

(NDPA), an independent, statewide party supported mainly by Black Belt African Americans and left-leaning whites. That same year, Lowndes County's black residents elected three of their own to county government, including John Hulett to the sheriff's office. Black residents successfully placed an increasing number of independent candidates in the county courthouse throughout the early and mid-1970s, and black Democrats starting in the late 1970s. By 1980, African Americans occupied a majority of the offices in the county courthouse, a tribute to the experiment in independent politics launched fifteen years earlier. *See also* Black Panther Party (BPP); Carmichael, Stokely (1941–1998).

**Further Readings:** Carmichael, Stokely, with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell. *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)*. New York: Scribner, 2003; Carson, Clayborne. *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.

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## Lynching

One of the most shameful chapters in the great epic that is American history is the lynching of African Americans. Although used against every race, ethnicity, and both genders, by the late nineteenth century it had become a code word for the random and wanton murdering of blacks, especially black men. As such, generations of blacks grew up knowing that their lives could be snuffed out for the most trivial of reasons or no reason at all.

The **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)**, the first national organization to catalog and study lynching, defined it as the illegal killing of a person by three or more people claiming to be serving the cause of justice or upholding tradition. The venerable *Chicago Tribune* began tracking lynchings in the late nineteenth century. It reported that there were 4,951 lynchings in the United States from the years 1882 through 1930; they had been reported in every state of the union except Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Nevada, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin. Of the victims, 3,513 were black and 1,438 were white; 92 were women and 76 of those women were black. Eight-two percent of the recorded lynchings occurred in the eleven states of the former Confederacy. Yet mob violence in America was not new to the post-**Reconstruction** era.

The use of mob violence in America can be traced back to colonial times. The mob acted as finders of fact and assessors of guilt. Mob violence was especially popular during the Revolutionary period; because of the excesses of British authority, many colonists had lost respect for regular law and order. After the Revolution, this kind of mob violence gradually fell out of favor in more settled regions of the country.

Within the dynamics of the mob, there is a sense of anonymity that permits members of the mob to lose themselves within it. Because of this, there is often confusion about what exactly has taken place; it is easy for members of the mob to draw erroneous conclusions. Moreover, while there is often a supposed leader within the mob, the leader, too, often loses perspective of



Two African American men, lynched in Marion, Indiana, 1930. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

the situation and is easily swept up in activities in which that particular person might not participate under normal circumstances.

Lynching as a means of punishment was also very common during the antebellum years. Thieves, gamblers, and others who were considered deviants in the West and South were often hanged for their crimes. Deviant behavior was not the only reason lynchings flourished during this time period; the system of justice in the southern and western portions of the United States was often pitifully slow; therefore, mob violence was often employed.

Those people who were lynched during the antebellum years, however, were much more likely to be whites or free blacks. Slaves were seldom killed; they represented a considerable monetary investment to their masters. It was probably abolitionists who were the first group to see lynching as extralegal violence that was directly connected with the **racism** that caused slavery and the intimidation and coercion that was so much a part of the institution. Abolition-

ists also pointed out that the southern code of honor and the protection and preservation of white feminine virtue combined to make southern men quick to respond to real or perceived violations of either.

Ironically, the increasing effectiveness of the abolitionist movement and Nat Turner's rebellion were important elements in the revival of lynch law in settled areas. Southern whites lived in terror that slave insurrections, some of which were encouraged by abolitionists, could occur at any time. These fears presaged the institution of more severe penalties for slaves who disobeyed their masters' orders or attempted to escape, and the whites, free blacks, or mulattos who helped them.

Extensive use of mob violence as an extralegal instrument of justice again flourished during the later portion of the nineteenth century as frontier America was being settled. In areas where tools of justice such as the constable, courts, and jails had yet to be established, it was natural that extralegal methods to ensure that justice would be realized would be employed. This extralegal violence was often directed at Indians, and widespread prejudice against Native Americans ensured that public reaction was such that whites were seldom punished for this activity. Organized, semipermanent bodies of citizens often came together to suppress crime and enforce community standards and the law. As the West developed, legal means of social control did also, and mob violence was less likely to be employed. Lynchings in this area of the country gradually tapered off during the last third of the nineteenth century.



