"The Skeleton in America's Own Cupboard": Mississippi's Theodore G. Bilbo and the Shaping of Racial Politics, 1946-1948

By

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Abstract

In the summer of 1946, Theodore Bilbo, a politician from rural southeast Mississippi, ran for election as a United States Senator. Fearing that a large number of newly-enfranchised blacks in his state would work to have him removed from office, Bilbo encouraged whites in his state to intimidate, threaten, and otherwise prevent African Americans from voting. Bilbo's rhetoric and the violence that ensued as a result of his speeches sparked controversy in both national and international communities, sparking a process of political realignment within the United States that would have ramifications for the decades that followed. Using personal correspondence, newspapers, Senate committee files, and the papers of the NAACP, this dissertation examines Theodore Bilbo's 1946 election illustrating the myriad forgotten voices in the early civil rights struggle; the ties between national and international policy in the early Cold War; and some of the earliest policy platforms of modern conservatism that emerged as a dominant political force following World War II.

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Introduction

Theodore Bilbo stood just north of five feet tall, but his voice rang out like that of a giant throughout the crowded Jackson, Mississippi church on June 30, 1946. "Nevertheless!" he bellowed as sweat dripped from his brow, "the Negro is likely to try to register [to vote]….There are remedies for that….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."[1] In the aftermath of World War II, white conservatives in the South shook at the thought of nearly three million African American veterans returning home, armed with the recent Supreme Court decision outlawing the white primary, enabling them to register and vote in state and national elections for the first time in nearly sixty years. For southerners like Bilbo, the prospect of even allowing one African American to vote posed a dire threat to long-standing traditions of white masculinity and racial superiority.

In the months leading up to the election, Bilbo's rhetoric became so toxic that it worried both whites and blacks throughout the nation. In fact, his speeches inflamed so much fear that civil rights leaders in Mississippi asked President Harry Truman to send the National Guard to help protect voters on July 2. Their call went unheard, and Bilbo won his Senate seat for the third time in a nearly fifty year-long political career.[2] Slowly, however, reports began to trickle out of Mississippi that violence, intimidation, coercion, and fraud had been used to disfranchise Mississippi's black population. Civil rights

[1] "Bilbo Urges Mississippi Men to Employ 'Any Means' to Bar Negroes from Voting," *New York Times*, June 23, 1946.
[2] "Negroes Ask Vote Guard," *New York Times*, May 19, 1946.

organizations flooded the offices of the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections urging an investigation into the legality of Bilbo's election. The Senate dragged its feet throughout the fall of 1946, but eventually enough political pressure mounted in the public sphere, forcing the Senate to conduct an investigation and eventually a hearing in the winter of that same year. Sixty-eight African Americans testified in front of a Senate sub-committee loaded with Bilbo's friends and political allies. Their testimonies provide some of the most harrowing descriptions and nuanced accounts of the malevolent nature of white supremacy and how it functioned at the local level in both overt and covert forms.

Bilbo's hearing, a national and international spectacle by the fall of 1946, helped push Truman to act on civil rights policy and adopt civil rights reforms as part of his party platform by 1947. Conversely, nations who watched and judged from the sidelines helped press the issue of African American civil rights further into the national spotlight. By the spring of 1946, the atrocities carried out by Adolph Hitler in the name of ethnic cleansing were not a distant horror from a bygone era, they were living memories embodied by the Nazis who stood trial in Nuremberg only months prior to Bilbo's hate-filled campaign. As Numan Bartley suggests, "the logic of a war against Nazi Germany encouraged a reevaluation of racial beliefs at home."[3] The Second World War and its aftermath required both citizens and politicians in the United States and other nations throughout the world to reevaluate their racial ideologies.

The emerging cold war between Soviet Russia and the United States brought a new level of interconnectedness to the post-war world. Nations that had previously not

[3] Numan Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 13.

been the focus of American foreign policy suddenly became hotly-contested battlegrounds between rival superpowers pining for political and economic influence. It was in this atmosphere that domestic policies of nations often intertwined with their foreign policies in ways not previously witnessed. William Chafe observes that during the early Cold War, "the inauguration of an anticommunist crusade within America's own borders…paralleled the Cold War abroad," and were in fact, "two halves of the same walnut."[4]

This work examines Theodore Bilbo's 1946 election and foregrounds its importance within several fields of historiographic inquiry including southern political history, the civil rights movement, white resistance studies, and the rise of modern conservativism to create at once a more transparent yet more opaque picture of political change in America in the years immediately following World War II. Bilbo's election and the events that transpired afterwards, are understudied areas of political history. When placed in both national and international contexts, Bilbo's 1946 election stands out as one of the most significant events of the mid-twentieth century, and the events that proceeded it held drastic implications for the trajectory of American electoral politics that continued decades after he had passed away.

Writing Bilbo out of History

This dissertation engages with four major fields of historiography to more fully understand the role of Bilbo's election in both national and international history. The first field includes scholarship that is devoted to tracing the long and complicated arc of

[4] William H. Chafe, *Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 103

southern political history. Many historians including Jack Bass, Chester Morgan, James Cobb, and Michael Perman have included Bilbo as part of their works on political culture in the South, focusing primarily on his rise to power as a Demagogue at the turn of the century, his relationship with Franklin Roosevelt during the New Deal, and his filibusters against anti-lynching legislation. These scholars often use Bilbo and his actions as examples of extremism in southern politics, or to put it more simply, an "accentuated form of the darker political strains that run throughout the South."[5] The aforementioned works also recognize that Bilbo is not an easy figure to pin down in southern history.

Classifying him as a demagogue, Chester Morgan and William Holmes point out, is complicated, by the fact that, unlike most southern demagogues, Bilbo actually passed meaningful legislation while in office. Demagogues, according to Michael Perman, "duped" their poor white constituents by "making [them] feel good, or angry, or both" by campaigning on issues that had no chance of actually coming to fruition, but which stirred the deepest and darkest fears about racial intermingling within their constituents.[6] Typical demagogues at the turn of the century, figures such as Jeff Davis of Arkansas, William O'Daniel of Texas, and Ben Tillman of South Carolina, did nothing for their constituents in the way of actual reforms after winning office. What is striking about Bilbo is that once he was elected, he passed an uncharacteristically high amount of legislation, usually aimed at poor whites, such as the creation of a tuberculosis hospital,

[5] V.O. Key quoted in Jack Bass and Walter DeVries, *The Transformation of Southern Politics: Social Change and Political Consequence since 1945* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1976), 186; Chester Morgan, *Redneck Liberal: Theodore G. Bilbo and the New Deal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985); James Cobb, *The South and American since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); James Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Michael Perman, *Pursuit of Unity: A Political History of the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Numan Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995).
[6] Perman, *Pursuit of Unity*, 195-197; Morgan, *Redneck Liberal*, 3; Holmes, *White Chief*, x..

adult night classes for poor whites, and a training school for delinquents. Bilbo passed so much legislation during his tenure in office that Chester Morgan even declares him to be a "liberal."[7] Since they tackle such a large swath of history, these works do not lend themselves to an in-depth study that traces Bilbo's political ideology from his earliest beginnings through the final years of his life.

This dissertation acknowledges the work of these scholars by uncovering the events that shaped Bilbo's rise to demagogic fame in the early twentieth century and importantly places those events in the context of how they shaped his political ideology throughout his career. Paying particular attention to Bilbo's final campaign for Senate, this work helps illuminate the common threads of racism, "common man" politics, and back room alliances with elites that constituted Bilbo's life-long political ideology. Understanding Bilbo in such a manner opens a crucial window into the foundations of modern conservatism and its genesis in southern politics.

A few scholars have emphasized the tail end of Bilbo's career in their works as an attempt to place Bilbo into the longer timeline of southern history. Robert Fleegler argues that Bilbo's popularity ultimately declined "because of the growing intolerance of many whites toward public racism and anti-Semitism" following World War II. According to Fleegler, "white elites," brushed off Bilbo's racist statements during the 1920s and 1930s as mere grandstanding, but World War II, because of its relationship to racial ideology, forced these elites to more introspectively grapple with their own views of race, as well as what they believed were acceptable and unacceptable forms of racism. Ignoring scholarship from Dan Carter, Joseph Crespino and others, Fleegler asserts that white

[7] Chester Morgan, *Redneck Liberal: Theodore Bilbo and the New Deal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 2.

elites grew disdainful for an openly racist brand of politics and turned against Bilbo towards the end of his career, working to remove this type of public racism from Mississippi's political scene after Bilbo had passed away.[8]

Garry Boulard grapples with how white liberals responded to Bilbo. Building on the work of Morton Sosna, Boulard looks closely at the testy relationship between Hodding Carter, editor of the *Delta Times Democrat*, and Bilbo. Boulard provides crucial evidence that white liberals in the South, though outnumbered by their conservative counterparts, fought vociferously against bigotry. While Boulard's work importantly complicates the narrative of the fight against Bilbo and other white supremacists in the South, he does not discuss Bilbo's Senate hearing and forgoes a discussion of Bilbo's life and political career in the context of southern political history, white resistance and geopolitics in the early Cold War.[9]

Works by Richard Ethridge and F. Ross Peterson dissect Bilbo's hearing but their works, like those of previous scholars, do not acknowledge the important roles African Americans played in unseating Bilbo. Ethridge argues that Bilbo's downfall came as a result of the "political enemies" Bilbo made for himself while he was a Senator.[10] The brunt of Ethridge's work is concerned with Bilbo's hearing over war contracting money rather than his voting rights hearing. When he does discuss the latter, he mentions it fleetingly without placing the hearing into the larger national and international context of

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[8] Robert Fleegler, "Theodore G. Bilbo and the Decline of Public Racism," *Journal of Mississippi History*, 68, 1 (March 2006): 1.

[9] Garry Boulard, "'The Man' versus 'The Quisling': Theodore Bilbo, Hodding Carter and the 1946 Democratic Primary," *Journal of Mississippi History* 51 (August 1989): 201-217; see also Morton Sosna, *In Search of a Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

[10] Richard Ethridge, "The Fall of the Man: The United Staets Senate's Probe of Theodore G. Bilbo in December 1946 and its Aftermath," *Journal of Mississippi History* 38 (August 1976), 242.

the struggles over race and citizenship in the early Cold War.[11] Conversely, Peterson looks more specifically at the voting rights hearing, but his work, at times, paints a hagiographic portrait of Glen Taylor, whom he argues, led the charge to unseat Bilbo.[12] Other works on the hearing have retread similar arguments of the aforementioned scholars, but much has been left out. This dissertation seeks to fill the gaps left by these scholars by reframing Bilbo's life and political career in the larger context of national and international politics, bringing to light the multitudinous voices who protested, testified, and petitioned in the hopes of having Bilbo removed from office.[13]

The story of Bilbo's hearing also converses with a second group of scholars who have examined the origins of the Civil Rights Movement. In today's scholarship it is commonplace to find works that push the timeline of civil rights achievements beyond the Montgomery bus boycott or *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). While some scholars have made invaluable contributions to the study of civil rights efforts by reframing the origins of the movement, most who choose to include Bilbo in their analyses only do so as a minor part of their work. Steven Lawson pays the most significant amount of attention to Bilbo's hearing in *Black Ballots* (1976). Lawson's twenty page account of the hearing includes snippets of testimony as well as some of the more well-publicized acts of violence associated with Bilbo's campaign. The majority of Lawson's work, however, focuses on the political in-fighting between the Civil Rights

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[11] Ethridge, 248.

[12] F. Ross Peterson, "Glenn Taylor and the Bilbo Case," *Phylon*, 31 (Winter 1970): 344.

[13] Additional analyses of Bilbo's political career can be found in Enoch Seal Jr. "The Senatorial Career of Theodore Gilmore Bilbo," Master's Thesis, Mississippi State University, 1951; Bobby Wade Saucier. "The Public Career of Theodore G. Bilbo." Ph.D. dissertation, Tulane University, 1971; Charles Pope Smith, "Theodore G. Bilbo's Senatorial Career. The Final Years 1941-1947," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Southern Mississippi, 1983.

Congress and the NAACP during their early efforts to unseat Bilbo, and does not examine the larger importance of the hearing on both national and international scales.

Lawson's work is also exemplary of a larger trend in most analyses of post-World War II civil rights efforts which includes the works of Jennifer Brooks, Christopher Parker and John Dittmer who have emphasized the role of veterans as activists in the post-war period. These authors describe these individuals as having "whetted their appetite for freedom" by fighting abroad, which drove their desire to seize their suffrage rights once they returned home.[14] Bilbo's hearing adds an important layer of complexity to these works, highlighting pre-war and home front activism in Mississippi that sheds light on lesser-known veteran and non-veteran figures such as Kattie Campbell, Nathaniel Lewis, and Joseph Parham who were also at the vanguard of the struggle for civil rights in post-war Mississippi. A thorough examination of hearing testimony also questions previous characterizations of non-veteran testimony and activism, which has been described as having been "less spectacular" than that of veterans.[15]

Other works that cover Bilbo's hearing include John Egerton's *Speak Now Against the Day* (1994), Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom* (1994), and Patricia Sullivan's *Lift Every Voice* (2009). All of these scholars devote a few pages to Bilbo's campaign and hearing, but the varied and broad topics of each book require the scholars to only briefly mention Bilbo's campaign and hearing as contextual evidence for

[14] Steven F. Lawson, *Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South 1944-1969* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 101-103; Jennifer E. Brooks, *Defining the Peace: World War II Veterans, Race, and the Remaking of Southern Political Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004); Christopher S. Parker, *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the South* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009).
[15] Lawson, 102.

their respective histories without offering a thorough analysis in both national and international contexts.[16]

This dissertation also situates Bilbo's hearing within the international context of the Cold War and therefore engages with the budding field of transnational civil rights scholarship. Mary Dudziak, Thomas Borstelman, Penny Von Eschen, and Brenda Gayle Plummer have all analyzed the civil rights movement in the context of the international stage, examining how racial policies domestically influenced American relationships abroad. Even though their works all cover the Cold War period, these scholars largely use Bilbo as a small example to make the larger point that America's Cold War foreign policy influenced civil rights developments in the domestic sphere.[17] All of these authors contend that foreign nations looked at America as the "arsenal of democracy" during the post-war period, and racial conflict in the nation attracted widespread attention from Asian, Latin American and South African countries. This dissertation adds nuance to these studies and highlights the attention Bilbo's hearing received in two economically and geopolitically important nations to underscore the significance of Bilbo's hearing in a

[16] Dittmer, *Local People*, 2-9; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*; 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), 32-33; John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994); and 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), 2-8; Gilbert Jonas, *Freedom's Sword: The NAACP and the Struggle Against Racism in America, 1909-1969* (NY: Routledge, 2005), 154

[17] Dudziak, 13.

global context and aid the contention that Bilbo's hearing placed significant pressure on the Truman administration to take meaningful steps on civil rights policy.[18] [19]

Nations across the globe followed Bilbo and his hearing with interest and, at times, used that interest as leverage to gain concessions from the United States. Scrutinizing the roles of internationally powerful nations such as South Africa and India within the context of Bilbo's election and hearing provides new and important analysis of the role domestic political action played in shaping international policy in the early Cold War.

The third field of scholarship with which this work engages is the historiography of white resistance and the rise of modern conservatism. Answering the call of Charles Eagles, who claimed that most historians of the civil rights movement had "emphasized one side of the struggle…and [had neglected] their professional obligation to understand the other side, the segregationist opposition," scholars including Jason Morgan Ward, Kevin Kruse, Jason Sokol and Michelle Brattain have worked to chronicle the methods and the mechanisms by which white southerners resisted civil rights efforts and how these methods of resistance helped form the political bedrock of modern conservatism.

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[18] Paul Gordon Lauren, "Seen from the Outside: International Perspectives on America's Dilemma," in *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 26-27.

[19] Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000) Chapters 1 and 2; Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anti-Colonialism* (NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Gerald Horne, *Communist Front?: The Civil Rights Congress, 1946-1956* (New Jersey: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988); Horne, *End of Empires: African Americans and India* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008); Michael S. Krenn, *The African American Voice in U.S. Foreign Policy Since World War II* (NY: Garland Publishing, 1998); Carol Anderson, "From Hope to Disillusion: African Americans, the United Nations and the Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1947," in Krenn, *The African American Voice in U.S. Foreign Policy Since World War II* (NY: Garland Publishing, 1998); Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1988* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

Many of these scholars, such as Kruse and Sokol, have chosen to examine white resistance at the grassroots level in individual communities. While these studies have offered important context to white resistance efforts throughout the South during the post-war period, their focus on grassroots actors neglects the leadership that politicians like Bilbo provided for these individuals in framing their methods of resistance.[20]

Brattain and Ward address the political leadership behind white resistance in their respective works, but both historians emphasize the state of Georgia and, more specifically, the policies of Eugene Talmadge as being the progenitors of the ideology behind white resistance. Much like Kruse and Sokol, Ward and Brattain's works have had an immeasurable influence on the historical understanding of how and why conservative white politicians used political levers to control black advancement. Yet, as Ward readily points out, Bilbo stands out as an anomaly in the context of southern politicians, taking his racist beliefs to a new level beyond simple political discourse. He cites Bilbo's repatriation plan in 1938 as evidence that Bilbo harbored deeper racial animosities than his Georgia counterpart, declaring that when Bilbo announced his repatriation plan on the Senate floor, many of his colleagues from the Deep South labeled the effort a "crude and counterproductive stunt."[21] These studies have been instrumental in shaping the overall framework of this dissertation. Despite their thoroughness, they have left room for further study, particularly in how Bilbo played a role in shaping the discourse and methods surrounding white resistance and modern conservative thought.

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[20] Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007); Charles W. Eagles, "Towards New Histories of the Civil Rights Movement," *The Journal of Southern History* 66, 4 (November 2000): 816.

[21] 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), 30; Michelle Brattain, *The Politics of Whiteness: Race, Workers, and Culture in the Modern South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

Studies of white resistance have also been linked to studies searching for the rise of modern conservatism in America. However, this scholarship has focused disproportionately on the 1950s and 1960s as the timing for the change in American politics, which, these scholars argue, began to shift incrementally towards conservative values following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. Authors including Dan Carter, Joseph Crespino, and Elizabeth Tandy Shermer see the bulk of this conservative shift as having taken place decades after Bilbo passed away. Their subjects of study: George Wallace, Strom Thurmond, and Barry Goldwater do not consider Bilbo's effect on shaping the minds of these individuals. All of the aforementioned either worked with Bilbo in Congress or grew up listening to his speeches on their radios. While Crespino's work is the only one out of the three that attempts to push the timeline for the rise of conservatism further back into history by examining Thurmond's run for president in 1968, he does not give fair weight to Bilbo who pushed the party towards its ultimate fracture in 1948 with his race-based rhetoric.[22] Kari Frederickson only gives Bilbo a cursory mention in her examination of the Democratic Party's 1948 implosion. In *The Dixiecrat Revolt* (2001) she adeptly analyzes how conservatives came to split from their more liberal colleagues in the Democratic Party beginning in 1932, but she fails to adequately detail Bilbo's role in shaping the race-based nature of the party's split, arguing instead that Bilbo played a small role in "[defining] postwar liberalism."[23]

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[22] Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, *Barry Goldwater and the Remaking of the American Political Landscape* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013); Dan Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995); Joseph Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America* (NY: Hill and Wang, 2012); Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[23] Kari Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 48.

Uncovering Bilbo

This work utilizes manuscript collections, Senate records, personal correspondence, organizational records, and newspaper articles from both national and international sources to piece together the legacy of Theodore Bilbo's 1946 Senate Campaign. The Theodore Bilbo Papers held in the University of Southern Mississippi's McCain Special Collections Library and the Papers of the Senate Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures housed at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. have proved to be particularly fruitful resources for this project. The voluminous collection of the Papers of the NAACP ground this project in the experience of civil rights workers and organizations fighting to have Bilbo removed from the Senate. Newspaper resources held at Emory University, Pennsylvania State University, and the University of Virginia have provided the grassroots social lenses through which to view the larger implications of Bilbo's election for both national and international politics.

This story begins by providing a window into life for whites in post-Civil War Mississippi up through just prior to Bilbo's election. Understanding the political and racial dynamics of this time period are crucial for understanding the events, people, and places that shaped Bilbo's early life, career, and mindset. Born shortly after the close of the Civil War, Bilbo grew up at time when the myth of federal Reconstruction was in its infancy. Influential politicians, especially the "White Chief" James Vardaman, helped solidify the false memory of uncontrollable and lecherous blacks who, if given the opportunity, would destroy southern society. Bilbo witnessed the success of demagogues like Vardaman and their popularity greatly influenced his political ideology. The second

chapter offers the counter perspective of black life in Mississippi from Civil War through Bilbo's election, providing a glimpse of how African Americans navigated the growing restrictions on their civil and social rights. This chapter importantly sets up the principal actors and organizations present throughout the dissertation who led the fight against Bilbo and became driving forces for civil rights in the twentieth century.

Chapters three and four dive into Bilbo's campaign, looking at the rhetoric he used, the reaction of the black community, and how the federal government responded to growing racial unrest in Mississippi. These chapters examine the Justice Department's investigation into the campaign, detailing their efforts to obtain testimony from African Americans throughout Mississippi. These pages highlight the obstacles federal agents faced as they attempted to compile evidence against Bilbo, and underscore the multiple techniques that were used to reinforce white supremacy and disfranchise blacks in the state. Chapter five analyzes witness testimony from the Senate hearing, which took place shortly after the Department of Justice's investigation and importantly foregrounds the voices of those who are not typically included in analyses of this time period. Paying particular attention to the varied social and economic statuses of these individuals in order to add complexity to traditional narratives and characterizations of the early civil rights movement.[24] The recommendation of the Senate committee and the reaction from the international community are the subjects of chapter six. Bilbo's hearing sent shockwaves throughout the nation, but once the committee sent its recommendation to seat Bilbo to the Senate, the political storm amplified to such an extent that it caused a

[24] Francois N. Hamlin's recent work on Clarksdale, Mississippi speaks to this point. See Francois N. Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale: The Black Freedom Struggle in the Mississippi Delta after World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

shutdown of the legislative branch. The final chapter traces the legacy and political cost of Bilbo's election for the Democratic Party and situates the election in the long continuum of the rise of conservative politics in America. Looking at the aftermath of Bilbo's election provides a deeper understanding of the election of 1948 and how this election reflected and was influenced by racial politics associated with Bilbo's rhetoric.

In August of 1947, Bilbo's obituary declared that he was "a defender of 'white supremacy'…so that the blessings of the white man's civilization shall forever remain the priceless possession of the Anglo-Saxon."[25] The belief that Bilbo or other "Anglo-Saxons" could possess citizenship and "civilization" is one of the driving questions behind this work. How were concepts of citizenship and belonging shaped in the post-World War II period, both in America and abroad, and how did those conceptions come to influence one another? As Bilbo's story reveals, the varying definitions of citizenship and who could control and "possess" it often led to bitter conflicts within nations throughout the world that had drastic consequences for the shaping of twenty-first century politics.

[25] "Obituary," *New York Times*, August 24, 1947.

Chapter 1:

"Our Faith is in God, Next Year's Crop, and the Democratic Party"

The Civil War left in its wake a sea of bitter feelings and resentment among the citizens of the former Confederate States of America. Many white southerners viewed federal intervention into state and local politics after the war as salt being poured into the open wounds southerners tried to soothe in the aftermath of having their economic, social, and familial livelihoods torn asunder. The southern economy hinged on slavery and slave labor. Emancipation, as Gavin Wright points out "was an economic revolution" that represented a "dramatic break" with the South's previous economic system.[1]

For blacks in Mississippi, 1865 represented a "year of jubilee," but most whites "found themselves wiped out financially" and some blamed blacks for their hardships. James Loewen contends that in the budding New South, "many [former] planters, accustomed to controlling black people, resented having to treat them as free workers."[2] This chapter examines the development of Mississippi's economy and society from the post-Civil War period through Theodore Bilbo's early life and political career. Understanding the background and divergent lives and statuses of Bilbo and Mississippi's African American population are necessary for comprehending the manner in which these forces converge and clash after World War II.

[1] Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 19, 34.
[2] Loewen et. al, *Mississippi: Conflict and Change* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1978), 140.

Developing Social and Political Norms

Even though slavery had ended with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, Mississippi continued to develop social and economic policies, aimed at keeping African Americans in a condition of near-slavery. Mississippi made a slight attempt to diversify its economy by encouraging industrial growth through tax incentives and advertising which branded the state as a place with "unrivaled resources" which included an abundance of low-wage labor.[3] Despite these incentives, Mississippi's economy continued to largely revolve around agriculture. In fact, the state invested more heavily in cotton production following the Civil War, and developed a system of tenancy and sharecropping, which kept African Americans and poor whites in the lowest possible rungs of social and economic life.[4]

In addition to the economic policies adopted by the state, Mississippi added a host of new laws to solidify the diminutive status of blacks. Vagrancy laws, known as Black Codes, adopted in the 1866 Mississippi legislature, required that

> All freedmen, free negroes and mulattoes… found on the second Monday in January, 1866… with no lawful employment or business, or found unlawfully assembling themselves together, either in the day or night time… shall be deemed vagrants and on conviction thereof shall be fined…fifty dollars…and imprisoned at the discretion of the court.[5]

If freedmen could not pay the fine, the law declared, "it shall be prima facie evidence of vagrancy, and it shall be the duty of the sheriff to arrest such freedman… and

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[3] "Development of the South," *New York Times*, April 30, 1894; George Tindall, *Emergence of the New South: 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 96-98.
[4] Wright, 34-35.
[5] Mississippi Black Codes (1866) Article 1, section 1 and Article 3, section 2-7. http://www.blackpast.org/primary/1866-mississippi-black-codes; date accessed April 22, 2015.

proceed at once to hire…to anyone who will pay the said tax."[6] Often in these situations, former owners were given the right of first refusal.[7] Not only were African Americans in Mississippi subject to the whims of the new laws which placed them in debt to the state, but they could even be sold back to their former owners. The characteristics, language, and tactics used by white Mississippians in their fight to retain control over the state's free black population became recurring themes throughout Mississippi politics well-into the twentieth century.

The introduction of Congressional or "Radical" Reconstruction in 1867 caused a reactionary backlash from resentful whites throughout Mississippi against the "Yankees," to whom they had just lost the Civil War and against African Americans whom they resented as the bringers of the federal government's presence. In response to a Congressional inquest in the late 1860s, Congress organized the southern states into military districts to be administered under the authority of the federal government. As historian James Garner explains, military administrators of these districts were given "absolute authority over life, liberty, and property" in their region.[8] Under the direction of General Edward C. Ord, one of the lead commanders of Sherman's army, Reconstruction in Mississippi witnessed a dramatic rise in African American civil and social rights, "but simultaneously increased conservative resentment" in the state. [9]

Under Radical Reconstruction, the military sought to maintain peace and order and register African Americans to vote. Ord appointed and reapportioned positions in the Mississippi government to reflect a tokenist approach to equality with appointments to

[6] Black Codes, Article 3, section 7.
[7] Loewen, 146.
[8] James Wilford Garner, *Reconstruction in Mississippi* (New York: Macmillan and Co, 1901), 156.
[9] Loewen, 153.

federal offices including Isaiah Montgomery, a former slave of Jefferson Davis, who was appointed as a Justice of the Peace.[10] Ord appointed a total of 71 African Americans to positions throughout Mississippi's government including circuit clerks, county administrators, sheriffs, and aldermen.[11] Ord also passed sweeping proclamations against "whipping or maiming as punishment," collecting "any tax on freedmen…that was not imposed upon all persons," and other protections which, by-and-large, wiped out the Black Codes.[12]

By July of 1867, over sixty thousand freedmen had registered to vote, while only forty-six thousand whites remained on the polls. These numbers shocked Mississippi whites who believed that, "it was now plain that the management of their political affairs, which they had come to look upon as theirs [by] right, must soon pass to their late slaves, together with white strangers from other states."[13] Fear and rumor reined in Mississippi as whites ruminated about the possibility of an African American-run state.

Politicians encouraged fear in the minds of their constituents with proclamations that the United States Congress neutered Mississippi of its ability to maintain home rule. As James Garner notes, many Mississippians believed that Congress had "contrived for them [Mississippians] the perpetuity of negro rule….southern states were foredoomed to become African provinces…they and their children were to be held in negro subjection."[14]

Creating a Politics of Hate

[10] Garner, 164.
[11] Garner, 164.
[12] Garner, 166.
[13] Garner, 175.
[14] Garner, 178.

Theodore Bilbo was born into the atmosphere of racial animosity and vitriol that swirled throughout Mississippi and other parts of the South during this period. The verbal and physical attacks upon the free black population of Mississippi and the fears of African American rule that rested beneath the surface of every slave holding society in the South were given new life during and after Reconstruction, and would form the backbone of Bilbo's political views

During Reconstruction, violence became an ingrained part of Mississippi's political process. The rise of political terrorist organizations including the Ku Klux Klan, the White League, and Knights of the White Camelia, exemplified the beliefs of many Mississippians that violence and intimidation offered the best means of keeping African Americans "in their place." For white Mississippians, political equality could lead to social equality, and directly to race-mixing. Historian Walter Lord noted in 1965 that, to most of white Mississippi, "the mere hint of 'mongrelization' was appalling….there could be no compromise—not an inch…on anything that might open the door to race mixing."[15]

To keep African Americans "in line," the Ku Klux Klan and other paramilitary groups organized around principals meant to strike fear into the hearts of African Americans or those who supported freedmen's efforts in the post-war South.[16] Eric Foner notes that while "violence…had been endemic in large parts of the South since 1865….Radical Reconstruction stimulated its further expansion."[17] The Klan and similar groups used violence and intimidation to keep the Democratic Party, which promised

[15] Walter Lord, *The Past that would not Die* (NY: Harper Collins, 1965), Chapter 2.
[16] Garner, 338.
[17] Eric Foner, "Black Activism and the Ku Klux Klan," in *Major Problems in the History of the American South*, Vol. 2, 2nd ed., ed. Pal D. Escott et al., (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 53.

"redemption" from Republican administrations, in power and keep the Republican Party, "the party of Lincoln," out of office.

The tension between radical groups seeking to suppress black voting rights, and African Americans desirous to exercise the rights guaranteed by the recently passed 15th Amendment boiled over in pockets throughout Mississippi during this period. On March 8, 1871 riots erupted between whites and blacks in Meridian, Mississippi over a fire that caused nearly 75,000 dollars ($1.4 million in 2014) worth of damage to the town. While the fire was raging through the business section of the town, William Clopton, an influential African American implored the city's black population to stop fighting the fire, which he allegedly told the crowd, would only save the property of "rebels and men who were no friends of their race."[18] After the flames had been subdued by both black and white townsfolk, seven African Americans, including state senator and reverend J. Aaron Moore, were charged with "riotous behavior," which allegedly aided in the fire's ferocity.[19]

During testimony before Judge E.L. Bramlett, one of the arraigned, Warren Tyler, refuted the testimony of a white witness who implicated Tyler and others as inciting the riot. When the witness walked toward Tyler with "a walking stick in his hand," Tyler fired at him with is revolver in self-defense, but hit judge Bramlett in the head, killing him instantly.[20] Immediately following Bramlett's death, whites and blacks in the courtroom drew firearms and "firing became general." Tyler jumped out of the courthouse and Moore was shot in the torso. A local posse hunted down Tyler and killed

[18] "The Riot in Meridian," *New York Times*, March 14, 1871.
[19] "The Riot in Meridian," *New York Times*, March 14, 1871.
[20] "Riot in Mississippi," *New York Times,* March 8, 1871.

him. The posse then turned to Moore's church which they burned to the ground and three seemingly innocent African American citizens of Meridian had been killed. The posse then forced the mayor, Theodore Sturges of Connecticut, to leave the city. [21]

The riot in Meridian exemplified the political and social environment that would shape the trajectory of Mississippi politics for the decades following the Civil War. Not only did violence become a staple of electoral politics in the state, but White citizens in Mississippi began to use rhetoric that reflected disgust with the perceived lack of autonomy in running state affairs. The perceived assault on southern norms by "outside agitators" led southern whites to the logic that it was necessary to defend one's rights by "any means necessary." Both phrases, coined during this period, became common parlance in Mississippi, and came to define how Theodore Bilbo and other politicians including his mentor, James Vardaman, would mold the southern political lexicon in the decades that followed.[22]

Resisting the New South

African Americans did not sit idly by as passive recipients of white violence in the saga of oppression that began to slowly erode their basic human rights. In fact, African Americans after the Civil War exercised the rights granted by the 14th and 15th Amendments to become active political and social citizens of the state. By 1870, the

[21] "The Riot in Meridian," *New York Times*, March 14, 1871.
[22] Continual references to "outside agitators" can be found in the congressional hearing records concerning the Meridian riot. Testimony states that a Mr. Poland believed "the difficulty arose primarily from the Ku-Kluxing of the colored deputy sheriff who came over there from Alabama…it was one of the chief causes of the riot." Much more can be seen throughout the entirety of the testimony in Senate records. See *U.S. Senate*, 42nd Congress, 2nd Session, 1872, no. 41, pt. 11, Condition of Affairs in the Southern States, Mississippi, vol. 1, 209-210.

Lieutenant Governor, the Secretary of State, over sixty legislators, and the presiding officers of both houses of the legislature were African Americans.[23] Civic organizations including the Union League and Loyalty League sprouted up to encourage black participation in the state politics.[24] Michael Fitzgerald notes that the Union League's activity was curtailed to a certain extent by the violence precipitated by the white supremacist organizations, but for a time, African Americans constituted the majority of Mississippi's electorate. Therefore, "the competition of Reconstructionist planters for black votes," gave freedmen a substantial amount of power to push for equality in the post-war period. In response to the violent tactics of the Klan and other organizations, the Union League in Mississippi organized around a more militant stance in 1871, leading to open clashes with whites throughout the state, most famously in Vicksburg in 1874 in which two whites and twenty nine African Americans were killed.[25]

The racial tensions surrounding African Americans' right to the franchise coalesced on September 1, 1875, when widespread rioting broke out throughout the state on the day of the state's election. The governor of Mississippi, Adelbert Ames, cabled President Grant stating that "unauthorized and illegal armed bodies overthrew the civil authorities of Yazoo County, and took forcible possession of said county." In Hinds County, the Sheriff reported that he had also witnessed election day violence and was "unable…to maintain peace and protect rights." Governor James Alcorn noted that similar disturbances had occurred in Warren County, which was described as being "in a

[23] Loewen, *Mississippi: Conflict and Change*, 157.
[24] "The KuKlux," *New York Times*, July 21, 1871.
[25] Michael Fitzgerald, *The Union League Movement in the Deep South: Politics and Agricultural Change During Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 86.

state of terrorism."[26] Responding to the growing pressure from northern legislators and boosters, President Ulysses Grant was unwilling to send military resources to quell the riots and resentment growing in the Magnolia state. Grant's lack of intervention signaled the end of Reconstruction in Mississippi. The events of September 1875 set a standard for how the nation viewed the South in the years following the Civil War. Rather than a region in need of help during a transitional period, the nation began to view the South as a "lost cause."

In the decades that followed, owing to the largely-perceived failure of Reconstruction, the national political and social climate began to shift towards a more conservative bent in which state and individual rights became the law of the land. This manner of interpretation opened the door for drastic abuses of African American rights by southern states. In March of 1875, Congress passed The Civil Rights Act, which was labeled as "An Act to protect all citizens in their civil and legal rights," and applied most exclusively to places of public accommodation. Passing the act allowed Congress to tell concerned citizens that it was acting on behalf of aggrieved parties in the southern states, while not really giving the bill any meaningful teeth.[27]

The Civil Rights Act's façade of protecting "civil and legal rights" of all Americans came unmasked before the Supreme Court in 1883 during the *Civil Rights Cases.* The Civil Rights Cases were a series of five separate lawsuits filed in different state courts, but were ruled upon by the Supreme Court as a whole unit since each separate case utilized similar logic and reasoning to attack discrimination based on the 14th Amendment and the Civil Rights Act. Handed down by Justice Joseph P. Bradley,

[26] "The Mississippi Riots," *New York Times*, September 9, 1875.
[27] http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reconstruction/activism/ps_1875.html, date accessed January 24, 2015.

the eight to one majority of the court declared that the 14th Amendment pertained only to Congressional action, and therefore did not apply to individuals. The court wrote that since the claims filed by African Americans were seeking redress for discrimination in private businesses rather than state owned or operate establishments, the 14th Amendment could not be applied. Bradley stated, "It is State action of a particular character that is prohibited. Individual invasion of individual rights is not the subject matter of the amendment."[28] He further claimed that,

> [the 14th Amendment] does not invest Congress with power to legislate upon subjects which are within the domain of State legislation, but to provide modes of relief against State legislation, or State action….It does not authorize Congress to create a code of municipal law for the regulation of private rights, but to provide modes of redress against the operation of State laws and the action of State officers.[29]

With the stroke of a pen, the Supreme Court sanctioned the "lost cause" and facilitated the rapid rise of segregation and discrimination throughout the nation by allowing private businesses to maintain their own standards for discrimination. As long as state law did not inflect or explicitly sanction discrimination, the Supreme Court reasoned, the law could not be subject to the purview of the court.

Following the *Civil Rights Cases*, Mississippi and other southern states began to carry out discrimination on a massive scale with the silent backing of the Supreme Court. The period following the end of Federal Reconstruction, known as "Redemption," reflected the lost cause mentality, which came to shape the political mind of young Theodore Bilbo, then only ten years old. The rampant infringement on black and poor white voters' rights during this period, Michael Perman notes, constituted the second

[28] *Civil Rights Cases*, 109, U.S. 11 (1883).
[29] *Civil Rights Cases*, 109, U.S. 11(1883).

phase of disfranchisement enacted by Democratic politicians against Republican voters. Perman notes that the means employed to disfranchise Republicans differed from Reconstruction because while "violence continued…Democrats primarily focused their efforts on the electoral system." To accomplish their goals, Democrats used fraud, election rigging, gerrymandering, and election supervision to nullify Republican votes.[30]

Restricting the Black Vote

Federal Reconstruction promised political equality to African Americans throughout the South, but white supremacists maintained control over their states through Democratic machines that held sway across the region. As political and social restrictions against blacks tightened in the wake of the Civil War, Mississippi gained recognition as the "pioneer" of various forms of suffrage restriction that effectively limited black and poor white votes in order to perpetuate political power in the hands of a few individuals. Through each successive generation of political and social perversion, Mississippi increasingly became what Julius Thompson termed an "American Siberia for black people."[31] As the decades after Reconstruction pressed onward, African Americans increasingly became both socially and politically isolated to such an extent that they began to rely on strict routines that would guarantee survival, the slightest variation from which could spell death.

By 1890, the Mississippi state legislature further formalized racial stratification with a new state constitution that reapportioned the legislature and gave predominantly white counties greater representation in Congress and restricted suffrage rights in

[30] Michael Perman, *Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South 1888-1908* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 11.
[31] Thompson, *Black Life in Mississippi*, xxi.

counties with high populations of black voters. These actions created white majorities in black majority counties.[32] To achieve gerrymandered disfranchisement, whites included new voter registration policies in the new constitution including an "understanding clause," which preyed most acutely upon poor whites and blacks who possessed sub-standard levels of education by requiring voters to read and interpret a particular section of the United States Constitution to the satisfaction of a county registrar.[33] Mississippians aided these understanding clauses with a "poll-tax," a fee that was required to be paid on election day so that one might cast their vote.[34] C. Vann Woodward notes that the poll-tax effectively "decimated" the total number of registered black voters in most southern states by between 500 and 10,000 percent.[35]

Whites also used extra legal means to make the process of voting exceedingly distressing for African Americans. Pervasive voter intimidation occurred on election day. Often, white militia groups would station armed guards at polling stations to intimidate those undaunted by the rigors of the registration process. The extra legal means used to keep blacks from voting proved effective. According to James Loewen,

> The sun rose on Election Day…. a white militia company from Alabama paraded and a cannon was trained on the polls all day. In some places, armed white men supposedly going hunting, "accidentally" fired shots into the air near blacks. At one precinct in Claiborne County, whites stacked arms near the polls and dug trenches as if for war.[36]

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[32] Michael Perman, *Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888-1908* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 81.
[33] Perman, 85.
[34] C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South* 1877-1932 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971) , 335-336.
[35] See Woodward's charts on poll-tax adoption and voter registration totals in Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 342-343. It should also be noted that Woodward discusses the effect on the poor white population in southern states who were also disfranchised by the poll-tax, but not nearly as severely as the black population.
[36] James Loewen, *Mississippi: Conflict and Change* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1974), 161.

Through cannons, understanding clauses, and outright violence, whites in Mississippi had reduced the total number of registered black voters to 8,615 out of an eligible black population of over 140,000 by 1892. 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."[37] Using amendments and addendums as weapons white officials had turned the state's constitution into a tool for white supremacy, effectively turning a black majority of 37, 000 into a white majority of 58,000.[38]

The possibility that African Americans might overcome these obstacles of disfranchisement became a perennial specter that haunted the minds of southern whites who sought a permanent solution to the problem of black suffrage. In 1902, Mississippi became the first southern state to enact the direct primary system of elections which required all voters to have "voted Democratic during the previous two years" and further stated that all registrants had to be white.[39] Since Mississippi was a majority Democratic state, winning the primary meant certain victory in the general election.[40] By the early twentieth century, white politicians in Mississippi 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."[41]

Shaping "The Man"

Theodore Gilmore Bilbo came of age in a political climate born of violence, intimidation, and disfranchisement in the post-Civil War period. Born in 1877, Bilbo's

[37] James W. Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (NY: Harcourt, Brace, World Inc. Publishers, 1963), 19; Perman, 89; Woodward, *Origins*, 344.
[38] Woodward, *Origins*, 344.
[39] Perman, 306.
[40] Silver, 13.
[41] Silver, 18.

early years have been described as "average" for any poor white child growing up in the south-central Mississippi town of Poplarville, which lies in the "Piney Woods" region of Mississippi; East of Hazelhurst and just north of the Gulf Coast. Before and after the Civil War, the region's economy rested primarily on the lumber and pine tar culled from its rich pine forests. The population of the Piney Woods region has been described as "economically poor, politically unpredictable and in a constant state of economic transition."[42] The non-plantation mentality of this region put the people of the Piney Woods at odds with those of other regions such as the Delta. According to one account, people of the Piney Woods were "possessed of an inherited distrust of the planter, of the aristocratic system that great plantations breed." The Works Progress Administration compared the Piney Woods to the northwestern "Hill Region" of the state, which was also populated by many non-slave owning whites. Since these regions existed largely outside of the orbit of plantation culture and politics, they became coveted areas in electoral politics, and could "determine the political fortunes of the State" if unified behind a single political cause.[43]

Growing up in the hardscrabble backwoods, Bilbo did not attend school until the age of fifteen when he directly entered the local high school in Poplarville. Larry Balsamo, one of the foremost chroniclers of Bilbo's early life, believes that Bilbo received most of his early education from his family and "itinerant preachers," who served small, rural communities in many capacities in addition to providing religious

[42] Works Progress Administration, *Mississippi: The WPA Guide to the Magnolia State* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988), 6.
[43] WPA, 7.

salvation.[44] After completing as much of a formal education as possible, Bilbo entered the George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville, Tennessee in 1897. No information exists to verify that Bilbo officially graduated from Peabody College, but evidence indicate that he began teaching in small rural schools in 1899.[45] Larry Balsamo surmises that the failing health of Bilbo's first wife and the need to support his young daughter pushed him to become an itinerant teacher in a series of one-room schoolhouses throughout southern Mississippi.[46] Bilbo became the principal of a newly constructed boarding school in 1902, only to witness its financial collapse in 1903. It was around this time that Bilbo decided to test his hand at Mississippi politics by entering the race for Circuit Clerk in Pearl River County.[47]

During the turn of the century, Bilbo's home region of the Piney Woods was beginning to become a political hotbed and powerhouse in the state. Railroads and lumber companies began to purchase enormous tracts of land for roughly $1.25 an acre.[48] The promise of steady employment, and low wage labor increased business interest in the region, and it is estimated that by 1920, the value of the land in the region had increased 2,000%.[49] The influx of new businesses rapidly changed the demographics of the Piney Woods. African Americans and poor whites sprinted to the region in search of work, causing the population of Pearl River County to explode by over 100%.[50]

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[44] Larry T. Balsamo, "Theodore G. Bilbo and Mississippi Politics, 1877-1932," (PhD Dissertation, University of Missouri, 1997), 2.
[45] Balsamo, 8.
[46] Balsamo, 8.
[47] Balsamo, 7-8.
[48] Balsamo, 3.
[49] Balsamo, 4.
[50] Balsamo, 4.

The new black and white faces appearing in the Piney Woods coupled with its potential to become a political machine, made the area ripe for political discord, presented a prime opportunity for a young politician willing to play on popular sentiments to gain a tremendous amount of power. At the turn of the century, a political message based on protecting the rights of poor, white farmers began to take hold throughout the South. "African Americans," as Michael Perman astutely notes, "were not…the primary threat or enemy of the region's impoverished masses. They were the scapegoat for the economic grievances that the Populists had addressed in the 1890s." As industrialization began to hit the South in the first decades of the twentieth century, railroads, urbanization and modernization threatened the traditional farming economy and rural lifestyle of most southerners. Perman points out that unlike the Populists who tried to build class-based and, at times, even interracial alliances to deal with the price deflation and market control large corporations imposed on rural communities, "rural rabble rousers tended to present this ongoing conflict in social and cultural rather than in economic and political terms. Consequently, their protest became more an expression of cultural grievance than a reform movement driven by a program and an agenda."[51]

The politician who could enrage the masses against the "high collared roosters…who looked down their noses at the ignorant and grimy country dwellers" would be assured victory. Successful politicians of this period included "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman of South Carolina, Frank Burkitt and James Vardaman of Mississippi, and Tom Watson of Georgia, who all "ventilated their followers' complaints and did so with such bluster and braggadocio….They provided psychological outlets that rural and poor

[51] Michael Perman, *Pursuit of Unity: A Political History of the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 201.

people craved and needed."[52] These individuals set the standard for the "common man" message and anti-African American rhetoric, which both became central to Bilbo's core political beliefs and rhetoric.[53]

The advent of direct primaries had a tremendous effect on the success of this new brand of southern politician. Since the people rather than political insiders now chose their candidates for office, anyone could become a candidate. The system was effective at assuring unity behind one candidate. This winnowing process could take a full field of twenty candidates down to the two. The victors of the initial primary would then have a run-off election to determine a single Democratic candidate before heading to the final election against a Republican candidate who stood little chance of actually winning. The novel twist on this new primary system was that it was for whites only. Mississippi's political elites codified this into law with the constitution of 1890, greatly undercutting any chance of a feared interracial alliance between poor whites and blacks. Candidates for office now had to muster statewide appeal from white voters and they needed to cater their message to the state's majority population of poor farmers who could still vote in the Hill and Piney Woods as well as the wealthier white farmers of the Delta. This system, Michael Perman highlights, led directly to the rise of the demagogue in southern politics.[54]

For the first time in Mississippi's history, politics became a recreation activity. According to one writer, Mississippians would "swap a good library for a second-rate

[52] Perman, *Pursuit of Unity*, 202.
[53] Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 145.
[54] Loewen, *Mississippi: Conflict and Change*, 191-192.

stump speech…it would be thoroughly in tune with our hearts."[55] For most Mississippians, politics became more than recreation, it became a way of life. "For deep within each of us lies politics," one Mississippian wrote, "It is our football, baseball, and tennis rolled into one. We enjoy it; we will hitch up and drive for miles in order to hear and applaud the vitriolic phrases of a candidate we have already reckoned we'll vote against."[56]

Making the most impressive campaign speech, or stumping, became an integral part of Mississippi politics during this period. Political platforms mattered less than the mental dexterity a candidate could demonstrate during a speech. Mississippians believed that a politician's "speech will have to do with personalities, not platforms; and we will score him, not on his intelligence, but on his ability to string invective adjectives without a break."[57]

One of the first and most successful politicians to adopt this new southern ethos of political culture, and one who would play a very influential role in Bilbo's life, was James K. Vardaman, known to most Mississippians as "The White Chief." Often dressed in a white suit with a black hat and dark brown hair which dangled to his shoulders, Vardaman played up white fears of black domination as one of his foremost campaign promises. In 1903 while campaigning for governor, Vardaman frequently called African Americans a "curse to America, unfit for citizenship" and played up fears of racial equality.[58] In one such speech, Vardaman claimed that "as a race, [blacks] are deteriorating morally…they are increasing in criminality with frightful rapidity….those

[55] WPA, 8-9.
[56] WPA, 8-9.
[57] WPA, 17.
[58] Quoted in Loewen, *Mississippi: Conflict and Change*, 192.

who can read and write are more criminal than the illiterate." Vardaman incited white fears by telling his audiences that these crimes were caused by the "manifestation of the negro's aspiration for social equality."[59]

Vardaman's victory in the 1903 gubernatorial race by a majority of nearly 3,000 votes gained national attention. The *New York Times* reported that the entire 1903 election was "fought on the race question, and was the first one on that issue in many years."[60] Bilbo undoubtedly went, as most other Mississippians did, to see Vardaman stump across the state, and made mental notes of how the politician spoke; noticing what turns of phrase and flourishes of the tongue gained the most applause from the crowd. Vardaman's language most likely excited Bilbo to the possibility of trying his own hand at politicking. It is clear that to a certain degree that Bilbo took cues from Vardaman's political career. This influence has made the two men seem very similar to, but different from most other politicians from the time period categorized as demagogues. Typically, these turn of the century demagogues, such as Jeff Davis of Arkansas, campaigned on issues that they knew had no chance of moving forward, such as repealing the Fifteenth Amendment. These campaign platforms were well-received by their constituents, but once these officials reached office, they had little else in the way of a policy agenda, often accomplishing nothing at all.

