

## Book Review

# *Wilmington's Lie: The 1898 white supremacist coup in North Carolina*

David Zucchino, Atlantic Monthly Press, 336 pages

By Fred Mazelis  
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*Wilmington's Lie* provides a detailed account of an infamous chapter in the consolidation of Jim Crow segregation and terror in the states of the former Confederacy following the US Civil War. The white supremacist coup that took place in Wilmington, then the largest city in North Carolina, overthrew a multiracial government and took the lives of scores of African Americans.

Although it is widely assumed that rigid segregation and lynch mob terror followed immediately after the end of the Civil War, that is not the case. Even after the end of Reconstruction in 1877, it was another two decades before Jim Crow became entrenched, through legal decisions such as the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling of the US Supreme Court, as well as through political and extralegal efforts by Southern Democrats to whip up racism.

As author David Zucchino explains, North Carolina was one of the last states to become an integral part of the white supremacist counterrevolution that followed the end of Reconstruction. In the period leading up to 1898, there was a continuing Republican Party presence, both statewide and in the major cities. In 1894, a coalition of Populists and Republicans on a so-called "Fusionist" slate won control of the state legislature. In Wilmington, white Fusionists were elected mayor and to a number of other key positions. Blacks also played a prominent role. In this period, Wilmington was described as "the freest town for a Negro in the country."

The Democrats, brazenly employing white supremacist demagoguery, set out to take back control of the legislature in 1898. They used a combination of ballot stuffing, terror directed against black voters, and the use of race-baiting to mobilize whites. On the heels of this statewide election victory, they moved immediately—only two days later—to overthrow the multi-racial government in Wilmington.

The coup took place on November 10, 1898. It began with the torching of the *Daily Record* building. Alexander Manly, the African American editor of this influential daily newspaper, had already fled the city to avoid a possible lynching. For the rest of the day, frenzied racist mobs, the infamous "Red Shirts," attacked black workers, shooting at least 60 dead. Whole families were forced to flee for their lives into neighboring swamps. The actual death toll was likely significantly higher.

The pogrom was followed by the organized banishment of leading black citizens, as well as several white officials, including Mayor Silas Wright and police chief John Melton. Wright and Melton were among the "Big 6," the name given by the white supremacists to a group that was targeted as "traitors to the white race." Among the African Americans who were marched to the railroad station and forcibly ejected under humiliating

circumstances were the Rev. J. Allen Kirk, an outspoken minister; William Henderson, a leading lawyer; and Thomas Miller, the wealthiest black in the city.

The leading white supremacists included Josephus Daniels, the editor of the *News and Observer*; Colonel Alfred Waddell, former Confederate officer and former mayor of Wilmington; state Democratic chairman Furnifold Simmons; and other leading business and military figures. A number of these would go on to illustrious political careers during the many decades when racist southern Democrats exercised enormous influence within the Democratic Party as a whole. Simmons spent 30 years in the US Senate, and Daniels was appointed Secretary of the Navy by Woodrow Wilson in 1913, and Ambassador to Mexico in 1933 by Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The white supremacists made absolutely no effort to disguise their racist appeals. They issued leaflets against white Republicans reading, "These degenerate sons of the white race who control the republican machine in the county, or those whose positions made them influential in putting negro rule on the whites, will suffer the penalty of their responsibility for any disturbance. ..."

Two weeks before the 1898 election, Waddell declared, in racist demagoguery quite reminiscent of Donald Trump's recent denunciation of "shithole countries": "The Negro was a slave and was brought here as such. Is this his country? For 3,000 years the Negro has had a whole continent to himself, and it is in the same condition now as it was at the beginning, except where white settlements have been made."

The Wilmington massacre was a turning point. Jim Crow segregation quickly became universal throughout the former slave states. As Zucchino writes, "The killings and coup in Wilmington inspired white supremacists across the South. No one had ever seen anything like it. Wilmington's whites had mounted a rare armed overthrow of a legally elected government."

North Carolina, following the lead of Louisiana, enacted "grandfather clauses" in its voting eligibility requirements. All voters would have to prove literacy, but those whose fathers or grandfathers voted would be exempt. Naturally, this meant that while most uneducated and illiterate whites would be able to vote, blacks would not, because their fathers and grandfathers had been slaves.

These laws became the rule through most of the former Confederacy. Although the Supreme Court invalidated them in 1915, by that time they had already accomplished most of what they set out to do, and they were followed by other schemes to deny voting rights. Many poor whites remained effectively disenfranchised, along with the vast majority of the

black population. Concomitant with the attack on voting rights came the segregation of public space. In 1899, North Carolina passed the state's first formal Jim Crow law, segregating train compartments. This was only the beginning of such legislation.

A weakness of Zucchini's book is that, in large part, it confines itself to harrowing accounts of murder and mayhem by the Red Shirt mobs, as well as the maneuvers and conspiracy of the Democratic Party racists who created the conditions for the coup, without sufficient explanation of the motives behind this pogrom and its broader historical significance. Racism is implicitly presented as an end in and of itself, rather than a means to the end of political control, and through that, class domination.

