered that the reports of what he said concerning visiting blacks the night before the election had been taken out of context by the “liberal media” which could not be trusted. Bilbo further clarified for the interviewers that he meant for his listeners to “see [blacks] the night before [the election] and tell [them]that [they] had no right [to vote].”²⁷

Immediately after the interview, civil rights organizations including the NAACP and CRC received numerous letters from other civil rights organizations interested in helping support a nationwide movement to oust Bilbo. The Industrial Union Council,

²⁶ “Senator Bilbo Meets the Press,” reprinted in *The American Mercury*, November 1946, interview by Bert Andrews, Cecil Dickinson, Ernest Lindley, Lawrence Spivak and Jack Page, pg. 528-529; “Klansman Bilbo Scurries Through Cellar to Escape,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, August 17, 1946.

²⁷ “Senator Bilbo Meet the Press,” *The American Mercury*, pg. 530.

Congress of Industrial Organizations-Political Action Committee, the NNC, the Southern Conference on Human Welfare, and the Independent and Benevolent Protective Order of the Elks (which had most of its branches in the North) all agreed to help unseat “The Man.”²⁸



Illustration 3.
“Uncle Samson and Delilah.”
Cartoons such as this permeated the national media after Bilbo’s interview and satirized the federal government’s idyllic state while white supremacy ruled in the South. (*Philadelphia Afro-American* August 17, 1946)

While the NAACP and other Civil Rights groups tried to piece together a plan concerning Bilbo, violence continued to escalate in Mississippi. On August 18, an African American man’s mangled body washed up on the banks of the Pearl River in Crystal Springs. Newspaper reports could not identify the man whose head had been

²⁸ Letter from Charles Lafollette to Charles Houston, September 4, 1946, NAACP Files, Unseating Bilbo, Par18, series b, reel 4.

“crushed by multiple blows.”²⁹ While the report failed to identify the race of the man’s attackers, the mere possibility that his death had been caused by whites, further heightened the fear prevalent in Mississippi’s black community.

Two days later, racial violence in Mississippi once again earned a front page spot on newspapers across the country as a posse of nearly 300 whites searched Smith County for eight black men accused of shooting a white man. African American newspapers contended that a disagreement between one of the black men, Johnny Craft, and a white man earlier in the day ended against the white man’s favor. In retaliation for Craft’s “uppity” nature, the white man rounded up a group of his friends and blocked the highway on which Craft and his family drove from church. Feeling trapped by the roadblock, someone inside Craft’s vehicle fired a gun which caused the white men to flee. Later in the evening the same group of white men arrived at Craft’s house armed but Craft and his friends shot at the attackers; wounding the town marshal and deputy sheriff before fleeing into the woods and surrendering to the search party several days later.³⁰

White newspapers, however, exacerbated racial suspicions and tensions in the state by emphasizing Craft’s dangerous training from the military, which whites viewed as threatening and signaled a propensity for violence. The white press further asserted that Craft, his brothers, and friends were the ones who blocked the road that afternoon, not a group of white men, and a twelve year old boy “shouted something at the Negroes as he went by.” Hearing the insult, Craft fired his gun in the boy’s direction. Whites alleged that after the boy reported the incident to police, officials visited the Craft home

²⁹ “Unidentified Negro Found Dead in River,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, August 18, 1946.

³⁰ “Last of Crafts Gives Up,” *Jackson Advocate*, August 24, 1946; “Mississippi Posse Seizes 8 Negroes,” *New York Times*, August 20, 1946

with the intention of merely talking to him, but were shot as they entered the property.³¹ What Craft's arrest highlights other than the inherent contradiction between the white and black press is that the image of 300 armed white men in search of a black man occupied the front pages of nearly every major news outlet in the country. The startling image of policemen and citizens armed to the teeth pressed the issue of civil rights even further into the national spotlight, making it nearly unavoidable for President Truman. In response to the pictures from Smith County and the unending escalation of violence in Mississippi, Assistant U.S. Attorney General Lamar Caudle ordered that the suspects be given the "utmost protection" while in custody.³²



Illustration 4.
"Smith County
Posse."
The scene in Smith
County as the 300
man posse readies
itself for the hunt
for Johnny Craft.
(*Jackson Clarion-
Ledger* August 20,
1946)

Despite multiple acts of violence in Mississippi after Bilbo's campaign, some early signs of racial progress could be seen. On August 1, leading members of black and white communities in Hazlehurst met "to protest the growing brutality towards Negro

³¹ "Smith County Violence Ends," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, August 18, 1946.

³² *Ibid.*

people.” Blacks at the meeting specifically referenced the recent beating of reverend E.D. Scott by a white police officer as evidence. Reports from Scott and others present during the incident indicated that after attending a concert in Jackson, Scott and a group of friends returned to his car only to find that they had been “wedged in” by an officer’s vehicle. A woman from Scott’s group approached the officer and asked him to move his vehicle, but “after violently talking to the young girl the officer when [sic] to the front of the car where the minister was seated at the wheel and started beating him violently, even after he had informed him that he was a minister.”³³ Blacks and whites at the Hazelhurst meeting agreed on the severity of Scott’s beating and even seemed to reach a tenuous level of racial understanding.³⁴

As August wore on, further acts of violence had many wondering whether Bilbo’s speeches had instigated a resurgence of the Klan. At the end of the month, a cross burned on the campus of historically black Tougaloo College in Meridian and the *Advocate* pointed out that the “spread of the reign of terror...[has] recently become almost a daily occurrence...Negro citizens of all classes are subjected to these acts of terrorism.”³⁵ The increasing level of violence in the state and the government’s refusal to investigate Bilbo’s campaign forced Ohio Senator Edward Johnson of the Senate Privileges and Elections committee to resign “in disgust over the failure of party leadership to carry through a full and impartial investigation of Senator Bilbo’s campaign.”³⁶

Violence seemed to be spiraling out of control in Mississippi, but also appeared to be taking on a particular shape directed at black religious and civic leaders who served as

³³ “Timely Intervention of F.B.I. Stops Mob Action- See Motive in Tougaloo Cross Burning- Officer Kills Man Over Abuse of Negro; AME Minister Beaten,” *Jackson Advocate*, August 24, 1946.

³⁴ “Citizens Protest Brutality at Hazlehurst,” *Jackson Advocate*, August 24, 1946.

³⁵ “Timely Intervention of FBI Stops Mob Action,” *Jackson Advocate*, August 24, 1946.

³⁶ “2 Senate Groups May Act to Keep Bilbo From Seat,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, August 24, 1946.

the principal organizers for voting efforts in the July 2 primary. On August 31, three white men dressed as police officers entered the home of Reverend Estes Barnes of Collins, Mississippi. Barnes, who had left for a church errand, entrusted the care of his two teen-aged daughters to their Aunt. After gaining access to the home, the men led the two girls out of the house at gun point and into nearby woods where they planned to rape them. The third man remained behind with a gun pointed on the Aunt. Before the men could rape the women, Reverend Barnes returned home, retrieved his shotgun from the house and fired a shot into the air which caused the men to flee. The men were later caught by police and identified by the two women, but the judge only issued the men “minor fines.”³⁷

In an interesting twist of fate, the judge actually threatened the two black women with penalties since the daughters dropped the charges, the judge reasoned, there probably had never been any act committed in the first place and therefore the accusations of the women could have led to the “frivolous prosecution” of otherwise “innocent people.”³⁸ The attempted rape of the Barnes women signals the discontent of whites in Mississippi who attempted to re-assert their southern “manhood” in the face of Bilbo’s campaign speeches. Danielle McGuire argues that white on black rape often took place “as a form of retribution or to enforce rules of racial and economic hierarchy.”³⁹ Barnes’s highly visible position in the African American community as a leader and political organizer made him and his family targets for whites desirous to maintain their power; attempting to combat the ever-encroaching apocalyptic ruin which Bilbo indicated

³⁷ “Fined Following Charges of Attempted Rape with Arms,” *Jackson Advocate*, August 31, 1946.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ McGuire, xviii-xix.

would coincide with racial equality. Not long after the trial, the Barnes family left Collins and Mississippi's presence in the national media continued to skyrocket.

Two more crosses burned in Jackson during the last week of August and it seemed as though Mississippi would never be relieved from its most violent summer in recent memory.⁴⁰ On the evening of August 27, Reverend R.E. Daniels and three fellow passengers traveled home on the Magee-Mize Road in Clinton when their car "was run down by a band of white men who ordered the occupants out with rifles." As Daniels tried to exit the car, the men knocked him unconscious. One of the other passengers, the principal of a local black school "was pulled from his seat by three whites who attempted to bash his head against the side of the car." When the principal's wife screamed out "don't kill him," the white men slapped her down and drove off.⁴¹ The violence against Daniels; the attempted rape of the Barnes girls; the three crosses that burned on Tougaloo's campus; and other acts of racial hatred perpetrated after Bilbo's election during the summer of 1946 dominated national headlines. Coupled with other acts of violence that occurred in states such as South Carolina, Tennessee and Georgia that summer helped provide national support for the campaign to oust Bilbo.

Newspapers could not help but notice the correlation between Bilbo's election campaign and the sharp increase in racial terrorism. One reporter who covered the Smith County manhunt reflected on the violence of the summer, and believed that the "wave of racial antagonism and violence" fell eerily "fast on the heels of Bilbo's pre-election hate campaign." The reporter noted that Truman would have to become involved in the South's racial strife if it hoped to avoid full-scale riots. "The quick action of the Justice

⁴⁰ "Community Ignores Burning of Fiery Cross," *Jackson Advocate*, August 31, 1946.

⁴¹ "Minister Badly Beaten in Smith County," *Jackson Advocate*, August 31, 1946.

Department,” he argued, “and organizational pressure from the North” were the only effective means of preventing “another massacre.”⁴²

Press coverage of southern atrocities did not subside as the summer rolled into fall, but signs that Bilbo’s reign as the nation’s supreme beacon of racial hatred was coming to an end became evident in early September when the Senator underwent treatment in New Orleans for “an inflammation of the mouth.” Bilbo’s absence, however, did not stop the NAACP from pursuing its plans to unseat him.⁴³ Walter White sent a letter to the NAACP’s board of directors asking them for the approval to secure the services of Congressman Charles M. Lafollette (R-Indiana) for the job of investigating and filing a brief on their behalf to the Senate concerning Bilbo. White believed that Lafollette’s experience “as a member of the Board of the American Council on Race Relations” would make him perfect for the job.⁴⁴

Even though the NAACP finally had a plan in-place to oust the Senator, violence continued to dominate the lives of Mississippi’s black community. On September 2 in Senatobia policeman Fred Mosby escorted T.V. Hillard to the police station when, according to Mosby, Hillard “attempted to grab a gun on the front seat of the car” and in an act of self-defense, Mosby shot and killed Hillard.⁴⁵ Hillard’s murder reinforced the resolve of civil rights organizations to fight more aggressively for Bilbo’s removal. Shortly after Hillard’s death, Edgar Brown of the NNC and James Rumble of the Citizen’s National League brought forth petitions to the Senate Campaign Investigating

⁴² “Clerics, Teacher Beaten; Girls Attacked in Reign of Terror After Miss. Manhunt,” *Philadelphia Afro American*, August 31, 1946.

⁴³ “Bilbo Undergoes Operation,” *New York Times*, September 1, 1946.

⁴⁴ Due to the Nuremberg trials, Lafollette would not be able to serve as a prosecutor in Bilbo’s hearing. Lafollette handed over his notes on Bilbo, however to the NAACP before he left for Germany; Memorandum from Walter White to the NAACP Board of Directors, September 9, 1946, NAACP Files, Unseating Bilbo part 18, series b, reel 4.

⁴⁵ “Negro Prisoner Killed; Deputy Asks Hearing,” *Jackson Advocate*, September 14, 1946.

Committee stating that Bilbo's "campaign was conducted in such a manner as to deprive Negroes of their right to vote," which the pair argued should be investigated immediately. The two submitted petitions to the investigative committee that reportedly contained over one million signatures.⁴⁶

That same week the associated press published a study that sent a threatening message to southern politicians and warned them of the ills of perpetuating white supremacy. The study, conducted by an unknown source, examined election results from Virginia and Georgia, and determined that non-white voters in the South held the potential to overthrow southern politicians in the near future. The study opined that "unless the efforts of reactionaries like Senator Bilbo...throttle their exercise of the right to vote," minorities in the South held the key to "defeating the conservative rings and machines in local politics."⁴⁷

The push to oust Bilbo continued and on September 7, representatives from the NAACP spoke over national radio urging the Senate to deny Bilbo his Senate seat. The organization stated that "Bilbo's open confession over the air that he is a member of the Ku Klux Klan disqualifies him from taking the oath of office as a Senator." Charles Houston, one of the speakers present at the broadcast, clearly had read Bilbo's interview published in the *American Mercury* weeks earlier and told listeners that Bilbo "cannot be loyal to the Klan and to the Constitution of the United States at the same time."⁴⁸ The legislative body realized that they could no longer avoid the Bilbo issue and the Senate

⁴⁶ "Senate Body Plans Bilbo Inquiry," *New York Times*, September 7, 1946; "Bilbo Target of Senate Probe," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, September 14, 1946.

⁴⁷ "Liberals View South's New Voters as Allies," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, September 14, 1946.

⁴⁸ "Urge Denial of Bilbo's Seat," *Jackson Advocate*, September 7, 1946.

Campaign Investigative Committee decided “unanimously” that it would send investigators to Mississippi to hear testimony and collect evidence on Bilbo’s election.⁴⁹

In response to the intensity of southern violence towards blacks in previous weeks and the investigation of Bilbo, Truman made his first unequivocal statement in favor of black civil rights. In a letter written on August 28, but not made public until September 12, Truman told Charles G. Bolte, World War II veteran and president of the American Veteran’s Committee that

I am keenly aware of the fundamental problem of discrimination in education...and of the broader problem of intolerance....Those who sincerely desire to see the fullest expression of our democracy can never rest until the opportunity for an education...has been given to all qualified Americans regardless of race, creed, color, national origin, sex or economic status.⁵⁰

The statements published in Truman’s letter marked a milestone for civil rights activists. Even though previous months had included little or no action from the President in regard to civil rights issues, Truman’s letter gave hope to those involved in civil rights efforts that their voices would finally be heard. William Berman argues that Truman’s letter symbolized an important transition period in the President’s administration in which Truman realized that the growing political strength of northern blacks required “that something be done about the likelihood of violence in the South.”⁵¹

With the perceived support of the President, the fight to oust Bilbo continued at a feverish pace. On September 21, the NAACP, the CRC and the MPVL submitted a joint complaint to the Special Committee to Investigate Elections and Privileges, which argued that Bilbo had conducted a campaign “tainted with fraud, duress and illegality” and asked that the Committee deny Bilbo his seat. The complaints also reiterated that Bilbo had

⁴⁹ “Senate Body Plans Bilbo Inquiry,” *New York Times*, September 7, 1946.