Vardaman and Bilbo were different. Both built up substantial track records in Congress of passing legislation including but not limited to ending convict leasing, increasing teachers' pay, restricting child labor, setting safety standards for railroads, and increasing funds for education. Vardaman's drive to pass meaningful legislation even led

[59] "Scores Negro Education," *New York Times*, January 20, 1904.
[60] "Vardaman Elected Governor," *New York Times*, August 29, 1903.

one historian to claim that he almost singlehandedly "thrust Mississippi into the mainstream of American progressivism."[61] Vardaman and Bilbo shared an ethos of progressive reform and also importantly used race as the lynchpins of their respective campaigns. Bilbo would attempt to use Vardaman-like tactics later in his career following World War II, but he would discover that the world around him had lost its appetite for overt racism.

Seizing the opportunity to enter politics, Bilbo ran against an experienced politician for Circuit Clerk in 1903 and lost by a margin of less than fifty votes.[62] He decided to bow out of politics temporarily and pursued several business ventures before returning to politics. He went back to teaching at a local boarding school in Wiggins, Mississippi, but a rumor concerning Bilbo and one of the female students forced his departure in 1904. The following year, Bilbo started a pharmacy with a local businessman and simultaneously enrolled at Vanderbilt University's Law School. As with many points in Bilbo's educational history, records of his attendance indicate that he only attended Vanderbilt for two years, but never graduated. Records do indicate, however, that Bilbo passed the Tennessee bar in 1906.[63]

In late 1906, Bilbo returned to his home state and decided to run for state Senate seat, which encompassed Pearl River, Lamar, Marion, Covington and Simpson counties. in the 1907 election. Bilbo ran on a platform based, in large part, on racial issues. He wrote in one opinion piece "the negro has never been and never will be the equal of the

[61] Morgan, *Redneck Liberal*, 16.
[62] Balsamo, 9.
[63] Balsamo, 12.

white man….The right to vote is not a natural right…but a political privilege."[64] Bilbo ran on the "redneck" or "hillbilly" Democratic ticket of Vardaman, which C. Vann Woodward defined as epitomizing the "class struggle between the 'red necks,' and their mortal enemies, the 'high-collared roosters' of the city."[65] Bilbo and others of the "red neck" fold gave a strong voice to many poor white farmers in the Piney Woods and Hill Counties.[66]

During the early years of his career, Bilbo began to develop the fiery brand of oratory with which he would become inseparably associated, and molded his image as the champion of lower class whites. Among other talking points, Bilbo fought for higher corporate taxes, a statewide child labor law, prohibition of alcohol, and bonuses for Confederate veterans.[67] Bilbo proved a formidable politician and won the primary election against his opponent, E.L. Dent, by a margin of nearly 3,000 votes.[68]

In 1910, Bilbo went from a regionally known state senator to one of the most talked about figures in national politics. When United States Senator A.J. Mclaurin died in December 1909, two politicians sat poised to take his seat in a special election held to fill the post. Leroy Percy, a lawyer and planter from Greenville, Mississippi, known for being a "level-headed lawyer and businessman," was seen as a moderate voice on racial

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[64] Bilbo quote from "The Southern Problem," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, January 10, 1910, quoted in Balsamo, 14.
[65] Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 376.
[66] 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, East, and Piney Woods of the South. For more on the split between these two factions see Balsamo, 15-16; and C. Vann Woodward, *The Origins of the New South 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 369-395.
[67] Balsamo, 22.
[68] Cecil L. Summers, *The Governors of Mississippi* (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing, 1998), 95; Balsamo, 24.

issues.[69] Percy stood as the only opposition to James Vardaman for McLaurin's seat, and he won the caucus by a majority of five votes.[70] The *New York Times* reported that both Republicans and Democrats in Congress rejoiced at Vardaman's defeat. Neither Democrats nor Republicans wanted to have their party associated with Vardaman whose "declared platform seemed to be the hatred of the negro….[and] the repeal of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments."[71] These same politicians believed that Percy's victory would end the factionalism witnessed with the increase in the use of racially charged rhetoric. As one newspaper noted, Mississippi would be "finally rid of the bizarre and reckless radicalism, which has been…called Vardamanism."[72]

The election of Percy was thrown into contention with the testimony of Bilbo who claimed in late March of 1910 that he had accepted a $645 bribe from L.C. Dulaney, a Percy associate, to vote for Percy in the election.[73] Percy denied the charges, but Bilbo persisted. National attention focused on Mississippi and an investigation was launched by the state Senate into Percy's campaign. Cecil Smith notes that as a result of the trial, Bilbo became "a political martyr," and became a firm supporter of Vardaman's political group. The state determined that it would hold a primary vote the following year to determine whether Vardaman or Percy would hold office.[74]

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[69] "Vardaman's Defeat Relief to Senators," *New York Times*, February 24, 1910.
[70] "Percy Defeats Vardaman," *New York Times*, February 23, 1910.
[71] "Vardaman's Defeat Relief to Senators," *New York Times*, February 24, 1910.
[72] "Passing of Vardamanism," *New York Times*, March 7 1910.
[73] "Bribed to Vote for Percy," *New York Times*, March 29, 1910; "Held for Bribery in Electing Senator," *New York Times*, March 30, 1910.
[74] Cecil L. Summers, *Governors of Mississippi*, 95; "Demand Bilbo Shall Quit," *New York Times*, April 15, 1910; "Senatorial Primary Called," *New York Times*, April 17, 1910; "Mississippi Primary Off," *New York Times*, May 8, 1910; "The Latest Graft Charges," *The Columbus Commercial* (Columbus, Mississippi), December 7, 1913.

It was during this second run for the Senate that Bilbo crafted and honed his political message. Large crowds turned out to hear him speak in the summer of 1910 as he stumped the state in support of Vardaman and for a political seat as Lieutenant Governor. Bilbo's invective became a lightning rod for state politics. His speeches polarized Mississippi's constituency, drawing the ire of some and the admiration of many. Bilbo was so polarizing that he even received a caning at the hands of a man on the streets of Yazoo City in which the assailant "broke his walking cane over the head and the arm of Bilbo," which fractured Bilbo's skull.[75]

Bilbo and Vardaman won the primaries in 1911 despite a "light" turnout from the state's voting population. Witnessing the election, Leroy Percy opined that "with Vardaman elected, I consider Bilbo's election fortunate for the state. The more nauseous the dose, the sooner will vomiting relieve the patient."[76] Much to Percy's chagrin, Vardaman and Bilbo would not be "vomited" from the belly of Mississippi politics, any time soon, but instead became staples of the state's political system for years to come. It should be noted that without Bilbo, Vardaman most likely would not have won this election. By 1911, Vardaman had lost popularity among poor whites in the southeast. His attacks on the lumber industry threatened his much-needed support in this region and his overt blatant racism had drawn the ire of delta planters, who Morgan argues, preferred a more subtle recognition of racial customs by their politicians rather than the type of recognition pandered by Vardaman on the campaign trail. Bilbo's ability to stump for

[75] "Senator Theo. Bilbo to Speak Here," *Aberdeen Weekly*, August 12, 1910; "Yewell Against Vardaman," *Macon Beacon*, July 8, 1910; "Senator Bilbo is Assaulted," *Pascagoula Democrat*, May 26, 1911; "Fractures Senator's Skull," *New York Times*, July 7, 1911.
[76] LeRoy Percy to John R. Goge, August 7, 1911, Percy Family Papers, quoted in James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1992) , 148; "Brewer Wins Mississippi," *New York Times*, November 8, 1911.

Vardaman in his home territory helped Vardaman win the election and helped associate Bilbo with Vardaman as a key progressive reformer and supporter of white supremacy. It was not long after this election, though, that the Bilbo-Vardaman alliance began to show signs of fatigue. Throughout his term in office, Vardaman had to continually distance himself from Bilbo who would often make racial and ethnic statements that went against Vardaman's sensibilities. William Holmes recalls one particular instance in which Bilbo remarked that a fellow politician was a "sheeny Jew," a remark that proved to be so "embarrassing" to Vardaman that he had to explain to his constituents publicly that he could not control Bilbo and that he did not share his sentiments. The relationship became one of necessity. Bilbo needed Vardaman to help court Delta and Hill County whites and Vardaman needed Bilbo to provide him with votes in the southeast Piney Woods. It was a relationship that remained strained for the remainder of Vardaman's political career.[77]

Even though his political star in Mississippi was on the rise, Bilbo struggled to overcome scandals after he entered office. These missteps, which would have certainly spelled doom for politicians in other regions of the country, bolstered Bilbo's credentials with his constituents, endearing him as a "common man" who was not above making mistakes. Only two years after Bilbo had won election as Lieutenant Governor, he was embroiled in yet another bribery scandal. This time, however, Bilbo could not defend himself by stating that he was taking a bribe to ferret out corruption in a political opponent's campaign. Bilbo and state Senator A.G. Hobbs were indicted by a grand jury for soliciting a bribe from a citizen of Belzoni who wanted Hobbs and Bilbo to lobby for

[77] William Holmes, *White Chief*, 254; Morgan, *Redneck Liberal*, 51.

the creation of a new county, which would be carved out of existing counties.[78] The 1913 indictment and the accusations that still lingered from 1910 put Bilbo on the national map as a politician frequently involved with unsavory behavior, but somehow he continued to remain a person in whom the people of Mississippi placed their utmost faith.[79]

Despite his setbacks from prior administrations, Bilbo used his political capital to become Governor in 1915. He made new enemies, engaging in a fist fight with his Attorney General, and a political split with a former ally.[80] However, he still managed to push through a considerable amount of legislation. In his one term as the head of the state, Bilbo established a new tax commission, which raised the value of businesses in the state to over $40 million, established a state highway commission, built limestone mines, a tuberculosis sanitarium, enacted prohibition, abolished public hangings, and started a night school for adults. George Tindall remarks that "Bilbo's record would have been impressive for any state…his opponents acknowledged that 'under his administration more forward-looking legislation was enacted than in any previous gubernatorial regime.'" In only one four year term, Bilbo managed to orchestrate a monumental reform plan that expanded the state's economy, but also gave him unparalleled political capital.[81]

In 1919 after he had finished his term in office, Bilbo returned home to Poplarville, ostensibly to remove himself from politics and he largely did so until 1922 when he announced that he would be helping James Vardaman run for Senate. Bilbo's

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[78] "Indict State Officials," *New York Times*, December 3, 1913; "Lieutenant Gov. Bilbo Faces Arrest in Mississippi," *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), December 3, 1913.
[79] "Bilbo of Mississippi Acquitted," *New York Times*, July 10, 1914; "Disgusting Tactics," *Macon Beacon* (Macon, Mississippi), June 11, 1915.
[80] "Governor Knocked Down by his Attorney General," *Washington Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1919; "Swept J. Taylor Breaks with Bilbo," *The Aberdeen Weekly*, February 22, 1918.
[81] George Tindall, *Emergence of the New South: 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 24-25.

time off from politics had not hurt him with his constituents and helped reinforced his image as a "man of the people."[82] While stumping for Vardaman, Bilbo's speeches were tinted with "good humor" and "infectious wit," he was often categorized as "an entertainer and a charmer, almost amounting to mesmerism." One writer declared that Bilbo could "bend his hearer's vision to zig-zag down the way he gazes, and as long as [the listeners] are under his spell, visualize the things that he sees." Bilbo perfected his oratory and his crowds grew. After hearing one of his speeches, a columnist for the *Macon Beacon* wrote that people cheered Bilbo and "marveled at the dexterous way in which he touched up a tar baby with enamel….It was a master stroke."[83] Vardaman lost his bid for Senate by a margin of nearly 11,000 votes. Historians of this era believe that, despite Bilbo's best efforts, Vardaman could not recover from devastating comments he had made regarding World War I. His anti-war sentiment drew the ire of many in Mississippi who largely supported the war due to its demand for cotton, which Mississippi's poor whites and Delta planters were all too eager to supply.[84]

Bilbo managed to distance himself from Vardaman's anti-war stance enough to stay politically relevant, and even though he continued to mire himself in more scandals he did not sink his ship. Instead, he buoyed his political aspirations and earned himself a new nickname, "The Man," which would forever tie his misogynist ideals about white masculinity to his overarching ideology of white supremacy. In the winter of 1922, Governor Lee Russell, Bilbo's former Lieutenant Governor, was charged with trying to

[82] "Theodore Bilbo," *The Chattanooga News*, September 23, 1920; "New Governor to Take Office in Mississippi," *The News Scimitar* (Memphis, Tennessee), January 20, 1920.
[83] "Bilbo Speaks in Macon," *Macon Beacon* (Macon, Mississippi), September 01, 1922.
[84] William Holmes, *White Chief*, 341; "Vardaman Left Behind," *New York Times*, September 7, 1922.

pay the governor's stenographer, Frances Birkhead, for sex.[85] When Bilbo failed to show up for court on the appointed day after receiving a subpoena, the Federal Judge, Erwin R. Holmes, sentenced him to thirty days in jail. While serving time, Bilbo announced that he would run for Governor in the summer of 1923. When he emerged from his stay in county jail, Bilbo proclaimed that he felt "as clean as the snow, purged of any suggestion of contempt." [86] In 1923, Bilbo campaigned against three other candidates for governor, and ran on a platform based on his previous accomplishments, promising his constituents that he would use convict labor to build more roads, and oversee the construction of a new printing plant in Mississippi so that school children could purchase textbooks at a reasonable price. Bilbo's platform allowed him to capitalize on the sentiments of the poor white electorate who applauded his effort to keep education costs down.[87]

Bilbo fell behind early in the race and never recovered. The leading opponent, Henry L. Whitfield, had gained a majority of the vote, and not even a run-off primary could hold back the tide of his supporters.[88] After his defeat, Bilbo took up residence in Jackson and began to publish a newspaper called the *Free Lance* in which he detailed his political ambitions and lambasted current office holders for their ineffectual leadership, which reached a circulation of over 17,000 people by 1926.[89] Shortly after starting his new endeavor, Bilbo announced his candidacy for Governorship in 1928, and it could not have come at a more fortuitous time for the champion of the poor white farmer.

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[85] Bilbo was implicated in the original charge, but the charge was later dropped and Bilbo was only called to testify as a witness; "Gov. Russell on Stand Denies Girl's Charges," *New York Times*, December 7, 1922.
[86] "Bilbo, Jailed, Will Run for Governor," *New York Times*, April 23, 1923; "Bilbo 'Purged' by Prison," *New York Times*, April 26, 1923.
[87] Balsamo, 145-146.
[88] "Whitfield has Safe Lead with Mississippians," *Abilene Daily Reporter*, August 8, 1923; "Whitfield Leads Bilbo," *New York Times*, August 29, 1923.
[89] Balsamo, 150.

Beginning in the mid-1920s, the price of cotton fell and the resulting depression caused a labor surplus in the state, which clamored for work.[90] Bilbo ran largely on a platform that offered hope to these displaced individuals. He promised to print textbooks at cost, a Bureau of Markets to aid farmers, and a tax cut.[91]

Bilbo won his bid for the governorship, but his second term was not nearly as successful as his first. He was constantly bogged down in political battles with Mississippi's Congress over funding for the state's printing plant. Bilbo had no plan to raise state revenue to the tune of over $60 million, which he promised throughout his campaign.[92] The Mississippi Education Association wrote that Bilbo had merely used his credentials as a former teacher to fool voters into thinking that there was a "textbook trust," which kept education costs high and provided sub-standard training for students.[93] Bilbo drew the ire of state teachers with his comments, and also other politicians by "placing this item first" on his list of priorities over raising state revenue which, the *Woodville Republican* argued should have been of "paramount importance."[94] Due to his inability to look beyond the printing plant, Bilbo vetoed virtually all other measures proposed by Mississippi's Congress, much to the consternation of Mississippians who lambasted the Senator for thinking "his mind was greater than the minds of the majority…of the Legislature."[95] Political gridlock ensued for much of Bilbo's time in

[90] Gavin Wright, *Old South New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy* (NY: Basic Books, 1986), 210.
[91] Balsamo, 155.
[92] Balsamo, 166.
[93] "Reply Criticizing Our Chief Executive for 'Insulting' State Educators," *Woodville Republican*, June 30, 1928; "Governor Bilbo's Attitude Toward Mississippi Educational Association," *Woodville Republican*, June 30, 1928.
[94] R.L. Brown, "State Capitol News Letter," *Woodville Republican* (Mississippi), September 29, 1928; Tindall, *Emergence*, 234.
[95] R.L. Brown, "State Capitol News Letter," *Woodville Republican*, September 28, 1928.

office, and he became one of the most hated figures in the state, unable to deliver on his electoral promises.

Bilbo's political capital drowned so quickly in fact that by 1930, none of the candidates for state highway commissioner, a relatively small position in the Mississippi government, would publicly announce that they had received an endorsement from him. One reporter pointed out that "usually the backing of the governor is a thing to be greatly desired by candidates for office."[96] The debacle over the printing plant left Mississippi in worse shape than when Bilbo took office. Bilbo's only real achievement in his second term was firing 179 faculty members at four different colleges and universities between June and July of 1930. He filled these positions with many of his friends, some of whom had not obtained a college degree. The attack on Mississippi's higher education system, which included Ole Miss, the state's flagship university, cost Bilbo important political points with whites throughout the state, especially planters in the Delta who had long-held ties to many of the schools Bilbo gutted. With the onslaught of the Depression worsening by the day, Mississippians voted in Martin S. Conner as Governor in 1932.[97]

Bilbo's attempt to reconstruct Mississippi's higher education system, while accomplishing little other than throwing most schools into complete instability, showcased the Senator's anti-intellectual sentiments, which would come to define a crucial component of conservative ideology in the years following World War II. Richard Hofstadter noticed that once intellectuals began to have greater access to the White House during FDR's administration, the president encouraged policies that promoted research and scientific professionalization. Small politicians, Hofstadter argues,

[96] R.L. Brown," State Capitol News Letter," *Woodville Republican*, May 10, 1930.
[97] Sumners, *Governors of Mississippi*, 100.

especially at the state level, who used to feel that "most matters were within their control" underwent a crisis of political power. They were terrified by the prospect of

> confronting better educated and more sophisticated experts…[small politicians] now [took] part less vitally…in the making of important decisions….the small-town lawyers and businessmen who [were] elected to Congress [could not] hope to expropriate the experts from their central advisory role, but they [could] achieve a kind of revenge through Congressional investigation and harassment…they [carried] on this task full of a sense of virtuous mission.[98]

By placing his friends in faculty positions throughout Mississippi's higher education system, Bilbo not only signaled his distaste for academics as the antithesis of his poor white constituency, but he also showed that he distrusted them on a personal level. He did not abolish departments wholesale, but replaced faculty with people whom he knew he could trust, despite their lack-luster credentials. Bilbo's distrust of higher education speaks to one of the foundational principals of modern conservatism, which Hofstadter recognized as being "older than our national identity."[99]

For the next two years, Bilbo found refuge in the newly created Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). Created by President Franklin Roosevelt with the task of reducing the production of key agricultural staples such as wheat, cotton, corn, and tobacco, the AAA made "agreements," with farmers to under-produce crops in order to stabilize the market. This subsidy program sat well with Delta planters in Mississippi who received payment for not fully utilizing their land. The policy hurt poor whites and blacks because it displaced many of them from their work as sharecroppers and tenants.

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[98] Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 35-36.
[99] American Economic Association, "Minutes of the Business Meetings of the American Economic Association held in Cleveland, Ohio December 29-31, 1930," *The American Economic Review* 21, 1 (March 1931): 268; W.H.C. "Editorial Comments," *Journal of Higher Education* 1, 8 (November 1930): 478.

Even though they had been displaced by farm subsidies, some of the aforementioned individuals found work in New Deal programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). It should be noted, however, that many African Americans did not benefit as fruitfully from these programs as many of their poor white counterparts. Previous scholarship has emphasized the role that these programs played in coaxing black voters away from the Republican Party, and solidifying their allegiance to the Democrats. However, in regional offices for the CCC and WPA, whites staffed a majority of the positions that determined who would be hired to work on government-sponsored projects. In Mississippi, this meant that despite being a black majority state, whites constituted 98.3% of CCC enrollees in the early years of the Depression. Though colorblind on paper, these programs lacked specific policies to enforce equality in the hiring process and their influence on securing black voters for the Democratic Party has been slightly exaggerated.[100]

Conversely, whites, both poor and wealthy alike, benefitted greatly from Roosevelt's reform programs. The traditional southern concern of federal intervention in state affairs took a back seat to the provisions of FDR's policies.[101] Even Bilbo benefited from the federal government's aid programs. Using his political connections, he was given a job clipping newspapers for the AAA with a cushy starting salary of $6,000 a

[100] See Simon Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy: The Republican Party and the African American Vote, 1928-1952* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2008); Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 112; older scholarship that promoted the idea of New Deal reforms leading to a political realignment of the black electorate include Nancy Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), xiv; George Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 446-447.
[101] Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy*, 24; Alan Brinkley, "The New Deal and Southern Politics," in James C. Cobb and Michael Namorato, *The New Deal and the South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 97-111.

year, a hearty sum in the midst of the Great Depression.[102] Only a few politicians, including Eugene Talmadge, warned of the dangers that such programs posed to the racial status quo. In the Depression's early years, these men were outliers, but they would constitute a growing voice of which Bilbo would later become a part as the Depression continued.[103]

It is no coincidence Bilbo re-entered politics in 1934. If Talmadge's apocalyptic proclamations that the end of the South was at hand did not convince him, Bilbo was stirred by the introduction of new anti-lynching legislation in the Senate in January 1934. The Costigan-Wagner bill promised to end lynching in the South by punishing sheriffs who refused to arrest perpetrators of lynchings, requiring the enforcement of existing anti-lynching legislation, and imposing a fine of up to $10,000 on counties where lynchings took place. The bill died by filibuster shortly after its introduction, but its proposal seemed to speak to Talmadge's concerns about the New Deal making inroads for equality in the South. It seems unlikely, but perhaps Bilbo knew that roughly 40% of all lynching victims in the 1930s died in Mississippi. However, if he was aware of this gruesome statistic, it makes his return to politics all the more fortuitous.[104]

He stormed into the race for United States Senator in the spring of 1934 after resigning his job with AAA. He squared off against three other candidates, none of whom posed as serious of a challenge to his seat as Ross Collins who was being backed by infamous Louisiana Governor Huey "Kingfish" Long. In his support for Collins, Long

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[102] According to the Consumer Price Index released by the Bureau of Labor and statistics, Bilbo's adjusted yearly salary equates to roughly $109,000 in 2016. Consumer Price Index, date accessed February 29, 2016, http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl; James Stuart Olson, *Historical Dictionary of the Great Depression*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), 3; "Californians to Vote Tomorrow," *The Bulletin* (Oregon), August 27, 1934.
[103] Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy*, 11-14.
[104] Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy*, 22.

promised to "out Bilbo Bilbo."[105] Bilbo certainly put that effort to the test. One reporter described Bilbo as having unmatched voracity on the campaign trail that spring, only eating meals of sardines, crackers, and soda in between his five daily speeches. While on the campaign trail, Bilbo did not openly criticize Roosevelt's New Deal policies and he frequently made reference to a rise in racial unrest that needed to be quelled. Even though Bilbo had been "consigned to political oblivion," when he left office in 1932, his 1934 campaign represented his new vigor for politics and showed the chord he was hitting with both poor and upper class whites. In the end, Bilbo out-Bilbo-ed Collins by "dealing in personalities," quoting scripture at length and mixing in a healthy dose of "cuss" words. Bilbo had narrowed the field down to himself and incumbent Hubert Stephens.[106]

In his traditional manner, Bilbo manufactured a "racial boogey-man" to combat his opponent's barbs. He charged Stephens as having a grandfather in the Senate who helped an African American man, Blanche K. Bruce, become a United States Senator in 1897. In his campaign speeches, Bilbo told sell-out crowds that if he were elected, he would "make Huey Long seem tame," by supporting wealth redistribution programs and economic adjustments that favored farmers. In this regard, Bilbo had successfully threaded a needle between the extreme economic liberalism of Long while also maintaining good political standing with the Roosevelt administration. When the numbers came in on September 18, Bilbo was the victor by a margin of 5,000 votes. Upon hearing the news, he remarked, "God bless the people. I knew they would re-elect

[105] George Durno, "News Behind the News," *The Evening Independent* (St. Petersburg, Florida), May 31, 1934; "Bilbo Resigns A.A.A. Job," *The Southeast Missourian*, February 26, 1934.
[106] "Bilbo Comeback Seen," *Berkeley Daily Gazette* (California) August 27, 1934.

me."[107] To help cement his image as a New Dealer, he declared in his victory speech that he would be "no more radical than President Roosevelt," and he would fight for old-age pensions, unemployment benefits, and a higher tax for wealthy Mississippians.

Bilbo continued to tout the mantel of the "common man," telling his constituents that he opposed the AAA's crop limitations, which put him slightly at odds with the Delta planters, but qualified his statement by telling listeners that he repudiated his opponent Stephens for being a man who "ran out on the President." In an appeal that would later draw deep criticism from national and international news outlets, Bilbo closed his victory speech boasting of his white supremacist credentials, telling the crowd that he had "stumped the state for Al Smith in 1928- me a Baptist, a Ku Klux Klansman," and further declared that he would "render real service…so long as the rights of [Mississippians] were not infringed."[108] Bilbo's promise to protect individual rights, support New Deal policies that aided both wealthy planters and poor whites, and maintain his commitment to white supremacy are indicative of a new brand of conservative politics Bilbo was helping to define in the pre-war period. Parts of this ethos would later become staples of post-war conservatism.

Once in office, Bilbo's voting record became a sterling example of a hardline New Dealer. Chester Morgan remarks that Bilbo's record, "was the envy of the most liberal of northern New Dealers."[109] Morgan points out that Bilbo supported all of FDR's Hundred Days improvements and further backed the president's efforts on public works,

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[107] F. Raymond Daniel, "Bilbo Nominated by Mississippians," *New York Times*, September 9, 1934; "Southern Primaries," *New York Times*, August 30, 1934; Thomas Fauntleroy, "Mississippi Opens Grudge Campaign," *New York Times*, March 18, 1934.
[108] F. Raymond Daniel, "Noise Like Long's Pledged by Bilbo," *New York Times*, September 29, 1934.
[109] Chester M. Morgan, *Redneck Liberal: Theodore G. Bilbo and the New Deal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 66.

banking control, and old-age pensions. Bilbo's support of the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act in 1935 ushered in one of the grandest welfare reform measures of the New Deal, providing emergency employment for an estimated 3.5 million United States citizens.[110]

In addition to backing the proposed legislative measures of President Roosevelt, Bilbo spent a considerable amount of time during his first two years in office stumping for down-ballot Democratic candidates Hugh White and Mike Conner.[111] His campaigning, however, took a toll on his personal relationship with his wife Linda, and in May 1937, Theodore Bilbo filed for divorce citing "habitual, cruel, and inhuman treatment." In arguments before a district magistrate, Bilbo's wife told a different story, one in which Bilbo had abandoned her and was "constantly unfaithful." "So many times he lived with someone else—for a year—and returned," She told the court between sobs. According to Linda, her and her husband had not lived under the same roof since 1928. Despite all of these accusations, which Bilbo did not deny, his wife stated that she would "still wait for him to return to her." Few studies provide an adequate window for viewing the relationship between Bilbo and his wife Linda, yet, Bertram Wyatt-Brown's work on the subject offers some perspective. Brown points out that southern women in the antebellum period had a torturously difficult time securing a divorce, even if their husbands had physically or emotionally abused them. Men did not have nearly as much difficulty being granted a divorce since the restrictive policies against divorce "laid deep in the common law and ecclesiastical polity…as a defense of male ascriptiveness." The reason that men did not divorce women during this period and in later generations,

[110] Morgan, 70-72.
[111] Morgan, *Redneck Liberal*, Chapters 4 and 6.

Brown argues, was due to concerns about the erosion of male honor. The chief reason for men seeking a divorce, according to Brown, was "an erosion of honor, not an anxiety about sundering God's union of man and wife." Brown elaborates that the oaths taken by husband and wife at wedding ceremonies were "pledges of sacred honor" not to be frivolously undone.

In addition to the fact that it would have been unlikely for Linda Bilbo to receive a divorce had she asked for one, her remarks indicate that she did not completely believe in the southern concept that women had the responsibility to "lighten the burdens" of their men's lives once they returned home from work. Southern men and women believed that females should only strive to perfect their domestic talents rather than busy themselves with formal education.[112] Linda Bilbo's testimony acknowledges this traditional view of white southern women, but also points towards the complicated nature of power dynamics within the southern household. Had she truly bought into and embodied white male idealizations of the perfect southern housewife, she assuredly would not have aired her husband's indiscretions to the court. Her testimony provides evidence to support Laura Edwards' claims that southern women, both black and white, often used the public space of a trial proceeding to exert influence over household or community affairs.[113]

Bilbo thought it best to part ways with his wife, despite the political implications a divorce would have on his career in a region that believed heavily in marriage until death. They were granted a divorce, and the testimony from the hearing revealed Bilbo to

[112] Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 202, 284.
[113] Laura Edwards, *The People and their Peace: Legal Culture and the Transformation of Inequality in the Post-Revolutionary South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

be an unabashed philanderer, earning him the nickname "The Man." It was alleged that Bilbo even told a crowd of female voters after his divorce that, "If these stories about 'The Man' are true, you've got to admit sisters, he's a man."[114] Bilbo's infidelity did not alienate him from his constituents. Once again, an incident that perhaps would have doomed many other politicians in other parts of the nation only further endeared Bilbo to his constituents. He was not impeached nor did he lose any political support over his divorce, exposing what Mississippi's voters viewed as important issues during the pre-war period, shining light on the desire for hyper-masculine political discourse and action that, to many southerners, Bilbo symbolized in its highest form.

Bilbo's affair made for salacious headlines, but it was not uncommon for white males in the South to pursue extramarital relationships and his trysts were seen as more normative than not in the South. Wyatt-Brown summarizes that "to the traditional southern mind, there was no 'double standard' of morality. The sexes differed. They lived separate lives—one in the world, the other in the home."[115] This view of separate worlds allowed southern white males like Bilbo to dissociate their extramarital life from their personal life at home, especially when the life outside of the home was predicated on a primal definition of hyper-masculinity. Brown surmises that, "southerners' touchiness over virility, stemmed from deep anxieties about how others, particularly Northerners…saw them. Yet the braggadocio, the role-playing, the self-deception should not be seen as 'gentlemanly masquerade'….They meant every word."[116] In this regard,

[114] "Bilbo: The Stormy Career of 'The Man' from Mississippi," *The Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, August 27, 1947; "Ex- Wife May Oppose Bilbo in Senate Race," *Reading Eagle* (Pennsylvania), July 27, 1938; "Wife Contests Divorce Senator Bilbo of Mississippi," *The Lewiston Daily Sun* (Maine), May 19, 1937; "Senator Bilbo, Tearful Wife, Argue Divorce," *The Day* (Connecticut), May 19, 1937.
[115] Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 54.
[116] Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 34-35.

Bilbo's actions were assuredly seen by many as being reprehensible for breaking his marriage vows, but his actions were weighed against his ardent support of segregationist principals. For Bilbo's largely poor white constituents, black equality was the larger threat to their traditional way of life than Bilbo's infidelity. They willingly traded in Bilbo's personal politics for Bilbo's promise of protection from the black population.

Throughout the rest of his term in office, Bilbo continued to support Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies, although his loyalty had started to waiver. By 1937, as Alan Brinkley describes it, "the active phase of the New Deal had largely come to an end." Roosevelt no longer had the political capital he possessed in his first term to push through meaningful reform based legislation. His policies began to shift from reform based liberalism, defined as legislation aimed at restructuring the government and providing employment opportunities to poor citizens, to New Deal or rights-based liberalism, which had the goal of providing increased worker's rights as well as African American civil rights. As a result of this shift, Bilbo and his southern colleagues began to line up decisively against FDR.[117]

One of the most galling acts to senators like Eugene Talmadge who already opposed Roosevelt occurred at the Democratic National Convention in 1936 when FDR not only allowed African American delegates to participate in the convention, but an African American minister gave the invocation. Before the reverend could finish his prayer, Ellison "Cotton Ed" Smith, a Senator from South Carolina, audibly walked out of the convention hall. Smith's reaction was indicative of many southern politicians after

[117] Alan Brinkley, *End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (NY: Vintage Books, 1995), 3-6.

1936 convention who, "did the electoral arithmetic."[118] The "electoral arithmetic" as Jason Ward phrases it, refers to the fact that a substantial number of black voters had given their support to the Democratic Party since 1932. In the 1932 presidential election, nearly 75% of African Americans voted for Republican Herbert Hoover, but by 1936, the same number of black voters cast their ballots for Roosevelt. The vote totals from the election in 1936 terrified southern Senators even further when it was revealed that Roosevelt did not need a single southern vote to secure his victory over Republican challenger Alf Landon.[119] Ward relates that, "some [southern senators] worried openly that a subversive alliance of uppity blacks and slick urban politicians had seized control of their party."[120] Talmadge began to receive support from Congressmen throughout the South who had previously thrown their weight behind Roosevelt.[121]

Bilbo teetered between support for his fellow southern brethren and the President. He did not fit the mold of Eugene Talmadge and "Cotton Ed" Smith by openly and vociferously criticizing the president's policies, despite his self-proclaimed opposition to the Costigan-Wagner anti-lynching bill. Instead he showed strong support for Roosevelt's measures including relief spending under the McCarran act. Other southern Senators believed the bill aided too many urban northern blacks and the Wagner Act, which supported organized labor would doom the South. However, "Bilbo supported [the

[118] Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy*, 21.
[119] Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy*, 25.
[120] Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy*, 21.
[121] Simon Topping has recently pointed out that while white Senators' fears certainly were not without merit, they were most likely a little overblown. He asserts that even though blacks voted overwhelmingly for FDR in 1936, this was in large part due to how African Americans viewed Roosevelt as a person rather than how they viewed the Democratic Party as a whole. Topping's argument, contrary to Nancy Weiss's contention, is that blacks were not allied with the Democrats until much later since the black community nearly split its allegiances in half during the 1940 election; Simon Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy: The Republican Party and the African American Vote, 1928-1952* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2002), 4-6

Wagner bill] throughout," according to Chester Morgan, "helping defeat an amendment to legalize company unions" which would have undercut organized labor.[122]

A decrease in New Deal appropriations for southern states and FDR's attempted purge of southern Senators in 1937 began to drive a wedge between Bilbo, whose constituents depended on relief money, and the Roosevelt administration. Between 1938 and 1939, Bilbo worked to pass legislative reform that would aid his poor white constituents. His proposal to fund a chemical laboratory to explore alternative uses for cotton found support from Roosevelt who called the bill a "really good thing."[123] Bilbo's proposal was part of a larger "chemurgic" movement in rural regions that sought to use farm products in chemical production.

First proposed by George Washington Carver, Charles Herty and William Hale, the chemurgic movement sought to turn sweet potato starch, wood and cotton cellulose, and tung oil into usable ingredients in material production.[124] Bilbo fought hard in the Senate to pass an Amendment to the Farm Relief Act that would have provided funds for the construction of laboratories in Deep South states devoted to chemurgic study and development. He desperately wanted one of these plants to be built in Mississippi as a means of gaining political favor with his constituents in the piney woods who relied on the timber industry for employment. Bilbo helped the bill pass Congress, but only one southern chemical lab was opened in New Orleans. Even though his state was left out of the bill, it helped him gain favor with southerners outside of Mississippi who received steady employment in a high tech industry.[125]

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[122] Chester Morgan, 72-76.
[123] Roosevelt to Bell, June 11, 1937, quoted in Morgan, *Redneck Liberal*, 190.
[124] George Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 465.
[125] George Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 465.

Though he could not secure relief for his own citizens, Bilbo's political capital grew from his fight against anti-lynching legislation. The Costigan-Wagner bill had not made it out of the Senate in 1934, but arguments over re-introducing anti-lynching legislation continued periodically until a new bill the Wagner-Van Nuys Bill was introduced in the Senate in December of 1937. Bilbo stood with his southern colleagues denouncing the bill as an assault on southern customs and ways of life that would assuredly "open the facades of Hell in the South." After hearing that Bilbo had asked for unanimous permission to speak for thirty days straight in the second month of the filibuster against the bill, a group of college students from Millsaps sent a letter to him asking him to stop the filibuster and support the bill. Bilbo used the letter to ask for a federal investigation into the affairs of the students who signed the letter on the grounds that they had been brainwashed into joining a communist organization. Bilbo could not understand the origins of the "utterly inexplicable sentiment" of the students. The student's letter undoubtedly added to Bilbo's previously held suspicions of higher education and even helped him formulate the conspiratorial connection between academics and global communism, which he would use later in his career.[126]

One of Bilbo's talking points during this filibuster became one of the most intriguing incidents in his political career and put his racial ideology on display for the nation. The fight over the anti-lynching bill and white efforts to control blacks in the South coincided with a tide of black nationalism that swept across America during the late 1920s. Given his views on African Americans, one would not readily assume that Bilbo would support black efforts to obtain any civil rights, regardless of their content.

[126] "Move to Displace Anti-Lynching Bill," *New York Times*, January 22, 1938; "Asks Student Red Inquiry," *New York Times*, May 13, 1937.

However, Bilbo rallied to the cause of black nationalists, sponsoring a bill to repatriate African Americans to Liberia as the product of "outstanding leaders….[who] studied the race problems…and foresaw the ultimate outcome. They did not believe in a nation of mongrels [and] pleaded for a program…which would make America white."[127] Bilbo's comments on repatriation drew attention from blacks across the nation. Mittie Gordon, leader of the repatriation group Peace Movement of Ethiopia, told a friend that blacks had "found a Moses."[128] What started as a means of delaying action on anti-lynching legislation grew a life of its own and evolved in the weeks following Bilbo's mention of it in the Senate. In the months that followed, Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) wrote letters of support to Bilbo and even secured passage in the Virginia legislature of a bill that promised federal aid to blacks interested in resettling in Africa. Bilbo understood that he could gain substantial political capital with the bill, which would be well-received by poor white conservatives in Mississippi as a means of deporting their chief competition for unskilled labor. In an era before the New Deal, Bilbo would have almost certainly lost the support of planter elites in the Delta who would have seen the repatriation effort as an assault on their largest labor force, low wage African Americans. However, the subsidies the AAA provided to these individuals for not farming on their land allowed Bilbo to take a political risk.

For a short time, Bilbo was viewed as a prophet by the African American community. When he introduced his formal plan for repatriation in 1939, nearly 500 African American supporters filled the gallery of the Senate to hear the proposal. His

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[127] Theodore G. Bilbo, *Take Your Choice Separation or Mongrelization* (Self Published, 1947), 216.
[128] Gordon to Earnest Cox, June 29, 1938, quoted in Michael Fitzgerald, "We have found a Moses: Theodore Bilbo, Black Nationalism, and the Greater Liberia Bill of 1939," *Journal of Southern History* 63, 2 (May 1997): 300.

colleagues who initially viewed Bilbo's proposition to repatriate African Americans as a clever filibuster tactic, now viewed his formal proposal as a "crude and counterproductive stunt."[129] The plan never gained substantive traction in the Senate and formally stalled with Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland in September of 1939. Michael Fitzgerald notes that Bilbo's plan to repatriate blacks hinged on the involvement and support of key nations including England and France who would not be able to support the plan in the midst of war preparations. Despite its failure, the repatriation plan signified "a persistent strain of racial pessimism that fueled diehard resistance to the New Deal order….Clashes between the Roosevelt administration and the South's old guard provided an opening for militant white supremacists to engage in…racial agitation."[130]

With his repatriation effort squashed and the fight over anti-lynching legislation ended by 1940, Bilbo focused his efforts on his re-election campaign. He made the repeal of the poll-tax a key element of his platform, claiming that it hindered the voting ability of poor whites, the key voting bloc of his constituency. Bilbo's challengers alleged that repealing the poll-tax would cause more harm than good, allowing Mississippi blacks to "bring negroes swarming to the polls throughout the South."[131] Attacks on Bilbo's whiteness proved no match for his ability to use his political record as a "New Dealer" and support for poor white farmers to court voters and Bilbo sauntered to an easy victory over his closest opponent, Hugh White by a margin of over 20,000 votes.[132] Bilbo's second term as senator was largely focused on legislative measures dealing with the

[129] Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy*, 30.
[130] Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy*, 30; Fitzgerald, 316.
[131] Jackson Clarion Ledger, August 24, 1940, pg. 1 quoted in Morgan, *Redneck Liberal*, 226.
[132] "Bilbo Retains Senate Post," *The Tuscaloosa News* (Ala), August 28, 1940; "Bilbo Renamed in Mississippi," *New York Times*, August 28, 1940.

logistics of World War II. He debated such hotly contested issues including the age at which individuals should be drafted, whether or not servicemen should have access to alcohol, and whether or not women should be drafted into a wartime labor force.[133]

The shining achievement of Bilbo's second term as senator came between 1942 and 1944, when Congress took up the question of repealing poll taxes for federal elections. By 1940, sociologists estimated that the two dollar poll-tax, required as payment in advance of every election in most southern states, had disfranchised nearly 500,000 whites and almost 750,000 blacks in Mississippi in the 1942 election.[134] In sharp contrast to his emphatic fight to repeal the poll tax leading up to the 1940 election, Bilbo sought to maintain the poll tax when the bill passed in the House of Representatives and went before the Senate in the fall of 1942. He pledged to speak for thirty consecutive days if the bill was brought up for consideration.[135] Bilbo and his southern colleagues successfully defeated the bill three separate times during this period. Mississippians loved Bilbo's tenacity in the Senate. Bilbo's promises to hold eighteen month long filibusters in the face of federal intervention added fuel to his political fire, and gave him the added credentials of being a candidate focused on maintaining racial segregation and white supremacy at any cost.

The level at which Bilbo's political capital rose throughout his political career is nothing short of astounding, but evidences the political trends of Mississippians who were willing to elect a candidate with a checkered past as long as the candidate would be

[133] "Press Army Liquor Bill," *New York Times*, March 13, 1942; "Draft for Women Urged by Senators," *New York Times*, March 25, 1942; "Senators Split on 18 to 19 Draft, *New York Times*, September 4, 1942.
[134] The Consumer Price Index estimates that a $2.00 poll tax would be the equivalent of roughly a $34.00 tax in 2016. William M. Brewer, "Poll Tax and Poll Taxers," *The Journal of Negro History* 29, 3 (July 1944): 265; "Anti-Lynching Bill Backed by Y.W.C.A," *New York Times*, April 17, 1940.
[135] "Press Filibuster in Poll Tax Fight," *New York Times*, November 17, 1942.

a strong proponent of white supremacy and would advocate for the needs of the small farmer. In the post-Civil War period, the Democratic Party arose as the "party of redemption," and by 1890, Mississippians declared that they believed in few things, the utmost of which were "God, next year's crop, and the Democratic Party."[136] Political violence became an acceptable means through which to uphold these values and politicians became the chief vehicles for the solidification of racial separation at the turn of the century. Growing up in the rural Piney Woods of Mississippi, Theodore Bilbo watched from a young age as politicians built entire careers out of promises to keep races separate and unequal. Taking cues from James Vardaman and other high-powered Mississippi populists, Bilbo developed a brand of political speech that appealed to the poor white masses of Mississippi.

Throughout the early twentieth century, Bilbo experienced a series of successes and failures in the political realm, capped by an impressive gubernatorial career that witnessed a dearth of internal improvements and a general rise in the political and economic well-being of poor white Mississippians. Bilbo's career, however, was mired in scandal. His involvement in the 1919 bribery scandal showed the nation the dirty politics Bilbo was willing to use to gain power, and his implied involvement in the 1924 sexual harassment suit evidenced a further pattern of disingenuous and raucous behavior that was only solidified when Bilbo's wife divorced him in 1937. Despite these setbacks, Bilbo's political capital seemed to increase with each subsequent position in office. Mississippians clamored for Bilbo to assume the role of senator in 1934 even though he had been out of office for several years and was receiving an exorbitant salary for his

[136] Federal Writer's Project, *WPA Guide to Mississippi*, 8.

efforts as “pastemaster general.” Bilbo’s work as a senator increased his favor with poor whites in Mississippi who adored him for backing New Deal policies that provided steady wages. Bilbo’s greatest victory of filibustering anti-lynching and anti-poll tax legislation proved to be his undoing. During his early career, Bilbo developed a three pronged approach to politics that sowed the earliest antecedents to modern conservatism. By blending a “common man” approach to politics with a defense of government assistance for wealthy elites and a healthy dose of virulent racism, Bilbo unwittingly formulated a blueprint for conservative discourse in the twentieth century. As will be seen later, his fight for these values would lay the groundwork for his undoing in 1946 as the end of World War II ushered in an era of black political activism, which would help change the nature of American politics for decades to come.