Early in his narrative, the author devotes a few pages to the growth of the Populists in the early 1890s, and how "they teamed with Republicans, white and black, in an uneasy political and racial alliance known as Fusion." He then largely drops the subject. It was above all the threat of the unity of black and white sharecroppers, poor farmers and workers, in North Carolina and elsewhere in the former Confederacy, that led the ruling elites to consolidate the system of segregation and to encourage the use of racist terror.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was no revolutionary, but as a sincere advocate of racial integration and social reform he stressed some of these class issues. As King explained in one of his major speeches, in March 1965, "Racial segregation as a way of life did not come about as a natural result of hatred between the races immediately after the Civil War. There were no laws segregating the races then...the segregation of the races was really a political stratagem employed by the emerging Bourbon interests in the South to keep the southern masses divided and southern labor the cheapest in the land."

Zucchini does not explain how the development of American capitalism in the post-Civil War period led to the reconciliation of former enemies against the rising working class. He writes, for instance, that "[t]he white supremacy campaign had demonstrated to the nation that the federal government would reproach whites for attacking black citizens, but it would not punish them or even condemn them." The author finds that the inaction in the face of the coup of Republican President William McKinley, the son of Ohio abolitionists, "seems out of character."

Zucchini only mentions that the year of the Wilmington massacre was also the year of the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, in which the United States launched itself into the front rank of the imperialist powers, taking from the decrepit Spanish empire Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. The author sees in this only an unfortunate coincidence, as the war and other issues "overshadowed" the events in North Carolina.

The Spanish-American War of 1898 and the imposition of Jim Crow segregation on the South were not simply coincidental. It was the development of the class struggle, both at home and internationally, that led the ruling class to promote a resurgent racism, which was instigated or tolerated by both capitalist parties. The predatory war was justified, to a great deal, with rhetoric about the "civilizing mission" of what Rudyard Kipling called "the white man's burden." Racism became an important weapon in the buildup of American nationalism and chauvinism, justifying such crimes as the invasion of the Philippines and the subjugation of most of Latin America in the early decades of the 20th century through the imposition of puppet governments or outright occupations by the US Army.

In this context, McKinley's neglect of Wilmington was no accident. The Democrats were the party of the former Confederacy and of their Northern sympathizers and big city political machines. McKinley's Republicans had by now repudiated the ideals on which the Civil War had been fought. The two parties of capitalism bitterly opposed the unified opposition of workers, white, black, and immigrant. Frightened by the major eruptions of the working class in the North, and of the potential of the Populist movement in the South, Republicans and Democrats

recognized that short-term profits and long-term class rule—including the conduct of their shared imperialist foreign policy—required the division of the American working class along racial and national lines.

In his concluding Epilogue, Zucchini looks back on the events of 1898 from the standpoint of the 21st century. Here the weakness of his approach is most glaring.

The author is a contributing writer for the *New York Times*. Although he does not put forward outright falsifications on the order of the *Times*' 1619 Project (that the American Revolution was carried out to defend slavery, as Nikole Hannah-Jones claimed, or that Abraham Lincoln was a racist who viewed blacks only as an obstacle to white government), his standpoint is similar: that race is the fundamental dividing line in society and that American history is a largely unbroken history of anti-black racism.

Zucchini discusses contemporary efforts at voter suppression—how voter ID laws, gerrymandering and other techniques are used to lower the turnout of poor, African American and other minority voters. These techniques, he points out, have multiplied since the Supreme Court, in a 2013 decision, gutted the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965. Moreover, efforts at voter suppression have spread throughout the US. They are promoted by today's Republican Party, which has sought to encourage a racist constituency ever since the days of Richard Nixon's "Southern strategy." (Zucchini does not mention that the Democratic Party plays its own role in voter suppression, specializing in blocking workers' access to socialist and "third party" candidates on the left, much as the Democratic Party did to its Populist opponents of the late 19th century.)

From his observation that minority voters are among those facing voter suppression, however, Zucchini draws the conclusion that little has changed since 1898. He almost entirely overlooks the great struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, which succeeded in dismantling Jim Crow. This history also lives, despite the attempts to turn the clock back on voting rights and other democratic gains of the 20th century.

Because Zucchini does not see that the brutal imposition of Jim Crow racism in the 1890s represented the interests of the American ruling class, he misses the most potent connection between past and present, and between race and class. Racism, then as now, expresses capitalism's need to divide the working class. The Populist and Fusion movements failed because they were unable to maintain the unity of the oppressed masses, black and white.

Today, although racism exists and white supremacists seek to fan its flames, the fundamental issue is class. Despite the strenuous efforts of Trump and the Republican Party, there is no mass base for racism today. As the mass multi-racial protests following the murder of George Floyd showed, there has never been greater opposition to racism and greater potential for united struggle against inequality, police violence and all attacks on democratic rights. Every single one of these struggles poses revolutionary questions and can only be waged successfully by uniting the working class.

It is precisely at this point that the Democratic Party, the *New York Times* and similar forces come forward to declare that nothing has changed since the era of Jim Crow, and that "white America" is the enemy of "black America." This version of history minimizes or erases the great struggles against slavery and segregation. The aim is similar to that of the Republicans, even if it is framed differently. Both the defenders of racism and the promoters of a racialist conception of American and world history share a mortal fear of the working class, and therefore seek to encourage racial divisions.

Zucchini's book is informative and valuable for its depiction of the racial massacre in Wilmington, North Carolina. It is also necessary to read it critically, however, rejecting its narrow focus on race and its superficial conclusions on the nature of the present struggles.

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