⁵⁰ “National Commission Study Discrimination in Education,” *Jackson Advocate*, September 14, 1946.

⁵¹ Berman, 49.

“violated his oath of office of United States Senator to support and uphold the Constitution of the United States” when he called on whites to “use any means necessary” to keep blacks from the polls. The organizations accompanied the petition with several affidavits each signed by fifty African Americans who had been the victims of violence and intimidation on election day.⁵² After filing the petition, CRC head George Marshall wrote to Walter White of his elation at Mississippi blacks who signed the petition and stood up to white supremacy. “From the South,” Marshall wrote, “the most exciting news in decades- Senator Bilbo can be unseated! For years we have hoped for a grass roots movement in Mississippi. What seemed impossible is happening.”⁵³

Throughout the summer and into the early fall, the NAACP managed to keep their campaign to oust Bilbo relatively secret. They had been covertly sending telegrams to prominent celebrities on the necessity of supporting the organization in its fight against Bilbo, and had succeeded in securing support from Hollywood director David Selznick and other liberals who donated substantial amounts of money to their cause. Efforts against Bilbo slowed around mid-September, however, when the NAACP decided to focus its efforts on securing a meeting with the President to discuss anti-lynching legislation.⁵⁴ In the final weeks of September, they would achieve their goal, but not without pressure from external sources.

In mid-September, Truman began to bow to pressure from within the country, and as the fall months wore on, the President received international pressure amidst a growing

⁵² “Charge Election Tainted with Fraud, Duress, Illegality, Force and Violence,” Jackson Advocate, September 21, 1946; Affidavit signed June 25, 1946, NAACP Files, Voting Rights Campaign 1916-1950, part 4, reel 9.

⁵³ Letter from George Marshall to Mr. Pickens, September 25, 1946, NAACP Files Unseating Bilbo part 18, series b, reel 4.

⁵⁴ Letter from Walter White to Hodding Carter, September 25, 1946, part 18, series b, reel 4; Letter from Walter White to Arthur Spingarn, September 13, 1946, NAACP Files, Unseating Bilbo, part 18, series b, reel 4

Cold War that forced him to make further concessions to civil rights groups. One letter Truman received came from the West African National Secretariat Kwame Nkrumah who told the President that his letter “expressed the opinions of the peoples of Africa and peoples of African descent in England,” all of whom condemned recent acts of violence in Mississippi as “fiendish.” Nkrumah’s letter encouraged Truman “to put an end to this inhuman practice.”⁵⁵

Rewarded for its persistent efforts, and perhaps owing to the letter from Nkrumah, the NAACP finally received an audience with the President at the end of September in which they asked him to “use his influence” to enact federal anti-lynching legislation and made certain to mention their progress in Bilbo’s investigation, asking for any help the President might be able to provide.⁵⁶ Truman told the delegates that he would do what he could, but refused to make any clear promises about federal involvement in the South. Earlier in the week, Truman had met with Paul Robeson in a private conference who spoke on behalf of the National Conference on Lynching which championed a platform based on “keeping the Klan out of Congress- no seat for Bilbo.” In his meeting with the President Robeson asked Truman to issue a statement in opposition to the recent wave of lynchings and violence in the South. When Truman told Robeson that he would not be able to make any statement at the time since “political matters made it difficult,” Robeson called the President a “fascist” and the two individuals ended their meeting in animosity.⁵⁷

As the NAACP continued to gain support and gather evidence against Bilbo, it clashed with other civil rights organizations, most notably the CRC, over how to proceed

⁵⁵ “Africans Protest Lynching in U.S.,” *Jackson Advocate*, September 28, 1946.

⁵⁶ “Truman Gets Plea to End Mob Lynching, Terror,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, September 28, 1946.

⁵⁷ “Group Sees Truman on Lynching Mob,” *New York Times*, September 24, 1946.

with unseating Bilbo.⁵⁸ Emmanuel Bloch and the CRC wanted to proceed with a public campaign, using its resources to publish materials that would brand the effort as the “National Campaign to Oust Bilbo” complete with fundraisers, fliers, and petitions that could be used to gain national attention and support to keep “The Man” from taking his seat based on public opinion.⁵⁹

The NAACP, however, believed that the CRC’s ties to the Communist Party and the fact that it was headquartered in New York would torpedo any highly public efforts against Bilbo, a master at manipulating public perception who could label such an effort a shining example of “outside agitation.” NAACP organizers sought the cooperation and evidence gathered by the CRC, but wanted to keep the public profile of the campaign low. The NAACP, more so than the CRC wanted to spend its time and resources lobbying the President, securing support from other civil rights organizations, and funding Charles Lafollette.⁶⁰

Throughout October, the two groups exchanged telegrams arguing over the best way to unseat Bilbo. In mid-October, the CRC without the blessing of the NAACP began to make plans for a National Committee to Oust Bilbo dinner in New York which would be held at the end of the month. The CRC planned to have notable celebrities including Dashell Hammett, Paul Robeson, David O. Celsnick and Albert Einstein attend, and possibly give speeches. After the CRC made their plans, they sent a letter to Walter White asking for the NAACP’s support for the dinner. White informed the organizers that,

⁵⁸ Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 105.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 104-105.

⁶⁰ Letter from Quentin Reynolds and Vincent Sheean to Walter White, October 11, 1946, NAACP Files Unseating Bilbo, pt. 18, series b reel 4; Letter from Walter White to Quentin Reynolds, October 14, 1946, NAACP Files Unseating Bilbo, pt. 18, series b reel 4; Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 105.

I cannot accept your invitation...other efforts in this matter are being taken by the NAACP which I believe will be more effective. No publicity has been given, nor will be given to these efforts until the appropriate time...we do not believe it sound strategy to let one's enemy know the facts and strategy that will be used against that enemy lest he be forewarned. ...I expressed to Mr. Marshall my doubts of the wisdom of...mass meetings in New York at this time as a means of ousting Bilbo.⁶¹

The NAACP-CRC split would prove irreconcilable, and the NAACP continued to keep its campaign a secret and realized that the fight against Bilbo would “have to be done quietly and quickly. Premature publicity on what we are doing might conceivably and almost certainly defeat the whole plan.”⁶² The NAACP was not without its allies. They received “oaths of secrecy” from the Improved Benevolent Protective Order of the Elks, Hodding Carter, and David Celsnick amongst others who supported their cause.⁶³

In early October the push to oust Bilbo and the national attention focusing on civil rights issues forced Truman to make his second decisive step into the realm of civil rights. In his speech to the National Urban League delivered in St. Louis, Truman and Albert Einstein both gave speeches on the place of America in the post-war world. Truman told the audience that “This country must maintain a position of leadership in conveying the ideals of human rights...but must demonstrate the will and ability to uphold ideals of human rights at home.” Einstein took the podium and further explained that “without a solution of the racial- and more generally the minority problem- our example cannot be considered shining.”⁶⁴ The speeches given by two of the most prominent figures in American society helped gain further support for civil rights efforts

⁶¹ Letter from Walter White to Quentin Reynolds, October 14, 1946, NAACP Files Unseating Bilbo, pt. 18, series b, reel 4.

⁶² Letter from Walter White to Arthur Spingarn, October 1, 1946, NAACP Files Unseating Bilbo, pt. 18 series b reel 4.

⁶³ Letter from C.P. Howard to Charles Lafollette, October 8, 1946, NAACP Files Unseating Bilbo, pt. 18, series b reel 4; “Expect Many Negro Citizens To Be Called Upon to Testify As Senate Committee Investigate Bilbo Campaign Discount Violence During Hearing,” *Jackson Advocate*, November 30, 1946.

⁶⁴ “Truman, Einstein Urge Solution of Racial Ills,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, October 5, 1946.

and Bilbo's ouster, but the messages of racial solidarity and maturity contained in the speeches never reached Mississippi. On the same day, white candy store proprietor S.P. Davis of Canton shot and killed twenty-five year old John Jones in front of his store for allegedly "being drunk and using bad language in the presence of his daughter."⁶⁵

With violence increasing at a dramatic pace in Mississippi, attacks against Bilbo seemed to come from all sides. Civil Rights organizations could not wait for the Senate Investigating Committee to set a date and location for Bilbo's hearing, and sought to dismantle the Senator's credibility as much as possible. The Southern Conference on Human Welfare and the newly formed American Veterans Committee began circulating national petitions at the end of October in hopes of securing Bilbo's removal from office as the head of "the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia," a position which had essentially made him the mayor of the region for several years.⁶⁶

Finally, blacks across the country had great news to celebrate. In mid-October, the Senate announced that it would not just conduct a hearing on Bilbo's practices during his July campaign, but also revealed that it would look into accusations that the Senator accepted two \$25,000 bribes from a war contractor in order to allow the company to build a supply factory in the state.⁶⁷ The second investigation, brought forth by some of Bilbo's competitors for Senate including Ross Collins, would afford some southern Senators who felt conflicted about evicting Bilbo based solely on racial principals, the opportunity to impeach "The Man" based on his corrupt handling of state power. The charges against

⁶⁵ "Veteran Shot to Death by Canton Store Keeper," *Jackson Advocate*, October 5, 1946.

⁶⁶ "Vets Committee Seek Bilbo Ouster," *Jackson Advocate*, October 12, 1946; "To Circulate Petition Against Miss. Senator," *Jackson Advocate*, October 26, 1946.

⁶⁷ "2 Groups Probing Bilbo's Election," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, October 19, 1946.

Bilbo were stacked against him and many observers believed that even he could not wiggle his way out of an impeachment proceeding.



Illustration 5. “Hunting Season Opens Down South.”

The Smith County pursuit of Johnny Craft made national headlines and exemplified the rising violence in the wake of Bilbo’s election. (*Philadelphia Afro-American* October 12, 1946)

News of Bilbo’s second investigation did not have the impact that Truman hoped as black editors began to declare that the political damage had already been done. “The incompetence of Truman and his reluctance or refusal to do anything about mob violence in the South,” one reporter opined, “will be the main cause for the return of colored voters to the Republican Party.”⁶⁸

Bilbo’s press coverage over the past several months had given a bad name to Democrats throughout the nation. None could ignore the political implications of being associated with the party of the nation’s most hated bigot. To help deflect claims that they were “members of the same party as Georgia bigots” Democrats in the North attempted

⁶⁸ “Trend Toward GOP Predicted,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, October 26, 1946.

to disassociate themselves from their southern counterparts, and political candidates including William O'Dwyer who ran for mayor of New York and Herman Lehman who ran for Governor of that same state, based their entire campaigns on how they "would move immediately to exclude Senator Bilbo...from the Senate for fomenting racial and religious hatred." The men told their constituents that "Bilboism as a way of life is inimical and offensive...to the...democratic disposition of our people."⁶⁹

Conversely, Republicans capitalized on Bilbo's publicity and the fractious state of the Democratic Party to secure numerous victories in previously non-Republican states. In Boston, Henry Cabot Lodge boosted his political standing within the black community:

Here in Massachusetts, we are committed to the doctrine that in the field of civil rights everyone should be recognized on his merits as an individual...no considerations of race...should prejudice a person in relation to his fellowman....We cannot regard the triumphs of Bilbo in distant Mississippi...as something too remote to be of concern to us....I assure you...that I will not hesitate to support whatever measures are necessary to...guarantee equal rights to all citizens of the United States.⁷⁰

In New York, Irving Ives won his bid for the Senate, the first time a Republican held the post since 1927 by telling his constituents that he would "do everything in his power to keep Senator Theodore Bilbo from being returned to Congress."⁷¹

National focus on Bilbo continued through late October when an hour-long radio broadcast aired in New York that recounted Bilbo's long career in politics, and specifically showcased some of the Senator's most racially-charged epithets to depict his

⁶⁹ "Lehman Proposes Move to Bar Bilbo," *New York Times*, October 20, 1946; "O'Dwyer Backs Drive to Abolish 'Bilboism'," *New York Times*, October 18, 1946.

⁷⁰ Speech of Henry Cabot Lodge Delivered Over Yankee Network, WNAC, Boston, Monday, October 28, 1946 in NAACP Files, Unseating Bilbo, pt. 18 series b reel 4.

⁷¹ "Negro Group Lauds Ives," *New York Times*, October 26, 1946.

“unfitness” to hold his seat in congress or any position in government.⁷² Black newspapers built on the attention given to the efforts to unseat Bilbo at the end of October and encouraged northern African Americans, that since they “are free of the shackles of Bilboism,” to “shoulder a big share of the battle for complete emancipation.”⁷³ Blacks throughout the nation believed that their voices were not being heard in the Democratic Party, and sympathized with one organizer in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania who claimed that all 300, 000 registered African American voters in the city would “vote overwhelmingly for Republican candidates in the State and Congressional elections.” The man predicted that New York as well as other traditionally democratic states would support the Philadelphia effort, and told politicians and readers alike that black Republican votes would “be in protest against... ‘Bilboism.’”⁷⁴

Cognizant of the fact that black votes seemed to be bleeding from their party on the eve of mid-term elections and that a Republican Congress could halt their political agenda, Democrats attempted to coax blacks into voting Democratic. Ads occupied newspapers urging blacks not to forget FDR when they went to the polls on November 5.⁷⁵ Attempts to stem the tide of black out-migration could not be countered and in early November, African Americans turned out in large numbers in favor of the Republican Party. In 1946, the house gained control of the House and Senate with majorities in nine additional states from the previous election. African Americans seemed to be adhering to editorials that declared “We’ve Had Enough.”⁷⁶

⁷² “Bilbo Flayed in Drama Presented Over Radio,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, October 19, 1946.

⁷³ “Leadership Held North’s Obligation,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, October 26, 1946.

⁷⁴ “Assert Negro Vote Will Swing to GOP,” *New York Times*, October 18, 1946.

⁷⁵ “Lest We Forget,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, November 2, 1946.

⁷⁶ See appended Graph on GOP gains in 1946, “How GOP Gained Congressional Majority in 9 States,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, November 30, 1946; “We’ve Had Enough,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, November 2, 1946; Pauley, 40-41.

Republicans now controlled the nations' law-making apparatus, enabling them to enact meaningful legislation on lynching and African American civil rights. The mid-term victories also portended a frightening prospect for Truman's 1948 election. The elections also forced Truman to act more powerfully in matters of civil rights for the remainder of his first term. In the short term, the victory signaled an even more important victory: the ability to unseat Bilbo.⁷⁷

On November 17, after hearing reports from Justice Department investigators, the Senate Investigating Committee announced that it would hold a hearing on the legality of Bilbo's election, which it scheduled for early December.⁷⁸ Upon receiving word that he would have to appear before the committee, Bilbo blamed civil rights organizations stating, "They don't like it...because I want to send them back to Africa."⁷⁹



Illustration 6.
The *Philadelphia Afro-American* clearly did not hold out hope that Bilbo's investigation would be impartial. (*Philadelphia Afro-American* November 30, 1946)

⁷⁷ "Republican Victory Brings Little Hope for Liberal Legislation Without Change in Senate Rules," *Jackson Advocate*, November 16, 1946; Berman, x.