Chapter 2:

Dying for Freedom: Black Life in Mississippi to 1945

The crowd of roughly 2,000 onlookers stirred as John Johnson was brought to the wooden platform. Discussions of the day's events and local happenings lulled as Johnson's sentence was read aloud. The hushed tones died down even further as the noose was slipped over Johnson's head and cinched tightly around his neck. Johnson was asked if he had any last words, and with his final breaths, he told the crowd that he was not the only African American guilty for the murder of "Merchant Colquhoun." Two other men, Joe Gray and John Williams, had also been present at Colquhoun's death. The hangman then gave the signal and Johnson plummeted below the platform. In an instant, his life was over. The *New York Times* reported that even before Johnson's body had been brought down from the gallows, the crowd of gatherers had "seized an engine and started for Magnolia," determined to "storm the jail…securing the [other] two negroes."[1] Two years later, eighteen year old Louis Williams would meet a similar fate. Williams's crime was allegedly assaulting a ten year old white girl.[2]

Fears of black social progress in the post-Civil War period spurred whites to take extra legal measures to ensure that the racial caste system continued. These latent fears had existed in southern society since the advent of slavery and they continued to fuel mob violence in ebbs and flows as African Americans gained victories for equality. This chapter examines life for Mississippi's black population following the Civil War to provide context and an important counterpoint of black agency to the efforts of Bilbo and

[1] "Lynching in Mississippi," *New York Times*, June 20, 1892.
[2] "Lynching in Mississippi," *The Evening World* (New York), June 8, 1894.

other conservative whites to control their lives. When taken as a whole, the buildup of African American victories and the resultant backlash from the white community to those successes provides a more complete picture of Mississippi history, revealing the competing trajectories of both white and black communities in the state. These competing visions of the future of southern society set the stage for violent conflict in the post-World War II era, and laid the groundwork for a showdown between Mississippi's black community and Bilbo that held large repercussions for American politics in the decades that followed.

White Control and Black Defiance in Post-Reconstruction Mississippi

In Reconstruction era Mississippi, whites desired to keep the same social and political relationships between themselves and blacks as those that existed before the Civil War. When Reconstruction upended these expectations by providing African Americans with legal rights including the right to vote, white politicians came up with new modes of social and political control aimed at keeping themselves and their former-planter allies in majority-black counties in control. As a result of these methods, African Americans found themselves in a precarious position in post-Reconstruction Mississippi that was similar to slavery. African Americans had to abide by white rules of behavior or risk extreme forms of punishment. Fears of black domination and intermarriage sparked waves of violence. Ed Ayers notes that white southerners became "convinced that it was blacks who were dangerous, who bred the violence that hung over the South."[3] The specter of black sexual predation came to be a common trope whipped up with regularity by southern politicians to such effect that one white southern letter writer remarked to a

[3] Ed Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 153.

friend that, "the longer I am here, the more I dread and fear the nigger."[4] Almost daily, reports filled newspapers with acts of violence perpetrated against African Americans. For example, on April 20, 1880, the *New York Times* described the multiple crimes against African Americans that had taken place within the past week. The frequency of the crimes is staggering. The *Times* noted that earlier in the week, a white man was acquitted for torturing and lynching a black man in Petersburg, Virginia. The *Times* discovered that the man had "attempted the outrage of Mrs. Hattie Ferriss," an obvious reference to an alleged attempted rape. In James Jolly was arrested for the murder of a white woman named "Miss Norris." Jolly told officers that his brother in law tried to rape Miss Norris, and "in the attempt, killed her." Despite attempting to save Norris, Jolly was still held accountable for the offense. In Marshall Texas, "two young negro demons…arrested Patsy Hunter…taking her to a secluded place [and] outraged her person." The *Times* remarked that "the scoundrels…are in a fair way to pay the penalty with their lives."[5]

The particularly harsh punishments for crimes of a sexual nature, especially by a black man against a white woman, signaled the ultimate fear of the white southerner: if blacks were allowed even a single ounce of political or social equality, it would ultimately lead to mixed-race children, an abominable thought for conservative whites. The looming threat of black men lurking in the shadows ready to lunge at white women was a scary challenge to white masculinity. Mary Frances Berry neatly summarizes the underlying philosophy of the time:

> Patriarchy and racial and sexual subordination were the rule….Everyone had a role to play: White women were fragile, weak and in need of protection; African

[4] Alice Thrasher to Arthur Thrasher, September 28, 1896, quoted in Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 153.
[5] "General Telegraph News: Crime and Its Results," *New York Times*, April 21, 1880.

> Americans were subjugated but legally free; white men must exhibit their power and control in the family and over race and class inferiors or risk opprobrium and punishment.[6]

As Berry's analysis lays bare, legal restrictions and violence became the foremost attempts at social control by southern whites over the black population.

In the post-Reconstruction period, racial animosities also flowed from white resentments over African American and northern political "rule" during Reconstruction, which many southerners viewed as disastrous. James Cobb points out, however, that while blacks held many positions at the local level in most Mississippi communities as tax collectors, sheriffs, and members of boards of supervisors, most whites exaggerated the number of political positions blacks actually held during Reconstruction. The sheer rapidity with which blacks rose to positions of even slight power proved to be a terrifying thought for conservative whites who believed that if blacks were allowed to participate in electoral politics, only a few minor steps separated them from full social equality and intermarriage with white women.[7]

In the economic sphere, blacks fought for freedom and whites worked to subvert their efforts at every turn. Following Reconstruction, large landowning whites wished to keep their workforce stable and productive, and Eric Foner notes that "the vast majority of blacks emerged from slavery lacking the ability to purchase land…confronting a white community united in the refusal to advance credit or sell them property….The adjustment

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[6] Mary Frances Berry, "Judging Morality: Sexual Behavior and Legal Consequences in the Late Nineteenth Century South," *The Journal of American History*, 78, 3 (December 1991), 837.
[7] James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (NY: Oxford Press), 59.

to a new social order in which their persons were removed from the market, but their labor was bought and sold like any other commodity, proved in many respects difficult."[8]

African Americans did, however gain a modicum of autonomy during Reconstruction, buying land and often practicing subsistence agriculture. Such acts constituted individual-level resistance that "not only threatened the very foundations of the Southern political economy, but…put freedmen at odds with…former owners seeking to restore plantation labor discipline."[9] The direct response to black efforts to achieve autonomy by white landowners came to known as sharecropping, the system in which families signed contracts with large landowners and were held responsible for a section of that landowner's property. These families would typically retain one third of a year's crop for personal sale, but this amount could fluctuate depending on how many tools, seeds, and other equipment the landowner provided.

The system was not ideal for landowners who desired more direct control over their labor's production, but also left sharecroppers in a disadvantageous economic position in relation to landowners. The rise of the credit system, in which African American farmers could procure goods from local merchants in exchange for a lien on the growing crop, grew hand in hand with the sharecropping system and worked to supplant the autonomy of African American landowners. "Many landlords," writes Foner, "established stores on their own plantations, sometimes finding the business of supplying tenants 'as lucrative…than planting or renting.'"[10]

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[8] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Rowe), 106.
[9] Foner, *Reconstruction*, 110.
[10] Foner, *Reconstruction*, 173-174, 495-496.

While they may have achieved varying levels of autonomy through the sharecropping system, William Holmes argues that most black farmers at the turn of the century lived at the "bare subsistence level…more than any other group…[they] resembled the peasant classes in the poorest European nations of the nineteenth century."[11] Gavin Wright additionally notes that while these systems offered a small amount of room for African Americans to climb up the economic ladder, blacks still had to "know one's place…be acceptable, non-threatening, well-behaved. They had to compromise their autonomy."[12] Jacob Stevens from Hinds County commented that his family simply "lived and breathed along. Could barely live and that was all."[13]

Despite the depredations being heaped upon them, blacks set up effective civic and social organizations to combat white violence and carve out a place for themselves in Mississippi's separate and unequal political system. The Loyal League, a community-based initiative in the Mississippi Delta, "boosted morale and gave blacks a sense of community" by throwing parades and encouraging African Americans to participate in the political process. Other organizations including the Colored Order of the Knights of Pythias, the Independent Order of St. Luke, and the United Order of Moses sprang up throughout the state, largely with backing from northern philanthropists, with the purpose of educating African Americans.[14]

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[11] Cobb, *Most Southern Place on Earth*, 60.
[12] Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (NY: Basic Books, 1986), 101-102, 106.
[13] Jacob Stevens' testimony before the Senate Committee to Investigate the causes of the Removal of Negroes from Southern States to Northern States, 1880 quoted in *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* by Herbert Gutman (NY: Pantheon Books, 1976), 435.
[14] B.F. Lee Jr., "Negro Organizations," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 49, (September 1913): 131.

The brand of equality espoused by these organizations fostered the ethos behind the Colored Farmers' Alliance and Cooperative Union (CFA). The CFA was an off-shoot of the all-white Southern Farmers' Alliance, which did not allow black members but aided the CFACU in fighting for lower land taxes and increased rights for small farmers in the South. One newspaper wrote that the organization "will work out great good to both white and colored."[15] The CFA worked to provide education for its members on farming technology and practices, and encouraged its members to better themselves economically and socially by striving for independent land ownership. Since the large majority of African Americans were poor tenant farmers, the CFA gained widespread popularity throughout the South, at one point boasting a roll of nearly one million members.[16]

The large number of blacks joining an organization that promised social and economic betterment struck fear into the hearts of many southern landowning whites. The prospect that such an organization could ally with the all-white Southern Farmer's Alliance over the common ground of farmer's rights was an all-to-real fear that, for white elites in Mississippi, had to be met with violence. In 1889, reports circulated that African Americans had gathered in Leflore County Mississippi to protest increasing tax penalties against African American farmers. At least five African Americans were killed in the conflict between black farmers and the National Guardsmen sent to quell the gathering. The event showed that if legal means were not sufficient to control black behavior, violence could and would be used to suppress black attempts to secure equality. That no

[15] J.J. Rogers, "Editorial," *The Progressive Farmer* (N.C.), July 31, 1888.
[16] William F. Holmes, "The Leflore County Massacre and the Demise of the Colored Farmers' Alliance," *Phylon* 34, 3 (3rd Quarter, 1973): 268.

one was prosecuted for the deaths of the five African Americans further underscored the fact that not only would violence be used to control black behavior, but that the state would be complicit in its use and the typical of means of redress for such actions would similarly not aid African Americans.[17] Bilbo would use images of these events to invoke fears in white conservative southerners in the 1940s, martialing the memory of African American resistance as a weapon with which he could launch an effective assault on the collective psyche of his white constituency.

Tied to the image of black social and economic equality was the image of black voting. In the decades following Reconstruction, whites worked to subvert African American attempts to maintain the franchise by developing new methods of control including understanding and grandfather clauses, which left the qualifications of voters largely up to county registrars who typically judged African Americans as unfit to vote. These reforms were solidified in the constitution of 1890, which instituted a whole plethora of control schemes aimed at "completely disfranchising blacks and eliminating thousands of poor whites as voters." Apportionment, or the practice of counting African Americans as part of the total population despite the fact that their votes would be disqualified had the insidious effect of keeping the majority black populated counties in the Delta as the majority in the state's Congress. As a result of these reforms, in 1896, black majority counties in the Delta sent sixty-eight representatives to Congress with only 44,000 white voters while the heavily white "hill counties" with nearly 77,000 white voters sent only fifty-two representatives. The effect of the law on Mississippi's black

[17] William F. "The Leflore County Massacre and the Demise of the Colored Farmers' Alliance," *Phylon* 34, 3 (3rd Quarter, 1973): 267.

voting population was devastating. Just two years after the new constitution was adopted, only 8,615 out of a total eligible 147,205 voting age black males cast their ballots.[18]

African Americans resisted against disfranchisement when they were able. Isaiah T. Montgomery, the only African American present at Mississippi's constitutional convention of 1890 supported disfranchisement. However, Montgomery only did so with the hope that by allowing the constitutional disfranchisement amendments to pass, the racial divide between whites and blacks in the state might begin to subside. Otherwise, Montgomery reasoned, a "mutually destructive" conflict between blacks and whites would assuredly be inevitable. At the local level, black organizers including Blanche Bruce and James J. Hill urged their respective communities to fight against the disfranchisement statutes. Neil McMillen chronicles how some civic leaders in black communities throughout Mississippi started to "subvert the new system from within" by starting night schools for blacks, which taught attendees how to pass the arduous understanding clause. They set up black newspapers to voice their discontent about the new laws and to educate African Americans about social and political issues.[19]

African American activism would continue well-into the twentieth century, and its methods tended to mold themselves to the contours of white supremacy, often times, going undetected or unnoticed by whites. It was this bubbling underground volcano of black activity that would erupt in 1946 with Bilbo's election.

Lifting Voices: The Birth of the NAACP

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[18] Michael Perman, *Pursuit of Unity*, 177; Jack Bass and Walter DeVries, *The Transformation of Southern Politics: Social Change and Political Consequence Since 1945* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 193; R. Volney Riser, *Defying Disfranchisement: Black Voting Rights Activism in the Jim Crow South, 1890-1908* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2010)

[19] Neil McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 50-54.

African Americans outside of the South watched in horror as crimes were perpetrated against people of color, and they reacted by setting up civic and social organizations that would play a significant role in combating the evolving nature of white supremacy during the twentieth century. For purposes of this work, particular attention will be paid to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization devoted to increasing the rights of African Americans throughout the nation. Founded by Harvard-educated William Edgar Burghardt Du Bois in 1909, the organization focused its resources on legal defense, the investigation of crimes against African Americans, and protests against unequal and unlawful treatment. The NAACP struggled in its first few years to increase its membership rolls, but by 1919 the organization had 155 branches in the South with over 42,000 members.[20]

Almost immediately following its inception, the NAACP met stiff opposition from legislators in states throughout the South who attempted to ban the organization before it could spring strong roots. [21] After a riot broke out in Austin, Texas between whites and NAACP members, the justice of the peace indicated to the local branch that they had never received a charter to do business in the state, and therefore could be banned. The NAACP's defense team poured its resources into the fight in Austin, noting that "It may be that the whole future of the organization in the South depends on what we do at this moment." The legal battle against the NAACP persisted in the years following and whites began to use extra-legal means including economic sanctions to stop the organization's activity. Patricia Sullivan notes that this had such a devastating effect that

[20] George Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 159.
[21] James Weldon Johnson to Mary White Ovington, August 20, 1919 quoted in Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 86.

by 1920, "most NAACP activity in Texas had ceased."[22] Other southern states adopted similar practices to Texas, and momentarily slowed the progress of the organization throughout the South. The NAACP was resilient and exemplified the malleability of black resistance to white supremacy, molding and adapting its tactics to meet the varied situations presented by white supremacy's most ardent defenders.

Mississippi gained its first NAACP branches around the same time as Austin, setting up their first field office in Jackson in 1920, recruiting new members from the city's inhabitants. Mississippi's branches grew at a relatively slow pace until 1940 when letters from across the state poured into headquarters asking for materials and information on how to organize more local branches.[23] As the NAACP spread throughout the Magnolia state, blacks praised it as "a God sent organization for us Black folks" and sent encouraging letters on recruitment to NAACP headquarters in New York declaring that "I am trying to gain joiners everyday on my job."[24] 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 rural regions where white supremacy remained fiercest.[25]

Fighting for Equality without an Organization

As will become evident later during Theodore Bilbo's Senate hearing, African Americans often worked at the grassroots level, often autonomously from civil organizations in the early twentieth century. Booker T. Washington was one of the most

[22] Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 87.
[23] Letter to Ella Baker from Carsie Hall, September 13, 1944, NAACP Branch Department Files, Part 26, Series A, Reel 14.
[24] Letter from C.H. Thompson to Mary White, July 27, 1944, NAACP Branch Department Files, Part 26, Series A, Reel 14.
[25] Sullivan, 244.

famous social activists of the period, championing an idea of uplift and racial solidarity in nearby Alabama. Washington's message appealed to blacks throughout the South who often times had to work within white power structures to obtain their rights. His school for African Americans, founded in Tuskegee in 1892, taught students "how to bathe…what to eat…and how to care for their rooms." Washington's counterpart in Mississippi was William Henry Hotzclaw. Although not as well-educated as Washington, Hotzclaw certainly represented the well-intentioned black educators in the state who helped found educational organizations and institutions including the Mississippi Association of Colored Schools and the Mississippi Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers with the express mission of improving education for blacks in Mississippi. These schools were often starved for funds and lacked sufficient educators who were typically not more well-educated than their students. However, "Even an inferior education," according to Neil McMillen, "might have a subversive effect." For white Mississippians in the early twentieth century, any education for blacks, no matter the quality, posed a threat to the status quo of a docile, subservient labor force.[26]

Black women also became active forces for educational uplift in Mississippi outside of the traditional classroom, educating blacks and sometimes whites, on the terrifying forms of social and political control used against blacks. Holly Springs, Mississippi native Ida B. Wells became one of the nation's foremost critics of lynching in the early twentieth century and brought the realities of southern violence to the doorstep of white and black Americans across the country. Wells has been described by Neil

[26] McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 90-93; Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (NY: Dover Publications, 1995), 61.

McMillen as an "uncompromising, race-proud black rebel."[27] She crisscrossed the nation speaking out against lynching as "an outrage against [the black] race." She captivated audiences throughout the South as "an earnest and eloquent speaker." The *Washington Bee* declared that "No woman of the Race has greater power than she possesses to hold the attention of an audience." Her accusations brought the South into national and international focus. Southern congressmen tried to discredit Wells's statements, telling news outlets and constituents who had heard her speeches that Wells was "inspired by English and New England capitalists" who desired to make the South look bad in an attempt to divert immigration away from southern states, and make the region unappealing to industries who were looking to relocate to the South during this time period to take advantage of the region's non-unionized and low-wage labor.[28]

Blacks worked within Mississippi's system to change their social, economic, and political status, and when these attempts stalled, many left. Recent studies have suggested that the unencumbered use of lynching led to the first Great Migration of African Americans from southern states during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Stewart Tolnay and E.M. Beck have found a "positive effect of racial violence on out migration [from the South]," meaning that southern blacks were more likely to leave areas where the threat of being lynched was greatest. Since Mississippi and Georgia accounted for over one third of all African Americans lynched between 1882 and 1910, it

[27] Neil McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 285.
[28] "Miss Wells and Southern Lynchings," *The Sun* (NY), August 1, 1894; "Southern Mob Rule: The Simple Story of an Eloquent Woman," *Washington Bee* (D.C.), October 29, 1892; "A Plea for her Race," *The Hawaiian Gazette*, August 21, 1894; For more on Wells see Paula J. Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions* (NY: Amistad Books, 2008).

comes as no surprise that over one hundred thousand African Americans left Mississippi between 1910 and 1920.[29]

Isabell Wilkerson argues that economic opportunities, brought on by the intense industrial expansion that enveloped many northern cities during World War I, and later World War II, created a pulling force that led African Americans to leave the South. The First World War had decreased the flow of European workers to northern cities, and "the North turned its gaze to the poorest-paid labor in the emerging market of the American South."[30] As Northern industrialists began to recruit black laborers, southern whites stood "proud and ambivalent," pretending that the outflow of blacks would be a boon to the South, opening up jobs for poor whites eager take advantage of their competition's exodus. One southerner wrote, "when the exodus started…it was not seriously considered." However, the writer declared, as America increased its involvement in the conflict and out-migration increased, "many leading industrial operators of the South [started] to regard [the exodus of blacks] with alarm."[31]

As its labor force began to file out of the South in large numbers, white planters put pressure on Congressmen to control the situation. The resultant attempt to stem the outward flow of black workers came in the form of restricting the information that filtered into the South from northern industries. Many southern states enacted anti-enticement laws, which required northern businessmen who were found guilty of recruiting southern blacks to pay a fine of $750.[32] These attempts by whites did not work

[29] Stewart Tolnay and E.M. Beck, "Racial Violence and Black Migration in the American South," *American Sociological Review* 57, 1 (February 1992): 104-106.
[30] Isabell Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (NY: Random House, 2010), 161.
[31] "Negroes Leaving South," *The Hickman Courier* (KY), October 12, 1916.
[32] Wilkerson, 162-163.

to any great effect, and instead, whites turned to lynching as a means of instilling fear in blacks desirous of leaving the South. As Tolnay and Beck observe, "not only did black migration respond to the level of racial violence, but the level of racial violence directed at blacks may have been influenced by the level of black exodus from the South."[33] Wilkerson supports this thesis, arguing that as blacks continued to leave the South, whites increased their efforts at intimidation and obstruction, even going so far as to stop trains with high number of blacks to detain and question those on board.[34]

Bilbo, Lynching, and the Cost of Black Migration

Bilbo played an active role in using the fear caused by the threat of lynching to curtail African American mobility during this period. On June 27, 1919, African American John Hartfield was chased through southern Mississippi swamps by "posses" before being captured. Hartfield had allegedly confessed to assaulting a "young woman" from Ellisville. Once he was in custody, whites "rushed" Hartfield to the scene of the alleged crime. When they arrived in Ellisville the mob took Hartfield to the gum tree where it was alleged that he had assaulted the young woman. The *New York Times* reported on the communal and horrific nature of the lynching:

> It was on a limb of the gum tree that Hartfield was hanged as soon as the rope could be pulled by hundreds of hands….While the body was in its death struggles, pistols were produced by men in the crowd and fired point blank at the swinging form. Before the rope had been cut by bullets, burning faggots were thrown under the body and an hour later there was only a pile of ashes.

The *Times* coldly described the event as "orderly" and noted that no arrests were made after the gruesome spectacle was over. Just before Hartfield's lynching several Mississippi citizens had petitioned Governor Bilbo to intervene on Hatfield's behalf, but

[33] Tolnay and Beck, 106.
[34] Wilkerson, 163.

Bilbo simply replied that he was "utterly powerless" to stop the lynching and that attempting to do so would lead to many more deaths. He told petitioners that "nobody can keep the inevitable from happening."[35] That the governor of Mississippi supported outward violence towards blacks helped create a culture of fear that kept many blacks in the state. James Cobb points out that even though some African Americans expressed their discontent with life in Mississippi by leaving, "suspected out-migrants [were] roughed up and threatened by law enforcement officials…[and] train porters were harassed….Faced with little hope of legal protection from whites and even less chance for a fair trial…blacks had little choice but to suppress their anger and frustration."[36] Bilbo's tacit endorsement of mob violence intensified the racial climate in the state and provide evidence of his support for such forms of social control.

Bilbo blamed World War I for racial tensions in the state. Bilbo stated that the rise in violence against blacks "increased since the World War by the social reception and familiarity with the negro soldiers by a certain class of white women in France." Bilbo's solution to mob violence involved "teaching and training the Negro race" in the "proper relation that must necessarily exist between the races."[37] Bilbo's "blame the victim" attitude echoed the sentiments of most white southerners who believed that African Americans who stepped out of traditional societal boundaries in their interactions with whites deserved to be lynched.

As migration increased and black populations in northern and western cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York grew by over 100 percent, blacks who remained

[35] "Lynch Negro Who Confessed Crime," *New York Times*, June 27, 1919.
[36] James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, 117.
[37] Bilbo quote from *Jackson Daily News*, July 1, 1919 quoted in McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 237.

in the South found slight increases in economic and social mobility. Neil McMillen argues that "some race spokesmen…discreetly encouraged…the great migration, recognizing the growing need for black labor a chance to exact white concessions."[38] Even though most blacks dared not tell whites or even their own friends that they intended to leave the South, sometimes the threat of migration could work in favor of black farmers who would negotiate for higher wages along with better working and living conditions.[39] As the roaring twenties gave way to the Great Depression, blacks in Mississippi found themselves in an increasingly precarious position as the economic downturn ushered in the era of African Americans being the last people hired and the first ones fired.

Unemployment and other hardships of the depression fell disproportionately on rural blacks. According to David Kennedy, "one-fifth of all the people on the federal relief rolls were black, a proportion roughly double the African American presence in the population."[40] The black workers who were fortunate enough to maintain their jobs became the targets of white violence. Nathaniel Lewis worked for the Illinois Central Railroad in 1929 and remarked that blacks were frequently "set upon" by fellow white employees who had been fired. On-the-job tensions rose precipitously as the economy declined. Lewis recalled that prior to the Depression, black brakemen and firemen on the railroad held a majority of seniority positions over a large number of whites. As the years of the Depression wore on, however, even the most menial jobs became appealing to the now unemployed white Mississippians. "They started shooting…in the night….They shot

[38] McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 275.
[39] James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, 117-118.
[40] David Kennedy, Freedom *From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 164.

five of my neighbors who lived right around my daddy's place at that time," Lewis stated. "It made for a most hectic situation."[41] This pattern of work related racial violence was not endemic to railroad workspaces, but it also plagued many other industries during this period.

The Crusade against Lynching

The escalation in workplace violence would most likely have continued unabated had there not been a definitive change in the relationship between African Americans and the federal government during the New Deal. Patricia Sullivan argues that Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal reforms, beginning in 1932, changed the way African Americans viewed the federal government. During his campaign, Roosevelt promised to include blacks as part of his economic reforms, even remarking on one occasion that he believed in, "equal economic and legal opportunity for all groups, regardless of race, color, or creed."[42] The job-creating agencies pushed through congress in the first Hundred Days: the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Works Progress Administration (WPA), and the Public Works Administration (PWA) all helped provide African Americans with steady employment during the Depression and influenced their belief that the federal government would help them secure social as well as economic rights. "Washington became the focus of groups on the margins," Patricia Sullivan argues, "workers, African Americans and sharecroppers…found sympathetic allies in the young recruits of the New Deal."[43] Roosevelt also gained favor in the black community by appointing a "black

[41] Oral History with Nathaniel H. Lewis interview conducted by Tom Healy, October 24, 1978, University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, 37.
[42] Franklin Roosevelt quoted in Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 24;
[43] Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 4.

cabinet," a group of eight African American advisors with whom he met regularly, and by appointing the first black federal judge. With these reforms, Roosevelt steadily "brought African Americans into the government in small but unprecedented numbers."[44] These policies left many African Americans with the sense that the federal government would provide protection for them. As noted in the previous chapter, however, recent scholarship suggests that while blacks felt a real connection to the Roosevelt White House, it was not as deep of a connection as has been previously assumed. Often at the local level, African Americans were not allowed to enroll in the basic employment programs offered by New Deal organizations. Regional managers of the CCC and WPA enrolled a significantly higher number of whites than African Americans. Moreover, as Simon Topping has discovered, blacks were by no means completely invested in the Democratic Party following FDR's reforms. Topping shows how most blacks voted for FDR in 1936 because they liked his policies concerning anti-lynching legislation and supported the steps he took to incorporate African Americans in government, but they were not enamored with the platform of the party as a whole.[45]

The renewed fervor of southern lynchings during the Great Depression combined with the perception of governmental support spurred African Americans and their allies in Congress to lobby for federal anti-lynching legislation once again in 1937. The straw that broke the back of the congressional impasse on federal anti-lynching legislation was a report that surfaced in northern news outlets concerning the brutal torture of three African Americans in Duck Hill, Mississippi. The *New York Times* reported that nearly

[44] David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 378.
[45] See Chapter 1, 45-47; see also Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1994), 61; Simon Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy: The Republican Party and the African American Vote, 1928-1952* (Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 2008), 2.

200 Mississippians stormed the jail in Duck Hill, took "Boot Jack" MacDaniels, Roosevelt Townes, and "Shorty" Dorroh from their cell and brought them to the "scene of the crime" where they had allegedly killed a local white merchant. After chaining the gentlemen to the tree, the mob used a blow torch to extract a "confession" from MacDaniels, who they then "riddled with bullets." The mob then turned on Townes, and used the blow torch on him until he too confessed, after which time "the lynchers piled brush high about him, saturated it with gasoline and touched a match to the pyre." Turning on Dorroh, the mob decided to "release him after a severe horsewhipping, and warned him to leave the state." A local judge promised to investigate the lynching, but Congressmen understood that these promises almost always rang hollow in the South.

The House of Representatives, which had taken up the issue of passing federal anti-lynching legislation in 1934, used the Duck Hill lynching "as an argument in behalf of a proposal…to impose heavy fines and prison terms on persons participating in lynchings."[46] Most southern Senators believed that federal anti-lynching bills could never receive the support needed in either part of Congress necessary to pass, but the outrage over Duck Hill brought immense support to the cause and made the passage of such legislation a very real possibility. In the House of Representatives, Hamilton Fish believed it a gross injustice that Congress had not already passed such a bill, commenting that "the whole world is laughing at us."[47] Only three days after the lynchings, the Gavagan Anti-Lynching Bill passed the House by a vote of 277-118, but the vote fell largely along sectional lines, which foreshadowed a bitter debate once the bill reached the

[46] "Deny Crime 'Helps' Bill," *New York Times*, April 14, 1937; "Lynchers Torture, Burn Two Negroes," *New York Times*, April 14, 1937.
[47] "Deny Crime Helps Bill," *New York Times*, April 14, 1937.

Senate.[48] Southern Senators including North Carolina's Robert Reynolds talked relentlessly for hours about foreign policy, offering "a 'round the world oratorical cruise."[49] Of course Bilbo was one of the main antagonists to the proposed legislation, filibustering the bill for over four and half hours one day when only three senators were in attendance, calling the bill "political, damnable, and insulting," and that it would "open the facades of hell in the South."[50] Walter White, head of the NAACP, lobbied Eleanor Roosevelt to exert her influence on the matter, and she was able to secure a meeting between Franklin Roosevelt and White. At the meeting, however, Roosevelt appeared "unwilling to challenge the Southern leadership of his party."[51] With Roosevelt unwilling to lend his support to the bill, Bilbo and other southern senators had effectively stalled the effort. The bill was withdrawn from consideration in February of 1938.

The death of the Costigan-Wagner Anti-Lynching Bill did not deter blacks from pursuing other avenues to achieve equality. In 1940, the NAACP began to push for a Fair Employment Practices Bill so that blacks could achieve gainful employment in defense industries. NAACP leaders had long-noticed the racial exclusion inherent in American industries. The president of North American Aviation stated that "it is against company policy" to employ blacks, and Standard Steel in Kansas City proclaimed, "We have not had a Negro worker in twenty-five years, and do not plan to start now."[52] As the threat of Nazi Germany rose in late in 1939, America ramped up its defense production as a supplier of arms to allied nations.[53] If African Americans did not act, they would not only

[48] "Anti-Lynching Bill is Passed by House After Bitter Talk," *New York Times*, April 16, 1937.
[49] "'Big Stick' Swung at Filibusterers," *New York Times*, January 7, 1938.
[50] "Move to Displace Anti-Lynching Bill," *New York Times*, January 22, 1938.
[51] Walter White quoted in Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, 105-106.
[52] David Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, 765.
[53] Sullivan, 254.

risk losing out on quality war-time wages, but they would also risk stalling the momentum they had gained on civil rights issues.

In hopes of securing employment through the organization, letters from blacks throughout Mississippi flooded the New York headquarters asking for materials and information on how to organize branches in local communities.[54] As the NAACP spread throughout the Magnolia state, blacks praised it as "a God sent organization for us Black folks" and sent encouraging letters on recruitment to headquarters from some pioneers that they were "trying to gain joiners everyday on my job."[55] 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.[56]

Because of the growing membership rolls, A. Phillip Randolph, long-time civil rights advocate and head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Union felt that the President's intransigence on the matter of fair employment warranted a demonstration of black power. Randolph suggested that African Americans march down Pennsylvania Avenue in support of social, political, and economic equality. David Kennedy notes that the proposal for the march "caught fire in the black community" and it was estimated that by May, roughly 100,000 blacks would march on the capital in early July. The prospect of a demonstration of this size scared Franklin Roosevelt, who was determined not to lose the support of African American voters he had been steadily gaining since 1932.

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[54] Letter to Ella Baker from Carsie Hall, September 13, 1944, NAACP Branch Department Files, Part 26, Series A, Reel 14.
[55] Letter from C.H. Thompson to Mary White, July 27, 1944, NAACP Branch Department Files, Part 26, Series A, Reel 14.
[56] Sullivan, 244.

Roosevelt agreed to meet with Randolph and other civil rights leaders at the White House on June 18. Aware that he would most likely not be able to obtain bipartisan support in Congress for an anti-discrimination bill, Roosevelt asked Randolph what he could do and Randolph suggested that he pass an executive order, by-passing Congress. A week later, Franklin Roosevelt issued executive order 8802 creating the Fair Employment Practices Committee tasked with providing "full and equitable participation of all workers in defense industries." The Committee surveyed defense industries throughout the nation and provided recommendations to the federal government on how to remedy discrimination issues.[57]

The FEPC bill was hailed by African Americans as a victory, but Bilbo believed Randolph to be "the most vigorous, audacious, ambitious, and dangerous Negro in America today," who had used the war to "intimidate" Roosevelt with "the threat of riotous conditions" when the country was preparing for war.[58] Bilbo called Executive Order 8802 an "unprecedented exercise of war powers," that really only served to "indoctrinate…American soldiers…with the idea of social equality of the white and black races." For Bilbo, the actions of Randolph and his allies required a response. He stated that whites must, "solve the problem completely and irrevocably, or [whites] must prepare ourselves for the inevitable blood admixture of white and black races…total mongrelization."[59] Bilbo would make the FEPC bill a center-piece in his 1946 re-election campaign in which he took aim at the "communist tactics" used by Randolph and others African Americans to secure passage of civil rights legislation.

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[57] Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 767. For more on A. Phillip Randolph see Cornelius Bynum, *A. Phillip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).
[58] Bilbo, *Separation or Mongrelization*, 61.
[59] Bilbo, *Separation or Mongrelization*, 7.

Bilbo's words did not fall on deaf ears as fears of mongrelization turned into direct action by white southerners. In October of 1942, a white mob lynched two fourteen-year old boys in Shubuta, Mississippi because they had "confessed" to attacking a thirteen-year old white girl. The New York Times opined that "the crime to which these boys had confessed was atrocious, but no crime is atrocious enough to condone the savagery or mitigate the shame of lynch law in the American community." The editor declared that "a lynching is the best grist for the Nazi propaganda mill."[60] The following day, tragedy befell Howard Wash of Laurel, Mississippi who was grabbed by a mob from the jail for killing his boss. Wash's body, the *Times* reported, was "hanging from a small creek bridge…near the home of the slain man." Wash's lynching became the third in one week in Mississippi.[61]

Civil rights organizations pushed Roosevelt to use martial law to "bring an end to the reign of terror" in Mississippi. Roosevelt immediately sent the FBI to Mississippi to investigate the lynchings. This was the third time in nine months that Roosevelt had sent a federal organization to investigate southern atrocities. These investigations were "the first of their kind by the federal government in many years," and served to draw African Americans further into the orbit of the Democratic Party and Franklin Roosevelt, and simultaneously alienated the southern white population, which feared federal intervention in "state issues" just as much as black and white sexual relations.[62]

American Racism in an International Context

[60] "Mississippi Lynching," *New York Times*, October 17, 1942; "2 Negro Boys Lynched," *New York Times*, October 13, 1942.
[61] "Mississippi Mob Lynches a Slayer," *New York Times*, October 18, 1942.
[62] "Protest Sent to President," *New York Times*, October, 18, 1942; "F.B.I. to Investigate Lynching of Three," *New York Times*, October 21, 1942.

America's full-engagement in World War II had direct consequences on the development of American race relations and political discourse in the years that followed. Gail O'Brien declares that World War II, "affected race relations more powerfully than any event since the Civil War." According to Numan Bartely, "The war effort promoted national unity and blurred traditional ethnic differences [and] at the same time…it exacerbated racial tensions. The logic of a war against Nazi Germany encouraged reevaluation of racial beliefs at home."[63] A world war in which battle lines had been drawn between a nation built on racial engineering and another built on the principals of equality provided an amplified arena for scrutinizing racial policy and philosophy. 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. Surveying the home front landscape in 1942, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier theorized that, "the present war has brought to the surface the changes that have taken place in the Negro's attitude towards his status in America." Frazier observed that African Americans exhibited a more "militant manhood" since the war had started, thanks in large part to the "Double V" campaign espoused by the *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the nation's most predominant African American news outlets. Frazier further concluded that black attitudes towards the war had "been influenced to a large extent by the racial aspect of the conflict."[64]

[63] Numan Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 13; Gail Williams O'Brien, *The Color of Law: Race, Violence, and Justice in the Post-World War II South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 1.
[64] E. Franklin Frazier, "Ethnic and Minority Groups in Wartime, with Special Reference to the Negro," *American Journal of Sociology* 48, 3 (November 1942): 375.

At every opportunity, reporters cited acts of violence in the South to draw parallels between Nazism and the southern way of life. Remarking on the Shubuta and Laurel lynchings, one columnist declared, "Adolf Hitler's agents were not active last week in the State of Mississippi, but Hitler's work was being done there."[65] "In the eyes of unfriendly foreigners," he noted, "the State of Mississippi, and with it the United States, must stand condemned as not practicing what our spokesmen preach. As this news goes round the world…our cause will suffer."[66] This reporter was not far off the mark. As the war abroad progressed, other nations paid attention to these violent acts and placed pressure on American politicians to stop them. The external pressure exerted on these individuals would have a direct relationship to the rapidity with which civil rights legislation was adopted in the post-war period.

Acts of violence in the South provided ample fuel for civil rights initiatives in Congress directed towards voting rights. As mentioned in the previous chapter, securing the franchise was an important step to being placed on juries and could lead to the adoption of progressive civil rights policies. Patricia Sullivan explains that, "in the South, black political power was essential to securing gains on all other fronts—education, public facilities, employment, and justice in the courts."[67] Conservative whites understood the seriousness of black efforts to obtain voting rights and worked to stop them before they could fully begin. In late 1939, police and Klansmen in Greenville, South Carolina crushed an NAACP voting rights initiative by publishing the names of activists in the local paper, "harassing registered black voters," and arresting the local

[65] "Hitler in Mississippi," *New York Times*, October 21, 1942.
[66] "Hitler in Mississippi," *New York Times*, October21, 1942.
[67] Sullivan, Lift Every Voice, 245.

branch president James Briar. The tactics used in Greenville were characteristic of those used throughout the South to keep blacks from the polls. NAACP leaders realized that voices in the black community would not be heard until their political power could be felt at the highest levels of government. Thurgood Marshall told a crowd in Philadelphia shortly after the Greenville mobilization campaign that "the main challenge facing the association is to get the Negro the full right to vote in every one of the Southern states." Without the vote, Marshall believed, no one would be able to "shut up the Connollys [and] the Bilbos."[68] Following Marshall's directive, obtaining the full promises of the Fifteenth Amendment became the main focus of NAACP efforts in the decades that followed.

The NAACP's assault on southern franchise restrictions began in Congress with a push to pass a measure that would outlaw the poll-tax in 1944. As was the case with the anti-lynching bill, the anti-poll tax bill met little opposition in the House, but like the anti-lynching bill, southern politicians filibustered the effort at poll-tax reform. Bilbo played a key role in the fight against the bill. He used every tactic in his repertoire to stall debate on the measure. Leaving the legislative chambers after a particularly heated day of discussion, he told one reporter after that he was "ready to talk until Christmas."[69] The tactics of the southern Senators smacked of Nazism to one observer who wrote the New York *Daily Eagle* declaring that "Hitler must have rubbed his hands in glee when this reactionary group of…Senators did everything in their power to prevent the bill from reaching the floor."[70] After nearly a week of filibustering, the vote for cloture was

[68]Thurgood Marshall quoted in Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 245.
[69] "Senate Group Begins Filibuster Against Poll Tax Repeal Bill," *New York Times*, November 14, 1942.
[70] "Condemns Congressmen Opposing Passage of Anti-Poll Tax Bill," *New York Daily Eagle*, November 21, 1942.

defeated handily by Bilbo and his colleagues. Northern Democrats and Republicans offered a political logic for not supporting the bill as much as their constituents expected. These Congressmen, the *Daily Eagle* reasoned, were afraid that "the imposition of cloture against a reactionary minority would set a precedent which might someday work against a liberal minority."[71]

Roosevelt understood that continued blockage of African American rights could possibly cost him the 1944 election. He found other ways to help ease black discontent over southern racial violence and keep blacks in the growing "New Deal coalition." Kevin McMahon cites FDR's 193 liberal appointments to federal judgeships, including nine Supreme Court nominations, as evidence of his support for civil rights initiatives. McMahon believes that, "had FDR allowed southern Democrats to shape the judiciary policy in the same racially exclusive fashion in which they constructed key New Deal statutes, the Supreme Court would not have challenged segregation when it did (and may not have done so at all)." FDR's federal appointments, according to McMahon, created a judicial policy that was "a legal order clearly in conflict with his legislative compromises on race."[72]

Roosevelt's judicial policies were best seen in the increasingly liberal actions of the Justice Department on behalf of blacks during his administration. In April of 1943, the Justice Department announced that it would indict four men for depriving Howard Wash, whom they lynched in Jones County, Mississippi in October 1942, of his due process rights. However, the men were arraigned before a federal grand jury, which was

[71] "No Occasion for Pride," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 25, 1942.
[72] Kevin J. McMahon, *Reconsidering Roosevelt on Race: How the Presidency Paved the Road Brown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 12-13.

packed with local white Mississippians who quickly exonerated the accused in a unanimous decision. Even though it only took the jury one day to return their not guilty verdict, 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."[73]

Realizing that the fight against racism and lynching would be an uphill battle in Congress without necessary political pressure, the NAACP announced its plans for a nation-wide membership drive that would begin in 1944 and would coincide with the organization's prosecution of the *Smith v. Allwright* case, scheduled to appear before the Supreme Court that spring, which sought to outlaw the practice of whites-only primaries in Texas. A ruling against the Texas law would have drastic implications for black access to voting in the South. Local activists worked tirelessly to gain more members, and by April of 1944, the organization boasted a nation-wide roster of between 250,000-300,000 people, which was a six-fold increase in four years. Mississippi housed a remarkable fifty branches of the association.[74]

On a Collision Course with Hate

Two developments in the 1940s highlighted the civil rights efforts of earlier generations and propelled civil rights activists onto a collision course with Bilbo. In the spring of 1944, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Lonnie Smith in the case of *Smith v. Allwright*. In 1941, Smith, an African American dentist from Houston, sued a Texas registrar for refusing to register him in the 1940 congressional election because of his

[73] "Jury Frees 3 Men in Lynching Trial," *New York Times*, April 25, 1943.
[74] Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 288-289; 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

skin color.[75] The case, argued by NAACP attorneys Thurgood Marshall and William Hastie was a major victory for civil rights activists and marked a turning point in civil rights initiatives.

As noted in the previous chapter, during the turn of the twentieth century, in response to the threat of poor white and black political alliances, legislatures in nearly every southern state codified the practice of not allowing blacks to vote in primary elections. Since the Republican Party was still affiliated with Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction policies that afforded political and social opportunities to blacks, most southern whites voted for the Democratic Party. Under the direct primary system, southern electors chose the two best Democratic candidates who would then have a run-off before the general election. This election system assured party loyalty to such an extent that by the time blacks were able to vote in the general election, Republican candidates had virtually no chance of winning. That white skin was the main qualification for voting in these primaries, cut blacks completely out of the electoral process.[76]

The *Smith* decision undermined these measures of white control, which had been in place for nearly fifty years, and threatened the white political order. The Supreme Court was aware that they would face staunch resistance from southern Senators who would later proclaim that they would run elections on their own terms, and they crafted their legal argument carefully and used the weight of the Constitution to make their points ironclad. Forman Reed wrote the majority opinion in which he declared, "Texas is free to conduct her elections as she may deem wise, save only as her actions may be

[75] Steven F. Lawson, *Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South, 1944-1969* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1976), 41-42.
[76] See Chapter 1, 27-29, 32-33; Perman, *Pursuit of Unity*, 179-194.

affected by the prohibitions of the United States Constitution or in conflict with powers delegated to and exercised by the National Government." Reed then cited the Fourteenth Amendment's protections against state laws that abridge the rights of citizens on account of their race, and bolstered his argument by citing the Fifteenth Amendment's protections against voting rights obstruction. He then finished his opinion by concluding that, "under our Constitution, the great privilege of the ballot may not be denied a man by the State because of his color." [77]

Rightly fearing that the federal ruling would be used as a precedent through which blacks could gain suffrage rights in all southern states, conservative southern politicians began to use the *Smith* decision as a means of drumming up support for their political campaigns. Playing on his constituents' fears that the court, and by extension the federal government, was sticking its hands too deeply into "state affairs," Bilbo told reporters immediately following the ruling that, "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."[78] Bilbo's defense of the white primary endeared him to conservative whites throughout the state who believed he was standing up for traditional southern values. The *Smith* decision became a fracturing point for the Democratic Party. Upon hearing news of the decision, Frank Dixon, the governor of Alabama declared that for years, "the only thing has held the Democratic Party together in the South…has been the thing which caused its strength…white supremacy." Dixon believed that if the national body of the Democratic Party backed the Supreme Court's

[77] 321 U.S. 649, 657, 662; Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 282; See also 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)

[78]"Southern Leaders Prepare to Resist," *New York Times*, April 4, 1944.

decision, "the Democratic Party will become anathema to the white people in the South." Dixon's sentiments foretold the split in the Democratic Party that would come nearly four years later when southern Congressmen walked out of the Democratic national convention, now known as the Dixiecrat revolt.[79] After the *Smith* decision, northern Democrats began to distance themselves from their southern counterparts who declared that they would run primaries in a way that was "in the best interest of our people."[80]

The second development that sent civil rights activists hurtling towards Bilbo's path was the end of the Second World War in the spring and summer of 1945, which brought a powerful group of politically and socially conscious African American veterans home, ready to seize upon their civil rights. Many civil rights organizers saw in black veterans an unparalleled opportunity to gain national recognition for the fight for civil rights in the South. Tuskegee Institute's F. D. Patterson 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." Likewise, Reverend John W. Martin 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."[81] Similarly, sorority president Mae Wright Downs declared that "just as the United States won this greatest of all wars with the help of its allies, so the Negro race with their allies…intend to hold fast to the gains they have

[79] Dixon later remarked that following the war, the South had been thrust into a "political crucible," and Democratic Party leaders were creating a social revolution, see Kari Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 39, 89-90.
[80] "Democrats Watch Mississippi Moves," *New York Times*, June 4, 1944.
[81] "Feel War Sacrifices in Vain without Opportunity, Equality," *Jackson Advocate,* August 25, 1945

already achieved and to press ever forward for complete equality, which…they shall win." The *Jackson Advocate* likewise 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."[82] Black spiritual and social leaders believed that the end of the war offered an opportunity for blacks to achieve unparalleled civil rights advances.

To stem the political power of these returning veterans, southern politicians moved to discredit black veterans in hopes of making these paragons of the black community appear "unfit" to participate in a democratic society. In a speech before the Senate at the end of June 1945, Bilbo's counterpart in the Senate Mississippi Senator James Eastland declared that "Negro troops were an utter and abysmal failure [during World War II]." Eastland stated that black troops, according to military officials present in Normandy, had "assaulted members of the families of French farmers."[83] Similar statements came from James C. Evans of Tennessee who warned that "the problem of compressing the Negro soldier who has seen action in Burma, China, Egypt, and Germany back into the limited local channels will require our best efforts."[84] Ironically the "smear campaigns" of southern senators only enticed African Americans to increase their support for civil rights organizations such as the NAACP, which received "hundreds of protest letters" from Eastland's comments alone.[85]

National news media called attention to the tirades of southern congressmen, and the issue continued to drive a wedge in the Democratic Party, simultaneously boosting African American support for the Republican Party. As Danielle McGuire points out,

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[82] Ibid.
[83] "Negro Troops Fail, Eastland Asserts," *New York Times*, June 30, 1945.
[84] "'Returning Soldiers to be a Problem,' Says Civilian Aide," *Jackson Advocate*, July 28, 1945.
[85] "Embittered GIs Protest Eastland Racial Smear and Nazi Tactics," *Jackson Advocate*, August 4, 1945.