Large crowd watching the lynching of Jesse Washington. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

However, just the opposite happened during this period in the South. The number of lynchings of blacks by whites actually increased during this period, and the manner in which they were carried out became more barbarous as the nineteenth century drew to a close. Race prejudice was clearly a factor in the number of blacks lynched in the United States. The institution of slavery was based on the idea that blacks were inferior to whites in every way; blacks could not have been enslaved if this were not true. The South's loss of the Civil War was particularly galling to white southerners, and their views on the inferiority of blacks were heightened because of that loss.

Reconstruction was the first time the federal government moved to protect the rights of African Americans; in the decade after the Civil War, a flurry of federal legislation was passed. In 1865, the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands helped slaves resettle, find jobs, and gain an education, and the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which outlawed slavery, was passed. A strengthened Freedmen's Bureau Bill and the Civil Rights Act of 1866 granted blacks citizenship and entitled them to the protection of the federal government. The **Fourteenth Amendment** to the Constitution, passed in 1868, strengthened the Civil Rights Act of 1866. Especially galling to white southerners was the passage of the First Reconstruction Act in March 1867. Passed over President Andrew Johnson's veto, it divided the South into five military districts, each under the command of a general. These military personnel protected the lives and property of blacks until new civilian governments could be passed. Two laws were passed in 1870. The **Fifteenth Amendment** prohibited discrimination in voting based on race, color, or previous condition of servitude; the Enforcement Act of that year prohibited the wearing of masks or disguises, and protected the civil rights of citizens. The **Ku Klux Klan (KKK)** or

Enforcement Act of 1871—southerners called it the Force Act—made it a federal crime to interfere with an individual's right to vote, serve on a jury, hold public office, or enjoy the equal protection of the law.

Clearly, for a short time after the Civil War, the federal government, under the leadership of Radical Republicans, worked actively to promote and ensure black rights. But the giants of Radical Republicanism who had done so much to extend and protect African Americans' rights were passing from the scene. By 1870, Thaddeus Stevens had died, Benjamin Wade had been defeated in his bid for reelection, and Charles Sumner had been stripped of much of his congressional power. The Civil Rights Act of 1875, which prohibited racial discrimination in public accommodations, transportation, places of amusement, and public schools, was the last piece of legislation designed to help African Americans until well into the twentieth century.

In the midterm elections of 1874, the Democrats won control of the House of Representatives for the first time since 1861. The Democratic Party, with its solid southern base, moved quickly to solidify the results of the midterm election. Competition for jobs between poor whites and black men gave the Democratic party an opportunity to appeal to the economic fears of poor whites. The party also used psychological and economic intimidation against those blacks who tried to vote. Its best weapon, though, was a resurgent Ku Klux Klan. The Klan often operated with the tacit approval and assistance of officials in the Democratic Party.

It was the presidential election of 1876, though, that rang the death knell for Reconstruction and resurrected the crime of lynching. Republicans nominated Ohio Gov. Rutherford B. Hayes; the Democrats ran Samuel Tilden, famed prosecutor of the corrupt Boss Tweed ring in New York City. Tilden won a majority of the popular votes, but the electoral vote was close because both candidates claimed victory in Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina. Congress established an electoral commission of fifteen members, five each from the House, Senate, and U.S. Supreme Court. Voting 8–7 along party lines, the commission awarded the disputed electoral votes to Hayes. Democrats threatened a filibuster, and an informal agreement, the so-called Compromise of 1877, was reached. Hayes's supporters agreed to withdraw troops from the south and not to block the formation of all-white governments; southern Democrats agreed to deal fairly with black Americans.