⁷⁸ "Full Senate Inquiry is Voted on Bilbo's Right to his Seat," *New York Times*, November 17, 1946.

⁷⁹ "Bilbo Blames Negroes," *New York Times*, November 20, 1946.

Early in the going however, it appeared that the three Democrats on the committee would attempt to railroad the two Republican members into voting their way. Fissures between Henry Bridges and Allen Ellender became national news and some feared that the committee's internal strife would prevent the group from convening to weigh-in on Bilbo's election. Bridges later told reporters that his anger with the committee stemmed from "Bilbo's friend... [who] was trying to 'gloss over' charges filed with the committee against Bilbo."⁸⁰ Despite early squabbles, the committee settled their differences and prepared itself for the trip to Jackson.

African Americans voiced mixed concerns about the hearing. Some remained optimistic that the hearing would provide an ample arena for grievances to be aired and hopefully acted upon, but others believed that the proceedings would be an exercise in futility as the charges against Bilbo would almost certainly be a "whitewash." None, however, knew in definite terms what the hearing would mean for African American civil rights.

⁸⁰ "Hearings Scheduled for Miss. Capital," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, November 23, 1946.

Chapter 4:

Taking the Stand

The Special Committee to Investigate Senatorial Campaign Expenditures consisted of Senators Allen Ellender (D- Louisiana), Burnet Maybank (D-South Carolina), Elmer Thomas (D-Oklahoma), Bourke Hickenlooper (R-Iowa), and Henry Styles Bridges (R-NH). The ratio of southern Democrats to Republicans on the committee amplified Bilbo's chances of being exonerated. Before the committee convened, it sent agents to Mississippi to gather evidence and testimony from residents who faced violence and intimidation on election day.

Committee agents gathered 102 affidavits and an additional 280 oral testimonies. From this number the committee selected 102 individuals to testify. Sixty-nine of the selected were African Americans.¹ Previous treatments of Bilbo's hearing focus on the testimony of the thirty-seven veteran testifiers and typically omit the equally harrowing accounts of the twenty-eight non-veterans who also took part in what Charles Payne, John Dittmer and others see as "perhaps the most significant act of public defiance from Negroes the state had seen in decades."²

A careful examination of hearing testimony reveals a deeper complexity inherent in Mississippi's post-war civil rights movement, and requires historians to press beyond generalizations that the post-war effort was led and participated in solely by black veterans. Analysis of non-veteran testimony from Bilbo's hearing illustrates a more

¹ United States Senate, *Hearings Before the Committee to Investigate Senatorial Campaign Expenditures*, 79th Congress, 2nd Session, 1946, 1-22; Hereafter cited as *Campaign Expenditures*.

²For previous treatments on Bilbo's hearing see the Introduction of this work; Payne, 25.

accurate picture of the post-war civil rights movement in the state and importantly uncovers the long-forgotten voices civil rights actors in the post-war period.

Statement given at the hearing also allow one to acutely address questions on the post-war civil rights movement that have yet to be answered. Black voter motivation; the roles of black women in the post-war civil rights movement; the importance of the black and white clergy to voting rights effort; white women's importance in upholding the South's racial status quo; and the role elder black citizens in fighting for civil rights in the post-war South are all explained through hearing testimony. Perhaps most importantly, the hearing reveals important facets of black life in Mississippi that have direct influences on future civil rights efforts. Details of these influences such as the role of the "Citizen's Council," the importance of family tradition in civil rights activism, and the advantages afforded less visible activists of the black community are all underscored by hearing testimony, and add new dimensions to Mississippi's post-war struggle for equality.

Throughout the hearing the committee would refuse to understand these nuances, and after reviewing preliminary evidence gathered by committee agents in early November, committee chairman Allen Ellender told reporters that he did not see "a scintilla of evidence that the charges had been sustained." Ellender told reporters that Bilbo's hearing was simply as a ploy by "a number of well-meaning Republicans who want to recapture the Negro vote in the next election."³ Adding to the biased atmosphere surrounding the hearing, the committee announced in mid-November that, in order to make it easier for African American witnesses to testify, Bilbo's hearing would take place in Jackson, Mississippi.⁴ The committee failed to publicly state that the height of

³ "Senate Unit Stays Decision on Bilbo," *New York Times*, November 16, 1946.

⁴ "Senators Order Inquiry on Bilbo," *New York Times*, November, 17, 1946.

racial unrest in Mississippi brought about by Bilbo's campaign would undoubtedly have a detrimental effect on the willingness of many blacks to testify.

When asked by members of the press whether he realized that black testifiers would be risking their lives if they spoke at the hearing, Ellender stated that "public hearings might lead to killing." When confronted by CRC attorney Emmanuel Bloch in a later interview, however, Ellender told Bloch that descriptions of Mississippi as unsafe were merely attempts at sensationalism, and further assured Bloch, "the answer is no, of course not."⁵ Observers seemed to have no trouble discerning the obstacles black testifiers confronted. One reporter told readers that "there is no question in any rational person's mind that Negro witnesses who told the truth in Mississippi would not live to return home from the court house."⁶ Despite descriptions that Jackson would be a hostile environment for black testifiers, the committee ignored pleas for a change of venue and scheduled the hearing for December 2.

Black testifiers fortified their courage in the weeks leading up to the hearing, but Bilbo appeared quite comfortable. In a mid-November interview Bilbo retrenched his position on his campaign, and declared, "I'll stand by everything I've said in the past. I have done no wrong....I said during the campaign I didn't think Negroes have a right to vote in Mississippi and I still don't think so."⁷ Even though the Senate and the investigating committee refused to budge on a change of venue, African Americans still held out hope that President Truman might offer testifiers at least a modicum of protection. The government ignored the pleas from the NAACP and its allies for help,

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "Bilbo Procedure Scored," *New York Times*, November 18, 1946.

⁷ "Bilbo Stands on His Views," *New York Times*, November 17, 1946.

and blacks came to realize that if they were going to fight for their rights they would have to do so alone.⁸

Blacks filed into the balcony of Jackson's federal building on December 2 and Bilbo remarked to a reporter that he "expected to have the time of his life."⁹ Bilbo's statement reflects his ignorance at the level of media coverage the hearing would receive. As the hearing unfolded, reporters recorded entire testimonies that sprawled across the front pages of media outlets throughout the nation and awakened many to the torturous condition of being black in Mississippi.

The mood on December 2 set the tone for the hearing. Testifiers experienced rigorous and clearly prejudiced questioning by committee chairman Ellender who clearly took Bilbo's defense. Ellender sought to discredit black testifiers with questions designed to excuse Bilbo's statements as "traditional" for candidates in the state and attempted to place the blame for violence on "outsiders." Even though testifiers experienced threats and intimidation for their willingness to participate, the *Advocate* reported that African Americans arrived at the hearing with "a readiness to appear before the committee."¹⁰

T.B. Wilson, head of the Mississippi Progressive Voter's League, kicked-off the hearing. Wilson recounted a story that highlights the importance of black women in the fight for civil rights during the post-war period. Wilson told the court that he knew of a man and woman from Hinds County who arrived at the polls in late June only to be refused by the registrar who told them, "You go off and study some more and learn how

⁸ "Hearings Scheduled for Miss. Capitol," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, November 23, 1946.

⁹ "Mississippi Leans on Bilbo Inquiry," *New York Times*, December 2, 1946.

¹⁰ "Expect Many Negro Citizens To Be Called Upon to Testify As Senate Committee Investigate Bilbo Campaign Discourt Violence During Hearing," *Jackson Advocate*, November 30, 1946.

to answer that and come back.”¹¹ When the man and woman told Wilson what happened, he encouraged them to follow the registrar’s instructions and try again. The pair returned to the polls on July 2 and the registrar asked them if they had studied. When he quizzed the woman, she answered all of the registrar’s questions correctly.

Wilson told the committee that the registrar, skeptical an African American female would be able to register without cheating, asked the woman “Who told you?” “I have a dictionary,” she responded, “and of course I didn’t know the question was going to be asked or else I would have known it before I came.”¹² The registrar allowed the woman to vote and, according to Wilson, the group “didn’t have any trouble after that.”¹³ Wilson’s testimony supports Glenda Gilmore’s assertion that black women often utilized “their womanhood [which] helped them remain invisible as they worked toward political ends.”¹⁴ Previous treatments of the post-war civil rights movement neglect the fluidity with which women could act in civil rights efforts.

Holly Springs resident Samuel K. Phillips also recollected how his wife accompanied him to the polls on July 2 and brazenly resisted white supremacy. Phillips told the committee that when he and his wife walked into the courthouse, the registrar met them at the door and told them that they were not on “the book” and therefore could not vote. Phillips and his wife then visited the election commissioner, Mr. Belk, and asked him if they could register. Belk told Phillips that since he had been affiliated with the Republican Party two years ago, “if you vote, if you all vote, your vote will be challenged...Now what I mean by ‘challenged’ is that your vote will not be counted

¹¹ *Campaign Expenditures*, 26.

¹² *Ibid.*, 26.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 148.

tonight when all the other votes are counted.”¹⁵ Undeterred by the commissioner’s statements, Phillips’s wife told Belk, “Well now, I wasn’t asked any questions whatever. Now may I vote?” Despite denying him the right to vote, the commissioner allowed his wife to register and vote.¹⁶ Wilson and Phillips’s testimony highlight Danielle McGuire’s assertion that black women often used their perceived roles not simply as women, but as defenseless members of the black community to transgress the social order more effectively than males, especially veterans, in the post-war period.¹⁷

Other testifiers at the hearing reinforced Wilson and Phillips’s testimony on the active roles of black women in Mississippi’s post-war civil rights struggle. Meridian native Edward Knott told the committee that when he went to the courthouse with a group of African American voter on July 2, the registrar allowed the men to register, but as he placed his ballot in the ballot box, a white man sitting near the box stood up and said “I challenge that.” Without telling Knott why his vote was being challenged, the woman in charge of voting told him to come back the following day if he had any questions. Knott returned the next day only to be rebuffed by the same man who challenged his vote.

Knott importantly recalled that a “Miss Whitlock” went with his group to the courthouse only to be told by the registrar that “she did not know the constitution as well as she thought.”¹⁸ J.D. Collins also fleetingly mentioned the role of black women on July 2. “Two [members of the MPVL] registered,” Collins recalled, “I think about 2 weeks

¹⁵ Ibid., 307.

¹⁶ Ibid., 307-308.

¹⁷ Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance- A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to Black Power* (NY: Knopf, 2010).

¹⁸ *Campaign Expenditures*, 116-118.

before election time, and it was too late for them...one was a woman.”¹⁹ The testimony given from Collins and Knott, while small, further reveals the active role women played in Mississippi’s post-war civil rights movement.

One of the most substantive illustrations of women’s defiance to white supremacy in the post-war period came in the testimony of Natchez resident Camille Thomas. Thomas’s testimony as a veteran of the Army corps of nurses and as a black woman reveals a “double burden” experienced by many black females in the post-war South. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham characterizes this burden as a distinct “double gender consciousness” in which black women defined themselves “as both homemakers and soldiers.”²⁰ After arriving home from overseas in March of 1946, Thomas told the committee that she immediately looked for ways to exercise her political and civil rights. Bilbo’s hearing, she believed, offered the perfect venue. Thomas testified that even though she was afraid to vote after hearing Bilbo’s speeches she told the committee that she still wanted to exercise her rights as a United States citizen.²¹

Thomas met opposition soon after her arrival at the polling station, she recalled. The registrar asked her whether she had been affiliated with the Democratic Party for more than two years, and when Thomas told him that due to her active military status, “I could not have made any speeches or taken any part with any political party” the registrar immediately disqualified her.²² Even though she did not experience any violence at the hands of registrars on election day, Thomas strongly believed that Bilbo’s encouragements caused the registrar to deny her ballot. When Ellender defended the

¹⁹ Ibid., 249-250.

²⁰ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 142.

²¹ *Campaign Expenditures*, 293.

²² Ibid.

actions of the registrar as being part of election day procedure according to Mississippi law, Thomas snapped back. The exchange that followed between the two reveals the intensity with which black women were willing to fight white supremacy in the post-war period:

ELLENDER: That is the law, is it not?

THOMAS: I beg your pardon?

ELLENDER: In other words, unless you as a voter were connected in some way with the Democratic Party for at least 2 years before you voted, you could have been challenged. That is the Mississippi Law and probably why the question was asked of you.

THOMAS: No-

ELLENDER: Well- pardon me.

THOMAS: Well, no one voted.

ELLENDER: Well, you know I am sure-it is common knowledge throughout Mississippi- that the white people have always felt that in Democratic primary elections only white folks should vote; is that not true?

THOMAS: It is common knowledge- it is common knowledge that the Negro has never accepted that fact though.

ELLENDER: Has never what?

THOMAS: Has never accepted the fact.

ELLENDER: Why didn't they try to vote? If you say they haven't accepted it, why didn't they try to vote before?

THOMAS: Because- they didn't try to vote before because perhaps they would have been- some violence might have taken place.

ELLENDER: Well, in other words-

THOMAS: And, in fact, under Supreme Court decisions in the Texas case they could.

ELLENDER: In other words, violence would not only have taken place on July 2, but many years before because of the fact that white folks have always felt that they should be participants in white primaries and colored people should be excluded? Is that true?

THOMAS: That is true, but it is not accepted by the Negro.²³

Thomas's testimony highlights an important characteristic that undergirded the entire hearing: Ellender's inability to comprehend, or at least his refusal to believe, that African Americans wanted to upset the South's racial status quo.

²³ Ibid., 295.

Kattie Campbell was the second of the only two African American women to testify at the hearing. Campbell, a housewife from Port Gibson, told the committee that she encountered no resistance when she registered at the county courthouse in May, but on July 2 the registrar told her that she could not vote. When she asked him why, the registrar informed her that her poll-tax receipts were “irregular.” Campbell explained to the committee that she was not surprised by the registrar’s decision since she had changed her registration several times over the past several years. However, her understanding turned to disappointment when the committee informed her that she should not have been denied her ballot since the towns in which she previously registered all resided within the same county. Burnet Maybank attempted to downplay the registrar’s illegal actions by stating “Well, somebody just made a mistake.”²⁴ However, Ellender realized that Campbell’s statement could further implicate the registrar and perhaps even Bilbo, and quickly asked her to step down.

That black women willingly testified against Bilbo evidences Danielle McGuire’s argument that “by deploying their voices as weapons in the wars against white supremacy, whether in the church, courtroom, or in congressional hearings, African-American women loudly resisted what Martin Luther King Jr. called the ‘thingification’ of their humanity.”²⁵ Mentions of women in the testimonies of T.B. Wilson, Edward Knott, J.D. Collins and Samuel Phillips also bring to light Judy Litoff’s argument that African American women tenaciously carried the “Double V” campaign with them into the post-war years.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., 331.

²⁵ McGuire, xix-xx.

²⁶ Judy Litoff, “Southern Women in a World at War” in Neil McMillen ed., *Remaking Dixie: The Impact of World War II on the American South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 61-63.