Republicans in the post-war period began to capitalize on the racial rhetoric of southern Democrats and reshaped their platforms to underscore the party's rich heritage of emancipation and equality exemplified by their most revered alumnus Abraham Lincoln.[86] In New York, Senator Robert Wagner proclaimed that Eastland should have consulted with the War Department before making his unsubstantiated 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."[87]

In the winter of 1945, the Mississippi legislature took an unprecedented step aimed at diluting black political participation by allowing whites to have increased voting access. The Mississippi legislature passed H.B. 107 which exonerated all veterans, regardless of race, from paying poll taxes or showing a receipt of poll taxes for years 1941-1945. The drive from Mississippi's white population to exonerate white veterans pushed state legislators to adopt the measure. This decision influenced the choice of many black veterans to seek suffrage rights in the post-war period, and it became a central talking point for southern politicians, including Bilbo, who were gearing up for re-election campaigns, scheduled to begin in early 1946.[88]

African Americans, galvanized by the *Smith* decision and the increasing federal interest in civil rights issues, sat well-poised to obtain suffrage for the first time since 1890. However, Theodore Bilbo did not intend to simply let blacks upset the political and

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[86] "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;

[87] "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.

[88] "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; Aaron Henry and Constance Curry, *Aaron Henry: The Fire Ever Burning* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 64.

social order that he had helped perpetuate. Campaigning as the defender of Mississippi's "traditions," Bilbo began a whirlwind tour of stump speeches that set the state ablaze with racial animosity. Bilbo's re-election campaign in the spring and summer of 1946 would serve as a test case for how the South would conduct its elections in the wake of the *Smith* decision and the veteran poll tax exemption, which offered suffrage opportunities for blacks for the first time since the adoption of the 1890 constitution.

However, much had changed since the beginning of the war. The eugenics movement which allowed Adolf Hitler to commit the Holocaust was increasingly being recognized in most parts of the country as a phony science; membership rolls in civil rights organizations had not only increased, but these organizations had also gained strong political clout during the war. The legal triumphs of the war period instilled confidence in African Americans that their voices would be heard and that progress could be made. The end of the Second World War brought on the Cold War between Russia and the United States. Fueled by the scramble for international influence in post-colonial nations, propaganda became a powerful weapon in the struggle for the hearts and minds of nations trying to determine whether to ally themselves with capitalism or Communism. Southern violence and racial injustice became focal points for Russian media, and forced the United States government to act on behalf of black civil rights initiatives.[89] The two opposing forces of black progress and white hate would find their battlefield in Bilbo's

[89] The connections between international pressure during the Cold War and domestic civil rights initiatives in the United States has been the topic of a relatively recent field of historical inquiry. I will be exploring these connections with Bilbo in the upcoming chapters. Some prime examples of this scholarship are Mary Dudziak, *Cold War, Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Thomas Borstelmann, *Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

election, which would have important implications for the development of American politics for decades.

Chapter 3

"By Any Means Necessary": Theodore Bilbo's 1946 Senate Campaign

"Although…one of my opponents...says there is no race question in Mississippi today, I tell you we are living on a volcano that may erupt at any hour," Theodore Bilbo warned residents of Okolona, Mississippi in May 1946. "There is one of the most destructive drives on against the principles of the South since the carpetbagger days of the Civil War….[and] Anyone," proclaimed Bilbo, who "coddles, encourages, or otherwise intends to influence the Negro to vote in a white primary, should be horse-whipped, tar and feathered, and chased out of the state." Bilbo further instructed his audience that any African Americans who opposed his campaign "should be atomically bombed and exterminated from the face of the Earth."[1]

In the spring and summer of 1946, Theodore Bilbo traveled up and down the highways and byways that lead to Mississippi's rural towns, spewing a particularly vitriolic brand of racial hatred in an attempt to win re-election as a United States Senator. Bilbo littered his speeches with implied threats to African Americans, often encouraging any and all "red-blooded Anglo-Saxon males," to use "any means necessary to prevent Mississippi's black population from voting in the July 2, Democratic primary. Bilbo's hate speech put him at direct odds with a growing population of African Americans and their supporters who were eager to see the promise of equality finally fulfilled. Bilbo's campaign would lead not only to his political and social undoing, but would begin what many consider to be the modern civil rights movement.

[1] "Bilbo Cites Dangers of Mongrelization," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, May 21, 1946.

Building a Platform out of Hatred

Bilbo built his 1946 campaign on fear, and his tactics embodied the ethos of southern demagogic politics in its truest sense, what Wilbur Cash described in his seminal work *Mind of the South* as the ability to "whip up the tastes and passions of the Demos with ever more personal and extravagant representations of the South in full gallop against the Yankee and even more, the Negro."[2] Bilbo believed that if he could foreground the issues of race and equality and tie those primary focuses of the white community into issues associated with economics and southern history, he could build a strong base of support in Mississippi and the rest of the South.

Bilbo began couching himself as the foremost defender of the white race in January of 1946 by attacking the organizations and actors who were seen as the nation's foremost defenders of the black race. Attacking the FEPC on the floor of the Senate, Bilbo remarked that the bill was "the most disgraceful thing that has been done in the District of Columbia," which in Bilbo's mind was "a great southern city," and the capital of a "white nation." The most malicious facet of the bill was not its promise of giving blacks a better chance at jobs in the defense industry, but that it promoted "social affairs and social contacts [between blacks and] white boys and girls." Bilbo argued that the FEPC was an equality ploy cooked up by A. Phillip Randolph, W.E.B. Dubois, Eleanor Roosevelt, the NAACP, and the "Negro intelligentsia." Bilbo continued to try and build up racial fears by saying, "I am more alarmed over the race question in the United States than over the atomic bomb." He continued, "There are states in the American union which permit…Negroes and whites to intermarry, and today there are more than 600

[2] Wilbur J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), 252.

marriages a year between Negroes and whites."[3] As Bilbo inched closer towards the July 5 primary, he continued to stir up fears that linked any form of racial equality for blacks with the direst fears of white southerners. In using this racial rhetoric, Bilbo began to make himself a martyr for the southern cause and propelled himself beyond Mississippi into national and international spotlights.

A Rising Tide of Backlash

Bilbo's fight to preserve southern modes of white and black conduct drew ire from northern and southern outlets who believed that he was drawing unnecessary attention to the South at a time when national unity was crucial to stopping the spread of Communism. College students across the United States became so concerned over Bilbo's racism in the spring of 1946 that they formed the Inter-Collegiate Committee to Combat Bilbo aimed at "the ultimate rejection of Bilbo by his constituents," a goal that the Committee pointed out was "national in scope." The group had branches at multiple colleges and universities across the nation that participated in letter writing campaigns advocating for Bilbo's removal. The organization emphasized the international implications that Bilbo's fear-mongering could have on the prosecution of the Cold War. "Because Bilbo is attacking all that America stands for by his discrediting remarks against our loyal minorities," wrote one concerned college student, "he is a threat to the future of American democracy," and to "national unity."[4]

Celebrities also added their weight to the anti-Bilbo fight. Frank Sinatra began an anti-racial hatred campaign in direct response to Bilbo's "arch-racism." As his press

[3] "Bilbo Again Slobbers Venom in Attack on Mrs. Roosevelt, FEPC," *The San Antonio Register*, January 4, 1946.
[4] "Voice of the Campus," *The Collegian* (Richmond, VA), February 22, 1946.

agent, George Evans, recalled in early 1946, "Frank proposed to do something to curb the race poison Bilbo was spewing." "We stood a lot to lose," remarked Evans, "But Frankie felt so strongly on the subject of racial and religious intolerance that we decided to take the chance." Sinatra began a speaking tour that took him to 150 locations throughout the United States at which he talked to middle and high school aged youths about racism and prejudice, explaining to his audiences that "no scientist in the world can examine blood and tell from which race of man it came from," and therefore the question becomes "How can we be prejudiced against people who are exactly the same as we are?"[5]

Even as national support for an anti-Bilbo campaign started to gain steam, Bilbo's use of racial rhetoric and condemnations from northern politicians made him more popular with his constituents. "What really re-elects Bilbo," one reporter opined, "is the solid opposition he has built up in the north. Every time a bunch of Yankees issues a blast against Bilbo, it wins him votes at home where northern criticism is resented."[6] Southern whites believed that Bilbo must have been doing something right to stir up all of the animosities against him, and if his words made northerners angry, then that was all the better.

Blacks throughout Mississippi understood the potential that Bilbo's rhetoric possessed for encouraging election-day violence, and many African Americans decided to register as early as possible in the spring to avoid added barriers to the voting registration process that would assuredly be erected once Bilbo's campaign began in earnest. Field Secretary Daisy Lampkin told members of the Associated Press at the end of May that "colored people [in Jackson] formed a line…registering to vote in ever

[5] "Frank Sinatra's Sincerity Wins Anti-Hate Fight," *San Antonio Register*, February 22, 1946.
[6] "Bilbo Sure Bet Again," *Borger Daily Herald* (TX), February 4, 1946.

increasing numbers and southern members of congress are gravely concerned."[7] As the number of registered African Americans continued to rise, members from both the NAACP and the NNC wrote to the federal government, asking President Harry Truman to send troops to keep African American voters safe. By their estimates, 100,000 black veterans would be eligible to vote in July without having to pay a poll tax. The DOJ wrote to Edgar G. Brown, head of the National Negro Council in late June that it would not, as per his request, "send troops to police the polls in Mississippi," and refused to investigate Bilbo's campaign statements. The DOJ reassured Brown that it would "thoroughly prosecute any attempts to prevent [African Americans] from voting on July 2," but also told Brown that any aggrieved parties should address their complaints "to the authorities of [Mississippi]."[8]

Bilbo's Atomic Counterattack

After his fight against the FEPC in the Senate, Bilbo returned to Mississippi in early May to put his full efforts into his campaign. Bilbo kicked-off his campaign in Pontotoc, Mississippi, a town of nearly 2,000 people in northeast Mississippi, which according to *Times-Picayune* had "long been a Bilbo stronghold." Even though the Times-Picayune described his speech as "a slow start" to his third term campaign, the speech contained important insight into how Bilbo would position himself for the remainder of his campaign. He made himself into a martyr for the southern cause, telling his crowd that he could have "gone along" with minority groups and liberals, but if he did so, he would have, "betrayed the…confiding, white patriotic men and women of this

[7] "NAACP Field Secretary Tells of Registration," *Jackson Advocate*, April 27, 1946.
[8] Letter from Theron Caudle to Reverend George Strype, July 17, 1946; NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950; part 4, reel 9; "Negroes Ask Troops Guard Vote," *New York Times*, April 28, 1946; "Negroes Ask Vote Guard," *New York Times*, May 19, 1946.

state," and that even though it would have spared him a Senate career of criticism, he would still have been "a traitor of the deepest dye." Bilbo recalled the hardships he faced while he was in the Senate including "denunciations, castigations, smears…picketing of [his] home for six months at a time by Negroes, Communists, and the scum of the earth." Come July 2, Bilbo hoped that the people of Mississippi would recognize his hardships and sacrifices in the name of, "white civilization, and the integrity of the blood of [his] white race." [9]

To further make his point, Bilbo referenced his time as the chair of the Senate Committee on Washington, D.C., which made him the ex-officio mayor of the nation's capital. He warned his audience, "there is a great fight...to give the people of Washington, the right to vote, which will mean that the nation's capital will be turned over the Negro race to control and operate, but…as long as I am chairman this will never take place." If racial separation was not continued, Bilbo explained, it would lead the white race and "white civilization to bankruptcy." His opponents, Bilbo charged, did not have nearly as solid of a record on race, and they were all much weaker on racial issue than he was. [10] With these opening words, Bilbo had successfully made himself into the South's foremost champion of white manhood as well as southern conservative ideals.

Bilbo set up an ambitious campaign trail that often had him visiting three towns, delivering hour long speeches, in the same day. For example, on the first day of his campaign he spoke in Pontotoc, North Carrollton, West Point, and Ackerman, covering

[9] "Bilbo Launches Third Term Try," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, May 5, 1946 in Papers of the NAACP, part 18, series A, reel 1.
[10] "Bilbo Launches Third Term Try," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, May 5, 1946 in Papers of the NAACP, part 18, series A, reel 1.

most of the major political centers in northeast Mississippi.[11] Each time Bilbo spoke, he heightened fears of racial mixing and what he termed the "mongrelization of the white race" by using rhetoric that invoked images of a future with apocalyptic consequences. In Meridian several days after he kicked off his campaign, Bilbo mentioned to his audience that a Columbia University Professor Ralph Linton had recently declared that within nine generations, the "present rates of intermingling, intermarriage, and interbreeding of the whites and blacks," would produce a race-less nation. "There will be no more whites or blacks," Bilbo proclaimed. For Bilbo, Linton's hypothesis was too dire to ignore, and he suggested a possible solution to his audience that highlighted his use of extreme rhetoric to create a terrifying future for white southerners. Bilbo told listeners in Meridian that he would "rather see [his] entire race destroyed with the noted atomic bomb than to see it gradually destroyed within 300 years by mongrelization."[12] The devastating technology of the atomic bomb was brand new in 1946. Only months had passed since the United States had unleashed its destructive power on the people of Japan, forcing their surrender and the end of World War II. Hundreds of thousands of lives lost in a mere instant was a barely comprehensible image for the people of 1946. The *New York Times* explained the new found horror of such technology, "yesterday man unleashed the atom to destroy man, and another chapter in human history opened, a chapter in which the weird, the strange, the horrible becomes trite and obvious." "The result is unpredictable," the reporter opined, "because the forces unleashed yesterday are outside of human experience…..a great part of Hiroshima, a city of 818,000 persons has been destroyed.

[11] "Northeast Mississippi Catches Brunt of Current Senatorial Campaigning in State," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, May 9, 1946 in Papers of the NAACP, part 18, series A, reel 1.
[12] "Bilbo Assails Collins," *Meridian Star* (MS), May 8, 1946; Memo, "Bilbo's Speeches and Circulation Dates," in Papers of the NAACP, part 18, series A, reel 1.

Man has released unknowable forces."[13] By invoking the atomic bomb in relation to black-white relations, Bilbo played on the shock and awe associated with the atomic bomb's capability to destroy entire civilizations, effectively ramping up white fears to unprecedented proportions.

After Bilbo's first round of speeches, campaign manager A. B. Friend organized a state-wide meeting with the heads of pro-Bilbo enclaves in the hopes of organizing and solidifying Bilbo's message throughout the state. The organizing team set up a four pronged attack aimed at getting Bilbo elected "over any and all peckerwoods that may be in the race at the time" with the slogan "Beat All Four with Theodore." Bilbo's plan involved "campaigning for individual votes," and "contacting all white veterans still in service" in hopes of counteracting some of the negative press he had been receiving since his battle against the FEPC bill.[14] Bilbo's new plan also involved a certain amount of backtracking on some of his previous statements while also reinforcing some of his closely held beliefs. Only a day after he held his strategic organizing meeting, Bilbo announced to a crowd in Leland, Mississippi over the course of a two and a half hour oration, that he never promoted racial intolerance because he was "for every damn Jew from Jesus Christ on Down" and that "he was the best friend the negro ever had in Mississippi."[15] In Bilbo's mind, he had acted on "behalf of blacks" in the Senate by pushing forward his Greater Liberia Bill in 1939, which would have seen scores of African Americans forcibly relocated to Africa. To Bilbo, this was a great service to

[13] "The Atomic Weapon," *New York Times*, August 7, 1945.
[14] "Bilbo Chiefs Hear Senator in Action," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, May 13, 1946 in Papers of the NAACP, part 18, series A, reel 1.
[15] "Bilbo Denies Racial Bias," *Meridian Star*, May 14, 1946 in Papers of the NAACP, part 18, series A, reel 1.

blacks, whom he believed, always wanted to return to their native homeland, and for whites, whom he believed, should be separated entirely from African Americans.

Despite Bilbo's mental gymnastics in early May, a tactic he would revisit as his campaign gained national and international attention, he continued to focus the brunt of his political energy on becoming a martyr for the southern cause—a man beleaguered by outside agitators and internal dissidents. By the end of his first month on the campaign trail, he was continuing whip his crowds into angered frenzies, naming the Mississippi Progressive Voter's League and the Congress of Industrial Organizations Political Action Committee (CIO), as the two most dire threats to white southern ways of life. In Okolona, Mississippi on May 21, Bilbo stepped up his calls for whites to take action against blacks attempting to vote. He told his crowd that blacks in the state had joined into a conspiratorial league with Communists and Socialists. When combined with mongrelization, Bilbo declared, these three forces would, "destroy the white race, white civilization, and the white man's scheme of government." Bilbo hinted at the southern past when he told the audience that the problems were being caused by outside agitators, mostly from the north, who "profit from strife within our borders." By raising the ghost of a northern conspiracy, Bilbo harkened back to politics of the post-Civil War era in which southern politicians were elected to office on platforms based solely on opposition to northern intrusion into southern ways of life, often times hinting at a conspiracy between northerners and blacks.[16] Bilbo proclaimed that white Mississippians needed to "take up the battle of survival," if they cared to preserve their way of life. Furthermore, he urged that civil rights groups and activists, especially the leaders of the Mississippi

[16] 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), 27-28.

Progressive Voter's League, be "atomically bombed and exterminated from the face of the earth." "I tell you," Bilbo shouted, "there is one of the most destructive drives on against the principles of the South we have known since the carpetbagger days of the Civil War."[17]

Bilbo Fights Organized Labor

Some of Bilbo's largest opposition came from the CIO during what was termed their "Operation Dixie." Leaders of the organization understood that in the post-war period, many northern businesses would attempt to relocate to the South, which had traditionally been a hotbed of opposition towards labor unionization. As Barbra Griffiths points out in her seminal work, *The Crisis of American Labor,* CIO organizers believed that unionization and worker's rights would not be secure in northern industrial centers until the South had been made safe for unions. According to Griffiths, after the Second World War, unions found themselves on the defensive against businesses who wished to curb the gains in pay and wages brought on by wartime demands for industrialization and rapid production. Unions became the scapegoat for southern politicians who wished to encourage businesses to move to the South because of a surplus population that could work at low wages. Often, these politicians used the specter of Communism to turn the population against unions, embellishing the level of Communist influence in these organizations as evidence that they posed a threat not only to the South, but to the nation as a whole.[18]

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[17] "Bilbo Cites Dangers of Mongrelization," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, May 21, 1946 in Papers of the NAACP, part 18, series A, reel 1.

[18] Barbra Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); James C. Cobb, *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1990* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 103 -109.

Bilbo wanted to maintain credibility with his constituents, many of whom feared Communism and unionization, and as a result, he became the South's foremost critic of unions. Bilbo, however, did not solely rely on Communism in his critique of unions. Instead, Bilbo told his supporters that the CIO had the, "avowed aim of franchise for the Negro in Mississippi, which they'll buy in order to break the white man's government." Bilbo argued that southern liberals had joined with "socialistic and communistic political gangsters…conspiring with the CIO," in order to "wreck Mississippi and the South." He painted Sidney Hillman, the leader of the CIO, as a "Russian-born agitator" who was simply trying to destroy the "southern way of life." The defeat of Martin Dies in the 1944 Texas primary was used as evidence that the CIO was putting on a major effort to attack southern Democrats. Bilbo claimed that the CIO "spent tons of money…[and] paid poll taxes with CIO funds for negro voters" in Texas and that a similar strategy would be used in Mississippi to, "defeat the champion of southern ideals and southern customs—Bilbo."[19] The CIO's campaign against him, Bilbo proclaimed, would "test the stability of Mississippi's political set up—white supremacy."[20] The fear of organized labor and as well as organized blacks had terrifying implications for southern whites who saw it as one step closer to social and racial equality.

The Public and Bilbo

Bilbo's constituents ate up his vitriol. One man from Wesson, Mississippi wrote Bilbo remarking that he felt "proud" that there were people in Congress who, "know the Negro and what a treacherous person he is." The author was concerned that, "people who

[19] "Bilbo Speaks at Pearl City Monday," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, May 25, 1946 in Papers of the NAACP, part 18, series A, reel 1.
[20] "Challenge in Voting," *Meridian Star*, May 31, 1946 in Papers of the NAACP, part 18, series A, reel 1.

have never lived among them, known nothing about them, and are trying to give them too much power." The writer warned Bilbo, "we have never had the bloodshed we will have then." He closed his letter with best wishes to Bilbo in the coming campaign.[21] Similar letters began to pour in from regions throughout the South. "Your ideas on Negro back to Africa are absolutely correct," wrote J.D. Rowlett of Tampa Florida. Rowlett suggested letting "no one into the country except British."[22] Bilbo's appeal was not constrained to Mississippi either. Throughout his campaign he received letters from supporters throughout the nation who believed that he was standing up for all white people in America with his speeches. Charles Edwards from Wilmington, California expressed his gratitude to Bilbo for running in the Senate race. Edwards told Bilbo that, "the negroes that has come to California use all the privileges that is given them and it makes a fool out of them." Edwards felt confident that Bilbo would "handle this matter to the best of advantage [sic]."[23]

After Bilbo's first month of campaigning, Pass Christian, a small community in southern Mississippi, held its primaries. Pass Christian was the first city in the state to hold its primary elections, and it did so almost a month before other cities. Voting in Pass Christian presaged how Mississippians would vote in the rest of the primaries. Bilbo won in Pass Christian, but what alarmed Bilbo him the most was that "nearly a hundred" negroes were allowed to vote in the election. In a campaign speech at Greenwood following the Pass Christian election, Bilbo stated that such a showing at the polls by

[21] Letter from R.K. Brown to Theodore Bilbo, May 20, 1946. Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi. Box 928, folder 9.
[22] Letter from J.D. Rowlett to Theodore Bilbo, May 21, 1946. Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 928, folder 16.
[23] Letter from Charles Edwards to Theodore Bilbo, June 8, 1946. Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 931, folder 1.

blacks was evidence of a "CIO-PAC carpet-bagger invasion from the north."[24] At the rally, Bilbo told his listeners and his political opponents that "[everyone in Mississippi] in the interest of all mankind, and in the interest of white supremacy…should be happy joining [me] in [my] crusade." According to the apocalyptic Bilbo, black voting in Pass Christian represented "one of the most damnable demonstrations of demagoguery in our Southland" that would take the conjoined efforts of all white Mississippians to combat.[25]

Not all southerners were satisfied with Bilbo's calls to violence and his fear mongering. At a campaign stop in Grenada, youths attempted to egg the Senator as he spoke. Reports indicate that the eggs missed their target, but splattered several people in the audience. The youths were prosecuted but only received a "rebuke" from the local judge. Black residents did not passively listen to Bilbo's speeches either. In a letter from someone who called themselves the "black KKK," the author told Bilbo that his calls for racial hatred were hypocritical since the correspondent could recall a time when Bilbo, "got [his] biggest thrill from an intercourse with a certain colored lady back in Mississippi." The author reminded Bilbo of this transgression and chided him for the remarks he had made during his campaign, even going so far as to tell Bilbo that he would be stopped "once and for all." The letter writer went on to state that they would be "visiting Mississippi soon," to talk with Bilbo's "help" and discuss plans on how to "massacre" Bilbo's "old Gray ass." The Black KKK indicated to Bilbo that he could,

[24] "Bilbo Says Coast Vote 'Opening Wedge,'" *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 6, 1946 in Papers of the NAACP, Part 18, series A, reel 1.
[25] "Bilbo Condemns Negro Voting at Pass Christian," *Gulfport Herald*, June 6, 1946.

"turn around in your chair…and drop this in the basket, but Mr. Cocksucker, we are going to fix your old Gray ass once and for all."[26]

The rage felt by Mississippi's black community did not stop Bilbo's campaign from gaining steam. At a campaign stop in Tishomingo on June 24, Bilbo built on his self-crafted image as the defender of southern customs by telling his crowd that not even the Justice Department could secure an integrated election in Mississippi. Bilbo challenged Attorney General Tom Clark, the FBI and the Department of Justice to, "try to keep the white people of this state from running the white Democratic primaries as we think they should be run….I'm a darn good lawyer," Bilbo hinted, "I've defended people in 11 murder cases…and I got them all off free." Bilbo scoffed at the notion that anyone would be convicted for keeping Mississippi's primaries lily-white. He roared, "In the first place, they'd have to get a grand jury of Mississippians to indict a man. And second, they'd have to get a jury of 12 good and true Mississippi white men to convict him."[27] Bilbo's words were horrifyingly true for African Americans. Jury pools were taken from voter registration rolls, and without successfully registering to vote, one could not be selected for jury duty, a reality that left many African Americans at the mercy of all-white juries.

The Coming of the Storm

On June 25, the first reports were published in newspaper outlets throughout the nation that allowed people to witness the power Bilbo's words had on public action toward African Americans. Only a day prior, the NAACP had received a report from a

[26] Letter from Anonymous to Theodore Bilbo, June 27, 1946, Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 933, folder 10.
[27] "Bilbo Defies US to Enforce Negro Rights to Vote," *Gulfport Herald*, June 25, 1946.

man named Etoy Fletcher, an African American veteran of World War II, who had attempted to register to vote in Rankin County on June 12. After telling the registrar that he wished to register to vote, the registrar 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."[28] As he walked down the steps of the courthouse a group of white men grabbed him and carried him to a wooded area. The men asked Fletcher to strip and then began to whip Fletcher with a metal cable. When the men finished, they told Fletcher that if he ever came back to Brandon, they would kill him.[29] Fletcher's affidavit was later printed in every major newspaper in the country and brought heightened national attention to the chaos slowly unfolding in Mississippi.

A few days after the attack on Fletcher, reports reached the NAACP of a group of white men in Rankin County who beat Matilda Pickney as she walked home from her evening church service in Brandon, Mississippi. Pickney told the NAACP that 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 she could respond, the men knocked her to the ground and beat her so severely that it caused permanent damage to one of her eyes, which later had to be removed. It was posited by African American news organizations that Pickney had been beaten in connection with the upcoming election since her mother worked at the Rankin County courthouse.[30] It seemed as though Bilbo's speeches were beginning to have devastating effects on race relations beyond the polls.

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[28] Affidavit of Etoy Fletcher, NAACP Files, Voting Rights Campaign 1916-1950, part 4 reel 8 pg. 1
[29] "Bilbo Urges Mississippi Men to Employ 'Any Means' to Bar Negroes From Voting," *New York Times*, June 23, 1946.
[30] "Rankin County Woman Severely Beaten By Group of White Men," *Jackson Advocate*, June 29, 1946; "Alleged Flogged Negro Reported Missing," *Natchez Democrat* (MS), June 27, 1946.

Fletcher's beating and the spike in violence against African Americans in the South began to force a national conversation about race, democracy and the law. The government was now forced into a position to consider how much it would be willing to intervene in order to secure black suffrage in the South. Senator Glen Taylor (R- Idaho) opened a motion on the Senate floor on June 27, calling on the Senate's special Committee for campaign expenditures to investigate Bilbo's election tell the other Senators that "time is of the essence."[31] CIO president Sidney Hillman sent a telegram to President Truman pleading with 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. Assistant Attorney General Theron Caudle simply replied that if African Americans were turned away at the polls, their complaints would be given "careful attention."[32]

Those who despised Bilbo's hateful rhetoric found meaningful assaults on Bilbo's character in his actions as a Lieutenant Governor at the turn of the century. After his speech in Tishomingo, Bilbo received a letter from Bronx native "J.B." asking Bilbo that if he was such a good lawyer, he wondered if it had anything to do with the fact that Bilbo "still took bribes." J.B. believed that Bilbo should have been punished for his actions in 1910 and that his current campaign speeches made Bilbo, "not only a disgrace

[31] "Ohio [sic] wants Bilbo Investigated," Unknown, June 27, 1946 in Papers of the NAACP, Part 18, Series B, reel 3, "Correspondence on Removal of Bilbo, March through October 1946."
[32] Letter from Theron Caudle to Walter White, July 9, 1946, Papers of the NAACP, Voting Rights 1916-1950, Part 4, Reel 9; 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.

to [his] state and family, but to the nation as a whole."[33] J.B. and other optimists hoped that by bringing up Bilbo's sordid political past, they could shame him into curbing his behavior. Bilbo, however, believed that his dual battles against the omnipresent Communist threat and African American equality were too important. Nothing could shame Bilbo.

As the primary loomed near, Bilbo's apocalyptic rhetoric became even more racially charged. From a soap box in Picayune, Mississippi, Bilbo emphasized the dire conditions surrounding the July 2 election. "Our Constitution," stated Bilbo, "is so designed that few white men and no Negroes at all can explain it….unfortunately, a few of our clerks have slipped an let hundreds of Negroes register." The imagery of a massive flood of African Americans and Bilbo being the prophetic Noah, promising an Ark of white supremacy to shield white southerners from the on-coming storm was not lost on his constituents when Bilbo intoned, "The bars have been let down in Adams, Hinds, Lauderdale, Cahoma, and a few other counties, and they are going to try and vote unless the white people of Mississippi do something about it."[34]

Throughout his last round of speeches, Bilbo continued to use scripture and references to war to make his implied threats to the African American community appear justified to his constituents, making it seem as though the world were sitting on a precipice from which only Bilbo could save them. In Purvis, Mississippi, the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* described Bilbo's speech as an hour of "the strongest tirade against Negro voting in this state that the people have ever heard." He told them "over

[33] Letter from J.B. to Theodore Bilbo, June 27, 1946, Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 933, folder 1.
[34] Speech given at Picayune, Mississippi, June 21, 1946, quote in *New Orleans Times-Picayune* June 22, 1946, in Papers of the NAACP, part 18, series A, reel 1.

and over again," according to the reporter, "that July 2 was the gravest day in Mississippi's history in 70 years." Bilbo inflated the fear of his constituents by telling them that between 600 and 700 blacks had registered in Adams county, another 500 in Hinds county, and "several hundred in…other counties in the state." While the crowd angered and stewed over Bilbo's falsified numbers, he offered them hope and salvation: "we are faced with the issue and…it must be met now," he declared, "if you let a handful go to the polls on July 2 there will be two hands full in 1947, and from then on it will grow into a mighty surge. The white people of Mississippi can't afford to let it happen in a state where half of the population is Negro….The white men of this state have a right to resort to any means at their command to stop it."[35] In multiple speeches throughout the state in the week before his primary, Bilbo used similar rhetoric, calling on "every red-blooded, Anglo-Saxon man to resort to any means to keep Negroes from the polls on July 2." Often, Bilbo told his listeners that "if you don't know what that means, you're just not up on your persuasive measures."[36]

With Bilbo all but condoning acts of violence against black Mississippians, letters began to pour into senators, media outlets, and the president, urging intervention in Mississippi. New York army veteran D.S. Franklin wrote to Harry Truman a week before the primary telling him that "it is highly unfortunate that certain people for whom the troops fought, and I repeat, troops of all colors, have short memories and now suddenly decide that…men from that anemic state of Mississippi are an American race of supermen." Franklin scolded Truman:

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[35] "Introduced by Vets," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, June 20, 1946.
[36] "Bilbo in Laurel," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, June 22, 1946 in Papers of the NAACP, part 18, series A, reel 1.

> This country has no right to criticize the politics or humanitarianism of other countries when they allow…a statement by a Senator of the United States such as was made by Senator Theodore Bilbo in his June 22nd speech…in which he advocated disregard of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution and behaved in a manner similar to certain European fascists now on trial….I call upon you to take measures to censure Senator Bilbo in the strongest possible manner, including impeachment.[37]

Just a few days before the polls opened, Bilbo made a last-ditch effort to incite the passions of white Mississippians. "It is the most vital and important election held in Mississippi within the last 70 years," he proclaimed. "It is vitally important that every white, Democratic man and woman should make every sacrifice and that nothing should hinder them from participating in this primary election."[38] He implored the crowd, "Re-elect me so I can say to the negro lovers of the North, to the advocates of social equality…to the enemies of the South, that my fight, my stand, my views, and my convictions have been approved by the great body of Anglo-Saxon people of my state."[39]

Bilbo continued to encourage whites in Mississippi to prevent blacks from voting, even though he could feel that his comments were beginning to draw scrutiny from the federal government. As the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections held a special session to determine whether or not to begin an investigation of Bilbo's campaign, Bilbo told his constituents to "use any means at their command" to "keep the primary clean and white."[40]

Bilbo understood how the wheels of politics turned at both local and national levels, and he understood that his remarks about keeping blacks from voting could pose a

[37] Letter from D.S. Franklin to Harry Truman, June 25, 1946. Theodore G. Bilbo Papers. McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 933, folder 1.
[38] "Bilbo Makes Final Plea for Re-Election," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 2, 1946.
[39] "Eyes of Nation on State Vote," *Meridian Star*, July 2, 1946.
[40] "Stands his Ground," *Meridian Star*, June 28, 1946.

serious problem if violence did break out on election day. An anonymous telegram to the Senate on June 29 told congressmen, "you know the penalty to incite insurrection. Use your judgment concerning senator Bilbo's demand for keeping negroes from voting in the Mississippi primary."[41] Perhaps in response to this letter and other external pressure, Bilbo began to qualify and "clarify" his statements concerning using "any means necessary" to keep blacks from voting. In a few of his final speeches, Bilbo began to state that whites should still go to "any extreme" to keep blacks from voting, but that he did not mean "go to violence, but go to any extremes that are justified."[42] In subsequent speeches, Bilbo continued to temper his previous statements by telling his constituents that technically, "under the law, Negroes are prohibited from voting in white Democratic primary because every voter before being permitted to vote must have been in harmony with the Democratic party…for the past two years."[43] He encouraged registrars to use understanding clauses and other tactics from the Reconstruction period to keep blacks from voting, but in these last speeches, he shied away from implying that violence should be used against blacks. In his final speech before the election on June 30, Bilbo told a Jackson audience,

> 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.[44]

[41] Telegram from Anonymous to entire Senate, June 29, 1946. Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 933, Folder 15.
[42] "Bilbo Speaks in Capital City," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 28, 1946.
[43] "Bilbo Hits Back at Foes' Charges," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 30, 1946.
[44] "'The Man' From Mississippi- Bilbo," *New York Times*, June 30, 1946.

White newspapers joined in Bilbo's chorus and filled in the blanks left by Bilbo's implied rhetoric. An editorial in one Mississippi newspaper 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."[45]

Warnings from Bilbo and the beating of blacks including Etoy Fletcher and Matilda Pickney did not keep blacks from registering. Encouragement rose up from the NAACP as well as local civic leaders including Percy Greene, editor of the *Jackson Advocate*, the sole African American newspaper in the state. Through his newspaper editorial columns, 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 that may be demanded…that democracy might live in Mississippi."[46]

Greene tried to assuage growing racial animosity through a series of editorials in the *Jackson Advocate* in the days leading up to the election, which attempted to appeal to moderate whites in the state. Greene told his readers, "those who would bring up their children…need [to] 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 victims of disease of the mind," which Greene believed, would make them into "minions of hate, terror and violence."[47] Other civic and social leaders pushed blacks in the state to vote, arguing that if Bilbo was defeated, it would

[45] "Don't Try it," *Jackson Daily News*, June 1946, NAACP Files Voting Rights Campaign 1916-1950, part 4 reel 8.
[46] "Go to the Polls on July 2 in the Name of Democracy," *Jackson Advocate*, June 22, 1946.
[47] "Violence, Terrorism and Hate," *Jackson Advocate*, June 29, 1946.

serve not only as a triumph for Mississippi, but for the entire nation against hatred and "facism."[48] The editor of the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* published an editorial the same week that denounced Bilbo's speeches, 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.[49]

Letters of anger and disgust continued to flood Bilbo's office. S.M. Ramsey from Augusta, Georgia wrote Bilbo on the eve of the election, declaring that Bilbo missed his calling as a member of the Nazi party. The author, who referenced his time spent overseas during World War II, scolded Bilbo by saying, "you would have been a great asset to the Reichstag. The next time you happen to be on the floor of the Senate why not borrow an S.A. uniform, it suits you." Ramsey, whose family had been in the South "since before the Revolution," told Bilbo that his latest speeches were "the basest thing I have ever heard expressed by an American," and he closed his letter by accusing the senator of "leaning towards Facism [sic] and approving of anarchy."[50] Another veteran from Pennsylvania also excoriated Bilbo for his rhetoric. Richard Rettig noted that it was "disconcerting" to him that after fighting in Europe, he had come home to "find a person such as you- a Senator in the United States." Rettig compared Bilbo to a "lieutenant of

[48] "Defeat of Bilbo Declared Nation's Victory," *Jackson Advocate*, June 29, 1946.
[49] "Mississippi Has Always Run Her Primaries Without Interference," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 30, 1946.
[50] Letter from S.M. Ramsey to Theodore Bilbo, July 1, 1946, Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 934, Folder 2.

Hitler's," and stated that if Bilbo were re-elected to the Senate it would be "conclusive evidence of the undemocratic election procedures of your state." Rettig closed his letter by telling Bilbo that his letter was not written in hate or anger, but merely after "a cool consideration of what a worthless piece of humanity you are."[51] Other last minute letters simply asked Bilbo "what have [blacks] done to make you hate them so."[52]

By July 2, it was clear that Bilbo had stirred racial animosity to fever-pitch levels in Mississippi and throughout the nation. One reporter for *the New Orleans Item* observed that Bilbo had, "made racial relations an accepted issue in a Mississippi campaign for the first time since [James] Vardaman was elected on a platform calling for repeal of the 15th amendment and modification of the 14th" in 1920."[53] Another reporter explained the significance of Bilbo's election, stating that Mississippi's 200,000 eligible voters would, "have the eyes of the nation focused upon them Tuesday," when they went to the polls. Due to national and international interest in the campaign, the reporter explained, "out-of-state newspaper men, magazine writers, and photographers are beginning to pour into Mississippi for a firsthand account of what happens. Special telephone apparatus is being installed by all of the major news agencies….the nation awaits."[54] The reporter only slightly veiled the direction in which he thrust his blame for the added attention on the election when he stated, "some of the candidates have made charges and counter charges that have shocked the people and awakened growing interest."[55]

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[51] Letter from Richard W. Rettig to Theodore Bilbo, July 1, 1946, Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 934, Folder 2.
[52] Letter from Anonymous to Theodore G. Bilbo, June 30, 1946, Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 933, Folder 19.
[53] "Bilbo Seen Riding Race Issue in 3rd Term Bid," *New Orleans Item*, June 24, 1946.
[54] "200,000 Voters Ready Tuesday as Runoff Certain," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 30, 1946.
[55] "200,000 Voters Read Tuesday as Runoff Now Certain," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 30, 1946; Edgar Poe, "Eyes of Nation on State Vote," *Meridian Star*, July 2, 1946.

Despite the heightened level of national interest and an atmosphere that would increase racial animosity, the Justice Department denied requests by blacks to send troops to guard voting booths in Mississippi. South Carolina Senator Burnett Maybank, a member of the Senate Campaign Investigating Committee, told reporters that the Senate would not send investigators to Mississippi to keep an eye on election day practices because, "it would be an insult to the people of Mississippi." Maybank cited the fact that many of the letters of protest about the possibility for violence were coming from places outside of Mississippi, and therefore could not possibly reflect the real situation of voting in the state.[56]

Early reports from July 2 indicated little to no foul play at the polls. The *New Orleans Item* reported that, "feared opposition to [negro] presence at the polls failed to materialize," and estimated that about 3,000 of the 5,000 blacks who had successfully registered before July 2 managed to vote.[57] The *Jackson Advocate* told readers that, "there was not a single reported incident of violence." "Reports from all sections of the state," the *Advocate* noted, "indicated that there had been no incidents involving Negroes, either on the 'night before the election' or on Tuesday, election day," and other articles optimistically claimed that, "any instances of intimidation or violence…were quickly overturned by city officials."[58] Even though no incidents of violence were reported on election day, it appeared evident that Bilbo's campaign rhetoric had kept at least 2,000 blacks away from the polls, and kept scores of other eligible black voters from even attempting to register. As vote tallies arrived at the capitol, it became clear that Bilbo

[56] "Eyes of Nation on State Vote," *Meridian Star*, July 2, 1946.
[57] "Bilbo Clings to Slim Lead," *New Orleans Item*, July 3, 1946.
[58] "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.

would hold onto his seat with a 4,000 vote victory over his closest opponent, a margin just wide enough to have been shortened had all of Mississippi's registered blacks been able to freely cast their ballots.[59]

Bilbo gloated in his triumph days after the election, declaring that his campaign had, "met the enemy, and they are ours." Bilbo's only regret, he noted, was that he was not in a "southwide election" because he believed he had, "the same convictions that a great majority of southerners have."[60] Texas circuit judge A.R. Stout wrote Bilbo shortly after the election, congratulating him on his "overwhelming victory for the South," against what the judge described as "communistic mudcats in the sewer." Because Bilbo championed the ideals of Jefferson Davis and John C. Calhoun, Stout proclaimed, it would be a "glorious 4th of July."[61] Stout's letter and others that trickled into Bilbo's office over the next several days after his election indicated on a grand scale that Bilbo represented something greater than himself to many Americans. To these individuals, Bilbo embodied their basest fears about non-whites. He provided a mouthpiece for people who might otherwise hide their fears of non-white races. "Your phenomenal success and valiant advocacy of white supremacy," wrote Sulu Stovall from New York, "can only stimulate the admiration of every self respecting citizen regardless of the points of the compass."[62] J.A. Rayburn seemed to sum up these sentiments when he wrote,

> I think there are a few people who appreciates[sic] the far reaching effect of your election to the great deliberative body-the United States Senate, at this time. It

[59] 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.
[60] "Met, Beat Enemy, is Boast of Bilbo," *New Orleans Times Picayune*, July 5, 1946, Papers of the NAACP, part 18, series A, reel 1.
[61] Letter from A.R. Stout to Theodore G. Bilbo, July 3, 1946, Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 934, Folder 13.
[62] Letter from Sulu Stovall to Theodore Bilbo, July 3, 1946, Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 934, Folder 13.

> means something to Mississippi. It means something to the South, more than just the electing of Bilbo. The term Bilboism, has been loosely and sacriligiously[sic] used in Mississippi, but to me the term Bilboism, does not represent the MAN, but the epitome of the best traditions of American Democratic ideals, and a philosophy of government that will live in the hearts of men as long as time goes on.[63]

Bilbo used his victory to immediately push for new legislation that would crush any hope of black voting in Mississippi. On July 5, Bilbo told the state legislature that they needed to convene an extraordinary session in order to enact legislation that would block blacks from voting in next year's elections in which the governor would be chosen. Bilbo suggested that the state branch of the Democratic Party should pay for and conduct the next year's election so that greater control might be exercised over what groups of people cast ballots.[64] Already, however, criticism over voting practices on July 2 began to make headlines. Nelson Levings, one of Bilbo's opponents, challenged the election results stating that there had been some "irregularities" in Harrison County's vote totals. Yet these early challenges amounted to mere formalities as the state Democratic Party told Levings and other challengers that Bilbo had won his election legitimately, and Bilbo lauded his campaign manager, A.B. Friend and others at a celebration in Jackson's Poindexter Park to mark the occasion.[65]

Even though Levings's protest seemed to fall on deaf ears, and it appeared as though Bilbo would get away with his race-baiting rhetoric, news reports of election day violence began to surface. Only a week after the election, the *New York Times* began reporting on beatings, intimidation, fraud and even murder that blacks experienced at the

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[63] Letter from J.A. Rayburn, M.D. to Theodore Bilbo, July 4, 1946, Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 935, Folder 6.
[64] "Bilbo Asserts Legislature Should Act on Ballot Change," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, July 6, 1946.
[65] "Bilbo Celebrates Senatorial Victory," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 12, 1946; "Levings Protests Irregularities in Harrison Voting; Ellis Waits Final Count," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 5, 1946.

hands of whites on July 2. The murder of Choctaw county resident F.A. Fowler by county sheriff F.W. Barfield on election day earned a front page spot on many nationally syndicated newspapers. Reports began to circulate about Canton, Mississippi where officials deputized a local farmer who had often been "deputized for law enforcement duties when anything happens involving Negroes" and stationed him at a voting booth "armed with a heavy club and when the first Negro appeared to vote…he began beating him with the heavy club."[66] Affidavits from blacks 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. The atmosphere in Mississippi remained tense in the weeks following the election, "negro citizens," wrote one columnist, "still live under a deep cloud of fear and apprehension in many sections of the state."[67]

Building a Case against Bilbo

Anger in Mississippi's black community built precipitously at a perceived lack of progress following Bilbo's election. In mid-July, the Justice Department wrote to the NAACP stating that the Department was making "thorough" investigations into affidavits received from black voters about election day atrocities. The letter also noted that the DOJ would keep the NAACP "apprised of the results of this investigation."[68] With little to no progress by mid-August, Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP legal defense team lobbied the DOJ with increasingly aggressive letters. Robert Carter told the DOJ that, "the Justice Department has been given sufficient basis to warrant a thorough

[66]"Bilbo Pushes Vote Curb," *New York Times*, July 6, 1946.
[67] "Wide-Spread, Apprehension Among Negro Citizens as Reports of Election Incidents Grow," *Jackson Advocate*, July 13, 1946; "Violence Marks Election in Miss," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, July 12, 1946.
[68] Memorandum from Robert Carter, July 19, 1946, Papers of the NAACP, Voting Rights 1916-1950, Part 4, Reel 8.

investigation of this reported situation." Affidavits from African Americans, Carter argued, "allege a prima facia 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."[69] At the end of August, a cross was burned on the campus of historically black Tougaloo College in Meridian and the *Jackson 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."[70]

Acts of terrorism continued throughout the summer of 1946 after Bilbo's campaign with violence against blacks dominating national headlines. Whites wishing to uphold Bilbo's standard of "red-blooded" Anglo-Saxon values, targeted African American community leaders for brutal reprisals that they hoped would send a message that, in the future, African Americans should not become politically or socially active. Reverend R.E. Daniels' interaction with police was common for such African Americans in the weeks following the July primary. On the evening of August 27, Daniels and three passengers traveled home on the Magee-Mize Road in Clinton, Mississippi 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 Daniels' 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.[71]

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[69] Letter from Robert Carter to Theron Caudle, August 6, 1946, NAACP Files Voting Rights 1916-1950, part 4, reel 9.
[70] "Timely Intervention of FBI Stops Mob Action," *Jackson Advocate*, August 24, 1946; "Community Ignores Burning of Fiery Cross," *Jackson Advocate*, August 31, 1946.
[71] "Minister Badly Beaten in Smith County," *Jackson Advocate*, August 31, 1946.

African American newspapers could not help but notice the correlation between Bilbo's campaign and the sharp increase in racial violence. One reporter noted that "A wave of racial antagonism and violence, following fast on the heels of Bilbo's pre-election hate campaign is spreading throughout Mississippi."[72] The growing 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…Bilbo's campaign."[73]

On September 21, the NAACP and other civil rights organizations submitted a joint complaint to the Committee to Investigate Privileges and Elections, arguing that Bilbo had conducted a campaign "tainted with fraud, duress and illegality" and reiterated that Bilbo had "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 voting. The organizations accompanied their petition with affidavits signed by numerous African Americans who had been the victims of violence and intimidation on election day.[74]

After filing the petition, Civil Rights Congress executive 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

[72] "Clerics, Teacher Beaten; Girls Attacked in Reign of Terror After Miss. Manhunt," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, August 31, 1946.
[73] "2 Senate Groups May Act to Keep Bilbo From Seat," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, August 24, 1946.
[74] "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.

decades- Senator Bilbo can be unseated! For years we have hoped for a grass roots movement in Mississippi. What seemed impossible is happening."[75]

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

Chapter 4

Investigating Hate

Bilbo's voice came through somewhat cracked, but still very much energetic on the radio on August 9, 1946. Even a month after a long campaign that, by his own account, had him stumping at over 150 locations, his voice still maintained its dry, flat, and slightly hoarse tone, with its signature whistle hanging on every "s." Families across the nation were tuning their sets to hear Lawrence Spivak and Bert Andrews, popular hosts of the radio program "Meet the Press," interview Bilbo. The transcript of Bilbo's speech was later published in *Life Magazine* and other periodicals throughout the country and ultimately forced the nation to grapple with the increasingly problematic and widespread remarks of the senator from Mississippi, rallying celebrities like Dashell Hamett and Paul Robeson to the cause of impeaching the nation's most virulent racist.[1]

The major argument civil rights organizations presented to the Senate Committee on Campaigns and Elections was that Bilbo had committed election fraud with his statements, and abridged blacks' Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. It was rather easy for citizens accuse Bilbo of engaging in voter intimidation with his hate speech, but the larger and more significantly uphill battle would be gathering the evidence necessary to prove those charges. This chapter examines the investigation into Bilbo's Senate campaign conducted by the Department of Justice and place it back into the larger

[1] "Terror Unfolds in Mississippi," *Fairbanks Daily Miner*, July 30, 1946; 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; "Negro Group Lauds Ives," *New York Times*, October 26, 1946; "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.

dialogue of Post-World War II political history as a meaningful moment in which African Americans spoke out against one of the most powerful and terrifying racists in American history, bringing American civil rights issues to the foreground of national and international debates on citizenship.

