

The Republic For Which It Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896

## Ida B. Wells, democratic rights, and lynch mob sexual assault accusations against African-Americans

By Eric London  
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One of the central contradictions in American history is the fact that its most progressive struggle, the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, unchained the world's most destructive force, American capitalism.

It was from this period of plunder and industrial expansion that key elements still present in contemporary American politics emerged in embryonic form. In his book *The Republic For Which It Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896*, Stanford University Professor Richard White details the dynamism and criminality of these critical three decades, touching on many of these themes.

But one section of his book, part of the Oxford History of the United States, is particularly important for understanding the present bourgeois political climate involving rampant allegations of sexual assault.

After the Republican Party betrayed the liberated former slaves in exchange for the presidency in the 1876 election deal that ended Reconstruction, the former Southern Bourbon aristocrats, now operating under capitalist property relations, unleashed a vicious wave of racist reaction against Southern blacks. This was directed in large part against the emergence of the working class, both black and white, as well as immigrant, which threatened the wealth of the aristocrats. Those Northern politicians and generals who opposed the rebirth of Southern reaction were drowned out by the Northern businessmen who worried about upsetting their company profits.

In 1892, a 30-year-old African-American teacher named Ida B. Wells, born a slave in Mississippi during the Civil War, was outraged when a mob lynched three of her friends near Memphis, Tennessee.

Wells began a lifelong effort, in the face of death threats and violence, to document the wave of lynchings that erupted in the South in the 1880s and 1890s. It is worth quoting extensively from White's account.

[Wells] discovered that no matter what the original reason for mob violence, newspapers turned them into stories of the rape of a white woman by a black man. Wells showed that in some cases the rape accusations disguised consensual sex, and in most other cases the original reasons for the lynchings had nothing to do with rape at all. Accusations of rape were, she wrote, "an old racket." Her attacks struck at the core of the mythic South: the purity of Southern womanhood and homes threatened by black men. Memphis papers attacked her "obscene intimations," and a mob destroyed her press and threatened to kill anyone who tried to resume publishing.

Wells fled the South and set up shop in New York City. White continues:

Lynchings were more than executions; they were public spectacles, even entertainments, that often took place before large crowds. White men tortured black men, dismembering, castrating, and burning them. Photographers memorialized the murders. The photographs turned into postcards, sold widely. As Wells asserted, rape had become a racial weapon; the mere accusation against a black man amounted to a death sentence.

Wells made this last point central to her campaign to defend the democratic rights of African Americans against lynch mob violence. Wells took particular aim at Frances Willard, a prominent feminist temperance advocate and supporter of segregation. Willard's program at the time was that, "great

dark-faced mobs whose rallying cry is better whisky” threatened the “safety of women, of childhood, of the home.”

White writes that Willard gave a speech arguing “that lynching was the result of the rape of white women by black men and justifying lynch mobs as a kind of home protection. She claimed drink enflamed the passions of black men.”

A widely publicized confrontation between Wells and Willard arose when Wells denounced Willard’s claim that all victims of rape must be unconditionally believed. White writes that in 1894:

Willard attacked [Wells] for slandering Southern white women by saying that not all accusations of rape were true. The WCTU [Woman’s Christian Temperance Union] resolution of 1894, although lamenting lynching, indicated that it could not be banished until “the unspeakable outrages which have so often provoked such lawlessness [i.e., sexual assault and rape allegations] shall be banished from the world, and childhood, maidenhood, and womanhood shall no more be the victims of atrocities worth than death.”

When Wells again struck back at Willard, none other than the *New York Times* denounced Wells as “a slanderous and nasty minded mulatress.”

Beyond the material White presents in *The Republic For Which It Stands*, Ida B. Wells’s own writings show how central the question of the democratic rights of the accused were for the development of the movement to defend the civil rights of African Americans. In an 1893 article titled “Lynch Law,” Wells wrote that 269 black men were murdered by mobs after being accused of rape between 1882 and 1891. She wrote, “This crime is only so punished when white women accuse black men, which accusation is never proven...Investigation as to guilt or innocence of the accused is never made.”

In 1900, Wells wrote an article titled, “Lynch Law in America,” which warned against condemning a man “upon the unsworn and uncorroborated charge of his accuser. No matter that our laws presume every man innocent until he is proved guilty; no matter that it leaves a certain class of individuals completely at the mercy of another class...if a white woman declares herself insulted or assaulted, some life must pay the penalty, with all the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition and all the barbarism of the Middle Ages. The world looks on and says it is well.”

A central strength of White’s book is that it shows how the post-Civil War forces of political reaction, fearful of the growth of the working class, enflamed powerful moods of public hysteria, taking advantage of emotion and prejudice, to reroute social anger against the most vulnerable.

The present wave of sexual assault allegations is no

exception. Whether they are aware of it or not, today’s moralists who proclaim that all victims are to be believed *a priori* are adopting an outlook with a dark and violent past.

This is not limited to the late 19th century.

In 1915, a Jewish man named Leo Franks was falsely convicted of murdering a 13-year-old and was then abducted and lynched in Georgia. The prosecution based its case on the false claim that Franks was a Jewish predator who lusted for gentile girls.

In 1931, eight African American teenaged boys were convicted of raping a white woman in Scottsboro, Alabama and sentenced to death by the electric chair on the false testimony of the victim. This order would have been carried out had it not been for the intervention of the Communist Party, which demanded the right to question the accuser and appealed the convictions to the United States Supreme Court.

In 1955, 14-year-old Emmett Till was murdered while visiting family in Mississippi for the “crime” of whistling at a white woman. It was not until 2017 that the woman who testified that Till whistled at her—Carolyn Bryant Donham—admitted that she made-up the allegations. “That part is not true,” she told Duke University Professor Timothy Tyson.

Reactionaries are always emboldened by hysteria moods (called “national conversations” in today’s vernacular), and in perhaps no country are these moods so powerful as in the United States, which is simultaneously the most puritanical and prurient country on Earth.

Those who claim that there is a fundamental difference between today’s climate and previous periods in US history because of the race or wealth of the victims should be taught that the evisceration of democratic rights, no matter against whom it is initially directed, is always ultimately felt most heavily by the working class and the most oppressed.

The socialist movement has always stood for the principle that moral crusades, especially on questions of sexual purity, never serve to strengthen left-wing causes. Socialists fight the enemies of the working class not on the basis of personal proclivities but on politics and program.

Professor White’s book is a valuable resource beyond its portrayal of the important civil rights fight against the moral crusaders of the temperance movement who justified the lynchings of black workers and sharecroppers. Those interested in uncovering many truths about the formative 1865-1896 period should study *The Republic For Which It Stands*.

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