Testimony from the hearing also offers an interesting view of voter motivation in the post-war South that adds a deeper complexity to the post-war civil rights movement. These motivations have been previously characterized as stemming from the symbolism associated with returning black World War II veterans. Percy Greene, editor of the *Jackson Advocate*, took the stand, however, and told the committee that voting rights consciousness had long been present in Mississippi's black population. Greene argued that the call for equal suffrage rights did not "just [start] with the *Smith v. Allwright* case. It was evident throughout the South among intelligent people perhaps ever since 1917, and was intensified by the ideals upon which the war was being carried on."²⁷ Greene's statement buttresses John Higham's belief that "gradual prewar buildup of moral disquiet over the state of race relations" coalesced in a nationalistic fervor during the post-war period that forced civil rights issues to national prominence, and provided the impetus for the civil rights movement of the proceeding decade.²⁸

Ellender immediately attempted to discredit Greene's testimony by demanding of him, "How did [Emmanuel] Bloch come into the picture...the Civil Rights Congress, which I understand is a committee, a national committee to oust Bilbo?"²⁹ Greene rebutted, "I don't want to answer that part, I don't understand the Civil Rights Congress to be a national committee to oust Senator Bilbo."³⁰ The questioning quickly shifted to Bilbo's influence on election day turn out in which he stated that "he felt some of the fear...engendered by [Bilbo's] speeches," and stated that he was "certain" Bilbo's speeches kept many blacks in Mississippi away from the polls. Greene declared that he

²⁷ *Campaign Expenditures*, 43.

²⁸ Higham, 181.

²⁹ *Campaign Expenditures*, 36- 37.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

knew of “more than 1, more than 10, more than 25, more than 50 in the last weeks and months leading up to this campaign who...were refused registration,” and whom he believed had been denied as a direct result of Bilbo’s speeches. Ellender asked Greene, “Isn’t this, a good deal of this thing that you talk about, more in the imagination than anywhere else?”³¹ Greene angrily remarked, “No, sir....It at least isn’t imaginary to me.”³²

Later in his testimony Greene failed to remember the names of election day victims and Ellender asked him, “And so far as you know, you don’t know of your own knowledge of any of the complaints that actually occurred?”³³ Greene refused to respond to Ellender’s implication, and continued with his testimony that revealed his capacity as a civil rights leader in post-war Mississippi and further adds to the list of motivational factors for blacks who attempted to vote on July 2. Greene stated that in during the pre-election weeks he printed statements in his newspaper in which he encouraged blacks “to put down all show of force and arms and go to the polls.” Greene told the committee that his statements had been circulated in the New Orleans *Times Picayune* and the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*. The wide circulation of his statements, Green believed, significantly aided election day turnout.³⁴

M.S. Love’s testimony added another layer of complexity to black voter motivation in post-war Mississippi. Love, a physician and member of the Gulfport branch of the NAACP, told the committee that he even though he had been a registered voter in Mississippi for several decades, “fear had existed” in him on the day of Bilbo’s election.

³¹ Ibid., 38-39.

³² Ibid., 40.

³³ Ibid., 41

³⁴ Ibid.

However, Love explained, he knew he “had to take a chance, first or last, I took a chance...I was going to accept the privilege of voting, something I thought was my Constitutional right as an American citizen.”³⁵

Love’s opined for the court on the possible reasons for a higher than usual black turnout on election day. When asked by Ellender whether outside organizations such as the CIO had been “stirring” up black voter registration in the state, Love responded, “I think the Negro is waking up to the fact that he ought to vote and that he has that privilege” and stated that more blacks would have “probably voted and more allowed to vote and register” if not for Bilbo’s speeches.³⁶

Love also revealed the benefits military personnel reaped from their time in the service. When asked by the committee for his opinion on how many of Mississippi’s 66,000 returning veterans would have been eligible to vote in the July primary, Love stated, “I believe it is accurate to say that almost- well I think 100 percent-that it is quite safe to say that all men who have served for any substantial length of time in the armed forces in this war can read when they come out of the Army.”³⁷ Committee member Burke Hickenlooper reinforced Love’s statement and argued that “every discharged veteran of the state of Mississippi can read and write when he is discharged, thereby being substantially down the road toward eligibility for voting.”³⁸

Timothy Dillon from Tylertown cited different motivations for voting on July 2. Dillon told the packed courtroom that when he arrived to cast his vote, the registrar asked him to read and interpret a section of the state constitution. Even though Dillon read the

³⁵ Ibid., 230-234.

³⁶ Ibid., 234.

³⁷ Ibid., 232.

³⁸ Ibid., 232.

section required of him and answered the registrar's questions correctly, the registrar told him that he did not qualify.³⁹ Dillon told the committee that "everybody in our colored school registered, so we could have equal rights, so that's why I registered."⁴⁰ Dillon, like many others who testified, made sure to note for the record that Bilbo's speeches played a decisive role in why he had been denied his right to vote.⁴¹

Another Tylertown resident, J.B. Raiford believed that the growing political consciousness of Mississippi's black community could explain the July 2 turn out, which added further intricacy to Mississippi's post-war civil rights narrative. Ellender asked Raiford why blacks registered to vote when it was "common knowledge" that the white primary existed, and Raiford replied with conviction, "Yes sir. However we citizens of that community were real citizens, and we decided we was entitled to vote."⁴² Raiford further stated that "I had been paying my poll tax for years. They forced me to do that, and I told them I felt I was eligible to vote, being a citizen of this county."⁴³

Ellender challenged Raiford to make the connection between Bilbo's speeches and why he was unable to vote. Raiford articulated that before Bilbo's speeches, people had "lived very quietly there" and after reading Bilbo's speeches in multiple newspapers, he believed that the only way to keep Tylertown peaceful was to tell other blacks to stay away from the polls.⁴⁴ Testimony from Raiford, Greene and Dillon all evidenced different motivations for seeking the ballot on July 2, and complicate previous treatments

³⁹ Ibid., 281.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 282.

⁴¹ Ibid., 282.

⁴² Ibid., 284.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

of the post-war narrative that rely on the symbolism associated with veterans as the sole reason for voter motivation in the post-war period.

Testimony from the hearing also illustrated the role of white activists in Mississippi's post-war struggle for equality. Stanley Brav, a white rabbi from Vicksburg, used his time on the witness stand to challenge the committee and espouse his beliefs on racial equality rather than recall election-day voting obstruction. Brav told the court that he believed African Americans should have the right to vote alongside whites and that Bilbo's statements clearly had a negative effect on the African American desire to vote.⁴⁵ Brav opined, "throughout the country [Bilbo's statements] would be considered uncommon....They seemed to be of the sort that you would wonder in a candidate for the Senate [in any other part of the country]."⁴⁶ After being prodded by the committee to recall election-day obstructions, Brav stated that his African American cook wanted to vote, but told him that "she wants to live a bit longer, she is not going to bother to vote."⁴⁷

As a Jew in the South, Brav risked his life by testifying at the hearing, and actually suffered violence for his role in the proceedings.⁴⁸ As Clive Webb notes, "the Second World War witnessed an alarming increase in American anti-Semitism," and the status of Jews in the post-war South remained so delicate that "they dared not risk breaking ranks with the white segregationist majority."⁴⁹ However, Brav's willingness to

⁴⁵ *Campaign Expenditures*, 60-61.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴⁷ Testimony of Rabbi Stanley Brav, NAACP Files, Part 18, Series A, Reel 1; *Campaign Expenditures*, 61.

⁴⁸ Clive Webb, *Fighting Against Fear: Southern Jews and Black Civil Rights* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 171.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

testify reaffirms Webb's statement that "the most significant contribution to the emerging civil rights movement was provided by southern rabbis."⁵⁰

Catholic Priest George T. J. Strye was the second and final white man to testify on behalf of blacks at the hearing. The Pass Christian priest told the committee that after members of his all black congregation told him that they had been turned away from the polls on July 2, he spoke to the electoral board and sent a letter to the Attorney General. Strye stated that he had been encouraging all 500 of his African American congregants to vote in the weeks leading up to the election; telling them "you have intellects. Use them, [but] never resort to violence."⁵¹ When asked by the committee why he did this, Strye declared "I try to get them to become good citizens...I tell [them] that their duty as citizens requires them to be good, clean-living citizens."⁵²

Appalled with Strye's response, Ellender attempted to determine just how widespread such practices were in the South, and asked Strye "Do you know of any other place in Mississippi where that is attempted to be done?" Strye responded, to Ellender's dismay, that pastors in ten or twelve predominantly black Catholic congregations in the coastal region of the state had also encouraged church attendees to vote.⁵³ Strye's testimony sheds light on the important organizational role whites held in Mississippi's post-war struggle for equality, and more importantly uncovers the role of Catholics in that struggle. As R. Bentley Anderson points out in his study of interracial cooperation in New Orleans Catholic churches, the demands of the post-war period including "war, poverty, and idealism gave rise to Catholic interracialism...interaction

⁵⁰ Ibid., 21.

⁵¹ *Campaign Expenditures.*, 150.

⁵² Ibid., 152.

⁵³ Ibid., 153.

and cooperation between black and white Catholics to promote racial harmony and advance social justice.”⁵⁴ The testimonies of Brav and Strye at Bilbo’s hearing reinforce John Higham’s assertion that even though blacks led a vast majority of the civil rights campaigns that took place in the post-war period “the participation, validation and power of whites remained indispensable [to their work].”⁵⁵

Members of the black clergy also turned out in large numbers to testify against Bilbo during the hearings. McComb minister Lawrence Wilson took the stand and provided further complexity to the growing list of motivational factors for blacks in post-war Mississippi. Wilson told the committee that he believed Bilbo’s speeches played a significant role in galvanizing scores of Mississippi’s black population on July 2. Ellender, always on the side of Bilbo, asked Wilson, “You think that all of the propaganda you have seen in the papers has caused a lot of colored people to come out and want to vote and register?” Wilson responded “I think so. I think so.”⁵⁶ Wilson’s testimony underscored the testimonies of Strye and Brav that illustrated the important role of whites in Mississippi’s post-war civil rights movement. Wilson told the committee that “a white minister of the Methodist Church...talked with me,” and encouraged him to vote. After further questioning, Wilson revealed that the minister who came to see him, Joseph A. Smith, had been organizing African American voters in McComb weeks before the primary.⁵⁷

S.J. Dickey, another black minister from McComb, gave testimony that exemplified the roles of black clergy on July 2. Dickey testified that when he went down

⁵⁴ R. Bentley Anderson, *Black, White and Catholic: New Orleans Interracialism, 1947-1956* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005), 10-11.

⁵⁵ Higham, 187.

⁵⁶ *Campaign Expenditures* 162.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 163.

to the courthouse on behalf of his congregants to inquire about registration, the circuit clerk told him “Well, you tell them to study up on the questions that we are to ask them.” Before Dickey could relay the information to his followers, several whites stationed outside the courthouse accused him of “inciting” the African American population; a deadly allegation in the post-war South.⁵⁸ Shortly thereafter, a white man on the street came up to Dickey and warned him “If I were you I wouldn’t do it [register blacks] at the time being. I think it is a little bit too hasty.”⁵⁹ Later that same day, an African American man approached Dickey and told him that he heard Dickey’s name being discussed by white men with “quite a bit intimidation.”⁶⁰ Dickey, as a leader in McComb’s black community, feared for the safety of his congregants and told the court that after these admonitions, he would not register; nor would he take any blacks down to register. Dickey stated that he opted to “just stay neutral for a while.”⁶¹

Louisville pastor C.N. Eiland also took the stand and told the court that even though Bilbo’s speeches had enflamed tensions between the races in his home town, Eiland felt it necessary to lead by example in the fight for post-war civil rights. Eiland recalled that on July 2 he made his way up the courthouse steps in Winston County and noticed a group of white men sitting outside the building. He walked toward the entrance when one of the men in the group stopped him and asked what he was doing. Eiland informed the man that he intended to vote, and the white man replied “come back at 6 o’clock.”⁶² Eiland followed the man’s advice and returned to the courthouse a little before six. As he climbed the steps of the courthouse for a second time, the same group

⁵⁸ Ibid., 170.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 242.

of unfriendly whites greeted him and Eiland explained to the men, once again, that he wished to vote. One member of the group told Eiland, “Well I was trying to let you down easy...we are not letting Negroes vote. We took this country from the Indians and we are not going to allow you all to take it from us.”⁶³ The group member’s rhetoric echoed the language of Bilbo’s campaign speeches in which convinced whites that “if you let one little handful vote this year, there’ll be two handfuls next year, and four the year after.”⁶⁴

Eiland’s testimony also added further complexity to black voter motivation in post-war Mississippi. Eiland told the court that even though he had been registered for over nine years, the July primary marked his first attempt to vote, and stated that the reason for his decision stemmed from “an ad in the [Memphis] *Commercial Appeal* on the front page, where the Department of Justice...had advised all Southern states to let colored people vote, and I thought by that I could vote.”⁶⁵ Similar to later testimony given by Joseph Parham, Eiland felt galvanized by the Justice Department’s proclamation and the perceived reality of governmental intervention if his voting rights were denied.

Testimony from sixty year old reverend William A. Bender not only supported testimony given by Eiland, Dickey, and Lawrence Wilson on the importance of black clergy to the post-war civil rights struggle, but also revealed that elder blacks in Mississippi played crucial roles in the fight for voting rights as well. The importance of elder blacks in Mississippi’s post-war freedom struggle is often over-shadowed in the historical narrative by a strict focus on young veteran activists.⁶⁶

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ “Bilbo Speaks in Capital City,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 28, 1946.

⁶⁵ *Campaign Expenditures*, 243.

⁶⁶ Dittmer, 49; Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 103.

Bender, a reverend at traditionally black Tougaloo College, detailed his role organizing, teaching, and encouraging African Americans to vote in the post-war period.⁶⁷ Bender also told the court that when he arrived at the Madison County registrar's office on July 2, "A man met me as I was approaching the polls. He said 'We are not letting Negroes vote here today this is the white man's primary.' Then, the deputy sheriff jumped in front of the polling place with a pistol drawn and dared me to enter."⁶⁸ Bender left without casting his vote, and told the court that he believed Bilbo's speeches had radicalized Meridian's white community. Bender believed that "there would have been more Negroes registered except for Bilbo's intimidating speeches."⁶⁹

Sixty-eight year old McComb resident Joseph Parham also testified to the long history of civil rights activism present in Mississippi, and underscored the role of elder civil rights activism. Parham shocked the court when he revealed that he had been registered in Mississippi since 1898.⁷⁰ Parham recalled that when he arrived at the polling station he was asked by a white bystander "what kind of flowers do you want?"⁷¹ Parham replied as calmly as possible, "just any kind." Despite his decades-long registration the sheriff at the poll-booth lied to Parham and said that Parham was not registered. The sheriff then told Parham that he would have to go to the county seat of Magnolia if he wished to vote. As Parham left the courthouse, the sheriff accosted him and warned, "Old

⁶⁷ Bender's influential role at Tougaloo allowed him to educate black veterans on their rights at all-day workshops that did not require the attendees to be students of the college. Even though black vets returned home armed with the GI Bill that exempted them from paying college tuition, the Southern Regional Council reported widespread denial of veteran's benefits associated in post-war Mississippi. At these meetings, Bender told veterans that the only way to obtain GI benefits was through the ballot; "Veterans See Need to Vote to Obtain Proper Share of GI Benefits," *Jackson Advocate*, May 4, 1946.