The Interview Heard Round the World

The interview began rather casually with a question about Bilbo's least favorite Senator, to which Bilbo declared that, "courtesy" forbade him from making a specific statement, but quickly turned serious as Andrews and Spivak probed the Senator with questions about his recent campaign and his views on race. The interviewers had done their homework, because they referenced an interview from 1920 in which Bilbo had told reporters that he was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. Given his recent statements in the Mississippi primary, Andrews and Spivak wondered, was he still a member of the klan? Without hesitation, Bilbo replied, "I am a member of the Ku Klux Klan No. 40, called Bilbo Klan No. 40, Poplarville." When Andrews asked if Bilbo had ever left the Klan, Bilbo responded, "No. No man can leave the Klan. He takes an oath to [be in the Klan]. He is- once a Ku Klux, always a Ku Klux," but he qualified his statement by saying that he did "not know what the Klan stands for today." Spivak and Andrews jumped on Bilbo's answer. They asked the Senator to explain, "in very simple terms," how he could be a part of an organization that advocates lynch law, and tells constituents that they should "visit Negroes the night before an election," while simultaneously claiming to uphold the Constitution of the United States. Bilbo quickly answered that the interviewers had, "obviously been reading *Time, Life, The Saturday Evening Post*…and *The Amsterdam News*." Spivak interrupted, "No. I've been reading the *Herald*

Tribune…all reporters agree on that quote. What did they all do? Go out and make it up?" Undeterred, Bilbo argued that 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, and that he only meant for his constituents to "see [blacks] the night before, and advise them that had no right [to vote]."[2] When asked whether or not his statements constituted discrimination, Bilbo declared, "call it what you will, it's good strategy."

Pushing the Senator further, Spivak asked, "Did you take an oath to uphold the 15th Amendment?" "I have…but the 14th and 15th Amendments were adopted by fraud," Bilbo replied matter-of-factly. The interview ended with Bilbo's defense of using race as a political strategy, which summed up the climate of post-war politics in the South. Bilbo argued that, "the activities of certain segments of our population…to get the negro to vote has been so evident and persistent that we needed to take action to preserve white supremacy."[3]

Shortly after Bilbo's epithet-laden tirade on national and international radio, letters flooded the offices of the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections. Three Californians demanded that Bilbo not be seated, because they considered him a "disgrace to our democracy."[4] The American Labor Party declared that, "[Bilbo's] membership in KKK and continued presence in Congress," were a "disgrace to [the] country," and urged

[2] "Senator Bilbo Meet the Press," *The American Mercury*, , November 1946, pg. 530 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.
[3] Meet the Press Interview with Theodore Bilbo, Lawrence Spivak and Earnest Lindsey, August 8, 1946, Audio recording located in Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi.
[4] Letter from MF Wesselhoeft, Nancy Reed, and Helen Zuzalek to the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections, August 22, 1946, Papers of the Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, 1946, Mississippi, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., Record Group 46, Box 1, Folder 1 (hereafter cited as Senate Committee, NARA).

Congress to take "immediate action."[5] The national outrage over Bilbo's statements spelled dire consequences for the upcoming mid-term elections for politicians throughout the country. John Coleman from Providence, Rhode Island wrote Senator Theodore Green after reading Bilbo's interview on *Meet the Press*. Coleman expressed the views of many Americans and explained the devastating connection of Bilbo to the Democratic Party when he told Green, "if the Democratic Senators cannot purge the Senate and the party of Bilbo then I think they are utterly impudent in asking us to vote for the party."[6] Bilbo was beginning to have an effect far beyond Mississippi. Throughout the nation, Bilbo's stature as the nation's foremost white supremacist threatened to push many Democrats into the fold of Republicans.

While Bilbo's interview began to alienate him from whites throughout the nation, and land him in hot water with politicians in his own party, Bilbo's words on *Meet the Press* only further endeared him to the majority of white southerners, and stoked the flames of racial unrest already present from his campaign. On August 18, an African American man's mangled body washed up on the banks of the Pearl River in Crystal Springs, Mississippi. Newspaper reports could not identify the man whose head had been "crushed by multiple blows."[7] The gruesome murder evidenced the extreme levels of anger towards Mississippi's black population by Mississippi whites who perceived black voting a month earlier as a lack of respect or deference. Now that most media outlets had

[5] Letter from Parkchester American Labor Party to Senator James Mead, August 18, 1946, Senate Committee, NARA, RG 46, Box 1, Folder 1.
[6] Letter from John B. Coleman to Theodore Green, August 12, 1946, Senate Committee, NARA Box 1, Folder 1.
[7] "Unidentified Negro Found Dead in River," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, August 18, 1946.

left the state, whites felt that they could have more liberty, with their newly elected Senator's blessing, to solidify pre-existing racial hierarchies.

The fearfulness of whites after July's election exhibited itself in hateful acts towards black veterans. On August 18, 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 with the white man being disgruntled. In retaliation for Craft's "uppity" nature, the white man rounded up a group of his friends and blocked the route on which Craft and his family traveled to church. On the drive home from church that Sunday, Craft, with a car full of family members, approached the roadblock. Feeling trapped, someone inside Craft's vehicle allegedly fired a gun which caused the white men to flee. Having regrouped later that evening, the same posse of white men arrived at Craft's house armed, ostensibly seeking Craft to mete out "frontier justice" for his perceived insolence. Reports are mixed of what happened next, but it is clear that a firefight ensued between Craft and the posse. In the midst of the gunfire between Craft and the posse, the town marshal and deputy sheriff were shot. Craft, and the two men he had been in the house with, fled into the woods. Having heard news of the shooting, the local white community was not about to let a black man get away with firing a gun at a white man. A large hunting party of nearly 300 people, replete with search dogs, formed to hunt down Craft and his friends. Craft and his friends managed to elude the posse's dogs successfully for several days until they were coaxed into surrendering by family and friends.[8]

[8] "Last of Crafts Gives Up," *Jackson Advocate*, August 24, 1946; "Mississippi Posse Seizes 8 Negroes," *New York Times*, August 20, 1946

White newspapers played on the already heightened fears of the white community, painting a picture of a dangerous "negro," with expert military training in their portrayal of Craft and his allies. The white press further asserted that Craft, not the white posse, were the ones looking for a fight that Sunday. In fact, the *Clarion-Ledger* asserted, Craft and his friends were the ones who blocked the road that afternoon and prevented white cars from passing through. By the *Clarion Ledger's* account, it was the words of a twelve year old white boy who started the fracas when he, "shouted something at the Negroes as he went [through the blockade]." After 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 with the intention of merely talking to him, but were shot as they entered the property.[9] Craft's arrest highlights the conflicting narratives of events in Mississippi between white and black presses, but also underscores the escalating level of violence in the state. In response to the pictures from Smith County and the unending escalation of violence in Mississippi, Assistant U.S. Attorney General Theron Caudle ordered that the suspects be given the "utmost protection" while in custody, but offered no further assistance from the DOJ.[10]

The treatment of Reverend E.D. Scott added further credence to the theory that since Bilbo's campaign and election, targeting of blacks had become a routine part of life in Mississippi. Reports from Scott and others indicated that after attending a concert in Jackson at the end of July, Scott and a group of friends returned to his car only to find that they had been "wedged in" by a police officer's vehicle. A woman from Scott's group approached the officer and asked him to move his vehicle, but "after violently

[9] "Smith County Violence Ends," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, August 18, 1946.
[10] "Smith County Violence Ends," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, August 18, 1946.

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."[11]

Bilbo's rhetoric took shocking form in the lynching of Leon McTatie, a black sharecropper from Lexington, Mississippi. On July 30, police in Lexington arrested six white men in connection with the murder. Dixie Roberts, the owner of the land on which McTatie farmed and one of the white men arrested in connection with the lynching, admitted that he and his father-in-law had gone to McTatie's house to confront him about stealing a horse saddle. Roberts admitted that he and his father-in-law whipped and beat McTatie with "a buggy whip and leather strap," and forced him to leave the property. The last the men saw of McTatie, they declared, he was walking down the road off of the property. When police discovered McTatie's body in a bayou in neighboring Sunflower County, they determined that McTatie had been thrown in the bayou from a moving vehicle, but Roberts and his associates denied any such wrongdoing. The wheels of the southern criminal justice system turned in favor of the white men as the coroner in Lexington stated that, "there were no recognizable marks on the Negro's body when it was taken from the water," and therefore ruled the cause of death as "unknown" and allowed McTatie's murderers to walk free.[12] The flames of racial hatred, fanned by Bilbo's rhetoric, also claimed the life of Buddy Wolf, an African American general store owner in Hattiesburg. John Lewis, the town's sheriff, told reporters that he shot Wolf in

[11] "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; "Citizens Protest Brutality at Hazlehurst," *Jackson Advocate,* August 24, 1946.
[12] "Negro Death Laid to Mississippians," *New York Times*, July 31, 1946; "6 White Planters Held for Murder in Holmes County," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger,* July 31, 1946.

self-defense after Wolf tried to attack him. Reports indicated multiple black witnesses were present during the time of the shooting, but none were willing to testify. Without witnesses, the sheriff had little trouble evading conviction for Wolf's murder.[13]

Blacks were not even safe in jail. On August 3, a mob of whites attempting to kidnap R.C. Barlow, a black man arrested for striking a white woman, attacked policemen at a jail in Meridian, Mississippi. Even though the woman identified Barlow as her assailant, reporters indicated that, "no motive for the attack has been indicated."[14] The aggressive action of the white mob who sought retribution for the alleged assault of a white woman speaks to the larger influence of Bilbo's rhetoric on the minds of white southerners. In the weeks following Bilbo' election, whites viewed the entire southern way of life as under siege and sought to set examples to show blacks that, even though legal rights for blacks were increasing in most states, there would not be a change in the social or political rights accorded to blacks in the South.

The foremost targets of the effort to reassert white male dominance were black civic and religious figures who were often the most vocal leaders of the black community, many of whom helped organize voting efforts on July 2. 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

[13] "Mississippi Deputy Held," *New York Times*, July 31, 1946.
[14] "Citizens Attempt to Take Negro Man from Police," *Jackson Advocate*, August 3, 1946.

the car." When the principal's wife screamed out "don't kill him," the white men slapped her down and drove off.[15]

The attack on the family of Reverend Estes Barnes further illustrates white Mississippians' desires to reassert their authority in the aftermath of Bilbo's election. On August 31, three white men dressed as police officers entered the home of Reverend Barnes in 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, two of 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 "minor fines."[16]

To further underscore white male dominance in Bilbo's Mississippi, the judge threatened Barnes's two daughters with penalties since the prosecutor and justice of the peace believed that because the daughters dropped most of the charges against their attackers, there probably had never been any crime committed in the first place. Through this logic, the judge decreed, the accusations of the women could have, "led to the frivolous prosecution of otherwise innocent people."[17] The attempted rape of the Barnes women evidences the discontent of whites in Mississippi attempting to re-assert their southern "manhood" in the face of Bilbo's campaign speeches. As Danielle McGuire

[15] "Minister Badly Beaten in Smith County," *Jackson Advocate*, August 31, 1946.
[16] "Fined Following Charges of Attempted Rape with Arms," *Jackson Advocate*, August 31, 1946.
[17] "Fined Following Charges of Attempted Rape with Arms, *Jackson Advocate*, August 31, 1946.

points out, white on black rape often took place "as a form of retribution or to enforce rules of racial and economic hierarchy."[18] Barnes's political and social position in the African American community made him and his family highly visible targets for whites who desired to maintain the racial status quo. Bilbo's rhetoric enflamed the sensibilities of white Mississippians who bought into his message that apocalyptic ruin would quickly follow even the smallest token of racial equality.

Shortly after the Barnes trial on August 16, a fiery cross burned on the campus of historically black Tougaloo College. The cross had been placed on a hill that overlooked the campus and sat eighty-five yards from the home of the dean. The Jackson Daily News reported that, "the fiery sign could be seen by all families occupying the Negro faculty homes on campus." The dean of the college dismissed the cross burning as a prank, but one of the professors believed that the deed was carried out too carefully to have been a prank and opined that the burning "might be in some way connected with the fact that some Negroes voted in Mississippi [during Bilbo's election]."[19] Evidence seemed to point toward a more direct connection between the cross burning and Bilbo's rhetoric a few weeks later when a second cross burned in a predominantly black sub-division of Jackson. Refusing to believe that the cross had been erected by the Klan, the Jackson Daily News declared that most people in Jackson believed that the cross was burned by

[18] 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: Vintage Books, 2011), xviii-xix.

[19] "Cross of Fire at Tougaloo is Reported Here," *Jackson Daily News*, August 16, 1946 in Records of the Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, RG 46, Box 1, Folder 2, National Archives and Records Administration; "Community Ignores Burning of Fiery Cross," *Jackson Advocate*, August 31, 1946.

"labor organizations" who were attempting to organize blacks in the Jackson area.[20] The violence against Daniels, the attempted rape of the Barnes girls, the burning of crosses on Tougaloo's campus and other acts of racial hatred perpetrated during the summer of 1946 dominated national headlines and fueled fire for the campaign to oust Bilbo as people all across the nation realized that something had to be done to change the South.

Newspapers could not help but notice the correlation between Bilbo's election campaign and the sharp increase in racial violence. One reporter who covered the Smith County manhunt reflected on the violence of the summer and recognized that federal intervention seemed to be the only way to improve the situation in the state. "A wave of racial antagonism and violence," he wrote, "following fast on the heels of Bilbo's pre-election hate campaign is spreading throughout Mississippi….Only the quick action of the Justice Department and organizational pressure from the North…prevented another massacre."[21]

The Coalition Against Hate

In the midst of all of the violence, civil rights organizations began to pool their resources in anticipation of a long fight to unseat Bilbo. The NAACP compiled 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.[22] The NAACP also gathered financial and moral support from

[20] "2nd Fiery Cross, Symbol of Klan, Burns in Field Behind Store Here," *Jackson Daily News*, August 23, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, RG 46, Box 1, Folder 4, National Archives and Records Administration.
[21] "Clerics, Teacher Beaten; Girls Attacked in Reign of Terror After Miss. Manhunt," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, August 31, 1946.
[22] Letter from Daniel Byrd to Father George T.J. Strype, July 15, 1946, NAACP Files Unseating Bilbo, part 18, series b, reel 4.

other organizations such as the National Negro Publisher's Association (NNPA), which had strong ties to Hollywood and the press at large.

When the two organizations convened in Chicago at the end of July to discuss their plans, problems immediately arose over how to fund the investigation, and exactly what avenue they 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 to indict Bilbo. Some wanted to avoid national involvement at all costs and thought that bringing suits against the registrars who obstructed black voters would be a suitable 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]."[23] 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 in the magnolia state.

Meanwhile, a third organization, the Civil Rights Congress, had founded its own Committee to fight against Bilbo. Immediately following the launching of Bilbo's campaign, Edward G. Robinson organized a committee within the organization tasked with the sole purpose of ejecting Bilbo from the Senate. The National Committee to Oust

[23] 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.

Bilbo received a large majority of their funding from local branches throughout the country, and between 1946 and 1947 over $15,000 (the equivalent of early $188,000 in 2016) went towards unseating Bilbo. As Gerald Horne points out, the CRC's efforts "made the Negrophobic Senator Theodore Bilbo a household word."[24] Celebrities flocked to the CRC, which incorporated multiple organizations including the National Negro Congress, International Labor Defense, and the National Federation for Constitutional Liberties under its umbrella.

Celebrities would have been attracted to the organization's broad goals of equal justice for all citizens regardless of race since many actors during the late 1940s and into the 1950s were accused by the House Un-American Activities Committee of being affiliated with Communist-led unions, and some were even blacklisted from particular movie studios over their alleged affiliations.[25] Oscar Hammerstein II, Leonard Bernstein, Gene Kelly, David O. Selznick, and Albert Einstein were some of the foremost celebrities on the committee, serving at the will of CRC president and prominent author Dashell Hammett. The committee worked separately from the NAACP, but was no less vigorous in its efforts to unseat Bilbo. In the weeks following Bilbo's election and complaints filed by multiple Mississippians, the CRC sent one of its lead attorneys, Emanuel Bloch, with a team of other legal aids to take verbal testimony from Mississippi residents who felt intimidated by Bilbo's rhetoric. Horne notes that in addition to sending investigators to uncover the root causes of the violence spreading across the magnolia state, the CRC

[24] Gerald Horne, *Communist Front: The Civil Rights Congress, 1946-1956* (New Jersey: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988), 47.
[25] Gerald Horne, *Class Struggle in Hollywood, 1930-1950* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 132.

distributed 185,000 pamphlets and fliers in 32 states, which made the fight against Bilbo "a truly national campaign."[26]

As the NAACP continued to piece together evidence against Bilbo, it clashed with the CRC over how to proceed with the evidence collected in investigations and affidavits.[27] Emmanuel Bloch and the CRC wanted to proceed with a highly public campaign, using its ties to celebrities to bring added weight to the cause of impeaching Bilbo. The CRC wanted to convict Bilbo in a court of public opinion that would be influenced through a heavy dose of fundraisers, fliers, and petitions.[28] The NAACP, however, believed that the CRC's alleged ties to the Communist Party, either real or fabricated, and the fact that the organization was headquartered in New York would torpedo any highly public efforts against Bilbo, a master at bending public perception to view such an effort as a shining example of "outside agitation" in southern affairs. NAACP organizers sought the cooperation and evidence gathered by the CRC, but mostly 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 President Truman.[29]

In mid-October, without the blessing of the NAACP, the CRC began to make plans to host 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 its notable celebrity board members attend and possibly give speeches. After the CRC made their plans, they sent a

[26] Gerald Horne, *Communist Front*, 56.
[27] Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 105.
[28] Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 104-105.
[29] 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, 105.

letter to Walter White asking for the NAACP's support for the dinner but White informed the organizers that,

> 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.[30]

The CRC went ahead with its dinner and reception, effectively splitting the two organizations for years to come. Its years of activity in the South made the NAACP believe that the fight against Bilbo would have to be carried out "quietly and quickly." "Premature publicity on what we are doing," wrote Walter White, "might conceivably and almost certainly defeat the whole plan."[31]

Investigating the Causes of Hate

The stream of letters and the outspoken support mustered by the CRC and the NAACP could not be ignored. Senators, anxious about the growing black electorate, especially in northern industrial centers, determined that they would need to take action on Bilbo in order to insure that they would have the necessary support in the upcoming mid-term elections. A letter from Rhode Island native John Coleman exemplified the threat of Bilbo's continued presence in Congress. Coleman declared that, "if the Democratic Senators cannot purge the Senate and party of Bilbo then I think they are utterly impudent in asking us to vote for the party."[32] On September 7, the Senate

[30] Letter from Walter White to Quentin Reynolds, October 14, 1946, NAACP Files Unseating Bilbo, pt. 18, series b, reel 4.
[31] Letter from Walter White to Arthur Spingarn, October 1, 1946, NAACP Files Unseating Bilbo, pt. 18 series b reel 4.
[32] Letter from John B. Coleman to Theodore Francis Green, August 10, 1946, Special Committee on Campaign Expenditures, National Archives and Records Administration, RG 46, Box 1, Folder 1.

announced that it would launch an investigation into Bilbo's election, appointing Robert Builliard, a lawyer from Louisiana as the lead investigator. Bouillard employed Henry Kiley, Francis Kelly, and Roy Moon to help him investigate the claims of black Mississippians concerning election day violence.[33]

The announcement of the Bilbo investigation was welcomed by blacks throughout the nation, but many people were still skeptical about the possibility that a committee comprised of three Democrats, two of them southern, could actually prosecute an impartial and effective investigation into one of the members of its own party. Jane Payne from Flint, Michigan expressed her hope to Committee Chairman Allen Ellender that, "the investigation may be carried out without bias." She continued, "I feel that just procedure in this case will redound to the reputation of both parties and to the prestige of democratic government in this critical time in world affairs."[34] Payne's comments not only indicated that a lack of impartiality in the investigation could mean losing Democratic voters, but also hinted at the international implications of an investigation that favored Bilbo. In the earliest days of the Cold War, any propaganda that turned a lens onto America's difficult racial climate served to undercut the claim of western nations that capitalism benefited all citizens.

When investigators Kiley, Kelly, and Moon set off from Washington, D.C. in a southbound train headed for Mississippi on September 22, they did not anticipate the racial storm cloud looming ahead into which they rode. When they arrived later that evening in Jackson, eager to set up shop, they were not welcomed by workers in the

[33] "Senate Body Plans Bilbo Poll Inquiry," *New York Times*, September 7, 1946; "To Aid Inquiry on Bilbo," *New York Times*, September 10, 1946.
[34] Letter from Jane M. Payne to Senate Campaign Investigating Committee, November 17, 1946, Senate Committee on Campaign Expenditures, NARA, RG 46, Box 1, Folder 3.

federal building, which would be their headquarters for the foreseeable future. They were given a small, outdated, desk and telephone-free space, normally used for Grand Jury deliberations, from which to work, despite the fact that the circuit clerk later showed the investigators three other fully-equipped rooms which, as they note, "could have been allocated, but…for some reason, were not." The men had trouble finding a secretary to take dictation and help with organization despite the fact that several were recommended before their arrival. The recommended reporters, the investigators noted, had to be discarded because of "partisan beliefs," "inconvenience," and "doubt as to the ability to maintain…secrecy." After hearing the investigators' motivations, one of the candidates told Kiley and Kelly that she was, "a Bilbo Man," and that she found the investigation into Bilbo "disagreeable." In the final page of their first report, investigators Kiley and Kelly were quick to note how fast word travels about foreigners being in a community. The men stated that shortly after arriving, "it was impossible not to notice that we were being shadowed by an agent of the FBI, whose headquarters…are not in the building." They then described that not long after they had talked to the FBI agent, a local "Commissioner of Narcotics," introduced himself to the investigators and "made several inquiries as to where [we] intended to establish offices." The agents were stunned that they had garnered such attention. "How he obtained our names," Kiley wrote, "we do not know."[35]

The attention paid to the investigators quickly died down, and by September 26 Kiley and Kelly remarked that, "our movements do not seem to interest certain officials

[35] Henry Kiley and Francis T. Kelly, Report #1 to Clerk of Committee and Counsel of Committee, September 24, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, RG 46, Box 2, Folder 2.

here to the extent that they did upon the date of our arrival."[36] The disinterest from officials would not, however, mean that the investigators would have an easy time obtaining testimony and affidavits from Mississippians against Bilbo. William Bender was the first person to be interviewed by Kiley and Kelly. Bender was an African American reverend who taught at Tougaloo College in Meridian, Mississippi. In his interview, Bender provided the investigators with candid testimony about how he was denied his right to vote on July 2. Bender told the investigators that as he approached the polls, three white men approached him and told him that he could not vote. When he asked who the men were and on what authority they were denying him the right to vote, the men told Bender that they were not officers of the court, but that they were, "not allowing niggers to vote today." Undeterred, Bender continued into the polling station and attempted to enter one of the voting booths, but as he was about to enter the booth, Bender recalled, "one of the three jumped up on the stoop in front of the door and threatened me to enter….He had a gun and moved his hand towards the gun and made a threatening motion."

Bender had driven to the polls on July 2 with two army veterans whom he asked to come over and witness what was happening, but the men would not leave the car. According to Bender, the boys were "quite frightened" by the whole incident, and Bender immediately left the polling station. The white men then got in a car and followed Bender and the two other gentlemen all the way back to Tougaloo. When asked about why the men denied Bender his right to vote, Bender believed that the men "had either received instructions or they had made up their own minds" to prevent him from voting. They

[36] Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, RG 46, Box 2, Folder 2.

pried Bender for more information, asking him if, he had "any reason to believe the actions of [those] men may have been caused by…remarks made by various Senatorial candidates during the primary campaign." "I wouldn't say candidates," Bender replied assuredly, "I would say candidate, Senator Bilbo." When asked to explain why he faulted Bilbo for the actions of the white men on election day, Bender told the investigators that he had heard Bilbo tell a crowd at Tupelo on June 9 that, "the way to keep [negroes] away is to see them the night before the election." Bender recalled Bilbo telling the audience that he would also "forgive [white people] for what [they] did to [negroes]." Bender concluded his interview by stating, that he believed "Bilbo's threats caused many negroes from exercising their right to vote." [37] With such clear and devastating testimony provided on only the third day of their investigation, Kiley and Kelly were optimistic that they would have more people like Bender coming forward to tell similar tales of election day disfranchisement.

The following day, however, the two men realized that the long and icy hand of white supremacy could even reach into a federal investigation. In their fifth report from the field, Kiley and Kelly noted that "thus far, five persons invited via the 'grapevine' to come in and make statements for tomorrow afternoon declined for various reasons….There is no doubt that what is uppermost in the minds of our potential deponents is the fear of reprisals."[38] After a week without willing witnesses, Kiley and Kelly struck out on their own to see if they could not bring the interview to the

[37] Interview with William Bender, October 1, 1946, Report #12, Interview conducted by Patrick Kiley, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, September 26, 1946, NARA, RG 46, Box 2, Folder 1.
[38] Henry Kiley and Francis Kelly, Field Report #5, September 27, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, RG 46, Box 2, Folder 2.

interviewees. Kelly visited Greenwood, Mississippi, the home of J.D. Collins, a prominent community leader in Greenwood who, on election day, was called into a meeting with the most prominent white businessmen of the town, including the mayor, who told him that, "they had a list of 32 registered colored citizens," and that they wanted Collins to "get in touch with every one of them…and tell them it would be for their safety if they did not appear at the polls on July 2." The cabal then told Collins that he and three other African Americans in town would have permission to vote, but if "Dr. Evans, Mansfield Wilson, Barry McGrew, and C.B. Hinds tried to vote…there would be Hell to pay." "You wouldn't want any harm to come to your people, would you?" the white men asked Collins. "Bilbo has come here and stirred up things," the white men explained, "the educated [white men] paid no attention to what he said," the white men assured Collins, "but the low whites," they continued, "are the ones who would do harm to the colored people who voted." After the meeting, Collins stated that he "went personally to everybody on the list and told them [not to vote]." As a result, none of the thirty-two blacks voted.[39]

The implied economic threat of the white committee in Greenwood, comprised of the most influential financiers in the town carried a different, but no less burdensome weight for black Mississippians like Collins. The implicit economic threat rather than the physical threat that underscored the meeting between Collins and the white committee, highlights the multifaceted nature of Bilbo's plea to use "any means necessary" to reinforce white supremacy during the July 2 election. These events presaged the Citizen's Councils of the 1950s, which were what Neil McMillen describes as, "the uptown klan,"

[39] Affidavit of J.D. Collins, October 1, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, Box 2, Folder 1.

which attempted to maintain the racial status quo through economic and social intimidation. A statement from Collins, received by the Senate shortly after Bilbo's election, indicated that Greenwood held the promise of additional willing witnesses to election day obstruction.[40]

Upon arrival in Greenwood, Kelly interviewed twenty-seven blacks at random on the streets of the town. All of the individuals interviewed, Kelly noted, met the standards needed to be an eligible voter of Mississippi, but none of them had registered for the July 2 primary. Kelly reported that eleven of the twenty-seven interviewed told him they did not register to vote because of, "fear caused by listening to broadcasts and reading articles in newspapers. According to Kelly, none of the individuals interviewed would provide their names or contact information, and twenty-two of the twenty-seven did not wish to comment further. Those that did, Kelly reported, gave a general deposition, of "not much use."[41] Kelly then attempted to visit some of the homes of the thirty-two registered African Americans in Greenwood who should have voted on July 2, but did not. He was discouraged to find that, "several homes had no access," and "in others, wives and other members of the family would not talk because of fear of reprisals."[42] Kelly did manage to meet with Collins, who reaffirmed his statements from his post-election petition, and elaborated on the motivations and actions of the white committee after his meeting. Collins told investigators that committee members, "kept constantly calling me on the telephone…so often that I stayed away from my work so wouldn't be

[40] Neil McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction* (Champagne: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 360
[41] Francis Kiley, Field Report #14, October 2, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, RG 46, Box 2, Folder 2.
[42] Francis Kiley, Field Report #14, October 2, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, RG 46, Box 2, Folder 2.

bothered by them. They wanted me to be sure that I notified everybody on the list. They constantly checked to see if I left anyone out." Collins explained that one of the committee members told him that "Bilbo's speech on June 5," which he gave from the steps of Greenwood's courthouse, in which Bilbo encouraged white people in the town to use any means necessary to keep blacks from voting had, "stirred up these Carroll County Peckerwoods, who had gone to the Court House [sic] and gotten a list of all of the registered negro citizens."[43] After obtaining Collins's testimony, the investigators were able to obtain signatures from the thirty-two registered African Americans to whom Collins had spoken, who all affirmed that they felt intimidated on election day and that Collins's statements were accurate.

The investigators noted that had July 2 been the last date on which violence against the African American community took place, perhaps they would have obtained more testimonies, but in their reports, Kiley and Kelly continually made reference to on-going acts of violence against blacks since Bilbo's election as a primary reason why many refused to provide statements. When they canvassed Tougaloo College where wooden crosses had been burned less than two months prior, the men noted the delicate nature of their investigation made finding willing witnesses difficult. "It must be remembered," Kiley wrote, "that about a month ago…only 50 miles from here there was a shooting affray between negroes and whites which resulted in a posse of nearly 200 men surrounding a swamp, which…resulted in the capture…of seven negroes….feeling is still running high." Kiley also tread lightly at Tougaloo because he did not want to

[43] Affidavit of J.D. Collins, October 1, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, Box 2, Folder 1.

encourage white animosity against the college, which had over 200 veterans enrolled under the G.I. Bill and would be seen as a bastion of agitation.[44]

However, Kiley did interview Lionel Fraser, the dean of the college, who stated that when he went to the polls on July 2, the registrar met him at the door and asked him under which party was he registered. Fraser replied that he was an independent, and the registrar immediately retorted, "this is a Democratic Primary," believing that Fraser would presume that only Democrats were allowed to vote. Fraser referenced the *Smith v. Allwright* (1944) decision, which outlawed whites only primaries and after "a certain amount of discussion," Fraser recalled, he was allowed to cast a "challenged ballot." Challenging ballots was the response of white registrars in Mississippi to the *Smith* decision, whereby any ballot could be challenged by the registrar for any reason and that ballot would be segregated from the rest of the other ballots so that details behind the challenged votes could be investigated in greater detail after the election had taken place. In Mississippi, challenged ballots were not counted towards the vote total and often were not investigated further after they were challenged.[45]

Fraser also stated to Kiley that on July 2 he had brought Elijah Robinson, a veteran, with him to the polls who was asked similar questions about party affiliation, and when he was asked for his poll tax receipt signaling that he had paid his annual fee, Robinson was confused. He was under the impression that he did not have to pay poll taxes for 1946 or any subsequent year because he was a veteran, but the registrar

[44] Francis Kiley, Field Report #16, October 6, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, RG 46, Box 2, Folder 2.
[45] Henry Kiley, Francis Kelly, and Roy Moon, Summary Report to Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, October 31, 1946, Senate Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, Box 2, Folder 1

protested Robinson's eligibility to vote and told Fraser and Robinson that they would need to go to the county courthouse in Jackson in order to receive an exemption receipt. Once Fraser and Robinson had received the exemption in Jackson, they returned to the polling station where the registrar challenged Robinson's ballot and segregated it along with Fraser's.[46] Fraser and Robinson's testimonies highlight the forms of disfranchisement practiced in post-war Mississippi. Despite the promises of the *Smith* decision and laws that exempted veterans from paying poll taxes, whites fashioned new ways to exclude blacks from exercising their Fifteenth Amendment rights, which would form the basis of the *de facto* segregation that persisted in many southern states even after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

While Kiley struggled to find willing witnesses at Tougaloo, Roy Moon had a great deal of success a little over one hundred miles east of Jackson near the Alabama state line in Meridian. Moon managed to gather statements from seven African Americans who testified to being disfranchised on July 2. One such man was James W. Hunter, a seventy-seven year old resident of Meridian who told investigators that when he arrived at the polling station, he was allowed to mark his ballot and that the registrar even marked his ballot as "voted." When Hunter went to place his ballot in the ballot box he remarked, "the lady there took it from me, and stated she had orders from the sheriff to place all negro ballots in an envelope and not let them be placed in the ballot box."

[46] Out of a total number of 82, 833 people registered in Mississippi for the 1946 election, only 1,337 were African American and of that number only 264 African Americans voted in the July election. In Lauderdale County where Meridian is located, out of a possible 12,00 people who registered, only 133 were black and of that number only 27 voted in the July 2 election. The numbers gathered by investigators did not account for a total number of eligible voting age African Americans, only the total population and registered voters. See voting statistics gathered by Department of Justice Investigators, Memorandum to Senate Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, November 18, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, Box 1, Folder 4; Affidavit of Lionel B. Fraser, received by H.P. Kiley on October 5, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, Box 2, Folder 1.

Hunter further stated that he saw this happen to multiple African American men who attempted to vote on July 2.[47] Hunter's affidavit underscores what Elizabeth McRae sees as a "rising southern conservatism of the postwar era…which appealed to some women in a…fundamental way." According to McRae, white women in the postwar south, even more so than men, sought "to protect their domestic and political authority from the South's old and new demons." [48] By segregating black votes, white women bought into and championed a specific "public motherhood identity," challenged by Bilbo's speeches, which called on them to reinforce and uphold the status quo "through any means necessary." Failure to uphold these ideals and assault these demons could mean not only a destruction of white supremacy, but also a destruction of white womanhood.[49]

In Gulfport, Roy Moon took the statement of John T. Hall, who vividly recalled that on election day he walked toward the polling station, but was stopped mid-stride by a man, who asked what he was doing. Hall told investigators that he showed the man his poll tax receipt, at which time the man, "hit me a glancing blow beside the head." Hall called out to the policeman stationed at the door of the polling station to come to his aid, but Hall stated, "he just stood there." Hall left the polling station without casting his vote and immediately drove to the home of John Payne, the chief of police, and told him what happened. Payne informed Hall that he would place a different officer down at the

[47] Affidavit of James W. Hunter taken by Roy Moon, October 3, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, Box 2, Folder 1.
[48] 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; 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.
[49] McRae, 262.

polling station, and that Hall should return to vote later in the afternoon once this officer was on duty.

Heeding Payne's advice, Hall returned home and decided to run some errands with a friend before voting. "We had driven about 5 miles," Hall remembered, "when a police car with three officers in it," stopped the car and ordered Hall and his companion out. Hall kept a firearm in his car for protection and when the officers saw it, they ordered Hall and his friend to get into the police car. Hall told Moon, "I was forced to sit on the floor in the rear seat of the police auto, and when I tried to address officer Byrd, he tried to hit me several times with his police stick." Hall and his friend were taken to the local jail and held until an attorney could secure their release. The release was not without its price. "After some discussion," Hall explained, "I promised the chief…that I would not return to the polls, and both of us had been charged with assault with a deadly weapon." When the time came for Hall's hearing, two weeks after the polls had closed on July 2, the charges against he and his friend were dismissed. Hall's experience, magnifies the intricacy of the web of white supremacy in Mississippi in which every apparatus of at the disposal of the local government was used to oppress the black population. The nature of white supremacy ran so deep in this region that even the local police, sworn to uphold the laws of the constitution, acted as the wardens and at times were the fiercest defendants of white supremacy.[50]

The investigators canvassed multiple counties in Mississippi, but the number of affidavits and willing witnesses did not nearly match the number of black Americans who voted in the election. In Washington County, for example, investigators noted that of the

[50] Affidavit from James T. Hall taken by Roy Moon, October 8, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, Box 2, Folder 1.

126 registered African Americans, only twenty-five voted, but they were only able to obtain eighteen interviews and only five sworn statements.[51] During his visit to Gulfport, Roy Moon remarked, "it is like pulling teeth to get any of these people here to enter this matter….the general opinion is that they have been treated very good by the white people in the past…now that this storm is over things will stay normal if not stirred up."[52] In these interviews, however, investigators uncovered instances of violence and intimidation not detailed by the press such as the fact that five crosses, not three as previously reported, had burned in and near Jackson between August 13 and August 27. The investigators determined that, in addition to being caused by Bilbo's admonishments against black voting, that the crosses represented, "a revival of the Ku Klux Klan movement, supposedly extinct in Mississippi since 1924."[53]

The investigators traveled throughout Mississippi, collecting testimony where possible and interviewing potential witnesses through the end of October. On October 31, investigators Moon, Kiley and Kelly sent a thirty three page report to the Senate Committee detailing their findings, and came to several conclusions. First, Circuit Court Clerks in Mississippi, "might have followed various and diverse methods, but that their actions…proved conclusively that they were consistent with regard to arriving at their ultimate common goal of confronting the negro with as many obstacles as possible…to prevent him from registering." The investigators further noted that in most cases, the obstructions used against African Americans "follow the pattern outlined in some of

[51] Francis Kelly, Field Report 18, October 7, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, Box 2, Folder 2.
[52] Letter from Roy A. Moon to Henry Kiley, October 11, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, Box 2, Folder 2.
[53] Henry Patrick Kiley, Addenda to Report 19, October 8, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, Box 2, Folder 2.

Senator Bilbo's speeches." Kiley and Kelly cited speeches by Bilbo in May 1946 and July 1946 in which he explicitly told his audience, "the circuit clerks are under oath to protect the provisions of [Mississippi's] Constitution….if a man or woman serving in this…office…cannot think up questions…to disqualify undesirables then write Bilbo…and a hundred good questions…can be furnished." [54]

Kiley and Kelly then provided a detailed list of the myriad ways in which white registrars disfranchised blacks on July 2, including, but not limited to:

> closing the poll books on June 15….asking interminable [sic] difficult questions relating principally to the Constitution of the United States and putting these questions principally to negroes and disqualifying them no matter how well they may have responded….turning negroes away with advice threats or warnings that it was a white Democratic primary and no niggers would be allowed to vote.

From the testimony they gathered, the investigators told Ellender that, "the remarks used in the last primary campaign by one candidate in particular have never before been surpassed in acrimony, and that these bitter campaign speeches were no doubt for the purpose of putting the negro, especially the returned veteran, in his place." They concluded that, "it is very unfortunate that the committee has no yard stick available to measure the possible effect of Senator Bilbo's speeches." The investigators determined that since this was the first time blacks had tried to vote in a primary, "precedents and terms used in a relative comparative sense….make it extremely difficult to even an approximate line of demarcation between hereditary and traditional fear and what may be

[54] Henry Kiley, Francis Kelly, and Roy Moon, Summary Report to Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, October 31, 1946, Senate Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, Box 2, Folder 1.

termed Bilbo fear," ultimately telling Ellender that the evidence collected "may" fall under the purview of the Senate Investigating Committee.[55]

On November 16, Allen Ellender reported to the other members of the Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures that, "there was no evidence that Senator Bilbo had personally prevented negroes from voting," and that even though some African Americans had been prevented from voting, election officials had been acting "within their legal rights," when they denied them their right to vote. He further declared that he believed, "considerable outside influence," was being exerted against Mississippi and claimed that even though, "charges may have been made in Mississippi, they originated in New York City."[56] Ellender's implication echoed the sentiments of Bilbo and other southerners who believed that the actions of outsiders, rather than their own actions or words, could be blamed for the violence in Mississippi and the investigation that followed. Importantly, however, Ellender told the committee that if they wanted to conduct an investigation, he would not object.

Senator Bourke Hickenlooper, a Republican from Iowa, quickly motioned for a vote on holding a hearing into Bilbo's campaign. Senator Elmer Thomas, known in many circles for being a moderate Democrat, seconded Hickenlooper's motion and, without objection, the committee agreed to adopt the resolution unanimously. It seemed as though the jaws of justice were closing in around Bilbo's throat.

Taking a Stand against Bilboism

[55]Henry Kiley, Francis Kelly, and Roy Moon, Summary Report to Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, October 31, 1946, NARA, Box 2, Folder 1.
[56] Minutes from the Fifth Meeting of the Senate Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, November 16, 1946, NARA, Box 2, Folder 2.

The day after the resolution to investigate Bilbo was adopted by the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections, the committee announced that it would hold Bilbo's hearing in Jackson, Mississippi. The committee had originally planned to hold three hearings in different regions of Mississippi in order to give as many people a chance to testify as possible, but the desire to finish Bilbo's hearing before the Senate reconvened in January necessitated the committee's decision to hold the hearing in a central location.[57] What the committee failed to publicly state, however, was that holding the hearing in Jackson, despite its central location, could pose problems for Mississippi's black community. The level of racial unrest in Mississippi and the rest of the South had grown precipitously since Bilbo's election, which would undoubtedly cast a terrifying pallor over the proceedings.

Investigators Kiley, Kelly, and Moon recognized that the charged atmosphere of Mississippi would prove problematic for witnesses. They remarked that there should be, "no reason for optimism if and when these witnesses reach the subpoena stage." They continued, "while it is true that potential negro witnesses have the force of law on their side, their case might be likened to the case of a pedestrian…attempting to cross the street with a green light and the law in his favor, but who nevertheless, is seriously injured or killed in the process."[58] When asked whether he believed that blacks who testified in Jackson would be risking their lives, Ellender conceded that "public hearings might lead to killing." When confronted by CRC attorney and President Emmanuel Bloch in a later interview, Ellender backtracked exclaiming, "You are trying to be sensational…The

[57] "Senators Order Inquiry on Bilbo," *New York Times*, November, 17, 1946.
[58] Henry Kiley, Francis Kelly, and Roy Moon, Summary Report to Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, October 31, 1946, NARA, Box 2, Folder 1.

answer is no, of course not."[59] Casual observers seemed to have no trouble discerning the obstacles that confronted testifiers. One reporter opined 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."[60] The Senate steadily ignored the pleas for a change of venue from civil rights organizations and scheduled the hearing for December 2.

While black witnesses fortified their courage, Bilbo exuded a hubristic calm. In mid-November he retrenched his campaign position stating, "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."[61] The investigating committee was asked for a change of venue, but they refused, ignoring the known threat to African Americans witnesses attempting to testify.[62] That African American men and women showed up to testify against the nation's foremost racist with the eyes of the world upon them, knowing all-too-well that their testimony could cost them their lives was one of the most defiant acts in civil rights history, and ushered in an era of post-war civil rights activism

[59] "Senate Orders Inquiry on Bilbo," *New York Times*, November 17, 1946.
[60] "Bilbo Procedure Scored," *New York Times*, November 18, 1946.
[61] "Bilbo Stands on His Views," *New York Times*, November 17, 1946.
[62] "Hearings Scheduled for Miss. Capitol," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, November 23, 1946.

Chapter 5

Testifying Against Racism

On December 2, the *Jackson Advocate* reported that African Americans who had been subpoenaed to testify had arrived in Jackson with "a readiness to appear before the committee."[1]As African Americans filed past the throng of media outlets and into the balcony of Jackson's federal building on December 2, Bilbo sat cozily in his seat, casually remarking to a reporter that he "expected to have the time of his life."[2] Over the course of the next four days what unfolded in Jackson was unprecedented in civil rights history. The hearing became nothing less than a showdown between the recent memories of ethnic genocide and the more distant, but powerfully nostalgic memories of the antebellum South.

Nearly sixty-nine African Americans testified to having been either harassed, beaten, threatened, or intimidated on election day. These African Americans testified while staring directly in the face of white supremacy incarnate, knowing full well that their stories along with their names and hometowns would be printed in media outlets throughout the South. Charles Payne remarks that the hearing was, "probably the most significant mobilization of Mississippi Blacks in the forties."[3] John Dittmer and Steve Lawson, the two other historians with the most notable treatments of the hearing,

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[1] "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.
[2] In the Senate Committee files there is clear evidence from the investigators that violence against witnesses and the threat of violence would prevent many from willingly providing evidence against Bilbo. See Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, Box 2, Folder 3 and Box 4, Folder 2; "Mississippi Leans on Bilbo Inquiry," *New York Times*, December 2, 1946.
[3] Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition in the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 24.

similarly remarked that Bilbo's hearing, "demonstrated the awakening political consciousness…of younger blacks," and it "[was] a significant event in the history of the black struggle for freedom…in that crowded federal courtroom…the shock troops of the modern civil rights movement had fired their opening salvo."[4] While these historians, and several others, provide brief snippets of the hearing and offer a glimpse of the climate at Bilbo's hearing, none of them dissect the hearing's participants and testimony in detail. This chapter examines some of the most telling testimony from Bilbo's hearing, but importantly foregrounds the roles of long-forgotten actors in one of the most harrowing civil rights sagas of the mid-twentieth century. The names included in this chapter and the stories behind them reveal the deeper layers of the civil rights movement in which women, the elderly, and whites fought. Scrutinizing the testimony in such a way simultaneously sharpens and blurs the image of post-war activists, and presents a more complex vision of the shapeshifting nature of white supremacy in the post-war period.

Black Women Battle Bilbo

T.B. Wilson, head of Mississippi's Progressive Voter's League, kicked-off the hearing. 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 to "go off and study some more and learn how to answer that and come back."[5] When the man and woman told Wilson what had transpired, Wilson encouraged them to study some sample questions the registrar might ask, and try again. The pair returned to the polls on July 2 and the registrar, recognizing them from their earlier attempt, asked them if they

[4] John Dittmer, *Local People*, 9; Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 114
[5] *Campaign Expenditures*, 26.

had studied, and then quizzed the woman on various facets of the Constitution. She correctly answered all of the registrar's questions.

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?" She responded "I have a dictionary, and of course I didn't know the question was going to be asked or else I would have known it before I came."[6] Possibly too astonished to act otherwise, the registrar allowed the woman to vote.[7] Wilson's testimony highlights what Glenda Gilmore's argument in *Gender and Jim Crow* in which she posits that black women often utilized, "their womanhood [which] helped them remain invisible as they worked toward political ends."[8] As revealed in Wilson's testimony, and others that would follow in preceding days of the hearing, women played vitally important roles in opposing white supremacy in post-war Mississippi. Most treatments neglect women's roles in these early civil rights efforts. Importantly, Gilmore argues, women used their perceived status as defenseless beings to transgress the social and political orders of the South in a more effective manner than most black males, especially veterans, could.

Wilson's mention of African American female involvement in voting rights efforts highlights the important role black women played in the early civil rights movement, bolstered by the testimony of Kattie Campbell and Camille Thomas. Campbell, a housewife from Gulfport, recalled that she went to the polling station on July 2 and inquired about her poll-tax status. The registrar informed her that her taxes were irregular and out of date so she could not vote. Even though her poll tax receipts were

[6] Campaign Expenditures, 26.
[7] Campaign Expenditures, 26.
[8] 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.