Although Republicans kept their part of the agreement, Democrats did not. Upon the withdrawal of northern troops from Louisiana and South Carolina, their Republican governments collapsed, and white Democrats took over. By the close of the nineteenth century, virtually all of the Reconstruction-era laws designed to give equal opportunity to blacks and wipe out racial discrimination were repudiated by states' rights supporters and conservative judges. By 1880, black southerners had been stripped of their legal and civil rights and abandoned by the U.S. government. Emboldened by this lack of government oversight, the governments of the eleven states of the Confederacy set about returning to lives that were as close to pre-Civil War conditions as possible, and lynching quickly became the preferred way of dealing with blacks who dared resist.

Mob violence differed in various regions of the country. In the South, those who participated in lynchings and mob violence were likely to be a cross section of their communities: public officials, members of the Ku Klux Klan, the poor, and the working class. Moreover, in the South it was not uncommon for entire black communities to be destroyed during mob violence, especially if members of the communities fought back. In the northern and midwestern portions of the country, whites who participated in lynchings and mob violence were less likely to be from the middle and upper classes, nor did law enforcement and officials of the criminal justice system participate as often and on the same scale as in the South. Although Klan membership in some northern and midwestern states was high, there does not appear to be a strong link between that membership and participation in lynching and mob violence.

Whites used many excuses for the lynching of blacks. Among the most common was the need to protect white women from sexually depraved black men. However, if this were true, a few lynchings would have been enough to make the point. Other excuses included real or perceived transgressions against the social order, the inability of the criminal justice system to function properly, and a callousness toward black life that allowed killing blacks as a sport. Irrefutable empirical evidence, however, shows that lynching was aimed primarily at blacks who possessed the characteristics of the New Negro: they failed to pay sufficient deference to whites, excelled economically and socially, and dared to assert their rights under the laws and the Constitution. Each year, the number of lynchings and the extreme cruelty with which they were carried out increased. It was not enough merely to kill the victims; they were often tortured before death and their bodies mutilated afterward. Victims were beaten, set afire, had their extremities cut off; one pregnant woman was lynched hanging by her feet, burned afterward, and had the baby she was carrying cut from her womb, after which its head was crushed by the mob. There can only be one explanation for this kind of behavior: race hatred.

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, lynchings were so common as to have their various elements ritualized. The accusation of wrongdoing, the rush to judgment by whites, the gathering of the crowd, the hunting down of the victim, and the discussion of how the victim would be killed all had a purpose. Eventually, killing would not be enough; a spectacle to which the public would be invited was needed, even a special vocabulary was developed: *Negro barbeque* and *necktie party* were among the most common phrases used to describe lynchings.

By the close of the nineteenth century, lynching had morphed from merely a way to punish criminals and those who transgressed the social order, to the savage and depraved way that whites used to maintain their racial caste system.

White southerners gave myriad reasons for why they lynched blacks with such impunity: they were upholding the southern code of honor, protecting the chastity of white women, enforcing communal values. Even Progressive reformers such as Jane Addams did not decry lynching so much as express contempt for the lawlessness it represented. Many whites simply accepted

lynching as an occasional happening and the price southern society paid for the social engineering of Reconstruction and black depravity; they only spoke critically of it when it was carried out in an exceptionally brutal manner.

Lynching began to be seriously studied in the early twentieth century, partly in response to the tremendous increase in its numbers from 1880 through 1900. These early researchers were psychologists who were especially concerned with the concept of social pathology; that is, society, made up as it is of individuals, was sick and acted out its illnesses by engaging in deviant behavior. Those explanations faltered, however, since in many lynchings, the leaders of the community and law enforcement played active roles; society's leaders are not generally looked upon as deviant or depraved.

Psychologists also theorized that individual psychopathologies could explain lynching. By the 1890s, the frenzy with which the mob carried out lynchings—its use of lynchings as entertainment spectacles—the mutilation of the victims, and the focus on black sexuality as the primary explanation of lynching, were all a means of allowing the mob to vent its frustration, anger, and resentment over a rapidly changing economic and social system. Because poor whites could not challenge the white elites of southern society, their frustration could only be relieved by targeting the one group of people that was considered beneath contempt.