⁶⁸ Testimony of William Bender, NAACP Files, Part 18, Series A, Reel 1.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Campaign Expenditures*, 136.

⁷¹ Parham should have been exempt from having to re-register under a Mississippi statute that allowed previous registrants to continue to vote with a receipt of their initial registration. *Campaign Expenditures*, 128.

man, you are making a mistake. You are fixing to get into serious trouble. Don't you know if you go down there [to register] they are [still] not going to let you vote?" Parham told the man, "If they won't let me vote, I will try [anyway]." When he approached the registrar's office in Magnolia, Parham stated, a group of whites shoved him off the sidewalk and accused him of being drunk. The police immediately arrested him and detained him until the polls closed.⁷²

Parham's motivations for voting are particularly revealing and add a deeper understanding to black civil rights efforts in the post-war period. Parham told the committee that he wanted to vote because of a statement released by Attorney General Tom Clark before the election in which Clark pledged, "if any colored people was molested or tried to keep from voting, why, he would prosecute it, and I wanted to get the ballot, and I had made up my mind to vote."⁷³

Sixty-six year old Meredith Lewis, also from McComb, provided additional evidence of elder participation in post-war voting rights efforts. Lewis told the committee that even though he had been registered since 1927, when he arrived at the polls on July 2 the registrar did not allow him to vote. Lewis stated that the passage of the House Bill exempting veterans from paying poll-taxes had the greatest effect on his decision to vote. Lewis explained, "After I found out that the law had passed that the Negroes would be able to vote.... Were permitted to vote without paying taxes....Of course I had been a taxpayer....And I thought if my registration was good, why I could vote too."⁷⁴

R.S..Bostick, a seventy-two year old minister from Grenada, took the stand and reaffirmed the defiance of elder blacks in the post-war civil rights movement. When he

⁷² Ibid., 127-136.

⁷³ Ibid., 135.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 159.

arrived at the courthouse in Grenada, a janitor told him “they hadn’t gotten ready...hadn’t built the booths.”⁷⁵ Bostick waited across the street and saw “a white gentlemen come in and he walked right up and voted.”⁷⁶ After nearly forty-five minutes, Bostick returned to the polling booth and met a group of “judges” who sat at a long wooden table.

As I was going across [to register at the courthouse] I met the sheriff of the county and another gentleman with him, they called me over...and says ‘Bob say you come over to vote?’ I says ‘Yes, sir.’ ‘Well,’ he says ‘you are eligible and you are the only Negro in the county that’s eligible to vote.’ He says ‘I’m advising you not to attempt to vote. If you do you are going to cause trouble, and you will be the only one that will be the cause of it’....I say, ‘if there be any trouble you are the only one I have to come to for protection.’⁷⁷

Bostick’s testimony stunned the audience in the Jackson courtroom as he recounted his long-history of civil rights activism that stretched “way back yonder when the Constitution was changed.”⁷⁸

Testimony from the hearing also alluded to the importance of white women in physically upholding Mississippi’s racial status quo in the post-war period. Meridian shoe repairman S.J. Lovelady recalled that even though he had never experienced previous difficulties at the polls and had actually voted in previous elections, when he arrived at the courthouse on July 2, a white woman told him to hand over his ballot. He defiantly told the woman “No; for what reason? I am supposed to put my ballot in the box.” The woman replied, “No, you can’t put your ballot in the box...the Democratic Party has challenged all colored votes...I am instructed to put all colored ballots in an envelope.”⁷⁹ Lovelady recalled that the woman then separated his vote from the other ballots and told

⁷⁵ Ibid., 327.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 327-328.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 328.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 67.

him that if he had questions on why his vote had been segregated, he could show up at the courthouse later in the day.⁸⁰

When Lovelady returned to the courthouse later that day, he saw that everyone had left the polling station except for a small group of white men. Believing that the group might harm him if he attempted to inquire about his ballot, Lovelady left the courthouse. As he walked away, the group approached him and asked if he had been allowed to vote. When Lovelady replied that he had not, a member of the group said “It is a damn dirty shame....The colored boys have fought this war just like we white boys....If you were qualified and had your poll tax receipt, you have got as much right to vote as I or any other white man.”⁸¹ The interesting statement by the white man highlights a growing sentiment among at least a handful of whites in Mississippi that blacks should have the right to vote.

James W. Hunter told a similar account of election day obstruction at the hands of white women, and stated that after he filled out a ballot at the Lauderdale courthouse, a white woman “told me to hand the ballot to her.”⁸² Hunter confronted the woman about the segregation of his ballot and she told him “that she was instructed by the officers to put all colored votes in an envelope.”⁸³ Hunter told the committee that he was confident that his vote would not be counted.⁸⁴

Testimony such as Hunter’s and Lovelady’s evidence the fact that, white women held direct responsibility for denying black ballots in the post-war period. As Elizabeth McRae points out, “rising southern conservatism of the postwar era appealed to some

⁸⁰ Ibid., 67-68.

⁸¹ Ibid., 69.

⁸² Ibid., 74.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

women in a...fundamental way” in which they sought “to protect their domestic and political authority from the South’s old and new demons.”⁸⁵ McRae describes the defensive measures used by white women as being reinforced through a philosophy of “public motherhood identity,” which Bilbo directly challenged in his campaign speeches in which he alluded to the sexual abominations that would surely follow black political equality. In one such speech Bilbo proclaimed “I don’t mind having the nigger for my brother in Christ, but I’m damned if I want him for my son-in-law.”⁸⁶ Bilbo’s speeches evidence Danielle McGuire’s observation that “the closer a black man got to a ballot box, the more he looked like a rapist.”⁸⁷

Testimony from the hearing also evidenced features of the civil rights movement that would become prominent during the 1950s including the Citizens’ Council, family activism, and the benefits of being a non-veteran activist. J.D. Collins’s election day account of voter obstruction evidenced an early progenitor of the White Citizen’s Council, a prominent group in Mississippi’s later civil rights struggle, that Neil McMillen describes as the “uptown Klan” which used economic and social sanctions to coerce blacks into complying with community “norms.”⁸⁸ During his testimony, Collins recounted his role as a leader in Greenwood’s black community; educating residents of Greenwood, many of whom were veterans, on how to register. Collins remarked that he

⁸⁵ For more on the roles of women in upholding white supremacy see also Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) and Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), chapter 8; Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, “To Save a Home: Nell Battle Lewis and the Rise of Southern Conservatism, 1941-1956,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 81, 3 (July 2004): 261.

⁸⁶ “‘The Man’ from Mississippi - Bilbo,” *New York Times*, June 30, 1946; McRae, 262.

⁸⁷ Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 58 Quoted in McGuire, 54.

⁸⁸ Neil McMillen, *The Citizens’ Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 360.

had “organized the veterans...I advised them that they didn’t have to pay a poll tax for 2 years, and advised them to go up and get registered and vote.”⁸⁹

Collins told the committee that he “wanted the good will of our good white citizens” and decided to contact a group of them before the election.⁹⁰ As the election drew near, the group of “officials” to whom Collins had reached out called on him for a meeting. Collins stated that the group “was the upper-class men I might say, and naturally two of the men I admire and respect highly.”⁹¹ The men handed Collins a list of thirty two names and told him that “there had never been any disturbances there in the city and they didn’t want any...Mr. Bilbo had made those threatening speeches....And they referred about how he had created a disturbance and... wanted everything to go on peaceable.”⁹² The whites then instructed Collins to do his best to keep blacks in Greenwood from the polls on July 2.

Ellender attempted use Collins’s description of the Citizen’s Council-esque group to deflect responsibility from Bilbo by asking, “In other words, [black disfranchisement] was done by the local white people?” Hickenlooper came to the defense of Collins and asked, “But it was at least partially the result of certain speeches and statements that Senator Bilbo had made that stirred people up?”⁹³ When Collins answered affirmatively, Burnet Maybank quickly rallied to Bilbo’s defense and argued that the white primary had always been a tradition in Mississippi, and if blacks had been so keenly interested in politics, why did they not previously voted in greater numbers. Collins posited “They just don’t much want you to do that...each time that I went up to vote a lady told me that I

⁸⁹ *Campaign Expenditures*, 248

⁹⁰ *Campaign Expenditures*, 246.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 247.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 249.

wasn't registered. Well, I knew I was."⁹⁴ Collins evidenced the effect that the council had on blacks in Greenwood, remarking that "two or three of them boys [Voter's League members] were threatened on their job about it and asked not to go."⁹⁵

Committee attorney Louis Wyman cross-examined Collins and further attempted to deflect criticism from Bilbo. Wyman asked, "Didn't this committee tell you that Senator Bilbo's speeches had stirred up the poor whites?...and that it was in your interest, that they didn't want any trouble to come from these poor whites?"⁹⁶ By making scapegoats out of Bilbo's poor white constituency, the Senator could not be blamed for how the uneducated masses acted after hearing his speeches. Ellender believed that he could successfully discredit Collins's testimony by asking Collins to name the individuals on the Greenwood council. To Ellender's surprise however, Collins willingly gave the names of the committee members, which included the mayor of the city and a "prominent attorney."⁹⁷

Thomas Guyot's testimony evidenced the importance of familial activism in civil rights causes, which laid the groundwork for many prominent civil rights leaders in the traditional post-*Brown v. Board* (1954) narrative of the movement. Guyot, a veteran, local carpenter, and member of George Strype's Catholic congregation in Pass Christian, reported to the committee that a man stopped him on his way into the courthouse on July 2 and told him that he could not vote because the election committee had ruled that "no negroes would vote today."⁹⁸ Even though Guyot did not remain on the stand for a long period of time, his participation in voting rights activism reflects the importance of

⁹⁴ Ibid., 250.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 248.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 251.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 254.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 154.

familial encouragement in evolving post-war Mississippi's civil rights movement.

Guyot's activism would be continued in succeeding years by his son Lawrence who would, along with Fannie Lou Hamer, lead the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to Atlantic City in 1964 in an effort to obtain equal representation at the Democratic Party's National Convention.⁹⁹

Guyot's testimony exemplifies civil rights activist Aaron Johnson's statement that, "You've always had families that were not afraid...and they just talked to their immediate family and let them know... 'you're somebody... You can't express it right now but you keep this in mind." Guyot's involvement at the hearing and in July 2 voting rights efforts also underscores Johnson's point that "the movement of the 1960s was built on earlier work...it was able to draw resources and inspiration from older organizations and activists but also in the sense that it was able to draw some of its most important members from families...grooming its members for such roles."¹⁰⁰

Testimony from Joseph Bivins illustrated the leniency with which non-veterans could maneuver in the racially charged atmosphere of post-war Mississippi as less-visible transgressors of white supremacy. As Robin Kelley's argues, non-veterans, through their perceived image as non-threatening, were afforded with greater autonomy and the ability to work within the white power structure as invisible actors in the campaign to destroy white supremacy.¹⁰¹ Bivins, told the court that he voted without incident, and when asked

⁹⁹ Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007).

¹⁰⁰ Quote from interview with Aaron Johnson conducted by Charles Payne in Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 207-208.

¹⁰¹ Emilye Crosby makes a similar argument in Emilye Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 9; Robin D.G. Kelley, "We Are Not What We Seem: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of American History* 80, (June 1993): 76.

by Ellender why the registrar allowed him to vote when other blacks from his town had been denied, Bivins explained that a majority of the individuals turned away by the registrar had been veterans who were not allowed to vote because of their symbolic status in both black and white communities.¹⁰²

Ever since the first testifier had taken the stand, the hearing appeared to clearly be biased in Bilbo's favor. Ellender constantly badgered testifiers and cut testimonies short that implicated Bilbo. At one point, Ellender refused to allow a testifier to recall a story of election day violence telling the man, "I don't believe the committee would want to hear any of that."¹⁰³ As the hearings progressed, Bilbo's attitude began to mirror Ellender's, and despite the somber subject matter, reporters noted that Bilbo "seemed in good humor and smiled broadly as the witnesses told of the scare his campaign oratory had thrown into the Negroes in Mississippi."¹⁰⁴ Even with such terrifying testimonies as those given by S.J. Dickey and Joseph Parham, the mood in the Jackson courthouse continued to lighten and by the end of day two reporters remarked that, "He [Bilbo] and Mr. Ellender began to exchange winks as questions were fired at witnesses."¹⁰⁵ The jovial mood spread to white courtroom attendees, whose laughter briefly stopped proceedings.¹⁰⁶

The NAACP, however, remained optimistic that some of the testimonies hit-home with committee members. Charles Houston indicated that the organization's presence at the hearings had "given heart to many Negroes who are familiar with NAACP," and told

¹⁰² *Campaign Expenditures*, 82.

¹⁰³ *Campaign Expenditures*, 24.

¹⁰⁴ "20 Negroes Blame Vote Ban on Bilbo," *New York Times*, December 3, 1946.

¹⁰⁵ "Mississippi Leans on Bilbo Inquiry," *New York Times*, December 2, 1946.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

the head office that it was important to “continue to evidence strong support of the local people when they are asked to stick their necks out.”¹⁰⁷

The committee relinquished the floor to Bilbo on the final day of the hearing. The courtroom fell silent as eager whites and blacks listened in anticipation of what promised to be an unhinged racial tirade that would no doubt make headlines across the country. Bilbo asked the committee for permission to read a prepared statement “without interruption,” and after Ellender consented, Bilbo began.¹⁰⁸ Bilbo told the court that he had read “and analyzed the complaint filed by the committee,” and denied the affidavits of black voters declaring, “It has been my contention...that no Negro was qualified to vote in a Democratic primary even if qualified to vote in a general election.”¹⁰⁹

Since the first day when he made his perfunctory statement that he expected to have “the time of his life,” Bilbo gradually came to realize that the hearing had received a large amount of press coverage and national attention. He attempted to use his closing speech as a means to gain support not only from southern committee members, but also from southern newspaper readers at large; couching campaign oratory merely as a defense of southern and American ideals. Bilbo argued that civil rights organizations sought to “deter hereafter any man who dares to contend for things...that are purely southern” and asked the court “Surely the time has not come when a man shall be denied the constitutional right of freedom of speech in expressing his honest beliefs and convictions?”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Memorandum from Marion Wynn Perry to Walter White, December 2, 1946, NAACP Files Unseating Bilbo, part 18, series b, reel 4.

¹⁰⁸ *Campaign Expenditures*, 333.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 334, 338-339.