"irregular," Campbell related to the committee that she had no trouble registering to vote in May. Ellender asked, "Are they in the same county, these towns you spoke of?" "Yes sir," Campbell answered. Hickenlooper clarified, "They are in the same county as your residence?" "Yes," Campbell responded, "but different districts." Knowing that the registrar should have allowed Campbell to vote, Burnett Maybank jumped in and attempted to justify why Campbell was not allowed to exercise her rights, "Well, somebody just made a mistake," he reasoned.[9] Camille Thomas of Natchez also met voting roadblocks on July 2. When asked to recount the problems she faced on election day, Thomas provided a powerful statement on the role of black women in securing voting rights in the post-war period. She began:

> Prior to the Democratic Primary on July 2, Senator Theodore Bilbo had made a speech in which he asked every red-blooded Anglo-Saxon to keep the Negroes from the vote; use every means possible to keep the Negroes from voting, and when I attempted to vote…I was asked a question, whether I had been associated with the Democratic Party prior to the time of my voting…having served as a lieutenant in the Army for the past 3 years or more, I had not participated in any political party, so…I could not have…taken any part within any political party.[10]

Unmoved by Thomas's testimony, Ellender questioned, "well, was any violence used of any kind?" "There was not any violence used towards me," Thomas stated, "but I admit I was very much frightened in going to the polls because of—certain speeches had been made." "But it did not deter you, though, did it?" asked Ellender, "You were not too frightened?" "I was frightened quite a bit," Thomas corrected him. "You were not visited the night *before*, were you?" Ellender asked with disdain. "No. I wasn't," Thomas declared. Hickenlooper rushed to Thomas's defense, asking her "I presume you have discussed Senator Bilbo's speeches with other people of the colored race…it has been a

[9] *Campaign Expenditures*, 330-331.
[10] *Campaign Expenditures*, 293.

subject of comment and discussion as to what he said about keeping the colored people from voting?" "Yes, it has been a subject with everyone," Thomas answered. Hickenlooper continued, "as a result of those discussions…what is your opinion as to whether or not the statements made by Senator Bilbo actually prevented colored people from attempting to register…or attempting to go vote even?" Thomas took this opportunity to detail the fear Bilbo's rhetoric had injected into black communities throughout Mississippi. "Senator Bilbo prevented many persons from going to the polls," Thomas argued, "in view of the fact that he had asked every red-blooded Saxon to keep the Negro from the polls, and, quite naturally, they would be afraid to vote." "Is it your opinion," Hickenlooper queried, "that his speeches did result in actually preventing many Negroes from even attempting to vote?" "Yes," Thomas declared, "and it prevented them from voting after they went to the polls, his instructions to the officials at the polls."

Hickenlooper asked Thomas to clarify what she meant by "instructions." "You mean the statements he made in his speeches?" he asked. "That's right," said Thomas. "Do you have any knowledge," asked Hickenlooper, "that Senator Bilbo ever directly instructed any officials exactly what to do other than through is speeches?" "Not other than through his speeches," replied Thomas, "but in his speeches [over the radio] he said to use every means possible to keep the Negro from the polls, every means possible," Thomas emphasized. Thomas remarked, "he further stated that just a common question would keep the Negro from voting, by simply asking him a question of how long he has been associated with the Democratic Party."[11] Ellender jumped to Bilbo's defense, "That is in the law; is it not?" "I beg your pardon?" said Thomas. "Unless you as a voter were

[11] *Campaign Expenditures*, 294-295.

connected to the Democratic Party for at least 2 years before you voted, you could have been challenged? That is the Mississippi law and probably is why the question was asked of you?" Ellender offered. "No," said Thomas. "Well---pardon me?" asked Ellender, astounded at the black woman's derision of his reasoning. "Well no one voted." Thomas clarified. "Well did you ever attempt to vote before?" asked Ellender. "I did not vote before, but in view of the recent…Texas decision and also the laws of Mississippi exempting veterans from [paying the poll tax]….I feel that I should vote."

Ellender scoffed at her logic and responded by providing a common white southern answer to questions about inequality that rested in the cognitive dissonance of custom and heritage. "Well, you know, I am sure—it is common knowledge…that the white people have always felt that in the Democratic primary elections only white folks should vote; is that not true?" "It is common knowledge," Thomas began, "it is [also] common knowledge that the Negro has never accepted that fact, though." Almost in disbelief that Thomas was being subversive on the witness stand with her testimony, Ellender asked "Has never accepted what?...Why didn't they try to vote? If you say they haven't accepted it, why didn't they try to vote before?" "They didn't try to vote before because perhaps…some violence would have taken place," Thomas answered. Seizing the opportunity to weaken Thomas's testimony, Ellender pounced, "In other words, the violence would not only have taken place on July 2, but many years before because of the fact that the white folks have always felt that…colored people should be excluded? Is that true?" "That is true, but it is not accepted by the Negro," Thomas responded. "I don't doubt that all," Ellender smirked, "but the facts remain…that this…was the first primary in which the colored people attempted to vote in a white primary," and with that, Thomas

was excused from the witness stand. Thomas's testimony not only alludes to the fundamental roles that black women played in shaping the methods of protest in the early Civil Rights Movement, but importantly highlights the role of the female veteran. Historical narratives of this early civil rights period often champion the actions of male veterans who returned home from the war ready to seize the franchise, often neglecting the roles that women played in these early efforts, and undermining their agency as leaders, mobilizers, and powerful symbols in the black community. Thomas's testimony also provides a window into the psychology of southern whites who often used the age-old arguments of tradition and heritage as excuses for the disfranchisement and debasement of black people in the post-war period when change for black civil rights seemed to be gaining steam.

Community Leaders

White Allies in the Fight for Civil Rights

Women were valuable assets in orchestrating the fight against Bilboism and so were white allies throughout the state. Among the many witnesses to testify at the hearing was Stanley Brav, a white rabbi from Vicksburg. Brav told the court that he believed African Americans should have the right to vote along with whites and that Bilbo's statements clearly had a negative effect on the African American desire to vote.[12] He stated, "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.[13] After being prodded by the committee to recall

[12] *Campaign Expenditures*, 60-61.
[13] Ibid., 60.

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."[14]

Testimony from Reverend George T. J. Strype of Pass Christian further underscored the roles of white activists in Mississippi's post-war civil rights struggle. Strype told the committee that members of his congregation returned from the polls on July 2 and told him that they had been unsuccessful in voting. Upon hearing this, Strype spoke to the electoral board on behalf of his congregants and even called the Attorney General. Strype told the committee that leading up to the election he had been encouraging all 500 of his African American congregants to vote telling them, "You have intellects. Use them," but he told them, "never resort to violence."[15] When asked by the committee why he encouraged African Americans in such a way, Strype told them that "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."[16] Appalled with Strype's response, Ellender attempted to ferret out other potential hotbeds of civil rights activity led by religious leaders and asked Strype, "Do you know of any other place in Mississippi where that is attempted to be done?" Strype replied that pastors in ten or twelve predominantly black Catholic congregations, primarily in Mississippi's coastal region, had also encouraged church attendees to vote.[17]

Brav and Strype's testimonies point to John Higham's argument that while blacks, "bore the heaviest burdens" of the civil rights efforts, "the participation, validation and

[14]Testimony of Rabbi Stanley Brav, NAACP Files, Part 18, Series A, Reel 1; *Campaign Expenditures*, 61.
[15]*Campaign Expenditures*, 150.
[16] Ibid., 152.
[17] Ibid., 153.

power of white allies remained indispensable," to their work.[18] As an organizer and activist for black voting rights, Strype's testimony of his July 2 activities illustrates the role of the Catholic Church in organizing blacks to vote. In *The South's Tolerable Alien*, Andrew Moore makes the argument that while, "most Catholics enjoyed the legal, social and political advantages of white skin color….Catholics still flirted with the margins of the South's racialized public sphere."[19] According to Moore, Catholics, despite the fact that many shared the white skin of the racial oppressors in the South, were not viewed as equals by the majority population of Protestants in the region. Therefore, it was common for Catholics in the South to keep their distance from civil rights initiatives for much of their history. During the 1930s and '40s, however, Moore notes that many Catholic priests, in America in particular, were upset by, "the European Catholic Church's close affiliation with fascist governments, and sought to link democratic political movements more closely to Catholic doctrine."[20]

Grandfathering the Movement

Seventy-nine year old Joseph Parham, an African American fireman at the McLaughlin Hotel in McComb, shocked the court by revealing that he had been a registered Mississippi voter since 1937. Parham informed the committee that when he arrived at the courthouse he told the registrar that he intended to vote and wanted to know if his registration was still valid since he had not moved from the county. The registrar informed Parham that his registration was still valid, and Parham left. On July 2, Parham

[18] John Higham, *Civil Rights and Social Wrongs: Black-White Relations Since World War II* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 187.
[19] Andrew S. Moore, *The South's Tolerable Alien: Roman Catholics in Alabama and Georgia, 1945-1970* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 1-2.
[20] Moore, *The South's Intolerable Alien*, 5.

recalled that he showed up to the polls, but was asked if he had a poll tax receipt even though he was exempt from paying the poll tax. Parham responded that he did not have a receipt and the registrar directed him to go and get a certificate to show that he was exempt.

Despite admonitions from whites as he left the polling station, Parham boarded a bus and headed to Magnolia where he could obtain a certificate of exemption. When he arrived at the courthouse in Magnolia and explained to the registrar that he would like an exemption certificate, the registrar queried, "What do you want with it?" "I want to vote," Parham replied. The registrar asked, "Well, don't you know this is a Democratic primary, a white Democratic primary?" "Well, yes sir," Parham told the registrar. Parham informed the committee that he was issued a certificate, but as he was signing his name to the document, a white bystander sidled up next to him and coolly asked, "Old man, what kind of flowers do you want?" implying that the flowers would be used at his funeral.[21] Undeterred, Parham replied, "just any kind" and began to leave the courthouse when another white onlooker stepped in front of him and warned, "Old man, you are making a mistake. You are fixing to get into serious trouble. If you go vote—" Parham's testimony was cut short. Styles Bridges interrupted and asked, "Who was this man…who said this to you? Was he an election official?" Parham replied, "No. He was the sheriff of Pike County." Parham continued, telling the court that the sheriff told him "Don't you know if you go down there they are not going to let you vote?" Parham responded, "If they won't let me vote, I will try [anyway]."[22]

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[21] 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.

[22] *Campaign Expenditures*, 128.

Parham recalled that when he finally got back to McComb to cast his vote it was well after noon. When he approached the voting booth for the second time, two men who had just exited the polls started walking towards him. According to Parham's testimony, as the two men approached, Parham noticed that they "had it in their mind, looked like, to molest me" so he moved as close to the street as he could so as to avoid contact with either of them, yet as Parham passed the two men, one of them shoved him off the sidewalk and accused him of being drunk. Parham defended himself, telling the accuser that he was not drunk. The man took offense at Parham's willingness to defend himself, and the man "shoved [him] in the chest…with his fist." Noticing the growing intensity of the conversation between Parham and the white citizen, a nearby police officer immediately intervened, arresting Parham based on the white man's accusations that Parham was intoxicated.[23]

At the police station, Parham continued to defend himself against the aggressive police captain who believed Parham's accuser's testimony more than Parham's. Ellender tried to poke holes in Parham's story by asking, "Did he know you were coming to vote?" "Well, not—" Parham offered, but Ellender quickly jumped in, "Why should he have done that? What prompted him to do it? Do you know?" Parham told the committee that his attacker, "knew who went to Magnolia and qualified to vote, and they knew me very well, and he knowed[sic] that [voting] was my purpose."[24] Parham was taken before a local judge who heard testimony from both Parham and his accuser. The judge did not fine Parham or pass any judgement upon him, much to the chagrin of the attacker, who

[23] *Campaign Expenditures*, 129; Affidavit of Joseph Parham, October 16, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, Box 2, Folder 1.
[24] *Campaign Expenditures*, 131.

asked the judge "you don't want to go around making me out to be a liar!" The veiled threat to the judge's livelihood was evident in the man's statement. By not convicting Parham, the man argued, the judge would be giving implicit acquiescence to a black man dishonoring a white man in a public venue, which would only serve to reaffirm the fears of many whites in the post-war south. Fears that George Tindall refers to as a "rumor crisis," in which "rumor mills went into overtime production, fabricating tales of insolence in crowded buses, warnings that Negroes planned to 'take over' white women, and wild fantasies that they were gathering ice picks for a mass insurrection."[25] Parham's actions towards the white man would have been evidence confirming the rumors circulated in small towns across the South, and the judge's failure to act in order to stop such dastardly plots would have surely been seen as an affront to the entire system of white supremacy and control, threatening the very existence of white southerners themselves.

The judge released Parham without any penalty. By the time Parham stepped out of the courtroom on July 2, it was after 3pm. Despite the multiple roadblocks erected to stop him, Parham was determined to vote, and he headed back to the polls for the third and final time. When asked by Ellender, "Well, did you go back and vote?" "No," Parham stated. "When I started back, a white gentleman overtaken [sic] me. He says, 'Old man, if I was you I wouldn't go back over there. If you go back over there, you will have serious trouble." The man advised Parham to go home and urged him not to go back

[25] George Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 717-718.

to the polling station. Parham told the packed courtroom that he, "listened to [the man's] story and when he got through, I says 'I'll take your advice; I won't go."[26]

Unconvinced that Parham had made any meaningful connection between what happened to him on July 2 and Bilbo's words, Ellender inquired, "Did Senator Bilbo have anything to do with all this trouble you had?" Parham clarified, "I heard Senator Bilbo's speeches just like other people heard him….In his speeches he said to keep the Negroes from the polls by any means….If you can't do it otherwise…visit him the night before the election. And I guess they [white people] heard it just like I did, and that might have influenced them to do what they did." "Well," Ellender responded, "you weren't visited the night before the election were you?" "No sir," replied Parham. "And you didn't pay too much attention…to what Bilbo said because you went to vote." Ellender continued, "Was there any violence of any kind on election day that you know of?" "No sir, not that I know of," said Parham. "This idea…in Mississippi of keeping the colored people from voting in primaries has been of long standing, hasn't it?" Ellender questioned. "Yes sir." Parham stated. "It is nothing new?" Ellender asked. "No sir," Parham responded. Styles Bridges jumped in after Ellender's line of questioning and asked Parham point blank, "Would your decision as to whether to vote or not…been any different if you had not listened to Senator Bilbo's speeches…What I am trying to get at here is how much influence or how much effect Senator Bilbo's speeches had on you?" Interestingly, Parham stated, "I don't know as his speeches had anything to do with me because I heard his speeches, but I had read where that the Attorney General said if any colored people was molested or tried to keep from voting, why he would prosecute it…I had made up

[26] *Campaign Expenditures*, 132.

my mind to vote." Leaping at the opportunity to discredit the witness, Ellender chimed in, "So that Senator Bilbo's statement had no effect on you at all?" "No sir; didn't have no effect on me."[27]

Similar to Parham, sixty-six year old Meredith Lewis had a long history of political activism in Mississippi. When he took the stand, Lewis told the committee that he had been registered since 1927. When he went to vote on July 2, Lewis stated that he went to the polling station to see if his registration was still valid. Upon finding out that his registration was not in good standing, the registrar began to ask Lewis a series of questions including "who was the president of the United States, and how was he elected."[28] Ellender questioned Lewis on his motivations for registering to vote, and Lewis replied, "after I found out that the law had passed that the Negroes would be able to vote…I wanted to see if my registration were good." Ellender asked, "what law did you have in mind?" Lewis explained that he was referring to the veterans poll-tax exemption law passed in Mississippi just before the war had ended. Lewis told Ellender, "I thought if my registration was good, why I could vote too."[29]

Lewis's testimony importantly reveals the role of veteran activists in the post-war black community. Black veterans not only served as the organizers of voting rights efforts in the South, but also served as the symbolic leaders of the post-war civil rights movement, galvanizing scores of African American voters. As Steven Lawson points out, "hundreds of black servicemen, with discharge papers in hand, went down to the courthouses to obtain certificates freeing them from…the poll-tax….For the Negro it

[27] *Campaign Expenditures*, 135.
[28] *Campaign Expenditures*, 159.
[29] *Campaign Expenditures*, 159.

signified the first step over the political threshold."[30] Other scholars such as John Dittmer have noted that, "black GI's…hoped that the war to make the world safe for democracy might make Mississippi a decent home for all its citizens. Yet…the World War II veterans…were facing a seemingly impossible task in Mississippi."[31] Christopher Parker further believes that not only did these veterans face an uphill task, they "were especially motivated to seek change." Parker states, "[black veterans] were the ones who bore the burden of service, enduring an avalanche of taunts from whites in the ranks….Most important, they were the ones who fought, sweat, bled, and died in the name of democracy overseas….their collective blood and sacrifice irrevocably vested them in America."[32]

Despite Lewis's determined effort to follow in the footsteps of the multiple veterans who ventured to seize the franchise on July 2, he was not able to vote. When asked why he decided not to vote after going through the trouble of looking up his registration, Lewis responded, "I knew I wouldn't be able to answer the questions that [the registrar] would be asking me, because he asked so many questions…I couldn't take care of them so I just told him I didn't come down to vote." Ellender was puzzled. He asked, "Did you feel qualified to answer [the questions the registrar posed]?" "No," said Lewis. "Could you read the Constitution?" "I could read the Constitution," Lewis explained, " [but] when I went down before they didn't ask me the questions." That Mississippi's registrars changed the topics of the questions asked on election day speaks

[30] Steven F. Lawson, *Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South, 1944-1969* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1976), 103.
[31] John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 17-19.
[32] Christopher S. Parker, *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle against White Supremacy* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), xi-xii.

to the evolving and malleable nature of white supremacy, which evolved with each successful civil rights achievement by African Americans. "Fears over the domestic implications of World War II," Jason Morgan Ward asserts, "inspired a white supremacist understanding of Double Victory."[33] According to Ward, the white perception of being under attack by forces from both outside and inside of their own borders pushed white politicians to come up with new forms of discrimination designed to be more ambiguously defined than previous segregationist statutes and simultaneously more difficult to prosecute.

The Shapeshifting Forms of White Supremacy

While some African Americans experienced obstruction, others faced outright violence. Varnado Collier, a black carpenter from Gulfport, arrived to the polls on July 2 in the company of his wife. Both of them approached city hall where the voting booth was located and they were met by a police officer who they asked, "if this was the place where North Gulfport voting precinct was." The officer answered in the affirmative and escorted the Colliers inside the building where he directed them to walk, "down the hall and go through the door that is open there and that is where you vote." "Just as we turned down the east wing corridor," Collier remembered, "one of a group of 10 or 15 white men put his hand up and said, 'You people don't vote here today; come back tomorrow." Then, without warning, "they were all over me," Collier told the committee, "beating me up, and knocking me down, and threw me out on the porch."[34] "What became of your wife," asked Ellender. "She was hollering, 'Officer, stop them, don't let them beat my

[33] Jason Morgan Ward, "'A War for States' Rights': The White Supremacist Vision of Double Victory," in Kevin Kruse and Stephen Tuck, *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2012) 136.
[34] Campaign Expenditures, 159-160.

husband up,' and one of them hit her," replied Collier. He continued, "As I hit the porch--I suppose about that time I was unconscious part of the time…the jar brought me back to consciousness, and I got up and patted my pockets to see what I had lost....I missed my hat. And I attempted to go back in the building to get my hat, and one of the group pulled out a long knife and said 'Don't come back in here. Keep going buddy. If you don't, you will never walk out alive.'" The Colliers quickly left city hall, but they quickly noticed that "a man from the city hall [was] following us, a white man." Collier and his wife whispered to one another and agreed not to stop at their car so that their stalker would not know which car was theirs, saving them from a reprisal on their property. They walked back into town with the white man still in pursuit, "and all along the street," Collier remembered, "there would be a small group of white men…and he would stop and say something to them, but he was still pursuing us." Luckily the Colliers found a cluster of trees growing near a junkyard that obstructed their view from their pursuer for a few moments, just enough time to make contact with a friend they met on the street who got his car and took them to one of their relative's houses.[35] Ellender asked Collier whether the police officer escorted Collier and his wife to the voting booths or merely pointed out where the booths were once they entered city hall. Collier answer that the officer only pointed out where the booths were, but offered, "when he said 'go down this hall and vote,' it seemed to have been a give-away of what we were there for to the people that were standing around."[36]

Collier elaborated on the events after he and his wife arrived at their relative's house once they had evaded their pursuer. Their relative called a black doctor who

[35] *Campaign Expenditures*, 198.
[36] *Campaign Expenditures*, 199.

addressed Collier's wounds, and Collier recalled that his eyes were "banged up so badly" that the doctor told him to wash them with warm saltwater for a few days to get the swelling to subside. Once his wounds had been taken care of, Collier called the District Attorney in Jackson and retold his story. Once Collier had finished, the attorney informed Collier that "there was nothing he could do," and told him to call the FBI. Collier followed the prosecutor's instructions and recounted his experience for the FBI, telling them, "I want to go back and cast my ballot, and I would like to have some protection in doing so." The agent responded, "Well, it is not our province to give protection, only investigate. In fact, the polling places should be closed before we could get a man down there." Styles Bridges asked Collier, "Did Senator Bilbo's speeches…have anything to do with the occurrence which happened to you, do you think?" Collier responded, "I believe it did….since he advocated the open defiance of the court ruling, I feel like the people would have respected it more if he hadn't done that."

Despite the fact that the NAACP was not allowed to make a statement or speak for the witnesses, Bilbo's attorney had the privilege of providing questions for the committee to ask on his behalf. His attorney asked Collier, "Is it not true that Bilbo never suggested any violation of any law in any speech you heard him make or that you read?" "Well," Collier said, "I would think so." "In what respect," asked Bilbo's attorney. "Well this Texas case," Collier explained, "it was clearly stated that [a state party] must be controlled by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments." "You know that the law that was interpreted in that case was a Texas law?" Ellender chimed in. "Sure," replied Collier. "I presume you also know that the Mississippi law is somewhat different than the Texas law, and…Mississippi law remains Mississippi law until it is tested before

the Supreme Court of the United States." With a tinge of contempt, Collier responded, "If you interpret it that way: I wouldn't say that it did." "Pursuing that point a step further," Hickenlooper jumped in on behalf of Collier, "doesn't the Texas case clearly hold that a primary is an integral part of an election…and didn't they settle that once and for all in the Texas case?" Ellender rose to his own defense, "I think it held that, but…certainly the Mississippi law remains the state law until it is attacked and declared unconstitutional by a higher court."[37]

Collier's testimony highlights the fact that Bilbo's rhetoric ignited the passions of public officials at the local level and also at the federal level. That Ellender was willing to defend Mississippi's practice of exclusionary primaries speaks to Jason Morgan Ward's assertion that, "a consciously 'segregationist' countermovement emerged in tandem with the African American freedom struggle….when southern conservatives spoke of defending 'white democracy'…they considered black disfranchisement…essential to maintaining a society governed by and for whites….[which] rested upon regional allegiance to the Democratic Party."[38] Moreover, Collier's testimony signifies the acrimony that Bilbo's speech engendered in Mississippi. Whites not only developed informal and extra legal means of disfranchisement including economic intimidation and vote segregation, but the very real threat and use of violence had a devastating effect in disfranchising Mississippi's black population.

That the vast majority of these witnesses needed to be subpoenaed by the committee signifies the level of intimidation felt by blacks who believed that they were taking their lives into their own hands if they agreed to testify. In fact, the investigators

[37] *Campaign Expenditures*, 201-202.
[38] Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy*, 4.

were so nervous about the consequences for black testifiers if their names should be released to the public that when they submitted their composite list of potential witnesses to the committee, it came with a note that read "Confidential: To be kept under lock and key at all times."[39] Etoy Fletcher's recollection of the violence he experienced when trying to register on June 12 had been published in news outlets throughout the nation. With the severity of the violence perpetrated against Fletcher, it is rather surprising that he agreed to testify at the hearing. Fletcher told the committee:

> When I went out to register, the circuit clerk told me to go upstairs to the man that handled the veterans, and when I went up to see this man he told me that we weren't allowed to vote, and I went on out: and I was standing across the street…and a car came up before me three of the men got out…and told me to get in the car, I couldn't resist, so I got in…and they took me off down in the woods and whipped me.[40]

"They did what?" Ellender asked, "Do you know who these men are?" A soft-spoken and weary Fletcher responded, "I really don't know, probably I would and probably I wouldn't." Unwilling to push Fletcher further on identifying the men, Ellender asked Fletcher about his exchange with the registrar when he went upstairs at the courthouse. Fletcher stated that the man "threw a pamphlet on the table with the [United States] Constitution in it and he asked me had I read that pamphlet and I told him I hadn't. He said if I hadn't read the pamphlet I wasn't qualified to vote." "Did he…permit you to read the pamphlet you referred to?" Ellender inquired. "No sir he did not," Fletcher stated. Ellender returned his focus to the whipping, asking Fletcher, "What reasons did [the men] give for whipping you?" Fletcher recalled, "When we were going on out down

[39] Campaign Investigators Kiley, Kelly, and Moon sent a document to the Committee that detailed the statements of witnesses who refused to testify at the hearing without being subpoenaed, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, RG 46, Box 2, Folder 3.
[40] *Campaign Expenditures*, 46.

the road, they asked me where did I get it from that I could come up there and vote….then they asked me about how long I stayed in the service…that is about all they said." Elmer Thomas wanted further details on the whipping and asked Fletcher to describe his experience. "They took a piece of car cable, something wrapped…doubled, and they had me to lie down on the ground, they had me pull my clothes off and one whipped a while and then another one until they finished….It didn't break the skin, but it bruised it and there were some black places on it…on the legs."[41]

Not noticing a connection between Bilbo's rhetoric and what happened to Fletcher, Ellender asked, "You are certain that the reason why they whipped you was because you applied to vote?" "I am," Fletcher declared. "Had you heard the statements that were attributed to Senator Bilbo and that are recited in the charges that form the basis of these hearings?" Ellender asked. "Not much," Fletcher replied, "I hadn't been out of the service very long…so I didn't know."[42] Hickenlooper asked, "On the way back [from the woods] did you visit with these men, did they ask you any questions or talk to you at all?" "They told me that I could come to town any time I wanted to but don't come back up there to register; if I did, they was going to kill me," Fletcher answered. "They were going to kill you?" Hickenlooper replied. "That's right," said Fletcher. "Did they mention anything about Senator Bilbo, or anything about the senatorial campaign?" "Well," Fletcher began, "when we were on our way back to town they went by another man's house and just told him that [they] were going to vote for Bilbo and asked him did he

[41] *Campaign Expenditures*, 49.
[42] *Campaign Expenditures*, 49.

want to whip me some." In Fletcher's analysis, "they whipped me because I wanted to register to vote."[43]

Further testimony continued to highlight the direct connection between Bilbo's rhetoric and racial violence. M.S. Love, a doctor from Hattiesburg, recalled that he had "heard a lot" about instances of voter obstruction and violence on July 2. Love believed that "some of this violence was incited by some of the speeches that were made [by Senator Bilbo]," and he further posited that, "yes…there would have been more who would have probably voted and more allowed to vote and to register [had Bilbo not made his speeches]."[44] S.J. Dickey noted that he listened to Bilbo's speeches in McComb where he told his audience "Do no—whatever you do, don't let he Negro vote….disqualify him…if you don't want the Negro to vote, see him the night before." Dickey recalled, "it was quite a bit of intimidation." "After the speech was made," Dickey remarked, "it seemed that it created more race prejudice. I just decided I wouldn't go down to register."[45] "You mean to say," Ellender asked Dickey, "that Senator Bilbo's statements had the effect of keeping a lot of the colored people from registering and voting?" "I do…..I do," said Dickey.[46]

To those outside the South, the testimony was damning. The *New York Times* described Bilbo as a "political kingpin" of Mississippi and told readers that Bilbo and Ellender, "exchanged winks and smiles as a number of Negroes testified that they were not permitted to vote."[47] "The committee's hearings in Jackson," one op-ed claimed,

[43] *Campaign Expenditures*, 53.
[44] *Campaign Expenditures*, 227-231.
[45] *Campaign Expenditures*, 169-170.
[46] *Campaign Expenditures*, 172.
[47] "The Nation," *New York Times*, December 8, 1946.

"gave the country a liberal education in what white supremacy and one party rule really mean. The hearings, held in a genial atmosphere of considerable hilarity, revealed…what any ordinary police court would recognize as intimidation, both by threat and by violence." The only silver lining the author could find in the entirety of the proceeding was that hopefully, he wrote, "in time [the south's] Bilbos will educate every section of this country" against white supremacy.[48]

Bilbo Bites Back

As if the committee proceeding was not biased enough against the plight of Mississippi's African Americans, Senators Ellender, Maybank and Thomas allowed Bilbo to make a prepared statement to the committee and the audience in attendance. He immediately tried to deflect blame from his statements for election day violence by telling the committee, "this is the first Democratic primary held in Mississippi in 56 years where the Negro citizens…have attempted to vote, and you can readily appreciate the keen interest that was aroused throughout the state among the white Democratic voters as well as the great opposition such attempt aroused in the minds of all the people of the state."[49]

He then attempted to use legal arguments and an unscientific political study of the state to argue that since most black people in Mississippi voted Republican whenever they voted, and since Mississippi law required voters to declare allegiance to whichever party they were voting for in an election, he believed that blacks should not have the ability to vote in primaries with whites. "Surely the time has not come," proclaimed Bilbo, "when a man shall be denied the constitutional right of freedom of speech in

[48] "Education by Bilbo," *New York Times*, December 10, 1946.
[49] *Campaign Expenditures*, 333.

expressing his honest beliefs and convictions." These convictions, Bilbo argued, were the same convictions that Mississippi politicians had held for decades. He admitted to conducting an "aggressive campaign," but denied that the "purpose, object, design and calculation to effectively deprive and deny the duly qualified Negro electors of Mississippi of their constitutional rights." He further denied that he made, "any inflammatory appeals to the passions and prejudices of the white population of Mississippi to foster….and intensify a state of acute and aggravated tension" between white and black people within the state.

Bilbo did not stop there. He decided to use his bully pulpit to smear the organizations that were attempting to have him unseated, and played into the fears and rumors of his white constituency. "There are two…groups of people…who are trying to unseat Bilbo, and that is the all-out Negro groups and the Communist Party," he quipped. "It was this…clique and the press that have tried religiously to leave the impression…that I have waged war against certain religious [sic] or certain nationalities…there isn't a word of truth in it," Bilbo exclaimed. "It is the creation in their own minds," Bilbo reasoned, "in order to array these elements along with the all-out Negro element in their fight against me." Bilbo, skilled at beating the war drum for white supremacy, pulled on the heartstrings of his white audience by telling them, "the real purpose of this fight…is to use me as a symbol and destroy me and thus deter hereafter any man who dares to contend for the things that are purely American, and especially…southern."[50] Bilbo's statement importantly underscores his view, as evidenced by letters from sympathizers

[50] *Campaign Expenditures*, 338-339.

throughout the nation, that his brand of racism and xenophobia were not exclusive to the South, but were in fact "American."

Through his hearing, Bilbo became a figure too large to be labeled simply a racist. For many throughout nation, he became a champion of a southern brand of conservatism that would come to define the Dixiecrats and later the Republican Party over the next several decades, which blended racism with a strict defense of state's rights and individual liberties. For Bilbo, and others including Dana Wren from Aberdeen, Maryland, "In this country we have…state's rights and individual rights," she wrote. "I truly believe the state of Mississippi is capable of running their own affairs and need no advice or help of any minority group."[51] Bilbo was right, racism and conservative ideals were not uniquely southern, and had become as American in the post-war period as apple pie.[52]

In his final crescendo, Bilbo perked the ears of those who believed he was the victim of a Communist or "outsider" conspiracy. He declared, "Sidney Hillman, the CIO and the rest of the communistic, nigger outfits played [my speeches] up in all the papers."[53] Yet, Bilbo was quick to declare his love for the black race and played into the twisted logic of many of his supporters. "I have always been sympathetic to the Negro," Bilbo declared, "I have always assisted them in every way possible….I am the best friend

[51] Dana Wren to Theodore Green, June 29, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, RG 46, Box 1, Folder 1.
[52] Bilbo's sentiments speak to the trend in labor and working class history to trace the origins of modern conservatism back to the period immediately following World War II in which the "liberal consensus" thesis that Eric Hodgson advanced is undermined by an underground growing constituency of conservatively minded people who still support many of the New Deal policies of Roosevelt, but do not support racial equality, which is increasingly becoming a part of the Democratic party platform. For added insight see Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945-1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
[53] Campaign Expenditures, 342.

the Negro has got in the United States Senate."[54] In Bilbo's mind, his 1939 effort to repatriate African Americans back to Africa was an act of kindness and generosity.

In addition to Bilbo's rhetorical flares that conjured up ideas of conspiracy in the minds of his onlookers, Bilbo also summoned the ghost of the confederacy to bolster his defense. "In Mississippi immediately after the Civil War," Bilbo shouted, "when our good friends from the East and the North…came down and qualified all the niggers to vote and fill all the offices, sheriffs, United States Senator and Congressmen with niggers…that is the dream of these outsiders who try to intimidate and bulldoze…the officers of Mississippi so that they won't live up to the enforcement of the law and…protect white control in this state." Southern Burnett Maybank asked Bilbo, "Is it not a fact that from the memory from those days [of Reconstruction], passed on by those who lived in those days to the present generation of Mississippians…as you have said." Bilbo interrupted before Maybank could finish, "Yes," he remarked, "the historical facts are known by the younger generation, and a number of older people…what Reconstruction meant as to what Negro control would mean." Maybank pushed Trump further, "you mentioned…that during the Reconstruction days…the entire government [in Mississippi] was colored." "Let's see," Bilbo began, "I would say about 16 or 20 years, nigger control."[55]

Bilbo's choice to arm himself with historical memory to combat the foretold onslaught of black dominance was aided in part by the reconciliation efforts of the early twentieth century in which, as James Loewen describes, "textbooks abandoned their idealistic presentations of Reconstruction in favor of the Confederate myth, for if blacks

[54] Campaign Expenditures, 342.
[55] Campaign Expenditures, 354-356.

were inferior, then the historical period in which they enjoyed equal rights must have been dominated by wrong-thinking Americans."[56] Loewen points out that the trend to paint the Reconstruction period as one of black dominance and "Yankee intervention" pervaded the textbooks used throughout the nation during the early twentieth century, and shaped the minds of the youth in these "older generations" of Mississippians referenced by Maybank and Bilbo. Phrases used in textbooks of the time period, which derided northern involvement in southern affairs as "scalawag" or "carpetbagger regimes," delegitimized Reconstruction governments in the minds of many southerners.[57]

Wrapping up the Hearing

Throughout the rest of his testimony Bilbo deflected and flat-out denied all of his statements. He told the committee that the "liberal media" was the group responsible for all of the "slander and libel" associated with this speeches.[58] The bias of the committee showed throughout Bilbo's testimony as he and the southern Senators traded winks and laughs, underscoring the fact that what should have been a somber hearing dealing with election fraud, voter intimidation, and violence, had never been such an occasion for the white people in attendance.

At one point, Hickenlooper attempted to clarify Bilbo's position by asking him, "So if [African Americans] failed to go to the polls…they are violating their oath?" "You see," said Bilbo, "I don't know if you know the nigger or not. He is fickle; he is uncertain." "No I do not have any background," Hickenlooper began, but was quickly

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[56] James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (NY: The New Press, 1995), 157.
[57] James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, 186-187; Important studies on the effects of reconciliation between the North and South following the Civil War include Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) and David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).
[58] Campaign Expenditures, 348.

interrupted by Bilbo who quipped, “If you will come down and live with us for about 12 months, you will be all right.” The laughter from the courtroom stopped the proceedings.

Once Ellender could get the hearing back underway, Bilbo finished, “They are a real problem. There is no question about that.” As the questions continued, the atmosphere in Jackson shifted noticeably from one where there may have been a trace of human empathy for the violence perpetrated against people of color, to one in which the heavy subject matter came to be viewed as comical. On the subject of disfranchisement, the spectacle reached its zenith. “I didn’t want any of them to vote,” he exclaimed. “Would you? Would you want somebody to vote that you know was going to vote against you?” As if responding to a cue card, the audience erupted with laughter. “Well I am not concerned with that right now,” Hickenlooper offered over the boisterous crowd. “You would be on election day,” chimed Bilbo. The courtroom was again overtaken by laughter. The scene must have been paralyzing for Hickenlooper, a Republican Senator trying to hold a southern senator accountable for clear obstruction and obfuscation of federal voting rights violations. All of the gravity of the situation nullified with a few barbs from a man who had, several months prior, been advocating racial hatred only months after the end of World War II and weeks following the close of the Nazi war crime trials at Nuremberg.

Bilbo’s hearing gave the world a glimpse into the deepest and darkest corners of southern society, showcasing the multifaceted nature of white supremacy and how it could manifest in multiple ways in disparate communities throughout the South. Much like the black community itself, white supremacy was not a monolith, but often

"remodeled itself to meet any challenge."[59] The testimonies of Etoy Fletcher and Varnado Collier call attention to the physical violence blacks faced at the polls in the post-war period, which became manifest through Bilbo's rhetoric. Beatings, whippings, and knife brandishing were the "means necessary" to keep blacks from achieving the franchise. Affidavits and testimony such as that of JD Collins attests to the fact that whites also utilized more informal means of intimidation. By meeting with influential black leaders, white economic and business leaders of Greenwood were able to keep African Americans away merely from the threat of losing their jobs. If African Americans did manage to vote, whites often "challenged" their ballots, enlisting white women to be complicit actors in disfranchising black voters by stuffing their ballots in segregated envelopes.

Despite the nefarious practices of registrars and other Bilbo adherents, a small number of black Mississippians did manage to organize and push back against the white regime in Mississippi. R.S. Bostick and Joseph Parham's testimonies revealed that black activism in the post-war period was not limited to youthful veterans including Medgar Evers and Aaron Henry, but extended to elderly members of the black community as well. Kattie Campbell and Camille Thomas's testimonies add further depth and complexity to characterizations of black activism during this period by shining light on the roles of black women in post-war voting rights activism.

As evidenced by the testimony of Stanley Brav and George Strype, the hearing highlighted the importance of white allies in the struggle for civil rights. These individuals played important roles as mediators, bridging ideological divides between

[59] Jane Dailey, Glenda Gilmore, and Bryant Simon ed., *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 5.

white and black communities throughout Mississippi. As members of the cloth, white clergy played an especially important role in the white community, carrying with them the weight of the church's authority. Without such a moral force, the civil rights gains of the post-war period would not nearly have been as bountiful.

For the white Mississippians who showed up in Jackson from December 2 through 6, as well as many Bilbo supporters reading about the events in newspapers throughout the nation, the hearing was never about giving people a chance to voice their complaints about civil rights abuses. For many white onlookers, the event was another opportunity to see their hero, the nation's foremost "underdog" and champion of white supremacy, in action. A Bilbo victory or exoneration in such a battle would be a vindication of white supremacy, not just in Mississippi, but throughout the nation.

Chapter 6

"The Eyes of the World will be on Mississippi"

The scratch and crackle of the record could only be drowned out by the hushed whispers of family members gathered around the radio in the early spring of 1946. The mellow voice of Pete Seeger came over the airwaves. In a sing-song tune, Seeger began, "Listen Mr. Bilbo, Listen to me, I'll give you a lesson in history. Listen and I'll show you that the foreigners you hate are the same ones who made America great." Seeger continued to lash the Senator from Mississippi with lyrics that pointed out all of his contradictions and bigotry for the world to see. The song went on for another minute and a half, wrapping America in a collective cloak of both warmth and shame. Bilbo's campaign and trial had made him infamous. Civil rights groups such as the CRC and NAACP capitalized on the wealth and fame of celebrities like Dashell Hammett, Frank Sinatra, and Albert Einstein to draw considerable attention to the events surrounding Bilbo's campaign and Senate hearing both at home and abroad.

The story of Bilbo's Senate hearing has been covered to a degree in the historical record by scholars including John Dittmer, James Lawson, and Charles Payne, but all of these previous treatments offer only a one-dimensional analysis that neglects the larger national and international implications of Bilbo's actions.[1] Extant historiography by scholars including Mary Dudziak, Carol Anderson, Penny Von Eschen, and Tim

[1] Robert Fleegler, "Theodore G. Bilbo and the Decline of Public Racism," *Journal of Mississippi History*, 68, 1 (March 2006); Richard Ethridge, "The Fall of the Man: The United Staets Senate's Probe of Theodore G. Bilbo in December 1946 and its Aftermath," *Journal of Mississippi History* 38 (August 1976); F. Ross Peterson, "Glenn Taylor and the Bilbo Case," *Phylon*, 31 (Winter 1970); Charles Pope Smith, "Theodore G. Bilbo's Senatorial Career. The Final Years 1941-1947," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Southern Mississippi, 1983; John Dittmer, *Local People* (1994); Charles Payne, *I've got the Light of Freedom* (1994).

Borstelmann has detailed the myriad ways in which American domestic civil rights issues came to influence American foreign policy and vice versa, but these works have suffered from extremely broad geographic and temporal frameworks and have failed to draw connections between key nations during the immediate post-war period, utilizing source bases that are inadequate for answering questions regarding social agency. For instance, how did the United States navigate the treacherous waters of international politics during the early Cold War when the Soviet Union and the United States scrambled to shore-up influence in newly emerging nations? To what extent did Bilbo's campaign become an international liability for American foreign policy? More specifically, how did Truman and the United States at large manage to be just liberal enough on civil rights issues to maintain political and financial ties with nations with completely opposing views regarding race and citizenship?

This chapter seeks to detail the aftermath of Bilbo's campaign and Senate hearing and place those narratives onto a larger global context of Cold War geopolitics that illuminates the multiple dimensions of life that this event occupied for many post-war Americans.

The Aftermath of the Hearing

On its surface, it seemed as though the Senate's decision to not allow Bilbo to take his Senate seat would be a quick one. With the evidence provided, it was clear that Bilbo's rhetoric had crossed the boundaries of acceptable political campaign discourse and human decency. The issue for the Committee on Campaigns and Elections, however, was whether Bilbo's words could be directly tied to election-day violence. If so, he could be convicted of breaching the 15th Amendment which states that "The right of citizens of

the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude, and that Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation."[2] The Supreme Court had restricted the power of the federal government to become involved in state civil rights matters with its decision in the *Civil Rights Cases* of 1883; however, since Bilbo was a United States Senator, when he implored Mississippians to prevent African Americans from voting, he could be held responsible for any infringement of federal law including the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

More importantly, the Supreme Court had already set a precedent for restricting free speech that could be applied to the case against Bilbo. In the case of *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire* (1942), Walter Chaplinsky alleged that police unlawfully infringed upon his First and Fourteenth Amendment rights when they arrested him for inciting a riot in the town of Rochester, New Hampshire. Chaplinsky riled up townsfolk by slinging epithets and curse words such as "damned racketeer" and "damned Fascist" at people who passed by him on the sidewalk. In its decision, the Supreme Court declared that speech which could be construed as "fighting words," which it defined as "those [words] which by their very utterance inflict injury or tend to incite an immediate breach of the peace" are not protected by the 1st Amendment. The court classified the phrases used by Chaplinsky as "epithets likely to provoke the average person to retaliation," and thereby cause a breach of the peace, which is prosecutable under the law.[3]

Not only was there precedent and testimony the committee could use as a justification for impeaching Bilbo, but also scores of public opinion pieces crying for the

[2] Constitution of the United States, 15th Amendment, Articles 1 and 2.
[3] *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire*, 315 U.S. 568, 574 (1942).

committee to keep Bilbo out of office. One piece in the *Washington Daily News* warned that, "there will be no unanimous report of the Senate Elections Investigating Committee giving Senator Theodore G. Bilbo a clean bill of health in connection with last summer's Mississippi primary campaign."[4] The article importantly referenced the division on the committee between Democratic Senators Ellender, Maybank, and Thomas on the side of exonerating Bilbo, and Senators Hickenlooper and Bridges on the side of seeing Bilbo unseated. This division became all the more important after the hearings because, as the Washington Daily News pointed out, even though Hickenlooper and Bridges represented the minority party in the Senate on the committee, "that will not be the case after January 3." On January 3, the 80th Senate would be sworn in, and it would be majority Republican, and "free if they choose to act on recommendations as submitted by Sens. Bridges and Hickenlooper."[5] The implication could be dire for Bilbo. If he were to be exonerated by the committee, he would likely be forced out of the Senate by the Republican majority come January.

Leslie Perry voiced a similar belief that the evidence gathered at the hearing showed cause for Bilbo's dismissal. Perry wrote, "We believe ample evidence adduced during committee hearings…support the finding that advocacy of violence against Negro voters by Senator Bilbo kept thousands of them from the polls." "If federal laws and Democratic system are to be upheld," he continued, "your committee has no alternative but to recommend against seating Senator-elect Bilbo."[6] Charles Houston, one of the lead

[4] "Bilbo Will Get No Unanimous Whitewash in Election Probe," *Washington Daily News*, December 12, 1946, Papers of the NAACP, Part 18, Series B, Reel 3.
[5] "Bilbo Will Get No Unanimous Whitewash in Election Probe," *Washington Daily News*, December 12, 1946, Papers of the NAACP, Part 18, Series B, Reel 3.
[6] Memorandum from Leslie Perry to Styles Bridges, Bourke Hickenlooper, and Elmer Thomas, December 16, 1946, Papers of the NAACP, Part 18, Series B, Reel 3.

lawyers counseling the witnesses at Bilbo's hearing, wrote a strong letter to Ellender advocating that the testimony in Jackson clearly showed that, "the record of intimidation and terrorism was traced directly home to Senator Bilbo and his campaign speeches…and to attempt to say his speeches did not intimidate the Negroes and stiffen and inflame the whites is to disregard the massing of testimony which the record builds up." Houston explained that even though Bilbo told reporters after the election that he only wanted his supporters to use legal means to keep blacks from voting, this correction, "cannot offset his repeated appeals to violence and intimidation throughout the entire campaign….his nomination and election are illegal….Qualitatively the viciousness of his campaign speaks for itself…in the terrorization of the Negro voters."[7] Petitions from civic and progressive groups such as the one that came to the Committee from New London County, Connecticut, charged that "Bilbo has violated the United States Constitution," and further stated, "the United States Senate has an opportunity to strike a blow for Democracy in Mississippi that will be admired throughout the world."[8]

Conversely, there were many letters of support written in favor of Bilbo's position as well as that of the clearly biased committee. One such author, simply described as a "Yankee G.I," asked Ellender: "Who are these people who are putting up money for Negroes to be equal with the whites?" The G.I. offered his own answer, "The Jews!" "Notice the Jew Rabbi testified for the Negro," referencing the testimony of Rabbi Stanley Brav at Bilbo's hearing. The G.I. continued his tirade, "Their next move in the

[7] Letter from Charles Houston to Allen Ellender, December 16, 1946, Papers of the NAACP, Part 18, Series B, Reel 3.
[8] Petition sent to Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures from New London County, December 21, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, RG 46, Box 1, Folder 1.

South is social equality. Better get the Civil War ready. I am with you."[9] Theodore Larkin, also from New York, wrote directly to Bilbo stating, "you are right in your strong stand for white supremacy, and negroes should be banned from the polls….they are phony Americans, therefore they are not fit to be Americans, whatever they do is a hateful nuisance to true Americans." Larkin continued, "If negroes has got any sense, they should keep still and quiet in their masters' country….the hopeful negroes are determined to blacken Americans by their blood! More power to you." Larkin then closed with a chilling homage to Bilbo's campaign, "put three or more well placed atom bombs in New York City," he urged, "and your troubles will be over Mr. Bilbo."[10] The letters of Larkin and the "Yankee G.I." indicate the national level of support Bilbo had fostered in over the past year.