African American leaders vociferously disagreed with various white theorists about why lynching occurred and vehemently protested against lynching. It was they who conducted the first empirical studies of the crime, challenging the myths whites had spun. One of the most famous black critics of lynchings was **Ida B. Wells-Barnett**.

Born a slave in Holy Springs, Mississippi, in 1862, Wells-Barnett grew up during Reconstruction. As a child, she witnessed her father casting his first vote. Orphaned at sixteen and left with the responsibility of raising her siblings, Wells-Barnett had to give up her dream of finishing Rust College and took a teaching job. She later moved to Memphis, Tennessee, and politicized by the appalling conditions of the **Jim Crow** society she found there, began speaking out on the horrors of racism. She sued a Memphis railway company after they tried to force her to ride in a car designated for blacks. Although she won \$500, her judgment was later reversed on appeal. In 1892, one of her closest friends, Thomas Moss, was lynched in Memphis because he operated a grocery store that was more successful than that of his white competition. Galled by this act, she began speaking out against racism and especially the crime of lynching, traveling alone throughout the South investigating lynchings—often in disguise because a bounty had been issued for her.

Wells-Barnett's careful empirical studies exploded the sexual myth that whites had used to justify lynching. She pointed out that fewer than one-third of the black men who were lynched were accused, much less found guilty, of raping white women. She became an early and ardent supporter of federal anti-lynching legislation. Uncompromising in her support for an end to lynching, Wells-Barnett's implacability drew her into a number of public disagreements with some of the leading figures of her day, including

**Booker T. Washington**; Frances Willard, the founder of the Women's Christian Temperance Union; and the great Progressive social worker, Jane Addams, all of whom worked to end various social ills of the day, but who were not supportive enough in the campaign to end lynching. But as critical as Wells-Barnett was of white individuals and organizations that equivocated in their support for anti-lynching remedies, she joined the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching and worked tirelessly to ensure that the crime was punished and eventually eradicated.

Other than Wells-Barnett, no other African American studied the crime of lynching more thoroughly than **Walter White**. Born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1893, White, who had white skin, blue eyes, and blond hair, could easily have passed for white. At the age of thirteen, however, he had an experience that burned his racial identity forever in his mind and ensured that the eradication of lynching and racism would be his life's work.

White's father—who was as light as his son—was a letter carrier, a good job for a black man in a southern city in 1906. He also owned a large house in the black section of Atlanta; it was virtually the only house that was kept up, and for this he drew the ire of whites who were jealous of him. During the bitter political campaign of 1906, Thomas E. Watson, a candidate for governor of Georgia, broke from his long-standing support of agrarian radicalism and interracial cooperation and joined in the race baiting so popular among candidates in the South. The campaign, along with a newspaper circulation war between the *Atlanta Journal* and the *Atlanta News*, ensured that only the most negative and inflammatory information would be printed about the black population in Atlanta. This included many untrue stories about black men raping white women, and soon the town was a seething cauldron of racial tension that culminated in a full-scale race riot. A number of innocent blacks were killed, and White's father was targeted by his white neighbors who resented his industry and all it had earned for him.

Like Wells-Barnett, White relied on empirical studies and his own eyewitness accounts; his color and features enabled him to talk freely with participants of mob violence, law enforcement officials, and neighborhood residents. His book *Rope and Faggot*, published in 1929, was an effort to isolate and examine what he said were the ingredients of lynching: economic forces, race prejudice, religion, sex, politics, yellow journalism, and theories of racial superiority and inferiority based on pseudoscience. White concluded that whites in America had taught their children that lynching was an acceptable way to correct all social ills, especially if they involved black Americans.

According to White, there were several factors that created and perpetuated the psychology of the lyncher. First, government officials were derelict in their duty to uphold the laws faithfully and fairly. Second, humans love excitement, and will often do in a crowd what they would never do alone. Third, whites were unwilling to admit that they did not know or understand blacks. In fact, they had merely decided that there were only three types of blacks: the happy-go-lucky uncle or auntie, the habitual criminal or brute, and the humble, shuffling black of the antebellum years. Because of these prejudices, whites were unable to accept blacks in any other role.