Despite having just declared that he thought blacks should never have the right to vote even if they qualified to do so, he denied that his

Campaign was ruthless in any respect...and den[ied] that it was the purpose, object, design, and calculation to effectively deprive and deny the duly qualified Negro electors of Mississippi of their constitutional rights, privileges, and immunities to register and vote and otherwise legally participate in said primary election.¹¹¹

Bilbo continued to contradict himself and denied that he

Exhorted, agitated, and made any inflammatory appeals to the passions and prejudices of the white population of Mississippi to foster, stimulate, inspire, create, and intensify a state of acute and aggravated tension between white and Negro races in the state of Mississippi. I want to say right here off the record that the Negroes of Mississippi have never had a better friend.¹¹²

Bilbo believed wholesale denial of election-day acts would provide him with the most effective means of retaining his Senate seat, and took his testimony to the ends of perjury by denying “there were any attacks or acts of violence or intimidation, as charged in the petition and complaint.”¹¹³

Bilbo placed the responsibility for any violence that might have occurred on election day on “outside agitators,” and even indicted civil rights groups for fabricating the complaints, telling the committee that leaders of the NAACP and CRC “should be held accountable...for spreading propaganda.”¹¹⁴

Just as he had done in his August radio interview, Bilbo methodically denied every newspaper article that covered his inflammatory speeches and closed his tirade with the hope that the committee “in all justice will deny this petition in toto and give me

¹¹¹ Ibid., 335.

¹¹² Ibid., 335.

¹¹³ Ibid., 336.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 338.

the exoneration that the record both justifies and requires, and my full confidence in the membership of this committee leads me to believe that this will promptly be done.”¹¹⁵

While Bilbo committed perjury on the floor of Jackson’s federal building, the impact of the hearing could already be felt on a national level. On December 5, President Truman announced from Washington the creation of a committee on Civil Rights to “make recommendations for legislation or other means of strengthening the Federal Government’s hand in dealing with such problems as racial discrimination and mob violence.”¹¹⁶ Even though Truman did not explicitly state that hearings had been his primary motivation for creating the committee, many speculated that the publicity surrounding Bilbo’s hearing played no small part in the President’s decision. One headline claimed “Truman Tries FDR Timing Trick in Naming Committee,” and declared that Truman created the committee in order to “put the White House on high ground in case the Senate Investigating Committee, headed by Louisiana’s Allen Ellender, exonerates his Mississippi colleague.”¹¹⁷

Another reporter saw a clear connection between Bilbo’s hearing and Truman’s actions and stated that the President’s language “suggested such examples as the recent lynching of four Negroes in Walton County, Georgia...and current charges that Negroes were kept away from the polls in Mississippi by intimidation” were the primary motivational factors for the committee’s creation.¹¹⁸ Truman’s statement in which he declared, “freedom from fear and the democratic institutions that sustain it are...under attack. In some places...individuals- sometimes ex-servicemen, even women have been

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 340-344.

¹¹⁶ “Truman Creates Civil Rights Board,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1946.

¹¹⁷ “Truman Tries FDR Timing Trick in Naming Committee,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, December 14, 1946.

¹¹⁸ “Truman Creates Civil Rights Board,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1946.

killed, maimed or intimidated” seemed to quietly hint at Mississippi’s primary.¹¹⁹ Despite his attempts to win black support, Truman seemed to be steadily losing credibility with the majority of blacks throughout the nation who came to notice a “two-faced” nature in the President’s rhetoric regarding civil rights.

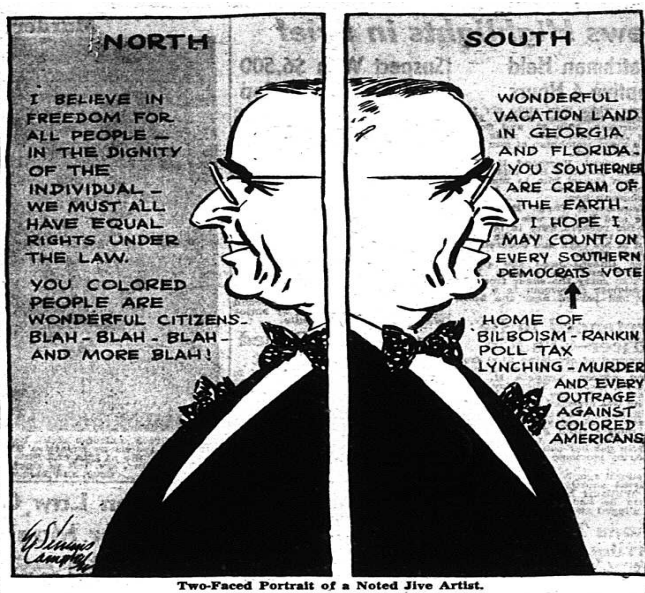


Illustration 7.
Disparities between Truman’s rhetoric and action on behalf of black civil rights cost him black support by the end of 1946. (*Philadelphia Afro-American* December 7, 1946)

Back in Jackson, Bilbo’s demeanor quickly changed after he finished his polished defense, which had largely masked the Senator’s virulently racist beliefs. When asked by Senator Thomas to approximate on the percentage of “native-born” Mississippians, Bilbo told the Senator that he believed Mississippi housed “a larger native-born Anglo-Saxon stock [90-95%] than any other state in the Union, save South Carolina.”¹²⁰ Thomas asked Bilbo if he included Mississippi’s colored population in that estimate, and Bilbo revealed his true colors, “Yes. Practically all niggers are native-born.”¹²¹ The committee continued to ask Bilbo questions that spawned intense reactions from Bilbo, which effectively

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ *Campaign Expenditures*, 344.

¹²¹ Ibid., 345.

illustrated the Senator's deep-seated hatred of the black race. Quotations of Bilbo's epithets including when he declared that "these nigger newspapers and others were trying to intimidate the public officials in their attempts to enforce the law.... I have no apologies to make when I say that I believe in white supremacy, and I believe in white control, and I believe in the superiority of the white race over the nigger race" drew national attention from blacks across the country and required the President to explicitly address civil rights issues for the remainder of his term.¹²² After Bilbo's tirade, and a few closing statements from whites who largely reaffirmed Bilbo's denials, the committee adjourned; bringing an end to an intense four days for Mississippi's black population.

¹²² Ibid., 346-347.

Epilogue

Bilbo's Election and Civil Rights History

The harrowing spectacle of the hearings and the testimony given by both veterans and non-veterans reverberated throughout the nation's media outlets. Scores of African Americans in Mississippi and throughout the South registered to vote and joined civil rights organizations in hopes of using the attention to force the nation into recognizing the pervading inequalities of southern life. In response, southern white politicians began to implement harsher and increasingly radical forms of suffrage restriction. Black political power in the North, strengthened and solidified by the hearings and other acts of violence in the South throughout 1946, forced Truman to implement a liberal platform toward black civil rights that would have far-reaching implications for the remainder of his own term in office as well the efforts of future civil rights activists.

Details from the hearings gained press coverage throughout the country, and Bilbo's prestige in the eyes of many southern whites rose exponentially. His image as a defender of southern "traditions" in the face of a federal investigation transformed him from simply a champion of white supremacy into a saint in the eyes of many; causing one reporter to state that "if the Senate declines to seat Theodore G. Bilbo...he can have the nomination again, if he wishes, or the Governorship, according to freely expressed opinion in Mississippi tonight." "Opposition candidates would be few," the reporter declared and "an opponent would immediately be labeled 'pro-Negro voters' and 'pro-outside interference.'"¹

¹ "Mississippi Ready to Rename Bilbo," *New York Times*, January 5, 1947.

Bilbo flew back to Washington to face a second investigation by the Senate War Investigating Subcommittee for his alleged illegal dealings with war contractors, but remained confident that neither committee would be able to bar him from his seat. He boasted, "They haven't even got a scratch against me."² Even if the Senate denied him his seat, Bilbo claimed, he would file and win a suit against the legislative body using a precedent set by the Senate Elections Committee nearly a decade prior known as the *Langer* decision.³

A more pressing matter, however, concerning Bilbo's election negated the Committee's reports. Since the mid-term elections, Republicans controlled the Senate and, after roll-call, would hold the votes necessary to oust Bilbo. This would only come to fruition if Republicans could manage to seat and swear-in their Senators before Bilbo's name could be called. Normally, the Senate operated their roll-call system alphabetically by last name. Bilbo's name was typically called in the beginning of the procedure, and this term, he would be the second man sworn in behind newly elected Connecticut Republican Raymond Baldwin. Once the Senate swore in Baldwin, however, the ratio of Republicans to Democrats would be thirty to thirty and if another Senator introduced a motion not to seat Bilbo, the vote on unseating "The Man" would end in a deadlock.⁴

Realizing the predicament at hand, Republicans threatened to read the roll-call roster in

² "Bilbo Predicts Victory," *New York Times*, December 16, 1946.

³ William Langer had a long political career in North Dakota holding various positions including governor, attorney general and Senator. In 1941, citizens of North Dakota charged the Senator with bribery, "receiving kickbacks," and leasing government property. The Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections investigated the charges and sent a majority report recommending that Langer be excluded from Senate by a simple majority vote. The Senate rejected the first part of the Committee's report, ruling that Langer's expulsion would require a two-thirds vote, not a simple majority and when voting opened, the Senate decided 52-30 not to expel Langer since voters knew that he had been indicted for embezzlement during a previous term in office; See "The Expulsion Case of William Langer of North Dakota (1942)," in Anne Butler and Wendy Wolff, *United States Senate Election, Expulsion and Censure Cases: 1793-1990* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1995), pp. 368-370; "Bilbo Plays Star Role in Colorful Capital Drama," *New York Times*, December 22, 1946;

⁴ "Bilbo Predicts Victory," *New York Times*, December 16, 1946.

reverse so as to swear in a substantial number of their newly appointed Senators before swearing in Bilbo and therefore successfully deny Bilbo his seat.⁵

At the end of December, indications seemed clear that the three Democratic committee members would file majority reports advocating that Bilbo be seated on the ground that he “merely followed the customs of the Southern States in advocating a white primary.” Republican members Bridges and Hickenlooper were determined, however, to keep Bilbo from his seat and reporters throughout the country assured anti-Bilboists that “the overturn in Senate control...insures that the minority reports...will secure full attention.”⁶ Legislators readied themselves for a deadlock and a possible shut down of the Senate. Southern Democrats, however, met opposition in the call to keep Bilbo seated from northern Democrats who had promised their constituents Bilbo’s head. Southern Democrats attempted to assuage some of the apprehension of their northern brethren by telling them that “this is no demagogue issue. It’s a state’s rights issue and an issue of the Constitution of the United States.”⁷

On January 3, 1947, the election committee sent its reports to the Senate, the same day that the legislative body reconvened. As expected, Democrats Ellender, Maybank, and Thomas submitted majority reports alleging that Bilbo was guilty of nothing more than using “crude and tasteless campaign oratory” and defended Bilbo’s campaign rhetoric in which he told whites to “use any means necessary” as an outgrowth of anxiety Bilbo held about “outside agitation” from civil rights groups and the liberal media; both of whom had been “interfering” in the state’s affairs prior to the election. Republicans Bridges and Hickenlooper submitted minority reports declaring that Bilbo should be

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “GOP Steering Body Will Act on Bilbo,” *New York Times*, December 31, 1946.

⁷ “Filibuster Plan Outlined,” *New York Times*, January 3, 1947.

denied his seat since he violated federal law when he used intimidating speech to keep African Americans away from the polls. The minority reports also alleged that by conducting his campaign in such a manner, Bilbo violated the Hatch Act, the Constitution, and the Federal Criminal Code. A day earlier, the Senate received the report from the second of Bilbo's investigative committees, the Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program, which had been signed by six of the nine members and declared that "Bilbo used his Senate office for his own personal gain." In doing so, the report alleged, Bilbo had obtained amenities from war contractors that included a Cadillac, a swimming pool and a man-made lake; the estimated cost of which totaled between fifty-seven and eighty-eight thousand dollars.⁸

After giving what careful consideration they could to the reports in the time allotted, the Senate convened on January 3; forced with the issue of addressing Bilbo's seat. Immediately following the opening prayer, Glen Taylor (D-Idaho) proposed that Bilbo be barred from taking his seat until the Committee on Rules and Administration could review the investigations. Taylor, joined by Robert Taft (R-Ohio) and other Republican political leaders, argued that ample precedent existed for Bilbo to be asked to step down based on corruption charges alone. After a quick vote, the Senate determined 38-20 that it would table Taylor's suggestion, and debate began.⁹

The Senate could not reach a verdict on Bilbo for the remainder of the day, and when it reconvened the next morning, southern Democrats filibustered Senatorial proceedings so that roll could not even be called. However, influential Senators Alben Barkley (D-Kentucky) and Robert Taft met with Bilbo and brokered an agreement that

⁸ "The Election Case of Theodore G. Bilbo of Mississippi (1947)," in Butler and Wolff, 103-33.

⁹ "Bilbo is Held Off; Senate is Stalled," *New York Times*, January 4, 1947; Butler and Wolff, 103-133.

put the issue of Bilbo's seat indefinitely on hold. The Senate agreed to let Bilbo travel to New Orleans for an immediate operation to remove cancerous tissue on both his jaw and cheeks which, Bilbo estimated, would require at least two months of rest and recuperation.¹⁰ During this time, the Senate determined, Bilbo would still receive his salary and his seating issue would be left "on the table without prejudice...until such time...that the Mississippi Senator was well enough to reappear."¹¹

Blacks throughout the nation hailed the Senate's decision as a victory and while many voiced their discontent over the agreement to pay Bilbo during his convalescence, one editor believed that "in Bilbo's case, the money is well-spent." The editor further noted that even if Bilbo returned after his operation, opposition to his seat would mount to such a degree during his absence that he would be denied his seat due to the issue's importance in the burgeoning Cold War. The editor remarked that the debate to unseat Bilbo, if it ever resumed, would not just symbolize a fight against one man but would become "a fight against the violation of certain principles of morality and decency" that placed "the Senate, more than Bilbo," on trial before the nation and the rest of the world.¹²

However, the NAACP and some other African Americans viewed the Senate's verdict as a shameful act that allowed the Senator to save face. Calls for Bilbo's indictment continued throughout early February as some believed "The Man" could be prosecuted for his dealings with war contractors which would "be a fitting end to his

¹⁰ "Compromise Wins," *New York Times*, January 5, 1947.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² "Bilbo Takes it on the Jaw," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, January 11, 1947.

career.”¹³ The NAACP vigorously pressed the Justice Department to review the briefs from the hearing in hopes that Bilbo might be indicted based on the testimony from the sixty-nine black testifiers, and even attempted to prevent the United States Treasury from paying Bilbo’s salary while he was out of office “for services which [he is] not rendering.” In the months that followed, the NAACP also lobbied the justice department to prosecute registrars and election officials who testified at the hearing to denying blacks their votes.¹⁴

No prosecutions followed, but reports from Mississippi seemed to indicate that Bilbo’s hearings had caused a political awakening amongst African Americans throughout the state. Only a month after the Senate’s decision on Bilbo, a witness from Mississippi stated that “the county tax collector’s office has been thronged with Negroes. They frequently arrive in groups of from a dozen to forty...In a majority of cases, they succeed in passing the severe questioning of the registrar.”¹⁵ NAACP field secretary LeRoy Carter reported to Walter White that “in spite of this type of open intimidation, Negroes in the larger cities are registering or making attempts to register in fairly large numbers.”¹⁶ Shocked at the mere possibility of blacks registering en-masse, headlines that read “White Supremacy is in Peril” attempted to goad Mississippi whites into action.¹⁷ Future coverage of “the great registration” revealed the crucial role of African American teachers in the fight for voting rights. Unbeknownst to most white southerners

¹³ “Indictment of Garssons May Foreshadow Fate Facing Bilbo,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, February 8, 1947.