Bilbo's vitriol was the great equalizer between residents on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line, pointing towards Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino's argument that, "the exceptional South has served as a myth." Lassiter and Crespino accurately contend that in most historical narratives, the North is typically painted as being free of the racial discrimination and atrocities that defined the South at mid-century. For Crespino and Lassiter, however, "the tendency to isolate the distinctive regional characteristics from a normative American narrative has set southern history in false opposition to an idealized national standard." In fact, the two argue, "most regional characteristics cited as evidence of differences of kind are really differences of degree."[11]

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[9] Letter from Yankee G.I. to Allen Ellender, December 4, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, RG 46, Box 1, Folder 1.
[10] Letter from Theodore Larkin to Theodore Bilbo, December 2, 1946, Theodore G. Bilbo Files, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 953, Folder 20.
[11] Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9, 12.

As James Cobb elegantly phrased it, "however tempting or convenient it may be to emphasize the disparities [between the South and the rest of the United States]…neither the South nor America can ever be truly understood as anything but a part of the other."[12] The stacks of letters received by Bilbo from New York, the District of Columbia, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and countless other locales reveal that support for Bilbo did not rest in one region over another and testifies to Cobb's assertion in 2011 that,

> The enduring tendency to cite racial bias in Pennsylvania or hostility to gun control in Ohio as evidence that a regional malignancy has now metastasized throughout the 'national body'…ignores a lengthy history of symptoms indicative not of a recent affliction but of a preexisting condition…[which is] evidence of how 'southern' America has been all along.[13]

The fan mail Bilbo received from all corners of the country also reflects the national media coverage of the event and how present Bilbo's case was in the minds of observers who often daydreamed of standing up for Bilbo, and by extension, the white race. T.J. Lyman wrote to Bilbo during the hearing, "I like you and I voted for you….I don't like the idea for someone…to come and tell us what to do. We don't but in their business….The nigger voted here in Starkville and no one did not care. I would like to be on the witness stand there…I am with you no matter how the trial goes."[14] F.E. Hasse's letter dripped with admiration for the Senator when he complimented Bilbo on standing up for white supremacy and stated, "I wish I could meet you some day and have a little chat together."[15]

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[12] James C. Cobb, *The South and America since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), vii.
[13] Cobb, *The South and America since World War II*, 318.
[14] Letter from T.J. Lyman to Theodore Bilbo, December 2, 1946, Theodore G. Bilbo Files, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 953, Folder 20.
[15] Letter from F.E. Hasse to Theodore Bilbo, December 3, 1946, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 953, Folder 23.

Many of these individuals glorified Bilbo's cause, reflecting as Chas Browning did, that Bilbo's case marked a second Civil War or Reconstruction period between the North and the South. "It makes my blood boil to read about the Damn Yankees and Carpetbaggers…testifying against you at our Capital," Browning stated, "It makes me think of the…carpetbag, reconstruction days…I used to read about them…when I was a kid in school. Those reconstruction days were what caused the South to hate the North….after the war the North sought to put the black heel on the white neck…and it seems they are again trying to do the same thing."[16] Another man from Bellafontaine, Mississippi declared that, "should they succeed in unseating you…let Mississippi secede from the Union and we will elect you president."[17] That southerners continually referenced the Civil War as a means of underscoring their anger at the investigation of Bilbo reveals the romantically constructed memory of the Civil War and Reconstruction periods in their minds, one that stood in stark contrast to the reality unfolding around them as African Americans testified against one of the most powerful white men in the state.

In his attempt to understand the mindset of the white southerner during the Civil Rights Era, Jason Sokol explained this cognitive dissonance. "White southerners often lived under the spell of their own collective history—or a certain interpretation of it….the white South nurtured its youth on the myth of the happy and faithful slave, told stories of heroic Confederate soldiers in the 'War of Northern Aggression,' and spun nightmares

[16] Letter from Chas E Browning to Theodore Bilbo, December 4, 1946, Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 953, Folder 24.
[17] Letter from J. N. Bennett to Theodore Bilbo, December 3, 1946, Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 953, Folder 22.

out of the 'tragic era' of Reconstruction."[18] Bilbo supporters evoked these images of the Civil War and Reconstruction because they viewed the events surrounding Bilbo as equally important as either of those events. For many in the South and throughout the nation, Bilbo was the heroic Confederate General, standing alone against the onslaught of outside interests and northern-dominated subversive groups.

The Decision

While the committee deliberated, Bilbo flew back to Washington in mid-December to face a second investigation by the Senate War Investigating Subcommittee for illegal dealings with war contractors. It was alleged that Bilbo had taken a bribe of $25,000 in order to act favorably towards these individuals and their business interests in Mississippi. When asked if he was worried about the second hearing, Bilbo boasted, "They can't stop me at the door." "Besides," he quipped, "they haven't even got a scratch against me."[19] Even if the Senate denied him his seat, Bilbo claimed that he could 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.[20]

The committee would not let the NAACP to testify at Bilbo's hearing. No formal rebuff of the NAACP's request exists, but one can assume that Ellender, speaking for the

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[18] Jason Sokol, *There Goes my Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 6.

[19] "Bilbo Predicts Victory," *New York Times*, December 16, 1946.

[20] 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 in North Dakota voted Langer into office knowing 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;

committee, reasoned that the NAACP was an outside organization and only individuals who were Mississippi citizens should be allowed to testify at the hearing. This did not stop the Charles Houston from filing a brief with the committee stating that,

> The record of intimidation and terrorism was traced directly home to Senator Bilbo and his campaign speeches by…William Bender and Reverend George T. Strype…his speeches were the subject of common discussion among potential Negro voters, and to attempt to say his speeches did not intimidate the Negroes and…inflame the whites is to disregard the massing of testimony which the record builds up.[21]

Houston explained that Ellender and Bilbo had both attempted to whitewash the hearing in favor of Bilbo by stating that intimidation of blacks at the polls was "traditional" in Mississippi elections, but, he pointed out, "not a single white official testified that he made any effort to uphold the Negro's right to vote, or to protect him." Furthermore, Houston argued, "his majority in the primary was only 3,834. The record shows over 30,000 Negro veterans in Mississippi eligible to register and vote….yet due to…Bilbo's campaign only a handful voted."[22]

When they were denied their right to present their case to the committee, the NAACP believed that since the three of the committee members were Democratic, that they would most likely have to take their fight to the Senate at large. The organization did believe, however, that they could sway the opinion of Elmer Thomas from Oklahoma. Despite being a Democrat Thomas was known for having a middle of the road stance on most social issues, and Walter White and the NAACP wasted no time in attempting to play to Thomas's politics. White wrote to Thomas on December 13, "your vote may be

[21] Letter from Charles Houston to Allen Ellender, December 16, 1946, Papers of the NAACP, Part 18, Series B, Reel 3.
[22] Letter from Charles Houston to Allen Ellender, December 16, 1946, Papers of the NAACP, Part 18, Series B, Reel 3.

the deciding vote on the committee….We ask you to oppose seating Senator Bilbo because his admitted vicious incitements to mob violence against Negroes for attempting to exercise their constitutional right to vote is the most anti-democratic force operating in the United States of America." White continued, "rejecting Bilbo will serve notice on other Demagogues that the American public…is at least aroused to voice decency…instead of bigotry." Importantly, White pointed out, "it will also say to the world which is now attempting to build a United Nations…that democracy is not decadent and that Senator Bilbo does not speak for the majority of Americans as is now believed by many people of other nations."[23] White understood the importance of playing up America's place in the international community to Thomas who, like many Senators during the post-war period, cared deeply about how America was viewed on a world stage in which the horrors of Nazism revealed the falsehoods of racial superiority. Mary Dudziak argues that such awareness made the United States vulnerable to criticisms from abroad in the burgeoning Cold War. "Diplomats around the globe," Dudziak explains, "were concerned about the effect of domestic race discrimination…on the anti-United States or pro-Communist leanings of other nations."[24]

On December 31, the committee convened in Washington to construct their ruling. "Because of some differences in interpretation of the voluminous record accumulated," Ellender wrote, the committee decided to write two separate reports that would later be submitted to the Senate. Senators Ellender, Maybank and Thomas wrote a concurring majority report in which they argued that the evidence presented to them at

[23] Telegram from Walter White to Elmer Thomas, December 14, 1946, Papers of the NAACP, Part 18, Series B, Reel 3.
[24] Dudziak, *Cold War, Civil Rights*, 45.

the hearing did not implicate Bilbo for the fraud and intimidation blacks experienced on election day, but reinforced the contention that the main culprits were "outside-of-the-State organizations."[25] The majority of the committee added that this agitation was aided by the poll-tax exemption statute passed in 1946 as well as by "agitation by certain radio commentators and correspondents from outside of the state, and the return to Mississippi of large numbers of Negro veterans," which they posited, "contributed to a situation…in which great interest in this primary was exhibited [by] both whites and Negroes."[26] The committee exculpated Bilbo's campaign oratory as a product of this besieged environment in which "the press and radio…were openly and avowedly out to get him," Ellender surmised. The alarmist overtones of the committee's wording echo Richard Hofstadter's analysis of American political culture over fifty years ago when he argued that such rhetoric whether about abolition, Catholicism, or Mormons, has permeated American politics since the founding of the nation and contributed to a "paranoid style" of American political discourse that capitalizes on the nascent fears of the public to win votes.[27] By stating that the media were "openly and avowedly out to get [Bilbo]," the committee stamped Bilbo's fear mongering with unconditional approval.

The opinion of the three Senators went on to systematically dismantle any arguments against seating Bilbo. They used the testimony of Stanley Brav and T.B. Wilson to note that Mississippi's primary had been lily-white for nearly fifty years, adding credence to their theory that Mississippi's black population was "stirred up" by

[25] Senate of the United States, 80th Congress, 1st Session, *Report of the Special Committee to Investigate Senatorial Campaign Expenditures, 1946*, Report No. 1, January 3, 1947, 6. Hereafter cited as Majority Report.
[26] Majority Report, 6.
[27] Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1964, 1-7.

outside organizations. They excused the behavior of election officials who either intimidated voters or segregated the votes of those who they allowed to cast them by stating that, "the discrimination against the Negro…came from their deep-seated traditional conviction that the Negro has no place in the Democratic primary….nothing he did was attributable…to the speeches or statements of Senator Bilbo."[28] "The majority of this committee," Ellender wrote, "are of the opinion that…irrespective of what Senator Bilbo actually said…the disqualification of and prevention of the Negro from registering or voting would have been the same."[29] Bilbo's statements about seeing blacks "the night before the election" were dismissed by the committee as meaning "giving friendly advice to Negroes," and that his statements about "using any means necessary," were meant to enlist people to use only lawful means at their disposal to keep blacks from voting.[30] "Mississippi politics have always been heated," the majority reasoned, and therefore Bilbo's campaign rhetoric cannot be seen as indicative of his "moral turpitude" or should not be considered unconstitutional. Ellender and his comrades further argued that they could not find any connection between low African American registration and voting totals and Bilbo's campaign. "Such a conclusion would be speculation," the men reasoned.[31]

To close their analysis, the majority writers informed the Senate that, "there is no evidence…connecting Senator Bilbo with any illegality or impropriety…or with any of

[28] Senate Majority Report, 7.
[29] Senate Majority Report, 8.
[30] Senate Majority Report, 9.
[31] Senate Majority Report, 9.

the alleged discrimination or denial to the Negro of Mississippi…the right to register or vote," and furthermore stated that Bilbo, "is entitled to his seat in the Senate."[32]

Dissenting from the majority report, Senators Hickenlooper and Bridges wrote a minority opinion, declaring that they, "do not agree with the conclusions of the majority of the committee." "Feeling the matter to be of grave import," the Senators believed that their opinion needed to be seen by the Senate.[33] Hickenlooper and Bridges posited that the evidence against Bilbo presented at the hearing showed that he had violated the Hatch Act, which, in part, states "it shall be unlawful for any person to intimidate, threaten, or coerce…any other person for the purpose of interfering with the right of such other person to vote for any candidate…at any election held…for the purpose of selecting…any Member of the Senate."[34]

The Senators pointed out that during the hearing Bilbo acknowledged the voter obstruction and intimidation, and had he been able to legally prevent blacks from voting, "not one would have voted." Hickenlooper and Bridges also believed that Bilbo's letter to his fellow candidates during the election, urging them to work together to prevent African Americans from voting, violated section 19 of the United States Criminal Code that makes conspiracy to injure people wishing to exercise their civil rights a federal crime. When combined with Bilbo's speeches, the Senators viewed the letter as, "inexcusable, reprehensible, culpable, and…taints with deliberate calculated fraud the election [of Senator Bilbo]."[35] The minority opinion also declared that Bilbo violated section twenty of the United States Criminal Code, which holds that "whosoever, under color of any

[32] Senate Majority Opinion, 12.
[33] Senate Minority Opinion, 13.
[34] Senate Minority Opinion, 13.
[35] Senate Minority Opinion, 15.

law, statute, ordinance...or custom…subjects…any inhabitant of any state…to the deprivation of any rights, privileges, or immunities…under the Constitution…shall be fined not more than $1,000, or imprisoned not more than one year, or both."[36]

The fact that Ellender, Maybank, Thomas, and Bilbo all agreed that the white primary was an "established tradition" in Mississippi made Bilbo culpable under this statute. Hickenlooper and Bridges explained that, as a senior member of Congress, Bilbo unquestionably knew the fifteenth Amendment, knew of the *Smith v. Allwright* decision, and knew that under the law of Mississippi, it was legal for blacks to vote. The Senators called out not just Bilbo, but Bilbo's practices, the act of Bilboism or demagoguery itself in their report. "This type of campaign oratory," they wrote, "openly advocating the suppression of constitutional rights for…white supremacy, tradition, or otherwise…is condemned as immoral, inflammatory, dangerous to the principles upon which our Government is established, and…[taints] with fraud and corruption a nomination secured by such means."[37]

The most damning argument of the Senators came in their rebuke of Bilbo not just for using horrifying language to get elected, but excoriated his behavior as a leader in the eyes of many United States citizens. "It is clear that a tense and strained atmosphere prevailed in Mississippi at the time of the July 2 primary," they wrote. "In such an atmosphere the…citizens of Mississippi looked to the leadership of the incumbent Senator for guidance," they argued. The type of "guidance" offered by Bilbo, instead of being calming, was "incendiary, terroristic, and illegal."[38] Possibly to allay the concerns

[36] Senate Minority Report, 16.
[37] Senate Minority Report, 19.
[38] Senate Minority Report, 20.

of other southern Senators who sided with Bilbo's rhetoric as a means of blockading northern intrusion into state affairs, the Senators tempered their derision of Bilbo slightly by stating,

> It is not our desire to discuss the philosophy of local attitudes or attempt to interfere with…the sovereign state of Mississippi to elect representatives of its own choosing, but when individuals who submit themselves for election to the Senate so far transgress the limits of the Constitution and Federal statutes, then those acts in and of themselves…violate the sovereignty of the State itself and become of grave concern to the Senate.[39]

The Senators concluded their powerful examination of Bilbo's campaign by telling the Senate that they had never heard such statements as those invoked by Bilbo used by someone seeking political office. "It goes far beyond mere crudeness," they wrote, "and strikes with disturbing force at the bastions of our national solidarity." "Such speech," they argued, "constitutes a corrupt and flagrant abuse of the right of free speech." They summarized that Bilbo's campaign violated the Hatch Act, the Constitution, and the Federal Criminal Code, which should result in Bilbo's expulsion from the Senate. Moreover, they held, Bilbo's tactics were "contrary to sound public policy, harmful to the dignity and honor of the Senate…[and] dangerous to the perpetuity of free government."[40]

Reacting to Bilbo

The backlash to Bilbo's election and to the committee's majority report was swift from people all across the nation. The letters received by the committee following their recommendation evoked a keen sense of a people who understood the role that Bilbo's election had not just on a national level, but on an international level as well. Evelyn

[39] Senate Minority Report, 23.
[40] Senate Minority Report, 23.

Tyler of the group Parents United Against Bigotry remarked that the "people of America and the world expect United States Senate [to be] impartial enough [to] investigate [its] own members when events warrant," she wrote. She continued, "Bilbo's statement inciting violence passed disrepute on [the] United States Senate."[41] Lewis Ferrell, a lawyer of Washington, D.C. shared a similar sentiment when he wrote that Bilbo needed to be impeached. "At a time when the United States is assuming the lead in the struggle for political freedom throughout the world," he argued, "when we are accusing other powers of undemocratic methods, it bodes ill for democratic processes to seat Theodore G. Bilbo in the Eightieth Congress….We must show the world we believe in what we advocate!"[42] "Bilbo's presence in the Senate creates a world-wide reaction against America and Democracy," wrote John Sengstacke, expressing a similar sentiment.

Sengstacke and others lamented Bilbo's actions and the committee's findings in their correspondence. "The world shudders to think that in any way the future of the world and atom bomb has to depend on men of the Bilbo calibre [sic]"[43] Ella Barrows of Yakima, Washington declared. She chided Ellender for his support of Bilbo stating, "citizens will have no respect for Senate with [sic] men of his caliber are condoned and protected neither will the world who anxiously watches actions of our Congress."[44] "I am ashamed and sad as I look at the quality of the representative body which appears to the world as the authority of America….the fact that we continue to permit a person of the

[41] Letter from Evelyn Tyler to Theodore Green, June 29, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, RG 46, Box 1, Folder 1.
[42] Letter from Lewis Ferrell to the Committee on Privileges and Elections, July 31, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, RG 46, Box 1, Folder 1.
[43] Letter from John Sengstacke to Theodore Green, September 17, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, RG 46, Box 1, Folder 2.
[44] Letter from Ella Barrows to Allen Ellender, January 3, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, RG 46, Box 1, Folder 2.

expressed opinions…of Bilbo to speak to us and to the world for the USA is a disgrace."[45] The authors of these letters and countless others sent to Bilbo and the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections speak to Thomas Sugrue's contention that in the post-war period, many activists throughout the United States, "fashioned protests that were performed on a local stage, but always with an eye toward the national and international." According to Sugrue, these activists always "acted locally, but thought globally."[46]

Bilbo on the International Stage

As it turns out, the writers of the aforementioned letters were not using hyperbole in their warnings about how nations throughout the world might view Bilbo's campaign, hearing, and exoneration by the Senate investigating committee at a time when the Cold War was rapidly becoming the defining feature of twentieth century American domestic and foreign policy. Importantly, Bilbo's campaign highlighted the post-war contradiction between America's image as the arbiter of democracy and its practice of racial separation on an international stage, in which the horrors of Nazism and racial engineering forced nations to grapple with definitions of racial identity and citizenship in new ways. In the newly formed United Nations, committed to the ideal of Human Rights, many emerging nations possessed the power to "punch-up" to superpowers about social and political issues. [47]

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[45] Letter from Elizabeth Moss to Allen Ellender, November 22, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, RG 46, Box 1, Folder 3.
[46] Thomas Sugrue, "Hillburn, Hattiesburg, and Hitler: Wartime Activists think Globally and Act Locally," in Kevin Kruse and Stephen Tuck, *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 88.
[47] Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (NJ: Princeton University Press), 23.

While extant historiography by scholars including Mary Dudziak, Carol Anderson, Penny Von Eschen, and Tim Borstelmann has detailed the myriad ways in which American domestic civil rights issues influenced American foreign policy and vice versa, these works have suffered from extremely broad geographic and temporal frameworks and fail to draw connections between key nations during the immediate post-war period. Moreover, such studies have utilized source bases that are inadequate for answering questions regarding social agency in defining the relationship between individuals and the international community after World War II. What has been suspiciously absent from the historical narrative until present are the roles of South Africa and India, two of the most economically and socially significant nations in the world during this time period. Both nations held substantial financial and raw material resources, and both emerged to define citizenship in different ways following World War II.

In 1946, as Bilbo harped on racial inferiority in Mississippi, the white minority South African government began redefine the terms of citizenship for South Africans and did so along increasingly racial lines. In so doing, the government tightened its grip around the throats of its non-white populations. The prosperity of the war years in South Africa did not trickle down to the masses and many African farm workers continued to be treated in a manner akin to slavery.[48] As early as January of 1946, non-white South Africans opined that "Politically, South Africa is a democracy…for the overwhelming majority, it is a slave colony."[49] In February, a host of voices from South Africa's 250,000 citizens of Indian descent, mostly concentrated in the country's Natal region,

[48] Borstelmann, *Apartheid's Reluctant Uncle*, 66-68.
[49] "Dr. E.T. Dietrich's Presidential Address," *Cape Standard*, January 8, 1946.

protested the passage of the Pegging Act—an act that barred Indians and black South Africans from acquiring property in areas that were not already designated as living spaces for these individuals. Delegations of Indians from South Africa were sent to India and England to voice concerns about the growing restrictions against people of color in South Africa.[50]

South Africa's increased racial restrictions seemed to be having detrimental effects at the local level. In the Northern Cape, residents noticed that "segregation is being introduced into little villages…where white and black had, in the past, got along in perfect harmony, and overlooked pigmentory trifles," as one columnist remarked.[51] Segregation arose in virtually every form of life in South Africa. Even post offices, such as the one in Port Nolloth, refused service to non-European patrons. One writer asked the *Cape Standard*, "we have segregation in industry, segregation in education, segregation on railway stations—now segregation in post offices. What next South African Democracy?"[52] That South African citizens were witnessing their nation transition from a democratic pre-war nation in which citizens of color were at least given a modicum of rights to one which was increasingly coming to be defined by the color of one's skin highlights a battle similar to the struggle African Americans found awaiting them when they returned home from the Second World War and one that was waged at the ballot boxes of Mississippi.

Much like the United States, South Africa embarked on a post-war campaign of anti-Communism that tied deeply into its policies regarding race. As Tim Borstelmann

[50] "Natal Indians Determined to Resist," *Cape Standard*, February 5, 1946.
[51] "Segregation in Namaqualand," *Cape Standard*, March 12, 1946.
[52] "Segregation in Namaqualand," *Cape Standard*, March 12, 1946.

argues, "the repressive policies of [the United Party] government and the rising tide of Afrikaner nationalism in 1946 and 1947 helped transform…democratic rule in South Africa."[53] The changing climate meant that in South Africa, the political party that appeared tougher on people of color, and by extension, their perceived Communist allies, would control the nation and, in turn, gain the favor of the United States. For these reasons, the zealously-white Nationalist Party began to make large inroads into South African politics during this period, campaigning on promises of ridding the nation of Communists and restoring law and order. Once in power, the Nationalist Party instituted laws regulating sexual relationships, marriage, housing permits, citizenship, and travel targeted at non-white South Africans, aiding in the overall disfranchisement and institutional poverty of the South African people of color.

Similarly, India, one of the most populated and promising emerging markets in the post-war period sought to reformulate its definition of citizenship. Strikes and revolts in India during World War II had renewed age-old debates within the British government about Indian independence. Despite the turmoil at home, Indians had their eyes on other nations, especially the United States and South Africa, and the United States returned India's gaze, realizing that it possessed a massive untapped economic market. In April 1946, the United States announced plans to build embassies, consulates, and residencies in India, which would bring an estimated infusion of roughly 6 million pounds (roughly 184 million pounds in 2014) to the Indian economy.[54] Girja Bajpal, India's Agent-General in Washington, told a New Delhi branch of the Indian Council on World Affairs that he believed the Second World War had made the United States "India-conscious."

[53] Borstelmann, *Apartheid's Reluctant Uncle*, 73.
[54] "America to Acquire Properties in India?" *Bombay Chronicle*, April 25 1946.

Indian politicians believed that if granted independence, India could become an international power. One politician believed that "Until this war began and the might of India in industrial, material, and manpower was put forth on the…battlefields of the world, America had not a very clear idea of the possibilities of India as a world power….I do not think that we are now looked upon as a land of tricksters…many Americans are wondering whether…there is not a country other than China in Asia which can take the role of leadership…in the maintenance of peace in this continent and possibly throughout the world."[55]

India used its position in the early Cold War to become a vocal critic of the racial and colonial policies of South Africa and the United States.[56] One scholar has noted that, "politically conscious Indians [were] greatly interested in the United States. Consequently, when the Indian government [acted] on an important question of American relations, it [was] likely to give considerable thought to prevailing Indian attitudes on the subject."[57] India's global importance and potential as a superpower became solidified with its inclusion into the United Nations in 1946. During its first months of UN membership, India began to criticize the growing mistreatment of Indians and people of color in South Africa. In late May, in response to the policies of the South African government, India terminated its trade agreement with South Africa and recalled its High Commissioner.[58] Shortly after severing ties, Jawaharlal Nehru declared that "the time has

[55] "War has Made USA India-Conscious," *The Statesman*, July 3 1946.
[56] Paul Gordon Lauren, "Seen from the Outside: International Perspective on America's Dilemma," in *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs 1945-1988* ed. Brenda Gayle Plummer (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 26.
[57] Lawrence K. Rosinger, *India and the United States: Political and Economic Relations* (NY: Macmillan Company, 1950), 4; D.R. SarDesai, *India: The Definitive History* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008), 301, 308-310.
[58] "India Breaks with South Africa?," *Bombay Chronicle*, May 30 1946.

come when the theory and practice of racial arrogance and discrimination must be challenged," and India would not "recognize or submit to the theory and practice of racial arrogance and discrimination," especially in regard to its citizens abroad. Nehru warned that while India might not be "strong enough as a nation or people to put an end to racial discrimination at the moment…. that time is coming soon."[59]

In the spring and summer of 1946, the government of India implemented strict domestic laws against European South Africans visiting the nation. Banks and hotels banned South African citizens, the Indian government refused to grant visas to South African Europeans wishing to visit India, India's flight control board diverted flights from its Bangalore-Karachi Airport arriving from South Africa, and the city government of Bangalore passed ordinances which forced 50 South Africans living in the city to leave.[60]

In June India filed human rights charges against South Africa in the UN General Assembly, making it clear that race relations and citizenship could no longer be relegated to national control. The complaint stated that relations between India and South Africa had become a "very serious" issue and had deteriorated to a point where India restricted all trade with South Africa and that continued racial discrimination in South Africa threatened future relations between the two countries.[61] Dr. N.B. Khare, a member of the commonwealth relations cabinet in India stated that placing India's issues with South Africa before the UN was "tantamount to war," and if the discussions in the UN failed, Dr. Khare declared that "the only thing left for India to do to establish her self-respect

[59] "India's Strong Arm will Protect her Children Wherever They Be," *Bombay Chronicle*, June 3, 1946.
[60] "Grave News," *The Statesman*, July 2, 1946.
[61] "India Files formal Complaint with U.N.O." *Bombay Chronicle*, June 24, 1946; "India's Complaint Before UNO," *The Statesman*, June 25, 1946.

would be the actual declaration of war…if the government does not do so, it will fall short of expectations."[62] "If racial oppression and colour bar [in South Africa] do not go," declared Sorabji Rustomji, leader of the passive resistance movement of Indians in South Africa, "then…[the U.N.] has failed, and the failure of this organization means World War III."[63]

The Soviet Union did not miss the opportunity to sidle closer to India, often critiquing the policies of South Africa and drawing close comparisons to racial policy in the United States in the pages of *Pravda*, the nation's foremost publication. In May, the *Bombay Chronicle* declared that there had been "Soviet penetration" throughout Asia, arguing that the Soviet Union had even set up a "high powered radio station" that was openly sending propaganda throughout India. Shortly following this report, *Pravda* began attacking South Africa's increasing racial policies stating the racial separation laws represented, "the peculiar antiquated approach of certain groups to the questions associated with the life…of colonial peoples."[64]

The campaign, hearing, and broiling Senate turmoil over Theodore Bilbo's racially charged campaign, posed clear problems for the future of amicable relations between the United States and India during this period. The connections between Bilbo, a senior Senator with an enormous amount of power in United States, the supposed heart of freedom and equality, were not lost on Indian citizens.[65] "The most deplorable manifestation of brutal and dangerous stupidity is Theodore Bilbo," wrote a columnist for

[62] "Anti-Indian Policy of South Africa," *The Statesman*, May 12, 1946.
[63] "Sowing Seeds of World War III," *Bombay Chronicle*, November 4, 1946.
[64] "Soviet Dope for India," *Bombay Chronicle*, May 7, 1946; "Soviet Press Attacks S.A. Colour Bar," *Bombay Chronicle*, June 28, 1946.
[65] "Discrimination in the U.S.A." *The Statesman* (New Delhi), June 24 1946.

the *New Delhi Statesman*, "He has disgraced the principles of the American constitution...[he screams] for violence, which should put any man in any country in jail for incitement to racial riot….Like [Joseph] Goebbels…[Bilbo] plays on the basest fears and passions of the ignorant."[66]

An Op-ed for the *Bombay Chronicle* remarked that India's brief to the U.N., threats of war against South Africa, and severing of diplomatic ties with racist nations would pressure the United States into enforcing economic sanctions against South Africa and would push it to make some reforms of its own regarding racial justice. According to the author of the Op-ed, India's UN brief was filed with, "an eye on the skeleton in America's own cupboard. There is the natural fear that someone may draw international attention to it to the United States' annoyance and serious embarrassment."[67] India kept a close eye on the elections of 1946. In June, Indian newspapers reported the flogging of Etoy Fletcher, and remarked that there appeared to be an "anti-negro campaign" in the United States. "The United States of America claims the right to democratic leadership," wrote the editor of the *Chronicle*. He continued:

> But there is also a good deal which constitutes an ugly and repulsive betrayal of the principles which the United States proclaims and professes to practice....The Negro is a pariah in many parts of the country and…an equal citizen nowhere. The constitution of the United States gives the Negro the vote. But that particular provision has been perverted deliberately to deny him the vote in the Southern States. It is again in full swing in Mississippi….One candidate is calling on every 'red blooded Anglo-Saxon'…to use 'any means to keep Negroes from voting….Meanwhile intimidation, terror, and violence are abroad. Is this democracy?[68]

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[66] Stuart Gelder, "Treatment of Negroes in U.S.A.," *The Statesman*, July 9, 1946.
[67] "An American Opposition," *New York Times*, June 27, 1946.
[68] Etoy Fletcher was the African American male who was whipped with a metal cable on his way to the polls on July 2. For more on his testimony before the committee and before committee investigators, see Chapters 4 and 5; "Anti-Negro Campaign," *Bombay Chronicle*, June 25, 1946; "Anti-Negro Campaign in U.S.," *Bombay Chronicle*, June 24, 1946; "Negro Flogged for Registering to Vote," *Bombay Chronicle*, June 24, 1946.

Other nations took notice of the violence in Mississippi. West African National Secretariat Kwame Nkrumah wrote President Harry Truman stating that his letter "expressed the opinions of the peoples of Africa and peoples of African descent in England," all of whom condemned the violence in Mississippi as "fiendish." Nkrumah encouraged Truman "to put an end to this inhuman practice."[69] The references to racial violence in the South and Bilbo's rhetoric became palpable examples of America's contradictions and inequalities for readers throughout the world. A writer for Moscow's second largest publication *Izvestia* pointed out the hypocrisy of western democratic governments. "Politicians…in the United States talk about the principles of the Atlantic Charter," the writer began, "but these clients of the Anglo-Saxon powers keep quiet about the fate of…Negroes in the United States….Despite all protests of progressive circles of the United States, the situation of Negroes, especially in the southern states, is very bad." The writer continued, "they are constantly reminded of the colour of their skin and are isolated from the white population by a wall of racial discrimination." "The latest intensification of discrimination against Negroes in the United States," concluded the author, "is one more example of the activity of American reaction on the homefront."[70] The author undoubtedly had his eye on the cross burnings, beatings and intimidation that followed in the months after Bilbo's election.

The heightened racial atmosphere in the United States, charged by Bilbo's hate-filled rhetoric, posed a significant problem for the United States in the midst of the burgeoning discord between South Africa and India. If it wanted to exert its influence abroad in the early Cold War in both nations, the United States would have to thread a

[69] "Africans Protest Lynching in U.S.," *Jackson Advocate*, September 28, 1946.
[70] "U.S. Reaction on Homefront," *Bombay Chronicle*, October 14, 1946.

diplomatic needle, appeasing the growing racial and national sentiments of South Africa while simultaneously courting racially conscious India. In an attempt to deflect growing criticisms from India and the Soviet Union, the United States loosened its restrictions on Indian immigration by passing the Indian Immigration and Naturalization Bill on July 2, 1946 (the same day as Bilbo's Primary), which allowed 75 "Eastern Hemisphere Indians" to enter the United States every year and provided avenues for naturalization for Indian citizens already living in the United States.[71] One congressman in the United States hailed the bill as "a token of the goodwill between two great nations," and opined that, "the future of both nations should be solidly entwined."[72] Pundits in India praised the bill as "of little material importance, but it would have moral significance," and declared that it was a "welcome gesture of goodwill," but that "it would be less than honest if Indians…refrained from deploring the virulent racial fanaticism, which certain…white Americans practice against their negro fellow-citizens."[73]

American policymakers and business interests also wanted to maintain solid diplomatic ties with India's polar opposite nation: South Africa. The United States understood the potential that South Africa's rich deposits of Uranium—necessary for the construction of atomic weapons-- and its abundance of raw materials including gold and diamonds could hold for economic growth. The United States also saw South Africa as a burgeoning market for tourism and industry. As one newspaper noted, South Africa

[71] "Truman Signs India Bill," *Bombay Chronicle*, July 3, 1946.
[72] "Indians Eligible for U.S. Citizenship," *The Statesman*, June 30, 1946.
[73] "Welcome Gesture," and "Negroes in the U.S." *New York Times*, June 18, 1946.

"makes few consumer goods. The public here has been deprived of overseas products for five years and now they are avid to buy anything and everything."[74]

In order to maintain stable relations with both South Africa, the United States began to offer justifications for and temper reports concerning the nation's harsh racial policies. In the early summer of 1946, American newspapers ran articles that painted the growing prominence of the Nationalist Party as a "necessary evil" for a nation filled with subversive elements including Communists and even witches. For example, in August 1946 the South African government hanged a black South African man for what they described as a "ritual murder," in which the man killed his victim in order to allegedly make a salve from the victim's organs that would give the murderer supernatural powers. The *New York Times* stated that "the trial [of the murderer] showed that witchcraft has a powerful grip on African Negroes even when converted [to Christianity]."[75] Othering black South Africans with such blanket statements allowed the United States to justify the Union's policies against its non-white populations. Another reporter for the *Times* justified the policies against people of color in South Africa by stating that the "ritual" murders stemmed from "certain political bodies" that were "using witchcraft as an instrument to further their aims to break the powers of [local] chiefs." The reporter lamented his belief that "Communist incitement is alleged."[76]

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[74] In the spring of 1946, the US announced an infusion of roughly 3,000,000 pounds into the SA economy through construction from Ford, General Motors, and Goodyear Companies who built factories in the country. "Boom in Capetown in Consumer Goods," *New York Times*, March 3, 1946; "South Africa Glad of New U.S. Plants," *New York Times*, March 7, 1946; "Africa is Termed Untapped Reserved," *New York Times*, December 11, 1948.

[75] "Basuto Man Hanged for Ritual Murder," *New York Times*, August 17, 1946.

[76] "Basuto Killers Doomed," *New York Times*, August 28, 1948; reports that South African officials had begun staging gladiatorial fights between African natives and policemen circulated news circuits during this period and helped further the foreign and "other" perceptions of South Africa in the United States as a nation filled with savages, both white and black that was beyond saving see "Negro Combats Staged by Police," *New York Times*, September 8, 1948.

The Aftermath of Bilbo's Election

Reactions to the Senate Committee's recommendation to seat Bilbo rippled throughout the world. For a certain segment of America's population, the committee's recommendation to seat Bilbo was hailed as a victory of white ideals and white supremacy in a world that appeared to be changing too rapidly following the war. As Morris Hemmenway declared, "States rights and White Supremacy are at stake. We cannot afford to lose them!" Similar sentiments echoed in wide ranging places such as New York and Chicago highlighted how whites viewed the larger stakes of Bilbo's battle. It was not only a battle for a Senate seat, but also a battle for their way of life. [77] This struggle fashioned Bilbo into the nation's foremost champion of white supremacy and southern "traditions." As the support of the committee, headed by a Louisiana Senator suggests, Bilbo's hearing had lasting consequences for the development of southern politics for decades to come. In the years that followed, southern Democrats distanced themselves from other members of their party by making racial issues a key component of their platforms, and turning elections into referendums on racial pride and northern intrusion into southern affairs.

Other citizens recognized the damage that the battle over Bilbo's senate seat would cause on an international scale in the growing Cold War with Russia. Many Americans, including members of the Civil Rights Congress, agreed that, "America does not wish to face a new world under the shame of the presence in its highest legislative

[77] Letter from Morris Hemmenway to Allen Ellender, no date, Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections, NARA, RG 46, Box 1, Folder 2.

chamber of a man steeped in the practice of violence and corruption."[78] These individuals understood that the effects of Bilbo's campaign and its aftermath would not be limited to the United States, but held broader geopolitical significance in the Cold War world. American fears became manifest in the United States' relations with India and South Africa. Bilbo's campaign speeches in 1946 provided the international community with a magnifying glass with which to view and criticize American foreign and domestic policy, which in turn influenced the relationships the United States developed with emerging nations. Newly minted post-colonial nations such as India, used Bilbo's actions to leverage its relations with the United States to receive more financial and diplomatic aid. South Africa's rising Apartheid regime used Bilbo's campaign and other instances of racial violence in America to critique American domestic policy and stave off criticism of its own policies against people of color within the UN.

While it appeared that Bilbo's confirmation was all-but assured, the battle over his Senate seat was not finished. In the weeks ahead, the Republican Party began to use the fight over Bilbo's seat as a new source of political capital with black communities in northern industrial centers. The result of these shifts would forever change the makeup of the Democratic and Republican parties and would have drastic implications for the American political landscape in the twentieth century.

[78] Memorandum to Theodore Green from National Committee to Oust Bilbo Sponsored by the Civil Rights Congress, November 19, 1946, Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, NARA, RG 46, Box 2, Folder 3.

Chapter 7

The Changing Winds of Racial Politics

Glen Taylor rushed through the main lobby of the Capitol building. It was a cold January morning, but the mix of nervousness and adrenaline managed to fortify the resolve of the newly elected Democratic Senator from Idaho. Once he grabbed his seat, the opening prayer commenced and afterward, Leslie Biffle, the Secretary of Senate, ordered that the first Senator, Raymond Baldwin of Connecticut, be sworn in. Secretary John Crockett administered the oath to Baldwin and was prepared to do the same for the next man on the list: Theodore Bilbo. However, shortly after announcing that Bilbo needed to come forth and recite the oath of office, Taylor lurched up from his seat and interjected, "Mr. Secretary, I send to the desk a resolution, to which I wish to address myself."[1] Many of the other Senators, especially those from southern states, had been expecting some sort of attempt to bar Bilbo from taking his seat, but not many expected the move to come from within Bilbo's own party.

The drama unfolding on the Senate floor highlighted the political strife Bilbo's campaign had engendered throughout the nation. Few could have realized when he was elected that Bilbo's presence in the Senate would cause such a disruption to the procedures of the federal government. This chapter examines the consequences Bilbo's election had for politics on both national and international scales, underscoring the political weight of Bilbo's statements and their effects on the Democratic Party's platform as well as the role of African American civil rights in national politics. These issues became exceedingly important leading up to the 1948 presidential election and

[1] GPO, Congressional Record, 80th Congress, 1st Session, January 3, 1947, pg. 7.

foreground some of the major issues that complicated and changed American political alignment in the mid-twentieth century. Illuminating these facets provides a profound understanding of the development of American social and political life in the post-war era. Previous works on this period have not adequately analyzed the role of Bilbo's election in shaping American politics and instead have placed emphasis on labor unrest, lynchings, or the great migration as reasons why the Democratic Party adopted a civil rights plank to its platform, ultimately leading to a victory for Harry Truman in the 1948 presidential election. These analyses, while important, fail to recognize the important role Bilbo's election played in these events. Examining the fallout from Bilbo's hearing underscores Glen Taylor's point that no other topic occupied the minds of Americans more in the post-war period than the fate of Theodore Bilbo.

Bilbo Halts a Nation

Just as quickly as Taylor had raised his resolution to bar Bilbo from taking his oath, other Senators filed motions arguing that the resolution should not be considered until after roll call. The objections went unheard and Secretary Crockett read Taylor's statement about Bilbo aloud. In his statement, Taylor argued that the Senate Committee's investigation "indicates that Theodore Bilbo may be guilty of violating the Constitution of the United States, the statutes of the United States, and the oath of office as a Senator."[2] He continued,

> The evidence adduced before the said committees indicates that the credentials [of Theodore Bilbo] are tainted with fraud and corruption; and that the seating of…Bilbo would be contrary to sound public policy, harmful to the dignity and honor of the Senate, dangerous to the perpetuation of free Government and the preservation of our constitutional liberties.[3]

[2] Records of the 80th Congress, 7.
[3] 80th Congress, 8.

Taylor then instructed that Bilbo's claim to his seat be put before the Committee on Rules and Administration with the aim of having further hearings on his efforts to obstruct voters in Mississippi. Until the Rules Committee produced a report regarding the legality of Bilbo's election, Taylor argued, Bilbo should not be allowed to take his seat. After Crockett finished reading the statement, Taylor addressed the Senate at large, stating that he presented his resolution with "a deep sense of its gravity and solemnity." Taylor offered the following qualifications for his remarks:

> I have frequently disagreed with the views of Mr. Bilbo…and…I have been doubly hesitant about taking this step….If the people of Mississippi…wish to elect to the Senate a man who advocates any belief extreme to the point of outraging great numbers of our citizens, that is their own business….But intimidation and violence cannot masquerade as free speech; indeed they destroy the freedom of the electorate.[4]

After Taylor's remarks, the Senate erupted into a frenzy. Muffled quips and even louder harangues were lobbed from the upper balcony onto Taylor and the other Senators. It was unusually crowded in the Senate chambers on January 3. News outlets noted that many friends, well-wishers, family members, and business associates, had come from all across the country to support their candidates on the day they would be sworn into office. The Senate was awash with such excitement after Taylor's denunciation of Bilbo that Biffle had to instruct the bailiffs and the Sergeant at Arms to "circulate about in the upper chamber and to direct the door keepers to keep order."[5] After calming the onlookers, Taylor gathered his thoughts and finished his speech, providing an important point of emphasis for the congressmen to consider. He declared,

> I am sure [that my colleagues] are fully aware of the great interest which the country has shown in this case. Throughout the country citizens are watching

[4] 80th Congress, session 1, part 1, 8.
[5] 80th Congress, session 1, part 1, 8; C.P. Trussell, "Senate is Unfilled," *New York Times*, January 4, 1947.

> today to see what action the Senate will take in this pressing matter….I do not exaggerate when I say that at this moment the honor and prestige of the Senate hang in the balance. To millions of Americans who have not previously evinced an interest in politics, today's action will alone determine whether this body is worthy of respect as the highest legislative body of a free people, or whether this body will fall into disrespect.[6]

Taylor told the Senate that he had recently traveled "through the Northwest, down the pacific coast to Mexico and across…to Washington," and the topic on every citizen's mind was Bilbo. "In short," Taylor concluded, "today it is not only Mr. Bilbo who is on trial. Today it is the Senate itself which is on trial….not only on trial collectively, we are on trial individually."[7] As if his point had not been driven home enough, Taylor evoked two of the largest fears in the post-war world to drive home the severity of seating a man like Bilbo in the Senate:

> [Bilbo uses] the same sort of cheap thrill that was pedled [sic] in Germany by an ambitious house painter some 10 years ago. We know that his doctrines and his methods brought no good to his people or the people of the world….they go directly counter to the teachings of brotherly love, which alone can save us all in this atomic age.[8]

Comparisons between Bilbo and Hitler abounded throughout Bilbo's campaign, but weaponizing the fear associated with the atomic bomb, in addition to Hitler's racial and ethnic beliefs, made Taylor's speech much more impactful to his fellow Senators and their guests. In fact, Taylor had elicited such an emotional response from onlookers that the upper balcony of the Senate, even though instructed not to do so, erupted in applause, drawing the ire of Democratic Georgia Senator Richard Russell who motioned that these individuals, "be cleared if they indulge in applause [again]."[9]

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[6] 80th Congress, 9.
[7] 80th Congress, 9.
[8] 80th Congress, 13.
[9] 80th Congress, 13.

Once Taylor had finished, and the Senate had come to order, Democrat John Overton from Louisiana stood in Bilbo's defense. He audaciously argued that by giving Bilbo a hearing before an irregularly called committee (the Special Committee on Privileges and Elections) rather than a regular committee such as the Rules and Administration Committee, the Senate was "undertaking to drag him by the heels to the door of the Senate and lynch him."[10] Echoing the sentiments of many of his constituents, Overton turned the issue of Bilbo's seat into one about state sovereignty versus federal government intrusion, arguing that Bilbo had been elected by the people of his state, and that endorsement should be reason enough for him to be seated.

Robert Taft, Republican Senator from Ohio, replied to Overton's analogy, "the question is not one of lynching anybody. The question is a very simple one of whether or not Senator Bilbo should be made a Member of the Senate."[11] Taft asked Overton if he would allow the thirty-five other elected Senators to be sworn in and then return to the debate over Bilbo. Overton knew that after those thirty-five Senators had been sworn in, the Republican Party would have a majority in the Senate and would most likely expel Bilbo as its first order of business. He decided to stall. When Overton did not acquiesce to swearing in the remaining thirty-five members, Taft pointedly asked, "then, the Senator is preventing the organization of the Senate." "No sir, I am not," Overton sharply replied, "I am fighting a resolution proposed by the Senator from Idaho and his aides on the Republican side."[12] For Overton and his supporters, they were not stopping the

[10] 80th Congress, 14.
[11] 80th Congress, 16.
[12] 80th Congress, 17.

wheels of government from turning, but the issue put forth by Senator Taylor was to be blamed for throwing a wrench into the system.

Despite Overton's objections, Taft proposed a resolution to the Senate that the question of Bilbo's Senate seat be resolved after the other Senators had been sworn in. Almost as if on cue, the next soldier in the Bilbo phalanx picked up Overton's spear. Democratic Georgia Senator Frank George continued with Overton's argument and meandered through the meaning of the word "expulsion" *ad nauseam* before Taft again stole the floor and proposed his resolution. A vote was taken, thirty-eight yeas to twenty nays. It appeared that the fight over Bilbo's seat would be tabled until Monday when the Senate reconvened. After the long battle over Bilbo's seat appeared to have ended for the time being, a motion was brought forth to administer the oath of office to Ralph Brewster, an incoming Senator from Maine. Immediately after the motion was put forth, Overton jumped to his feet and offered a substitute resolution that Bilbo be permitted to take his oath of office.[13] Supporting this resolution was none other than Elmer Thomas of Oklahoma, one of the members of the Committee that presided over Bilbo's hearing. Thomas went on record and recited all of the charges against Bilbo, evidence collected, and testimony provided that were assessed by the committee. In the congressional record, Thomas remarked that he wished to do this so that he could provide those Senators who were not present with an accurate rendering of the events surrounding the hearing so that they could vote on Bilbo's seat effectively.[14] After a lengthy discussion of every facet of

[13] 80th Congress, 20.
[14] Normally Congress would have timely access to the reports filed by Committees before the issues were brought before them, but the majority and minority reports were not filed until the morning of January 3 just before the Senate convened, so they did not have time to review the reports in detail. See Congressional Record, 80th Congress, Session 1, Part 1, 25.