Like Wells-Barnett, White concluded that it was the white man's inability to accept black economic and social advancement that caused most lynchings; it was black progress, not black crime, that frightened whites. This fear, and the pathological need to defend **white supremacy**, drove many whites to membership in the Ku Klux Klan.

White also looked at the connection between religion and lynching; he asserted that lynching could only happen in a *Christian* nation. It was the Christian church, after all, that had acquiesced in the evil of the slave trade. Furthermore, the Christian church helped slave owners use color as a justification for slavery and all the barbarities that went with it. Finally, White blamed religious leaders, particularly evangelical Protestants and holiness denominations for unleashing the torrid emotions of their congregations in their vocal condemnation of sex, especially sexual relations between white women and black men. White thought that southerners were obsessed with sex, and that obsession promoted widespread anti-black feeling.

By the beginning of the 1920s, the number of lynchings began to drop sharply. White credited the drop with a nationwide campaign to combat lynchings led by the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)**, and the introduction of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, which was introduced in Congress by **Leonidas C. Dyer**, a Republican congressman from Missouri. The bill sought to make lynching a federal crime and to give the government the authority to investigate, fine, and punish those who took part in lynchings and members of the law enforcement community who did nothing to stop them. Although the bill passed the House in 1922, it was killed by a Senate filibuster that same year. It again passed the House in 1937 and 1940; it failed in the Senate in each of those years due to real or threatened filibusters by southern Democrats and conservative northern Republicans.

While the Dyer bill was never passed, it can still be credited with the sharp drop in the lynchings of black men during this period. The increased scrutiny connected with lynchings and the bad publicity they drew clearly alarmed southern elites. They wanted no repeat of Reconstruction when the federal government was such an omnipotent presence in the region. Moreover, black migration north and the return of black soldiers from World War I were interfering with the South's efforts to attract the black manual laborers it so desperately needed. It, therefore, made concerted efforts to decrease the practice of lynching. There were eighty-three blacks lynched in 1919; by the time the Dyer bill was introduced in 1922, that number had dropped to sixty-one. By 1927, the number of lynchings had dropped to twenty-one.

As executive secretary of the NAACP, White ensured that it was the premier American organization in the forefront of defining the crime of lynching, recording its numbers, and eradicating its existence. The NAACP was founded in 1909 by a group of black and white intellectuals who were alarmed at the increasing segregation of American society and the subservient way in which the leading black spokesman of the day, Booker T. Washington, chose to fight it. By 1918, the NAACP was the leader in seeking federal intervention by its support of the Dyer bill and campaigned tirelessly for its passage.

Unlike other organizations or individuals that equivocated on lynching and sometimes excused the practitioners of it, the NAACP took a very straightforward position. Eschewing common legend that lynchings occurred because of defective justice systems, community rabble-rousers, and lecherous black men who would strip defenseless white maidens of their sexual purity, it described lynching as a means that whites used to maintain economic and psychological hegemony over blacks. For whites, what was at stake was their theory of color caste: they were extremely concerned with racial purity and the prevention of amalgamation and were determined to do anything to ensure that race mixing did not happen. To the NAACP, lynching was a crime with its roots in race hatred and an elaborate myth of white superiority and black inferiority. Whites needed no particular reason to lynch blacks.

In campaigning against lynching, the NAACP was assisted by faculty at Tuskegee Institute who developed a classification of the causes of lynching into seven types: (1) homicide, (2) felonious assault, (3) rape, (4) attempted rape, (5) robbery and theft, (6) insult to white persons, and (7) all other causes. The Tuskegee scholars had difficulty classifying each lynching, in part because of the inability to obtain accurate information. However, some generalities can be made. Murder was the most frequently cited reason for lynching, followed by rape. In fact, the data showed that of the 1,399 lynchings from 1889 through 1930 recorded by the Tuskegee faculty, only 214 were tied to homicide and 622 to rape.