¹⁴ Letter from Thurgood Marshall to Attorney General Tom Clark, January 23, 1947, NAACP Files, part 18, series b, reel 4; Memorandum to Thurgood Marshall from Walter White, January 11, 1947, NAACP Files, part 18, series b, reel 4; Letter from Thurgood Marshall to Charles Houston, January 14, 1947, NAACP Files part 18, series b, reel 4.

¹⁵ “Mississippi Sees Negro Votes Rise,” *New York Times*, February 2, 1947.

¹⁶ Letter from LeRoy Carter to Walter White, February 3, 1947, NAACP Files, Voting Rights 1916-1950, part 4, reel 9.

¹⁷ “White Supremacy is in Peril,” *Jackson Daily News*, January 29, 1947.

for the past decade black teachers had been requiring their students to memorize both the state and federal constitutions in “a parrot-like manner until they are letter perfect” in hopes of having even more African Americans registered by the next election.¹⁸

Early descriptions on the frenzy of black registration in Mississippi struck fear into the hearts of Mississippi state officials. Statements declaring that “40,000 negroes [in Mississippi] had paid poll taxes by the deadline last Saturday,” and “records in the Sheriff’s and Circuit Clerk’s office indicate that of the 16,000 expected registrants about 10 percent will be Negroes” heightened their sense of immediacy in preventing blacks from voting.¹⁹ The racial fears of Mississippi’s politicians reached such a pitch that they believed “the mounting number of Negroes paying poll taxes in preparation for voting in the primaries [of 1947]... [heightens] the need for a special legislative session against the alleged ‘menace’ of Negro voting in Democratic primaries.”²⁰ Some searched the legal system for ways to buttress the eroding white primary, and ideas concerning state-sanctioned restrictions on African American voting entered political discourse in Mississippi. Some constitutional lawyers offered up the solution of making political parties into private clubs that would enable the state’s Democratic Party to determine the eligibility of voters.²¹

In the months following the hearing, Bilbo and Mississippi became the focus and ridicule of blacks across the nation as Bilbo began to appear as a staple in African American theater performances. In February, African American comedians Vivian Harris

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “Negroes Gaining Mississippi Vote,” *New York Times*, February 7, 1947.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The move to make the political parties into private clubs was abandoned after it was discovered that a provision in the state constitution prevented the legislature from altering primary laws to such an extent as to mirror the “South Carolina Plan” instituted following the *Smith* decision in that state which eliminated all primary election laws and turned the Democratic party into a private club; “Mississippi Assays Negro Vote Plans,” *New York Times*, March 10, 1947.

and Tim Moore crafted a one act play that centered on a river boat ride that turned out badly for everyone except Bilbo. The performance clearly referenced the Senate's decision to leave Bilbo in office that created a dangerous situation for Mississippi's black population. One caption for the performance declared "Bilbo had his ticket but missed the boat."²² Bilbo reached an even wider audience later that spring when he became the topic of a Broadway musical *Finian's Rainbow*, which centered on a white "Bilboish Senator with an evil heart" who is changed to a black man by a leprechaun and "is forced to live the life of a sharecropper."²³

In response to the apparent growth of registered black voters, Mississippi legislators passed two new primary laws in March that directly attacked black suffrage. The first of the two laws targeted African American political allegiance, and required that a voter who had not participated in at least three primaries of the party to which they claimed allegiance needed to "prove that he is in accord with the statement of principles of the party" if they wished to vote. In order to be considered eligible by the new standards, African Americans now had to not only memorize both the state and federal constitutions, but also had to know the Democratic Party platform and be able to recite it without equivocation. The second law created committees for both Republican and Democratic parties that would handle voter grievances and charges of voting rights abuses independent of the court system. This law took aim at the reaction of blacks to the previous year's primary and was deliberately instituted to circumvent government

²² "But Bilbo Missed the Boat!" *Philadelphia Afro-American*, February 15, 1947.

²³ "'Finian's Rainbow' Broadway Satire, Scorns Jim Crow and Bilboish Senator," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, April 19, 1947.

involvement in Mississippi's elections.²⁴ The new laws exemplified what Jason Morgan Ward terms "[a] shift toward a consciously segregationist backlash" that became prevalent in the wake of Bilbo's campaign and hearing.²⁵

As tensions in the South began to focus sharply on black ballots, Truman met with the Civil Rights Committee which had been conducting "closed public hearings" on civil rights abuses in the South during the previous spring. In the two day meeting at the White House, George Weaver, a member of the President's committee, urged Truman to create a permanent FEPC which would abate "a growing trend toward the abridgement of civil rights...in increased lynching and...police brutality." Truman refused to immediately adopt any of the recommendations, but played up the meeting in the press as evidence of his growing interest in civil rights issues.²⁶

Blacks in Mississippi, galvanized by their newly-found political voice and the "success" of unseating Bilbo, began to attack Bilbo's racist "right hand man" in the Senate, John Rankin. During the war Rankin made numerous remarks on the unfitness of African American troops and often used racial epithets during debates on the floor of the Senate. Beginning in March, letters flooded into the NAACP from across the country urging the organization to increase its efforts to unseat Rankin. Reverend Donald Harrington from New York commented that "it would be a fortunate year for tolerance

²⁴ House Bill No. 38, Mississippi Legislature, Extraordinary Session 1947, NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950, part 4, reel 9; Letter from T.B. Wilson to Walter White, July 14, 1947, NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950, part reel 9; "Mississippi Weighs Revision of White Primary Laws," *New York Times*, March 30, 1947.

²⁵ Ward, 90.

²⁶ "Truman Unit Urges Job Bias Law," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, April 12, 1947.

and democracy if we see Theodore Bilbo excluded from his seat in the Senate for helping to disfranchise Negroes and John Rankin convicted of Libel.”²⁷

Federal attention, combined with the pressure on southern legislators to maintain industries that set up shop in their states during the war, seemed to be paying dividends for African American civil rights efforts in Mississippi beginning in the spring of 1947.²⁸ In May, the Mississippi Supreme Court ordered officials in Smith County to release W.O. Craft from prison. Craft had been a friend of Johnny Craft who, along with several other friends, led an angry mob of 300 whites on a swamp-laden chase in Mississippi for three days after Bilbo’s election. The Supreme Court ruling signaled an important step by the government in its involvement in civil rights cases and was meant to show the nation, and more importantly business interests, that the region was not lawless.²⁹

In an effort to obtain some measure of the growing black electorate for his 1948 campaign, and to stave off criticism in the rapidly expanding Cold War that “Russia is the only country that deals fairly with minorities” Truman gave a speech on June 29 to the NAACP at their annual conference in Washington, DC.³⁰ The speech marked a milestone in civil rights history as it was the first time a President addressed the organization despite its existence since 1909. The speech received widespread media coverage as it was broadcast over international radio; and some foreign dignitaries even attended.³¹ In his speech, Truman directly addressed the mounting racial tensions in the South and

²⁷ Letter from Donald Harrington to all NAACP Branches, April 3, 1947, NAACP files part 18, series b, reel 4.

²⁸ James C. Cobb, *Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1990* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 35-64; Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 239-272.

²⁹ “Miss. High Court Frees W.O. Craft,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, May 10, 1947.

³⁰ “Truman Speech to be Broadcast Over World,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, June 28, 1947.

³¹ “Whole Nation Awaits Speech,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, June 28, 1947.

declared that “it is more important today than ever before to insure that all Americans enjoy these [civil] rights. And when I say all Americans, I mean all Americans.”³²

Truman assured that crowd that even though the task ahead would not be an easy one, the federal government could be counted on to lead the way. The speech immediately struck an important chord with many African Americans who were enamored with the force, clarity, and unequivocal nature of the speech. The editor of the *Afro-American* admired that Truman addressed the issue of civil rights directly, and told readers that “the President made it plain that he is strongly in favor of Federal anti-lynching legislation and the unrestricted use of the ballot,” adding that the President’s statements were “something we have been waiting a long time to hear.”³³

With state primary elections only a month away, African Americans remained skeptical of whether their rights would be upheld. Unlike Bilbo’s election the previous summer, however, blacks felt a sharply different sense of despair. Many did not anticipate violence on election day but believed that their votes would still go uncounted due to Mississippi’s new laws. T.B. Wilson declared that “we are getting ready to defend ourselves if necessary” and members of the NAACP attempted to persuade national headquarters to file a “test case” before the election that would “straighten out” voting rights issues in the state.³⁴ In addition to pre-election reports which exacerbated racial animosity by declaring that between six and twelve thousand black Mississippians readied themselves to vote, blacks in Mississippi found themselves in an ethical dilemma due to the new legislation. Blacks realized that if they wanted a better chance at being

³² “Full Text of President Truman’s Address,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, July 5, 1947.

³³ “Civil Rights, Human Freedom,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, July 5, 1947.

³⁴ Letter from T.B. Wilson to Walter White, July 14, 1947, NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950, part 4 reel 9; Letter from Daniel E. Byrd to Robert Carter, July 6, 1947, NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950, part 4, reel 9.

able to vote, they would have to declare their allegiance the Democratic Party; a political party that opposed federal anti-poll tax legislation and an FEPC bill.³⁵

Unlike the previous summer's election, positive indications came from Washington that the federal government would do its part to uphold Truman's promise that the government would lead the fight for black civil rights. The same month as the Mississippi primary, the House voted, in its greatest majority ever, to pass an anti-poll tax bill. One reporter commented that despite the likelihood of a southern filibuster, the House vote represented "at least a moral victory" for civil rights activists.³⁶ Other reports that summer indicated a changing attitude throughout the nation toward civil rights for blacks. The Tuskegee Institute reported that there had been an overall curb in lynchings in the past decade and that while even a few lynchings were too many for the nation to ignore, more lynchings had been prevented in the past decade (273) than had been committed. The Institute further noted that the number of African American police officers rose substantially over the past year in some of the deepest southern states including Georgia and Florida. The press surrounding Bilbo's election and hearing and the federal interest garnered by the violence in Mississippi and the South as a whole had let loose a formidable force of social and political change upon the South.³⁷

Mississippians shuffled to the polls on August 5 and newspapers, as they had done the previous summer, reported no instances of violence. T.B. Wilson declared that "voting is going better for the colored people than ever before. There have been some

³⁵ "Negroes Must Condemn U.S. Safeguards to Vote Today in Mississippi Primary," *New York Times*, August 5, 1947.

³⁶ "At Least a Moral Victory," *New York Times*, July 22, 1947.

³⁷ "Tuskegee Reports Curb in Lynchings," *New York Times*, July 26, 1947; "Employment of Negro Police is Spreading in Region," *New York Times*, July 13, 1947.

turned down for reasons I don't think are exactly right-but the results are encouraging.”³⁸ After hearing reports later in the day that the black turnout in areas with traditionally high black election day participation had been low, Wilson told reporters that the results were “disappointing” and argued that “it is not because they are not interested... It may be that in other parts of the state they did not want to subscribe to [party] principles.”³⁹ From neighboring Alabama, the *Birmingham Herald* weighed-in on Mississippi's election stating that “the Mississippi Law... is a manifestation of trying to turn the clock back, a failure to face up to facts. The right to vote will be won eventually by all qualified citizens.” Despite the perceived climate of change in the South, the editor remarked that “it yet may be a long, difficult fight.”⁴⁰

Even without Bilbo inciting whites to use violence, the election was still marred by two reports of violent acts. One report from Laurel indicated a positive rather than a negative change in racial attitudes among Mississippi whites. The report referenced a fight between four white citizens. Two brothers, Walter and Ellis Gerald, attempted to coerce two white poll booth workers, Ransom and Otis Phillips, into letting African Americans vote. The atmosphere quickly turned from aggressive coercion to outright violence as the Gerald brothers opened fire on the Otises killing one and critically wounding the other.⁴¹

The second report, not widely covered by the press, contained a much bleaker message. The report described the lynching of local sawmill worker Versie Johnson, who

³⁸ “Negroes Must Condemn U.S. Safeguards to Vote Today in Mississippi Primary,” *New York Times*, August 5, 1947.

³⁹ “Most Negroes Unhampered in Mississippi Vote,” *Birmingham Herald*, August 6, 1947.

⁴⁰ “Mississippi Mud,” *Birmingham Herald*, August 7, 1947.

⁴¹ “Mississippi Aide in Primary Slain,” *New York Times*, August 7, 1947.

had reportedly been killed the evening before the primaries.⁴² After word spread of Johnson's murder, whites in Mississippi braced themselves for a wave of stories from African Americans that would reveal wholesale intimidation and voting rights abuses which would undoubtedly draw federal intervention. Unlike the previous election, however, no other reports of violence surfaced.

In the weeks following the election, the NAACP collected affidavits from the few blacks who attempted to vote and were turned away. Thomas D. Spencer sent an affidavit describing his election-day encounter with police officer Harold Ladner in Pass Christian. Spencer stated in the affidavit that, rather than resort to violence, the officer asked Spencer what he wanted and when Spencer told Ladner that he wanted to vote, the officer coldly replied "They are protesting your votes today, there will be no need of your staying here."⁴³ Elbert Murry told local NAACP officials in Meridian that he was intimidated by whites who attempted to coax him into "voluntarily" removing his name from the polls. After he refused, Murry stated that the whites told him "they had a hundred ways to get him if he voted." When he left, one of the men shouted at Murry, "If you niggers aren't satisfied with the way you're being treated, why don't you sell your land and go North where you can vote."⁴⁴ T.B. Wilson collected similar reports from MPVL members throughout the state and the NAACP immediately sent a letter to the justice department asking them to investigate.⁴⁵

⁴² "NY Group Demands FBI Investigate Miss Mobsters," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, August 16, 1947.

⁴³ Affidavit of Thomas Spencer sworn to and subscribed by E.J. Adams Jr. Notary Public Pass Christian, Mississippi on August 5, 1947, NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950, part 4 reel 9.

⁴⁴ Letter from Edward Knott to Marion Wynn Perry, November 18, 1947, NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950, part 4, reel 9.

⁴⁵ Memorandum to all Branches "Mississippi Voters Are Disqualified When They Approve FEPC Proposal," August 7, 1947, NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950, part 4, reel 9; Letter from T.B. Wilson to Thurgood Marshall, August 21, 1947, NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950, part 4, reel 9; Letter from Robert Carter to Tom Clark, August 11, 1947, NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950, part 4, reel 9.