Bilbo's hearing, including every line of testimony, Thomas yielded the floor to Robert Taft who, in utter disgust with the day's proceedings, offered a solution. The Senate should adjourn until the following day. "If by that time," Taft suggested, "those who are blocking the organization of the Senate have not changed their minds…we should meet Monday morning, Monday afternoon, Monday evening, and continuously…until this question is settled." Taft rebuked the Senators supporting Bilbo, declaring that,

> Resort to a filibuster in such an important matter, for such wholly inconsequential purpose, namely to prevent the temporary postponement of this question…is so unjustifiable that it seems to me that if those who are conducting the filibuster…are not willing to change their minds, they are going to face a complete change in the rules of the Senate….a change which will bring about majority cloture…and I think will have the full support of the country….two thirds of the Senate desire that the Senate be organized without Bilbo…yet in spite of that, a few desire to thwart the will of the entire Senate.[15]

Senate Minority Leader Alben Barkley, a Democrat from Kentucky, stood immediately and delivered a speech in support of Taft's convictions and importantly added, "the questions [involving Bilbo] are above partisanship. They are far above political considerations. They involve the integrity of the United States Senate….They involve the estimate of the world of ourselves as a legislative body, and involve not only our standing among our people, but world opinion respecting the validity of our action."[16] After a few parting words, the Senate voted and agreed to recess until the following day to continue debate. After nearly six hours of argument and debate, the Senate rested without coming to a conclusion on Bilbo's seat.

Debate raged on the following day. More Senators began to choose sides for and against Bilbo. Carl Hatch from New Mexico and Edwin Johnson of Colorado, both

[15] Congressional Record, 80th Congress, Session 1, Part 1, 30.
[16] Congressional Record, 80th Congress, Session 1, Part 1, 30.

Democrats, rallied to Bilbo's cause. James Eastland, Bilbo's counterpart in the Senate from Mississippi, also weighed in on the issue. Eastland contended that every state has the right to be represented by two Senators and Mississippi's rights should not be infringed, Bourke Hickenlooper pointed out that Virginia had gone two days now without any representation in the Senate because of the filibuster brought on by Bilbo supporters.[17] In one of the longest diatribes of the day, Ellender played up the conspiracy-laden tirades that Bilbo infamously used throughout his campaign to blame northern and outside interests in the actions of southern states. He rhetorically asked the Senate, "why should the election of Senator Bilbo have become so important all over the world?....I was abroad during the election in Mississippi. In newspapers in the Philippines, China, Egypt, Greece, and other countries I saw countless articles and a large number of pictures of Senator Bilbo."[18]

Ellender answered his own questions by detailing for the Senate his belief in a worldwide conspiracy in which, "certain groups" wanted Bilbo out of office. "If they should succeed in throwing him out, other members of the Senate who share his views better look out."[19] Ellender held the floor for nearly the entire day as he stalled on various talking points about Bilbo's character as an anti-Communist and even re-reading the entirety of the majority report and investigation into Bilbo's election.[20] The rest of the day was spent re-reading the Senate's War Investigating Committee's report into contributions Bilbo received from war contractors.

[17] Congressional Record, 80th Congress, session 1, part 1, 75-76.
[18] Congressional Record, 80th Congress, session 1, part 1, 78.
[19] Congressional Record, 80th Congress, session 1, part 1, 78.
[20] Congressional Record, 80th Congress, session 1, part 1, 79-80, 93.

Almost a second full day in the Senate was wasted without any action taken. Then, at the eleventh hour, Alben Barkley proposed a vote. He stood from his seat and told the members of Congress that in the August after his election, Bilbo had been diagnosed with cancer in his lower jaw. After a successful operation, during which much of his lower jaw was removed, the cancer did not abate and a second operation was recommended, but wanted to postpone the operation until after January when the fate of his contested Senate seat would be determined.

Barkley informed the Senate, "the Senator-elect has advised me that he is compelled…in the interest of his health…to return immediately to New Orleans in order that the operation [removing a larger section of his jaw, two glands in the throat and part of his cheek] may be completed at the earliest possible date."[21] Barkley announced that it would take Bilbo an additional six weeks to recover from his surgery after which time Bilbo's future health could still be undetermined. Barkley concluded by asking the Senate for unanimous consent to declare that the issue surrounding Bilbo's seat be tabled until he is able to return to the Senate and that the newly elected Senators be sworn in immediately.[22] Without any objections, the resolution passed, and for the time being, Bilbo was prevented from taking his Senate seat. The agreement brokered in the Senate importantly included a stipulation that many would later see as detracting from the overall "victory" of blocking Bilbo. During the backroom deal brokered between Barkley, Bilbo, and Taft, the Senate determined that Bilbo would still receive his full salary despite the fact that he would physically appear in the Senate. [23]

[21] Congressional Record, 80th Congress, session 1, part 1, 108.
[22] Congressional Record, 80th Congress, session 1, part 1, 109.
[23] "Compromise Wins," *New York Times*, January 5, 1947.

A Pyrrhic Victory?

The agreement with Bilbo was viewed as a mixed bag throughout the nation. A number of black news outlets hailed the Senate's decision as a victory, noting that while it was unfortunate that Bilbo would still be paid during his leave of absence, "in Bilbo's case," the editor of the Philadelphia *Afro-American* quipped, "the money is well-spent."[24] Moreover, the editor believed that even if Bilbo's operation and recovery went well, and he was able to return to the Senate, opposition would mount to such a degree that he would be denied his seat because the fight against Bilbo represented "a fight against the violation of certain principles of morality and decency," which placed "the Senate, more than Bilbo," on trial before the nation and the rest of the world.[25]

For others, the Bilbo agreement was a hollow end to a hard fought battle. Only days after word of the agreement reached the press, Charles Houston, the lead council for African Americans during the hearing, wrote a piece for the NAACP's periodical, *The Crisis* in which he warned readers that the fight against Bilbo was not over. The larger battle to be fought, he contended, was against what Bilbo had engendered: a political discourse built on racism and fear. To combat what was coming to be termed "Bilboism," Houston suggested federal prosecution of the registrars and other individuals who physically obstructed voters on July 2. "This does not call for an…investigation," Houston wrote, "the proof is already laid out in the official transcript of the testimony taken at the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections."[26] "The federal government should either enforce the Constitution in every state of the union, or confess democracy is

[24] "Bilbo Takes it on the Jaw," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, January 11, 1947.
[25] "Bilbo Takes it on the Jaw," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, January 11, 1947.
[26] Charles Houston, "The Highway," *The Crisis*, January 8, 1947, Papers of the NAACP, Part 18, series B, reel 4.

a failure. It is hard to understand how a government which can conquer Germany and Japan, still cannot make a Mississippi policeman behave and respect a citizen's…rights." Houston closed his editorial noting that if Bilbo dies or cannot resume office, an even more important battle will take place over who should replace him in the Senate. A special election would be required and that would be a key moment when African Americans should exercise their rights to vote in someone with less racial prejudice than Bilbo.[27]

Others similarly viewed the Senate's verdict as a shameful act that allowed the senator to save face. Thurgood Marshall and Walter White sought to file an injunction against the Treasury department so that Bilbo could not be paid his salary. "Even though we might eventually lose the suit," White wrote Marshall, "the nuisance and publicity value of the suit would be well worth it….such a suit would certainly force the Senate's hands on the shameful compromise, which they put over the American people."[28] The NAACP never followed through with its case against paying Bilbo his salary since it deemed the legal argument too flimsy, but it did send a letter on January 23, asking Attorney General Tom Clark of the Justice Department to prosecute testifiers at Bilbo's hearing who admitted to preventing blacks from voting in the primary, but failed to receive a meaningful response from the DOJ.[29] Calls for Bilbo's indictment continued

[27] Charles Houston, "The Highway," The Crisis, January 8, 1947, Papers of the NAACP, Part 18, series B, reel 4.
[28] Memorandum from Walter White to Thurgood Marshall, January 11, 1947, Papers of the NAACP, Part 18, series B, reel 4.
[29] Letter from Thurgood Marshall to Tom Clark, January 23, 1947; Letter from Charles Houston to Thurgood Marshall, January 16, 1947, Papers of the NAACP, Part 18, series B, reel 4.

throughout early February as many believed that only a prosecution in front of a jury would, "be a fitting end to [Bilbo's] career."[30]

Bilbo Leaves a Legacy

Bilbo would not have much time to enjoy being away from the limelight. In the weeks that followed the fight over his Senate seat, he witnessed the publication of his manuscript *Take Your Choice: Separation or Mongrelization* in which he outlined his views on racial separation and recalled his efforts in Congress to pass legislation on behalf of "the white race." In his first chapter, Bilbo called American race relations "our greatest domestic problem," explaining that while racial issues "may seem to lie dormant at times, it continually exists, lives on and sometimes rages with all the fury of a jungle beast."[31] His supporters loved the book. A man from Benton, Mississippi suggested that Bilbo should "have one hundred thousand copies printed at once….I could sell five thousand copies in one season myself."[32]

As months passed, things did not look bright for the ailing senator Bilbo, as he underwent three operations on his jaw to remove cancerous tissue. Even though reports were positive concerning Bilbo's health, readers throughout the nation understood that at nearly seventy years of age, the multiple operations had to be taking a toll on the Senator's health, and his followers became desperate for guidance. "If there was ever a time when we need people in the Senate that believe in white supremacy it's right now," wrote Sarah Williams. She informed Bilbo that she had recently attended a meeting held

[30] "Indictment of Garrisons May Foreshadow Fate Facing Bilbo," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, February 8, 1947.
[31] Theodore Bilbo, *Take your Choice: Separation or Mongrelization* (Poplarville, Mississippi: Self Published, 1947), 6.
[32] Letter from Wallace Blackwell to Theodore Bilbo, March 5, 1947, Papers of the Theodore Bilbo, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 960, Folder 4.

by an African American civil rights group in Washington, D.C. in which they talked about "[forcing] themselves upon the Anglo Saxon race." Without Bilbo in office, she despaired, "the white race is going to sit by and see the communist group put everything over they desire to concerning the Negro."[33] Weeks and operations had multiplied since his fiery election speeches and the subsequent press that followed.

The Senator was a shadow of his former self. From his hospital bed in New Orleans, he did not even have the strength to respond to letters and well-wishes from his faithful followers.[34] On August 7, 1947, Bilbo underwent a plastic surgery procedure in an attempt to artificially reconstruct the portion of his jaw removed by the doctors in previous weeks. After undergoing the operation, Bilbo took a turn for the worse, suffering a high fever and infection. Two weeks later, on August 22, he died.[35] The black press hailed his death as having removed "one more of the [racist] bloc" in Congress, which had previously included such infamous figures as Huey Long and Eugene Talmadge. "We are glad Bilbo's gone," wrote the editor of the *Afro-American*, "but certainly don't want a successor who'll be just as bad."[36] The Baltimore *Afro-American* reported that, "news of…Theodore Bilbo's death…brought unparalleled rejoicing throughout the civilized America….persons in Baltimore [treated] children to free sodas and bartenders throughout the country giving free drinks with which to toast he end of four decades of vicious racial hatred."[37]

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[33] Letter from Sarah Williams to Theodore Bilbo, July 1, 1947, Papers of Theodore Bilbo, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 964, Folder 4.
[34] "Bilbo has third Operation," *New York Times*, June 7, 1947; "Bilbo Convalescing," *New York Times*, June 9, 1947.
[35] "Bilbo Dead at 69 of Heart Ailment," *New York Times*, August 22, 1947; "Bilbo Stricken by Fever," *New York Times*, August 16, 1947; "Bilbo to Enter Hospital Today," *New York Times*, August 7, 1947;
[36] "Challenge to Mississippi," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, August 30, 1947.
[37] "Nation-wide Rejoicing Follows Bilbo's Death," *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 30, 1947.

Just before Bilbo's death in the spring of 1947, it appeared as though the previous year's election, Bilbo's hearing, and the increased attention on Mississippi from both global and national outlets were fueling a drive in black voter registration across Mississippi. An eye-witness declared in the spring of 1947 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."[38] Shocked at the mere possibility of blacks registering en masse, headlines throughout the South began to read, "White Supremacy is in Peril."[39] Throughout the spring, reports continued to trickle in 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."[40] 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… [heightens] the need for a special legislative session against the alleged 'menace' of Negro voting in Democratic primaries."[41]

In response to growing numbers of black voters, Mississippi legislators passed two new primary laws in March that directly attacked black suffrage. The first of the two laws required that any voter needed to have participated in at least three primaries, voting for the party to which they claimed allegiance and "needed to prove that he is in accord with the statement of principles of the party." The previous statute, a point of contention during Bilbo's hearing, did not require voters to have participated in any previous

[38] "Mississippi Sees Negro Votes Rise," *New York Times*, February 2, 1947.
[39] "White Supremacy is in Peril," *Jackson Daily News*, January 29, 1947.
[40] "Negroes Gaining Mississippi Vote," *New York Times*, February 7, 1947.
[41] Ibid.

primaries, but did require that they be registered to the party for which they would be casting their vote. Under the new law, if African Americans wished to vote in the Democratic Primary in Mississippi, and have any real say in a majority Democrat state, they now had to swear allegiance to the state arm of the Democratic Party, which opposed an anti-poll tax law, the Fair Employment Practices Committee, and anti-lynching legislation.[42]

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. It was clear that this law was designed to circumvent federal involvement in elections by creating committees for both parties populated by southerners who would disqualify the claims of the disfranchised despite being tasked with "redressing their grievances." [43] The cycle of achievement and repression, only beginning to become evident to the rest world, speaks to Jason Morgan Ward's contention that Mississippi's new laws embodied a "shift toward a consciously segregationist backlash" by Mississippi's white community in the wake of Bilbo's campaign and hearing.[44]

Charles Houston described the new laws as "queer twists" in the larger plot to disfranchise the black electorate in Mississippi. In his syndicated column, "The Highway," he wrote, "Mississippi demands that a Negro foreswear his claim to federal protection as a condition of exercising his federal right. In my opinion, this is clearly

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[42] Charles Houston, "The Highway," August 6, 1947, in Papers of the NAACP, part 18, series A, reel 3.
[43] 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.
[44] 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.

unconstitutional." Houston hoped that since similar laws enacted in states including Oklahoma and Texas were found unconstitutional, a Supreme Court challenge to Mississippi's new law would also be successful. Houston's optimism was tempered, however, by the prospect of engaging in a legal battle and spending valuable time and resources on an issue that should have already been settled. For civil rights activists in the post-war period, even a victory like keeping Bilbo out of office, came with the reality of having to fight against new and familiar defenses in the bulwark of white supremacy.[45]

Mississippi's primaries took place in early August, a few weeks before Bilbo's death. The *New York Times* reported that black voters were "unchallenged" at the polls. Reports indicated that election officials, "generally let Negro voters cast their ballots," without requiring them to swear allegiance to party principles as the new laws required. Similar to the previous year's election, some of the votes cast by African Americans were challenged by election officials, but, the *Times* reported, the new committee set up in the spring to handle issues involving state elections declared the challenged "frivolous" and allowed the votes to stand. Surprisingly, the committee declared that it would be "one of the quietest elections in the history of Mississippi." Percy Greene, editor of the *Jackson Advocate* and one of the testifiers at Bilbo's hearing, told the press that, "the voting is going better for the colored people than ever before. There have been some turned down for reasons I don't think are exactly right—but the results are encouraging."[46] In fact, the only violence on election day indicated the fracturing ideals of southern whites. Two white election officials were assaulted, one of whom was shot and killed, by two other

[45] Charles Houston, "The Highway," syndicated column, August 6, 1947, Papers of the NAACP, Part 18, series A, reel 3.
[46] "Mississippi Quiet in 'White Primary'; Few Negroes Vote, Most Unchallenged," *New York Times*, August 6, 1947.

white men because the election officials were letting African Americans vote without challenge.[47]

Almost instantly after Bilbo's death, talk spread throughout the nation of holding a special election to fill Bilbo's Senate seat, with speculation about who might run for the open position.[48] The new election held special significance for Mississippi. African Americans had registered in even larger numbers and had attempted to vote for the second time since Reconstruction only several weeks prior to Bilbo's death. The state had a chance, with this special election, to try and rewrite its devastating record on race relations, which was only harmed with Bilbo's election the previous summer. While Mississippi's African American population realized that the chances of electing a candidate in their state who pushed for racial equality was slim, many believed that placing a candidate in the legislative body who was even only slightly more progressive on racial matters than Bilbo would be a victory. Most news outlets believed that rather than elect a racial moderate to replace Bilbo, Mississippians would send John Rankin to the Senate. Rankin was cut in the mold of Bilbo. In his relatively short political career he had gained a reputation as someone who would protect white interests at all costs. In a multi-page tribute to Bilbo, the San Antonio *Register* proclaimed that, "Rep. John Rankin…[now] looms as the foremost champion of white supremacy."[49]

Even though Rankin was viewed as the likely choice for most conservative Democrats in Mississippi, politics in the state began to shift towards more racially moderate candidates after Bilbo's death. Bilbo's tumultuous 1946 campaign drew so

[47] "Mississippi Aide in Primary Slain," *New York Times*, August 7, 1947.
[48] "Battle Royal Seen for Bilbo's Seat," *New York Times*, August 23, 1947.
[49] "Hate Monger Bilbo, Dying Explains his Race Views," *San Antonio Register*, August 29, 1947.

much negative media attention to the South and Mississippi in particular that it jeopardized Mississippi's ability to vie for industrial companies looking to relocate to the low-wage and non-unionized south. James Cobb points out that the South had courted industry since the nineteenth century, but the decline in agricultural jobs from the 1930s-1940s, "dictated a more organized and structured approach to industrial development." Cobb explains that many pro-business leaders who entered the political realm after World War II, "at least offered recently re-enfranchised black voters more respect and less race-baiting…[which proved to be] a more palatable option than the incendiary demagogues they had known for far too long."[50]

Following Bilbo's election up through the civil rights struggles of the 1950s, politicians in the South could no longer be elected to office on a platform of white supremacy. Robert Fleegler argues that politicians who could most effectively toe the line between all-out racism and racial progress would have the most success.[51] The challenger who proved this point in Mississippi's special election was John C. Stennis. Throughout his campaign, Stennis chose not to engage in the overtly racist rhetoric of Bilbo and instead focused his political speeches on how he would court business and job growth in the state. 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." [52]

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[50] James C. Cobb, *The South and America Since World War II* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 68-69, 56; see also James C. Cobb, *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1990* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 64-95.
[51] Robert Fleegler, "Theodore G. Bilbo and the Decline of Public Racism," *Journal of Mississippi History*, 68, 1 (March 2006): 3-20.
[52] "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.

Stennis's election uncovered new struggles registered African Americans in Mississippi would encounter with their increased electoral power and participation. For instance, black voters realized that they needed to keep their support for Stennis out of 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."[53] Stennis easily won the election, and reporters noted that "not once during his campaign did Stennis discuss the so-called Negro question….his political philosophy and background are as different from the late Senator Bilbo's as day is to night….[his] victory would seem to indicate that the Bilbo faction had disintegrated following his death."[54]

Bilbo, Race, and the 1948 Presidential Election

Harry Truman could not ignore the saga unfolding during his administration. In most monographs, Truman's record on civil rights is mixed at best. Historians including Phillip Vaughn, Alonzo Hamby, Donald McCoy, and Richard Reuten offer positive assessments of Truman's stance on civil rights issues. Steven Goldzwig, Barton Bernstein, and Carol Anderson, however, view Truman's civil rights policies as largely toothless and hollow olive branches to the black community, which ultimately did not help blacks obtain any measure of equality. While all of these scholars agree that civil rights did become a leading part of Truman's political platform leading up to the 1948 presidential election, they are divided on the issue of why Truman decided to adopt this

[53]"Mississippi Shies From a '2D Bilbo,'" *New York Times*, September 15, 1947.
[54] Kenneth Toler, "Successor to Bilbo Pledges 'New Day' in Mississippi," New York Times, November 9, 1947.

as a part of his platform. More positive interpretations argue that Truman truly wanted to help the African American community. Other more negative assessments have claimed that he only adopted civil rights policies due to political expediency and the power of the black vote. What these analyses fail to take into consideration, however, is the role that Bilbo's election and its aftermath played in pushing Truman to adopt a more liberal stance on civil rights issues.[55]

Truman had not paid much attention to civil rights issues throughout this first year in office. When issues did come up that could involve the Justice Department, Truman tended to err on the side of state autonomy. The only policy representing anything resembling a civil rights initiative was the FEPC, which was a carry-over from the Roosevelt-era, that many historians agree had little actual teeth in terms of fighting for black civil and social equality. Barton Bernstein notes that Truman, "found racial matters peripheral to his interests and considered the problem only when it was thrust upon him." Bernstein believes that Truman continually sidestepped questions of civil rights issues in press conferences, deflecting criticisms with the statement "all you need to do is read the Senate record of Harry S. Truman." Bernstein also underscores Truman's "cautious" support for the FEPC, an organization for which "[Truman] was careful not to invest

[55] Positive interpretations of Harry Truman's civil rights policy include Alonzo Hamby, "The Politics of Democracy: Harry S. Truman and the American People," in Richard Kirkendall, *Harry's Farewell: Interpreting and Teaching the Truman Presidency* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004); Donald R. McCoy and Richard T. Ruetten, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1973); and Phillip H. Vaughan, *The Truman Administration's Legacy for Black America* (Reseda, CA: Mojave Books, 1976). For more critical examinations of Truman see Steven R. Goldzwig, "Inaugurating the Second Reconstruction: President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights," in *Civil Rights Rhetoric and the American Presidency*, ed. James Arnt Aune and Enrique D. Rigsby (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005); Barton Bernstein, *Politics and Policies of the Truman Administration* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970); Carol Anderson, "Clutching at Civil Rights Straws: A Reappraisal of the Truman Years and the Struggle for African American Citizenship," in Richard Kirkendall, *Harry's Farewell: Interpreting and Teaching the Truman Presidency* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004).

much political capital." Bernstein even goes on to note that Truman "dealt the FEPC a blow by ignoring the committee's request for a conference" and points out that one member of the committee resigned during his service, telling reporters that he believed the committee dragged its feet on civil rights issues, refusing to become completely involved in workplace equality. According to this committee member, the committee's inaction and Truman's refusal to push it toward action, was evidence that "Truman was condoning racial discrimination."[56]

By late 1946, however, Truman could not ignore the uproar caused by Bilbo's election and hearing, which seemed to be receiving national and international attention on a weekly basis. Carleton Kent, a Truman aide, later remarked that in a conversation he had with Truman during this period, the president told him that, "Bilbo was 'alright' until he developed that silly Negro business." Bilbo had been a seatmate of Truman's in the Senate and the two congressmen knew each other well. So well, in fact that when Bilbo had filibustered debate over the FEPC in 1945, Truman called Bilbo personally and asked him to end the filibuster, to which the Senator agreed.[57]

If Truman managed to ignore Bilbo's speeches this long, he could not ignore the political realities swelling around him as a direct result of Bilbo's actions. The amount of press coverage given to Bilbo throughout the year had begun to present severe problems for Democrats seeking election in the rest of the country. Democratic politicians in the North knew that belonging to the same party as Bilbo would pose difficult questions for

[56] Barton Bernstein, "The Ambiguous Legacy: The Truman Administration and Civil Rights," in *The Politics and Polices of the Truman Administration*, ed. Barton Bernstein (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), 272-274.
[57] Interview with Carleton Kent, Interview conducted by Jerry N. Hess, December 1970, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri. [Online] https://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/kentc.htm.

them on the campaign trail and could end up costing them their elections. In order to distance themselves from Bilbo, Democrats began to campaign on platforms that were explicitly anti-Bilbo. William O'Dwyer and Herman Lehman, both Democrats running for mayor and governor of New York respectively, based their entire campaigns on how they "would move immediately to exclude Senator Bilbo…from the Senate for fomenting racial and religious hatred." Both men and told their constituents that "Bilboism as a way of life is inimical and offensive…to the…democratic disposition of our people."[58]

For Republicans, Bilbo's rhetoric could not have come at a more opportune time. The mid-term elections of 1946 afforded the party with the opportunity to capture both houses of Congress for the first time in over a decade. Republican politicians capitalized on Bilbo's hate-filled speeches, painting all Democrats as supporters of Bilbo, which helped them win office in previously non-Republican states. For example in Massachusetts, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., running as a Republican, was very effective at marshalling support for his campaign by telling his audiences:

> 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 or creed or color or geography…should prejudice a person in relation to his fellowman. We…look with a suspicious eye on every manifestation of intolerance….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.[59]

Irving Ives, running as a Republican in New York, won his race for the Senate by telling his constituents that he would "do everything in his power to keep Senator Theodore

[58] "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.
[59] 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.

Bilbo from being returned to Congress." Ives was the first Republican to hold that post since 1927. [60]

Black newspapers encouraged African Americans living in northern cities to use their political voices to sound their discontent with the Democratic Party. "Since you are free of the shackles of Bilboism," a writer for the Philadelphia *Afro-American* encouraged, "you need to shoulder a big share of the battle for complete emancipation."[61] One organizer in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania threatened that nearly 300, 000 registered African Americans would, "vote overwhelmingly for Republican candidates in the State and Congressional elections" unless Democrats began to fight for black equality. This same organizer believed that New York as well as many other traditionally Democratic states would support the Philadelphia effort, declaring that Republican votes would "be in protest against…'Bilboism.'" [62] Democrats tried to quell the unrest of black voters by reminding them of the progress their race had seen under Franklin Roosevelt, but the effort was too little, too late. Both houses of Congress sent Republican majorities to seats as referendums on Bilbo.[63]

The exodus of black votes made it impossible for Truman to gingerly tip-toe around racial injustice. It came as no coincidence then that on December 3, 1946, as Bilbo listened to African Americans recount their election day horrors before the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections, Truman announced that he would create a Committee on Civil Rights to "make recommendations for legislation or other means of

[60] "Negro Group Lauds Ives," *New York Times*, October 26, 1946; "Bilbo Flayed in Drama Presented Over Radio," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, October 19, 1946
[61] "Leadership Held North's Obligation," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, October 26, 1946.
[62]"Assert Negro Vote Will Swing to GOP," *New York Times*, October 18, 1946.
[63] "Lest We Forget," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, November 2, 1946.

strengthening the Federal Government's hand in dealing with such problems as racial discrimination and mob violence."[64] Even though Truman did not explicitly state that his primary motivation for creating the committee could be traced to the hearings in Jackson, a few observers speculated that events surrounding Bilbo played a definitive role in the president's decision. "Truman Tries FDR Timing Trick in Naming Committee," read one headline. The article speculated that Truman was using a similar technique FDR used in his presidency regarding civil rights issues. According to the reporter, FDR would often wait until political expediency would allow for him to push through vague civil rights legislation such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, which was not geared toward helping African Americans find employment, but had the effect of doing so once it was created. To many Americans, Truman had 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."[65] Another reporter declared that, "Truman's language [about the committee] suggested [that he created it due to]…current charges that Negroes were kept away from the polls in Mississippi by intimidation."[66] The reporter referred to the statement by Truman in which the president declared, "freedom from fear had been gravely threatened from time to time, after the last war…organized groups fanned hatred and intolerance."[67]

In the spring of 1947, racial tensions in the South began to focus sharply on black ballots. In April, Truman met with the Civil Rights Committee that, since December, had

[64] "Truman Creates Civil Rights Board," *New York Times*, December 6, 1946.
[65] "Truman Tries FDR Timing Trick in Naming Committee," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, December 14, 1946.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.

been conducting "closed public hearings" on civil rights abuses in the South. During the two-day meeting at the White House, George Weaver, a member of the president's committee, suggested to Truman that he should create a permanent FEPC, which would abate "a growing trend toward the abridgement of civil rights…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. [68] The man from Independence, for reasons that still remain speculative, had not acted on any racial issues throughout his first year and half in office, but Bilbo forced a change in the president's priorities. From December of 1946 through the election of 1948, Truman took noticeable steps toward the black electorate.

To further his position with minority groups around the country, Truman made civil rights history in June 1947 by being the first American President in history to deliver an address at the NAACP's annual conference. The organization had been in existence since 1909 and had seen seven presidents take the oath of office. The speech received widespread coverage, foreign dignitaries attended, and it was even broadcast internationally over the radio.[69] In his speech, he directly addressed the mounting racial tensions in the South declaring to great applause 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."[70] Truman assured the crowd that even though the task ahead would not be an easy one, they could count on the federal government to come to their aid. The reaction was overwhelmingly positive. The speech struck a chord with

[68] "Truman Unit Urges Job Bias Law," *Philadelphia Afro-American,* April 12, 1947.
[69] "Whole Nation Awaits Speech," *Philadelphia Afro-American,* June 28, 1947.
[70] "Full Text of President Truman's Address," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, July 5, 1947.

many African Americans who were enamored with the force, clarity, and unequivocal nature of the speech. The editor of the *Afro-American* admired Truman for addressing the issue of civil rights directly, telling 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."[71] It started to become clear to Americans that presidential civil rights policy had changed forever, and with it the Democratic Party. The press surrounding Bilbo's election and hearing combined with the federal interest garnered by the violence in Mississippi and the rest of the South let loose an unstoppable force of social and political change across the nation.[72]

Despite these monumental steps on civil rights, to many African Americans, the Democratic Party was the party of Bilbo. As the election drew near, most African Americans still viewed Truman with only mild approval and declared that the election was "All Over But the Shouting."[73] Political cartoons frequently referenced Bilbo's ghost as being omnipresent in the campaign. One cartoon depicted a flying carpet titled the "Truman Victory Special" which held as passengers racist Democratic Congressmen John Rankin, James Eastland and Allen Ellender with the superscription "Only Bilbo is Missing."[74] A large number of African Americans in the bastions of northern manufacturing cities including Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York believed that the Republican Party offered their best chances for representation in the White House and

[71] "Civil Rights, Human Freedom," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, July 5, 1947.
[72] "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.
[73] "All Over But the Shouting," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, October 30, 1948.
[74] "Observers Say Dewey Will Get Most of Group Votes," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, October 23, 1948; "Only Bilbo is Missing," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, October 23, 1948.

promised to cast their votes Republican just like they had done in the mid-term elections of 1946. The *Afro-American* ran cartoons on its pages that all-but guaranteed GOP frontrunner Thomas Dewey would receive a majority of black votes in the country, and posited that the year 1948 would place the GOP on "the threshold of its greatest opportunity."[75]

Truman took more steps to distance himself from Bilbo as the election drew near. At his State of the Union Address, 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.[76]

It was clear to many Americans that the president was beginning to mold the Democratic Party into a party based, in part, on civil rights. Michael Gardner calls Truman's State of the Union address and the speeches that followed throughout that year, "a revolutionary vision for civil rights reform in a racist America."[77] Shortly afterwards, the president passed executive orders in 1948 integrating federal jobs and the armed services.[78] Truman's policy changes and political platform became tied so closely to civil rights issues that one scholar has remarked that, "Civil rights was the touchstone of the Truman election in 1948." Kari Fredrickson notes that, "for the first time since Reconstruction, the status of African Americans had become a national issue."[79] The cost of taking such a stance were catastrophic for the Democratic Party. In his inaugural address as Governor

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[75] "GOP Warned Against 'Do Nothing' Platform," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, June 23, 1948.
[76] "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.
[77] Gardner, 71.
[78] Ibid., 105-121.
[79] Kari Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 3; Gardner, 146;

of Mississippi, Fielding Wright declared that Mississippi would propose a third party candidate if Truman continued to enact civil rights legislation. Southern Governors met in Florida and determined that they would not support Truman, but would champion Strom Thurmond of South Carolina as a challenging candidate under the Dixiecrat banner based entirely around white supremacy veiled in the rhetoric of state's rights.[80] Familiar faces supported the cause of the Dixiecrats. Allen Ellender, Burnett Maybank, and John Overton were all enthusiastic about separating themselves from Truman whom they viewed as a disgrace to the Democratic Party.

The picture is now one of the most famous in history. Truman is shown standing on the caboose of a locomotive holding up a newspaper with the headline "Dewey Defeats Truman" as he points, smiles, and laughs. Truman won in 1948 capturing over three hundred electoral votes and roughly twenty-five million popular votes. Thurmond's presidential bid was futile and largely symbolic. He captured nearly one million popular votes and thirty-nine electoral votes, bested by Truman by a wide margin.[81]

The loss was not nearly as important as what the election presaged about American politics and political discourse which were rooted in Bilbo's 1946 election. From 1948 onward, Democrats adopted an open civil rights plank to their party's platform due to the attention Bilbo's campaign received. The harsh rhetoric, extreme violence, and governmental shutdown associated with Bilbo's campaign focused the world's attention on American politics and black civil rights in an era when the desire to have democratic influence abroad was of the utmost importance. Moreover, Truman's steps on behalf of civil rights split the Democratic Party along regional lines and revealed

[80] Frederickson, 78-81
[81] Frederickson, 184-185.

the increasingly conservative outlook of the American populace. In the years that followed, conservative publications, including William F. Buckley's *National Review* and organizations such as the John Birch society, espoused the ideals of the Dixiecrats and began to cultivate a conservative coalition of politicians that influenced public policy for decades to come.

Conclusions

"I have read your book," wrote J. Cinegarer. "I think your book is going to shake the whole country up and put the country in a mood to…start the negroe's [sic] back to where they belong." Bilbo received a countless number of similar letters from supporters and well-wishers in his final months such as the one he received from Sarah Williams in Washington D.C. who declared that she was "sorry to see" that Bilbo had been kept from his office due to a lengthy illness. She expressed her fear at the current state of affairs in the United States, indicating that she had recently "attended one of these meetings the Negroes have been having here, trying to force themselves upon the Anglo Saxon race." "I wonder," she queried, "if there is another in the Senate that has views as you had on white supremacy….This country and the people in authority have sunken to a low level when they permit a people of heathen descent…to dictate to the Anglo Saxon race." Williams continued to express her fears to Bilbo about a black takeover and told him that she hoped he would soon be able to "return to [his] post of duty."[1] For Williams and others invested in the fallacy of white supremacy, Bilbo was their exalted leader. Without him, white conservatives feared, their cause, and possibly the white race itself, would certainly be lost.

Even in death, Bilbo's popularity as the figurehead of white supremacists nationwide soared. Exact sales numbers for Bilbo's self-published manifesto, *Take Your Choice: Separation or Mongrelization* are not available, but with letters streaming into his office from booksellers and fans across the nation who professed that they were "extremely anxious" for his book, it is safe to assume the book witnessed modest success.

[1] Letter from Sarah E. Williams to Theodore Bilbo, July 1, 1947, Theodore Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 964, Folder 4.

What is perhaps more important than sales numbers, however, is that the manifesto served as a guidebook for conservative whites in Bilbo's absence. As K.O. Miller from St. Petersburg, Florida summarized, Bilbo was "gone, but never forgotten."[2]

Miller's sentiment sums up the legacy of Theodore Bilbo and importantly provides an added layer of complexity to studies of modern conservatism, challenging widely held timelines about conservatism's origins and its rise as a national movement. Previous works on modern conservatism have typically focused on the elections of major conservative figureheads including George Wallace and Strom Thurmond, who rose to power at mid-century on states-rights and race-based rhetoric. Bilbo's election importantly pushes the trajectory on the rise of modern conservatism backward in time and highlights the national support he received for his use of racialized rhetoric. One of the overarching commonalities between previous works is that these scholars have finished their assessments by alluding to the fact that while both Thurmond and Wallace received a remarkable amount of national support during their campaigns for President, predicated on varying degrees of racial superiority, neither of them won. Such conclusions accurately provide evidence of nationwide racism and support for racist policies, but ultimately show that Americans would not put a racist into a nationally significant office. For these historians, these moments in history mark small victories that gently push towards a "sigh of relief" thesis whereby these elections served as moments when American hearts, minds, and the Democratic system itself were stretched to their

[2] Letter from K.O. Miller to Theodore Bilbo, September 22, 1947, Theodore Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 965, Folder 23; Letter from J.S. Kelly to Theodore Bilbo, September 26, 1947, Theodore Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 965, Folder 23; Letter from J. Cinegarer to Theodore Bilbo, April 7, 1947, Theodore Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Box 961, Folder 17.

limits, but did not break. Conversely, Bilbo's election casts light on just how much racial prejudice permeated both sides of the Mason-Dixon line and how these prejudices, or the ability to overlook them, worked to shut down the governmental system at a crucial period in American history. The broader significance of Bilbo's story that is often overlooked in previous works is that positions in government beyond the presidency can have drastic implications on the process of governance. The support Bilbo received throughout the country in personal correspondence and newspapers additionally reveals that, nationally, people supported Bilbo's fight against the rising tide of change in the post-war period, even if that meant that they were supporting a politician who worked against their desire for a functioning government. This level of cognitive dissonance underscores the, at times, counterintuitive nature of the American voting population, which bought into a politics of populism over one based on substance in the post-war era.

Bilbo's early life and political career greatly shaped the man he would become. Coming of age in the era immediately following federal Reconstruction, he witnessed first-hand African American participation in Mississippi politics for the first time in history, and he was assuredly fed the lie that black participation in politics could only lead to ruination. It was not a far reach then that Bilbo developed a rabid xenophobic outlook in which he considered all outsiders a threat to his customs and his heritage. He honed his oratorical skills and racial ideology campaigning for James Vardaman in 1911, and experience that William Holmes believes, "without a doubt," helped secure the governorship for the "White Chief." The two developed a professional relationship, but Holmes points out that "it does not appear the two men were ever close." Bilbo's racial animosities were even too stringent for Vardaman who had to distance himself from

Bilbo on more than one occasion. The seed had already been planted. Bilbo would not back down from his racial ideology, even if it cost him the respect of other politicians, a recurrent theme in Bilbo's political career.[3]

One of the most formative moments in Bilbo's early life came with the adoption of the 1890 state constitution. Bilbo undoubtedly believed in the disfranchisement policies enacted by Mississippi's legislature aimed at restricting black suffrage, but the policies of the constitution that effected poor whites in the Piney Woods and Hill counties of Mississippi undoubtedly shaped Bilbo's political outlook. He and other politicians including Vardaman used the animosity created by the constitution's policies and the low wages given by large companies to appeal to poor conservative working-class whites and to build up the myth of the black scapegoat. Once he had cut his chops as a politician in the early twentieth century, he worked to oppose any measure that represented even the smallest amount of equality for blacks.

The "Back to Africa" campaign of 1938 was exemplary of Bilbo's racist ethos, embodying a twisted sense of civic duty by believing that resettling black citizens in Africa was the best thing for the black population, whom he believed, could never be fully accepted into white society. Bilbo's efforts for this cause were not common during this time period. He was even in the minority amongst the few other Senators, such as Eugene Talmadge and "Cotton Ed" Smith, who viewed Franklin Roosevelt's policies as upsetting the racial status quo. Within these political circles, Bilbo's attempt to repatriate blacks was derided as ham-fisted. His idea did gain some purchase in states including Virginia where the state passed a resolution to be the first state to deport their black

[3] William Holmes, *The White Chief: James Kimble Vardaman* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 254.

population if Bilbo's bill became law. Despite his ostracization from fellow southern politicians and blacks alike, Bilbo viewed his relationship with the black community in a positive light. He would later tell people that he was "the best friend the Negro has ever had."[4] This window into Bilbo's psychology provides evidence of his profound personal commitment to racial separation and further reinforces the notion that Bilbo did not just speak for Mississippians with this tyrannical racial views, but importantly was growing in importance as the nation's mouthpiece for conservative racial policies.[5]

By the time America entered World War II, separate worlds for whites and blacks had become deeply entrenched in Mississippi as well as the rest of the nation. Fighting in the Second World War changed the racial consciousness of the nation. The horrors of Hitler's eugenic policies forced many Americans to re-evaluate their racial ideologies and challenged America to put weight behind the idea that they were, in fact, the "arsenal of democracy."

As the first southern election after the war, Bilbo's election became the litmus test for how American democracy would function. The world watched to see how America, long-plagued by citizenship issues, would handle non-white citizens in the globalized post-war world. The newly-created United Nations brought added attention to these issues as an arena where criticisms between nations could be publicly aired. The testy relationships that developed during this period between India, South Africa and the United States testifies to the changing definitions of citizenship in the post-war world and centralizes the importance of southern politicians to those discussions. The United States

[4] Campaign Expenditures, 335. Bilbo made this claim as part of his closing remarks during the hearing in Jackson in 1946.
[5] Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy*, 29-30.

found itself in an increasingly untenable position as the world's champion of democratic governance that continued to discriminate against a wide swath of its own citizens. On the international stage of the Cold War, the United States scrambled to strengthen its influence abroad and solidify democratic governments as bulwarks against a perceived drive by Communist Russia for global domination. Bilbo's hearing received such great publicity that, while it was certainly not the only issue weighing on the minds of Americans and onlookers horrified by America's treatment of non-white citizens, it played a significant role in forcing Harry Truman to take a clear stance on race and citizenship. Truman would reap the rewards of his policies in the 1948 presidential election in which he won a majority of black votes in key cities including Philadelphia and Chicago, helping him retain his seat in the White House.

The testimony of African Americans at Bilbo's Senate hearing in the winter of 1946 ushered in a new era of activism that would come to characterize the post-war fight for equality. Covert forms of resistance continued in black communities, but African Americans were more willing to step into the spotlight on a grand scale following World War II and challenged the boundaries of white supremacy in more overt means. The fight against Bilbo also reveals the emerging effectiveness of the strategy of the NAACP. The organization's increasingly legal assault on the institutions of white supremacy witnessed new life after the success of *Smith v. Allwright* (1941). The case brought suffrage restriction to national prominence and put enormous pressure on politicians throughout the nation to act. The legal cases pursued by the NAACP and its allies laid the groundwork for the battles against segregation in the 1950s and 60s. Moreover, Bilbo's election reframes the civil rights struggle and muddies its waters by foregrounding the

voices and actions of previously forgotten characters in the civil rights saga. Veterans, wives, priests, youth, the elderly, and many others attempted to vote in July 1946 and many of these individuals testified against Bilbo at his hearing. Their stories deserve further analysis and introspection that cannot be offered in a study such as this, but their resolve and importance are worth note. These "shock troops," as John Dittmer would name them, stared into the face of the nation's most hated and feared racist in a national setting. Their actions were ones of defiance and resistance in the days before the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Birmingham Children's Crusade, importantly providing a more dynamic and rich context for Mississippi's civil rights struggle and the actors involved in it.[6]

Perhaps most importantly, Bilbo's election and hearing highlight the undercurrent of support for conservative thought present in America after World War II. When Bilbo began spewing racial epithets, he garnered sympathy and encouragement from people in every southern state, but also from individuals in Wisconsin, California, New Jersey, and a whole host of other non-southern states who all praised Bilbo for his ideas. For some, the changes being wrought by the war were happening too fast; for others, Bilbo was a beacon for First Amendment freedoms; and for many more, Bilbo was the last defender of white supremacy against what would be an onslaught of returning African American veterans, eager to fight for equality and upset the hierarchy of white supremacy.

As a result of his campaign, Democrats in the North pushed away from Bilbo who they viewed as a toxic member of the party. Republicans capitalized on Bilbo's campaign and began to cater their message towards the black community. The result of these

[6] John Dittmer, *Local People*, 9.

tensions split the Democratic Party in 1948 into the conservative Dixiecrat faction embodied by Strom Thurmond on one side and more liberal supporters of Harry Truman on the other. While the Democratic Party fractured along sectional lines, it revealed the deep tensions regarding race and citizenship within American society as a whole. When Thurmond captured 2.4% of the electoral vote in the 1948 presidential election, it signaled a growing demand in America outside of the South for conservative racial policies. Politicians who molded themselves in Bilbo's image, did not see themselves as national pariahs, but as Joseph Crespino points out, saw themselves "as central participants in a conservative counterrevolution that reshaped American politics." These figures importantly, "conceived of their struggle against civil rights activists and federal officials not merely as a regional fight to preserve white supremacy, but as a national battle to preserve fundamental American freedoms."[7] While it may appear to observers in the modern age that Bilbo's brand of conservatism was exported to other parts of the nation following his death, perhaps instead it points more directly to another historical truth. James Cobb wrote that the tendency to cite examples of racism in Pennsylvania or Ohio as evidence that "a regional malignancy has now metastasized throughout [America]" overlooks "a lengthy history of symptoms indicative not of a recent affliction but of a preexisting condition," that emphasizes just how "southern" American society has always been.[8]

Written in the context of Bilbo's hearing, Pete Seeger's lyrics from his 1946 song "Listen Mr. Bilbo" provide a powerful template for understanding recurrent debates in

[7] Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), 3.
[8] James C. Cobb, *The South and America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 318.

America over citizenship. After going on for several verses about the accomplishments of great "foreigners" who contributed to America's storied history, Seeger takes aim at Bilbo and sings "Now Bilbo you're taking one heck of a chance/ Your good friends the Duponts, came over from France/ Another thing, I'm sure, will be news to you/ The first Mister Bilbo was a foreigner, too."[9] Not only did Seeger point his finger at Bilbo for having, like most Americans, foreign relatives, but he also reminded the Senator that his friends, and more importantly the allies of the United States, were foreigners too. To upset these individuals, Seeger intoned, would be catastrophic not just for Bilbo, but for American policy as a whole.

In an editorial printed in the *Christian Science Monitor* shortly after Bilbo's election, the author tried to put a positive spin on how the recent drama surrounding Bilbo benefited the nation. He told his readers:

> Often, in the long run, a good cause is served well by its worst enemies. The opposition sometimes needs to be carried to such outrageous extremes, to be so egregiously dramatized, that the honest but perplexed are startled into sharper thinking. It looks as though Mr. Bilbo is right now engaged in performing such a function on behalf of better race relations….although unknowingly, unwillingly, and certainly with malice aforethought otherwise directed.[10]

According to the author, Bilbo's election provided an opportunity for the Democratic Party to re-examine itself and its stance on race related issues. He believed the extreme nature of Bilbo's rhetoric would shock the American population into action and help it reform towards more inclusivity. The author was correct on both counts. When combined with the similarly minded policies of Eugene Talmadge in Georgia, the beating of black army veteran Isaac Woodard in South Carolina, the Columbia, Tennessee race riots, and

[9] Bob and Adrienne Claiborne, "Listen Mr. Bilbo," performed by Pete Seeger, 1946.
[10] "Even Bilbo has his Uses," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 5, 1946.

other instances of racial violence, Bilbo's election forced the Democratic Party to re-examine itself. Understanding that African Americans could easily through their support behind another party if they were not catered to, Harry Truman took substantive steps in the spring and summer of 1947 to make civil rights reform a central part of the Democratic Party platform. The resultant Dixiecrat revolt nearly a year later laid the groundwork for the Republican Party to gain control over the southern electorate in the decades that followed.

Bilbo's political career and hearing reveal that state politics often intersect with national and international political spheres. Few, if any, Americans knew that the events in Mississippi in the spring and summer of 1946 would unfold in such a dramatic manner for the world to see. None could have imagined that Bilbo's election would be a major influence on Truman's decision to pursue a more aggressive civil rights strategy, leading to a large split in the Democratic Party that would ultimately lead to a restructuring of sectional party alignments. Despite all of the negative aspects of human society that the fight against Bilbo highlights: racism, violence, greed, and corruption, as the editor of the *Christian Science Monitor* declared in the passage above, Bilbo's election offered an opportunity for reflection, introspection and change. An opportunity that today is all too often taken for granted.

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