Three lynched African American men (two hanging from a post or tree, one laying on the ground) surrounded by a crowd of witnesses, 1920. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Like Wells-Barnett and White, the NAACP found that the reasons why African Americans were lynched ranged from the trivial to the serious and were as numerous as the people found in a lynch mob. Some of the more common reasons included incest, rape, murder, being disrespectful of white people (especially women), drunkenness, failing to pay debts, possessing a bad character, gambling, and theft. In many cases, the Tuskegee scholars found no offense had been committed or alleged; the lynching victim was merely in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The study of lynching in the latter part of the twentieth century has, for the most part, been carried out by psychologists and sociologists. These social scientists tended to look at issues such as individual and social pathology much as did those in the nineteenth century. It was not until Jacquelyn Dowd Hall published *Revolt Against Chivalry* in 1979 that the study of lynching wriggled free from the grip of psychologists and sociologists. Like Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Walter White, Hall connected the violence of lynching with the southern need to preserve the hierarchical relationship between blacks and whites. Hall also discussed the culture of violence in the American South, the economic and social dislocation wrought by modernism in the region, and the sexual tension between whites and blacks. Her research opened the door for a profusion of articles and books on the subject.

Indeed, the scholarship on lynching has never been more dynamic. Scores of historians, sociologists, and psychologists are breaking new ground in the study of lynching. Their theories range from economic distress to tension over race and sex, to individual psychopathologies. Little-known issues connected with lynching, such as the lynching of black mobs by black people, and lynchings in northern states, are also being studied; the latter promises to be fertile ground as it has rarely been studied. In October 2002, scholars from all over the United States and several other countries gathered at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, for the first ever International Conference on Lynching and Racial Violence. Scholars and students from a number of disciplines presented a wealth of new research on lynching, its history, and its impact on American arts and letters, politics, and the criminal justice system. Held in conjunction with the conference was the first southern exhibition of lynching artifacts, including postcards and photos, collected and owned by James Allen.

Lynching has all but disappeared. There are undoubtedly a number of reasons for this: modernization, industrialization, the **civil rights movement** of the 1950s and 1960s and the sweeping changes it brought to American society. Interracial dating and marriage, once illegal in the South and barely tolerated in the rest of the country, are much more common, and the pathological fear whites had of sexual activity between white women and black men has diminished. Yet the African American community still bears its scars. A majority of African Americans continue to believe that America operates a dual criminal justice system—often referred to as *legal lynching*—one for whites and another for blacks, and that it is impossible for blacks to be treated fairly or receive any semblance of justice. The explosion in the number of black men and women in prison and continued **police brutality** in large urban areas serve as proof of this belief.

Lynchings still occur in the United States, albeit rarely, and whites and blacks still react to them in starkly different ways. The 1998 dragging death in Jasper, Texas, of **James Byrd, Jr.**, by three white men shocked much of white America with its callousness and depravity. Many blacks, however, immediately made the historical connection to the lynching of black men in the South: the three white men overpowering the lone black one; the dark, lonely road; the fact that Byrd was tortured before his death and mutilated afterward did not seem to surprise most of black America. It must be pointed out that just as lynching was ritualized in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so is the nation's reaction to it in the twenty-first century. There is the often vociferous condemnation of the violence by a large portion of the white community; the soul-searching questions about how and why human beings are so cruel to one another and why in 2005 race is still a flashpoint in America. These days, most law enforcement officials seek to help, not hinder, the investigations of lynching, and the justice system generally comes forth with the appropriate punishment.

Recently there has been increased awareness of, and attention to, so-called legal lynching, or the application of the death penalty in the United States. African American males are still more likely to be tried, convicted, and executed than white men for the same crimes. The state of Illinois issued a moratorium on the death penalty in 2000 after thirteen death row inmates were exonerated. Several states are studying similar action. Although the occasional lynching still occurs, it is clear that lynching as the main way of maintaining the racial caste system is, for the most part, no longer accepted or tolerated in the United States. *See also* Atlanta (Georgia) Riot of 1906; Rape, as Provocation for Lynching.

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