The Justice Department, perhaps due to the new election laws that prohibited their interference in state elections, assured NAACP attorney Robert Carter that the affidavits he submitted would be given “careful study” and consideration, but no further action was taken in the matter.⁴⁶

From his hospital in New Orleans, things did not look bright for ailing Senator Bilbo. Weeks and operations had multiplied since his dishonorable discharge from Congress, and by late August it had become clear that Bilbo’s stay in New Orleans would be anything but temporary. On August 21, 1947, Theodore Bilbo passed away from complications associated with his battle against jaw cancer.⁴⁷ The black press hailed his death as removing “one more of the [racist] bloc” in congress that included previous members such as Huey Long and Eugene Talmadge. Reporters alleged that Bilbo’s death would provide a unique opportunity for racial matters to calm somewhat since the 1946 election and encouraged blacks in Mississippi to vote in the fall election of 1947 that would be held to fill Bilbo’s seat. “We are glad Bilbo’s gone,” the editor of the *Afro-American* quipped, “but certainly don’t want a successor who’ll be just as bad.”⁴⁸ A high black voter turn-out in the next election, many editors believed, might produce just enough votes to seat a candidate who held moderately progressive racial views, and could afford blacks more opportunities in post-war Mississippi.

Throughout September and the rest of the fall of 1947, blacks continued to use the momentum and attention garnered by Bilbo’s ousting to re-open their decades-long

⁴⁶ Letter from T. Vincent Quinn Assistant Attorney General to Robert Carter, August 18, 1947, NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950, part 4, reel 9.

⁴⁷ “Bilbo Dead at 69 of Heart Ailment,” *New York Times*, August 22, 1947.

⁴⁸ “Challenge to Mississippi,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, August 30, 1947.

struggle for anti-lynching and anti-poll tax bills.⁴⁹ However, the issue of filling Bilbo's vacant Senate seat took center stage as blacks vowed to place someone in the legislative body would give at least some credence to their growing political aspirations. As Robert Fleegler points out, after Bilbo's 1946 election and death in 1947 politicians in Mississippi could no longer be elected on an entirely white supremacist platform. The politician that could most effectively toe the line between all-out racism (which appealed to Bilbo's strong base of support among poor-whites) and a progressive tone toward African American civil rights (which appealed to Mississippi's business interests and the slowly increasing black electorate) would win.⁵⁰ John Stennis embraced this "new model" of the Mississippi politician. His artful maneuvering away from race-centered questions during the 1947 special election gained him support from former Bilbo stronghold counties, and also allowed him to accrue support from prominent white liberals and blacks including Hodding Carter and T.B. Wilson. Blacks saw Stennis as the most-favorable replacement to Bilbo since he appeared to only "mildly support white supremacy," and therefore could be considered, "the finest man in the campaign." Many viewed the former judge as "an old-fashioned southern gentleman who brings patience and understanding to racial questions."⁵¹ Needless to say, Stennis won the special election.

Stennis's election uncovered new struggles registered African Americans in Mississippi would encounter with their increased electoral power and participation. For instance, black voters understood that they needed to keep their support for Stennis out of

⁴⁹ "Anti-Lynch Law Asked," *New York Times*, September 21, 1947.

⁵⁰ Robert Fleegler, "Theodore G. Bilbo and the Decline of Public Racism," *Journal of Mississippi History*, 68, 1 (March 2006): 3-20.

⁵¹ "Successor to Bilbo Pledges 'New Day' in Mississippi," *New York Times*, November 9, 1947; "Bilbo's Successor Liked by Negroes," *New York Times*, November 6, 1947.

the media until after the election since a public declaration in favor of their candidate “would hurt [their candidate’s] chances in the rural areas where ‘white supremacy’ is an important factor.”⁵²

In December of 1947, the United States Supreme Court overturned the death sentence of black Mississippian Eddie Patton on the grounds that African Americans had been excluded from his trial jury. Patton, charged the previous year for killing a white man in Mississippi, maintained that the arresting officers extorted his confession from him. The Supreme Court’s decision forced Mississippi to retry Patton with blacks participating on the jury and opened a door, however small, for increased African American political and social equality throughout the country.⁵³

As political capital seemed to be increasing for African Americans throughout the South, white legislators in Mississippi resisted as much as possible. In the spring of 1948, Mississippi passed two more election laws aimed at wiping out black participation. The new laws made it mandatory for all voters to be “of good moral character” when they went to vote and also introduced the first literacy test to the state’s voting requirements. The laws made registration more subjective to the whims of the registrar and therefore presented more ambiguous and difficult hurdles to overcome.⁵⁴

1948 brought new challenges for the Truman administration which faced an election year and the President’s support within the black population was only cursory;

⁵²“Mississippi Shies From a ‘2D Bilbo,’” *New York Times*, September 15, 1947.

⁵³ A court case in New York involving George Moore and Lester Haughton was overturned based on this verdict, and in Mississippi, the third trial of Willie McGee for raping a white woman was overturned due to the same precedent; “Court Saves Negro Doomed By Whites,” *New York Times*, December 9, 1947. “2 Win Death Stay in Bronx Killing,” *New York Times*, December 27, 1947; “3D Mississippi Trial Given Doomed Negro,” *New York Times*, February 10, 1948.

⁵⁴Letter from Constance Baker Motley to Percy Greene, April 23, 1948, NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950, part 4 reel 9; “New Moves in the South to Restrict Negro Voting,” *New York Times*, April 25, 1948; “Morals in Mississippi,” *New York Herald Tribune*, April 10, 1948.

much of it coming immediately following his speech to the NAACP the previous summer. The large amount of northern blacks who held sway in key election states such as Pennsylvania and New York believed that the Republican Party offered their best chances at being granted a political voice. Throughout the past year and a half, the *Afro-American* had been running cartoons on its pages that declared it all but a certainty that GOP frontrunner Thomas Dewey would receive a majority of black votes. Black newspapers declared that 1948 left the GOP on “the threshold of its greatest opportunity.”⁵⁵ During his campaign, Dewey, played up his record of appointing blacks to government positions as evidence of his stance on civil rights and frequently made claims in election ads that he was “the best friend Negroes have had” since Abraham Lincoln.⁵⁶

Truman, however, took drastic steps throughout 1948 to ensure that he would capture some of the black vote. In January, Truman delivered his State of the Union address to Congress in which he told government officials and the public alike that

Our first goal is to secure full the essential human rights of our citizens....some of our citizens are still denied equal opportunity for education...and for the expression of their views at the polls....Whether discrimination is based on race, or creed, or color...it is utterly contrary to American ideals of democracy.⁵⁷

Truman continued to show an aggressive political agenda for civil rights reform the following month when he addressed a special message to Congress on civil rights that set forth what Michael Gardner terms “a revolutionary vision for civil rights reform in a

⁵⁵ “GOP Warned Against ‘Do Nothing’ Platform,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, June 23, 1948.

⁵⁶ “Since Abraham Lincoln,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, October 16, 1948.

⁵⁷ “Truman’s State of the Union Address: January 7, 1948,” in *Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risks* by Michael Gardner (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 68.

racist America.”⁵⁸ Most importantly however, Truman enacted executive orders 9980 and 9981 later in the spring which integrated federal jobs and the armed services.⁵⁹ Truman politically capitalized on the passage of these orders to distance himself from Dewey. Building on growing support from the two orders, Truman gave speeches in northern “hubs” of black society including Detroit and Harlem that had witnessed a drastic growth in their black populations since the Great Migration of the early twentieth century. Truman’s aggressive pursuit of the black vote during his 1948 campaign led one scholar to assert that “Civil rights was the touchstone of the Truman election in 1948.”⁶⁰

Preliminary polls taken weeks before the election indicated that a majority of African Americans in major northern cities, with the exception of New York, supported Dewey’s platform over Truman’s. Many observers sided with one reporter’s article that predicted that the election was “All Over But the Shouting.” Bilbo’s ghost was ever-present in the 1948 campaign as one cartoon depicted a flying carpet titled the “Truman Victory Special” which held as passengers racist Democratic congressmen including John Rankin, James Eastland and Allen Ellender with the caption “Only Bilbo is Missing.” The cartoon attempted to signify Truman’s ties with such nefarious characters of the Democratic Party as those mentioned above, and also portended what a re-election of the president would mean if blacks chose to vote for him on November 2.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Gardner, 71.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 105-121.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 146.

⁶¹ “Observers Say Dewey Will Get Most of Group Votes,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, October 23, 1948; “All Over But the Shouting,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, October 30, 1948; “Only Bilbo is Missing,” *Philadelphia Afro-American*, October 23, 1948.

Truman Is Their Magic Carpet--Only Bilbo Is Missing



Illustration 8.
Republican supporters invoked
the ghost of Bilbo to coax blacks
to vote for Dewey
(*Philadelphia Afro-American*
October 23, 1948)

Truman ultimately managed to secure enough votes to win one of the most surprising Presidential victories in American history. As he hoisted his copy of a newspaper with the headline “Dewey Defeats Truman” above a crowd of onlookers at St. Louis’s Union Station, blacks realized what his election foreshadowed for their immediate future. After an effective final two years of his first term in which he addressed civil rights issues head-on, Truman’s election meant that blacks could be assured of far-reaching support for civil rights legislation from the executive branch in the future. Since their votes had proved so crucial in both the mid-term elections of 1946 and the Presidential election of 1948, blacks could feel satisfied that the President would act on a new agenda that, with each successive year, would become increasingly progressive on civil rights issues. The election heralded an era filled with new responsibilities and expectations between the federal government and blacks throughout

the country that would play out in successive generations as the civil rights movement continued to grow.⁶²

Bilbo's 1946 campaign and Senate hearing reveal several important facets of the post-war movement for civil rights in Mississippi and the nation that have been, if not neglected, previously un-connected in analyses of the period. Increased African American participation in the electoral system in 1946 forced the white South to deal with the increasingly salient issue of black civil rights. Even while the black electorate in Mississippi remained low, statistics from the rest of the region reveal that blacks were gaining political ground at a record pace. In Georgia, the total number of registered blacks jumped from 20,000 in 1940 to 125,000 or nineteen percent of the total eligible black population by 1947. Likewise in Texas and Tennessee, the number of registered black voters increased 300 and 400 percent respectively to 80,000 in Tennessee and 100,000 in Texas by 1947.⁶³

Perhaps more importantly for the executive branch, the ties between southern African Americans and blacks in the North became painfully clear during the mid-term elections of 1946 that fell directly on the heels of Bilbo's campaign and the widespread violence that followed. The ties between the northern black electorate and civil rights issues in the South would only continue to mount in successive years as blacks continued to press the federal government for meaningful legislation and involvement on behalf of southern blacks.⁶⁴

⁶² "The Real Significance of the Truman Victory," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, November 13, 1948.

⁶³ Memorandum from Palmer Weber to Walter White et al, re: Citizenship in the South, November 8, 1948, NAACP Files, part 18, series c, reel 18.

⁶⁴ The estimated black vote in the 1944 election from the states with the highest number of blacks registered that also were key election states (New York, Pennsylvania and Illinois) totaled nearly a million votes- 865,056; See "Estimated Negro Vote in 1944 Presidential Election," NAACP Voting Rights 1916-1950, part 4, reel 8.

Bilbo's hearing additionally reveals previously overlooked agents of the civil struggle in post-war Mississippi. Testimonies given at Bilbo's hearing by white and black non-veterans clearly evidence the complex nature of the post-war civil rights movement that overturns previous conceptualizations of the movement in the Magnolia State as being led solely by veterans. Testimony from Stanley Brav, and George Strype as well as the mention of white reverend Joseph A. Smith by Lawrence Wilson, underscore the important role some whites played in post-war civil rights activism.⁶⁵

African American clergy members also played integral roles in voting rights efforts during this period as testimony from T.B. Wilson, Percy Greene, R.S. Bostick, and C.N. Eiland reveal. African American clergy played a crucial role in educating members of their community, including veterans, on how to vote and even lead their supporters to the polls on election-day. Testimonies from these and other individuals also highlight the multifaceted nature of voter motivation in the post-war South. Each of the testifiers recounted the long history of voting rights activism and consciousness prevalent in Mississippi's black population that.

The long history of civil rights activism in Mississippi created a generation of activists well into their late fifties and sixties who testified at Bilbo's hearing and whose election day experiences underscore the militant role of elder African Americans in the post-war civil rights movement. Evidence of their activism disputes previous characterizations of this segment of the African American population as placating to the white power structure during later civil rights efforts.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Testimony of George Strype and Stanley Brav, NAACP Files, Part 18, Series A, Reel 1.

⁶⁶ This view is most readily seen in connection with Freedom Summer efforts in 1964. Some works that emphasize this viewpoint are Wesley Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), chapter 3; Jason Sokol, *There Goes My*

Testimonies from and mentions of black women at the hearing such as that given by Camille Thomas and Kattie Campbell expose the importance of black women in the post-war struggle for civil rights. Through their testimonies, Thomas and Campbell exhibited what Danielle McGuire cites as “the beginning step in activism” in which black women “used their voices as weapons against white supremacy.”⁶⁷ Other mentions of women’s activism on July 2 by testifiers including J.D. Collins, T.B. Wilson and Samuel K. Phillips further relate the ability of black women to use their perceived status as non-threatening members of the black community to receive access to votes in the post-war South.⁶⁸ These testimonies add a new dynamic to Mississippi’s civil rights movement that lift and centralize the voices of housewives, nurses, carpenters, rabbis, and ministers back into the narrative of the post-war struggle for civil rights.

In *Civil Rights and Social Wrongs*, John Higham appropriately points out that all too often civil rights scholars view the movement as a “tragic failure.” Higham states that in reality “none [of the efforts] was a failure; they were simply incomplete....each surge reached some of their objectives, and the advances were never entirely lost in the reversals that followed.”⁶⁹ Even though Bilbo was never impeached for his racially-charged 1946 campaign, he never again took his seat in congress. As previously indicated some blacks even believed that the money paid to Bilbo was “well spent.”

Everything: White Southerners in the age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975 (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 241-249; and Taylor Branch also highlights the split between old and young generations in *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 40-60.

⁶⁷ Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance- A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 39.

⁶⁸ Testimony of Camille Thomas, Kattie Campbell, and Samuel K. Phillips, NAACP Files, Part 18, Series A, Reel 1.

⁶⁹ Higham, 189.

Even without his impeachment, his hearing put white supremacy on trial before the nation. The attention garnered from the campaign and hearing was quickly followed by action from the federal government, which marked a significant departure from the policies of previous Presidents. No longer could a President dodge the issue of civil rights and expect to receive sufficient support from the black community for their election. At the local level, despite the fact that blacks witnessed a harsh backlash from conservative whites following Bilbo's campaign, the actions of whites only solidified the black community's resolve to fight for their rights. The civil rights efforts that grew out of the fight to unseat Bilbo laid the foundation for Mississippi's civil rights movement upon which future generations would continue to build in the years that followed.

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