RACE AND POLITICS IN NORTH CAROLINA 1872–1901

THE BLACK SECOND

Eric Anderson

Louisiana State University Press
Baton Rouge and London
Chapter 14

THE MEANING OF WHITE SUPREMACY

Criminal means once tolerated are soon preferred.
—Edmund Burke

AFTER IT WAS OVER, the rival parties offered sharply differing interpretations of what had happened. According to Democrats, the "white supremacy campaign" of 1898 was just what it appeared to be—a furious popular rejection of the increased black political power fostered by fusion politics. According to Republicans and Populists, race became an issue because cynical Democratic leaders conjured up an imaginary threat of "Negro domination" in order to return their party to office. Populists, in particular, saw economic motives behind the campaign and repeated their pre-election charges that "the Democratic ‘machine’ and railroad monopolists" were insincere in their "bowling lustily about ‘negro domination.’"

Recent historians have tended to support the Populist interpretation. Joseph F. Steelman, in a carefully researched doctoral thesis, argues that the conservative "Matt W. Ransom faction of the [Democratic] party was in the ascendency in 1898." He maintains that "the economic policies of the Fusionists, particularly the aggressive record of the Railroad Commission" led Democrats to use "drastic" measures to regain control of the state. "Conservative interests were in the vanguard of the white supremacy campaign," in Steelman’s version of events. Hugh Lefler and Ray Newsome present the 1898 campaign as more than simply a struggle for white supremacy, noting "heavy financial support from business interests" for the Democrats and citing the claim of the conservative Charlotte Observer that "the business men of the State are largely responsible for the victory." A recent student of the process of suffrage restriction, J. Morgan Kousser, views the 1898 election in a similar light. Accepting J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton’s claim that the menacing "Red Shirt Clubs" were primarily composed of the "respectable and well-to-do," Kousser suggests that the campaign was designed to protect upper class economic interests as well as to insure white rule. Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that white supremacy was a contrived issue, that Democratic leaders were not genuinely concerned about increasing black political influence.

The main leaders of the white supremacy campaign, Josephus Daniels, Charles Aycock, and Simmons, were second district men, and their actions may be understood in light of their heritage. Three times Furnifold Simmons was a serious contender for the Democratic congressional nomination in the "black second." In 1886 and 1888 he attempted to accommodate Democratic politics to the presence of a large, active Negro voting bloc—a task he found frustratingly difficult, requiring the occasional aid of corruption and discounting to succeed. In 1890 the activities of the Farmers’ Alliance showed him how division in the white man’s party could allow the black candidate of the "Negro party" to win an unexpected victory. The Democrats’ most potent orator, Charles B. Aycock, was a native of Wayne County. Although Republicans seldom won in this county, they offered the Democrats strong opposition and occasionally elected a county officer or legislator. Twelve years before the white supremacy campaign, when Democrats faltered in the state election, Aycock attributed the party’s poor showing to hard times,

over-confidence, and "failure to draw the color line." 4 Josephus Daniels, the Democrats' most effective journalistic propagandist, used inflammatory cartoons, angry editorials, and often inaccurate news reports in the Raleigh News and Observer to preach a philosophy he had learned in the Second Congressional District. As early as 1882 Daniels was promoting white supremacy in the Wilson Advance. After one disorderly Republican convention, the teen-age editor declared that the confusion at the session "clearly demonstrated that the negro was unfit for self government." Five years later the Advance, now co-edited by Daniels and his brother, announced that it had "no faith in the negroes voting the Democratic ticket," since blacks would simply become purchasable voters when they abandoned their loyalty to the Republican party. 5 Daniels received a personal lesson in the perils of "Negro domination" when his mother was removed as postmaster of Wilson at the behest, so her son believed, of black politician James O'Hara. 6

No one learning his politics in the "black second" could imagine that race was a secondary issue. In counties where Negroes were 40 percent, 60 percent, even 70 percent of the population, the question of the black man's role in civic life never faded. For a time, it is true, the majority of eastern Democrats accepted Negroes as a permanent part of the voting population, opposed political violence, and showed some tolerance of officeholding by black Republicans. Yet even when tensions were at their lowest level and political life operated most "normally," a white Republican was in an equivocal position and genuine Democratic-black cooperation (as distinct from "trades" and deals) was rare. Democratic orators seldom let a campaign pass without warning white voters of the danger of renewed Reconstruction (and "Negro domination") if the Republicans captured the state once more.

"White supremacy," the dogma that the white community must always be able to control relations between the races, held the Democratic organization together. As Aycock himself observed, "We have fought for tariff and against tariff; we have fought for internal improvements and against them; for a tax on liquor and against it. We have fought for this issue and against that policy, but everywhere and all the time we have fought for white supremacy and the right to govern ourselves." 7 Whatever hopes of railroads and other businesses were threatened by Populist economics, no matter the factional disputes within the Democratic party, regardless of the narrow partisan maneuvers of Democratic leaders, the "real issue" of the 1898 campaign was "Negro domination." It is not enough to demonstrate, as Helen Edmonds does in her Negro and Fusion Politics, that black political power was far below black numerical strength, that Negroes did not actually control any level of government. 8 Democratic propaganda asked white voters different questions. Is the present level of black influence acceptable? Can the majority of white voters tolerate a situation in which the overwhelming majority of black voters, allied with a minority of white voters, are able to choose the state administration? Is the current trend of increasing black political influence a dangerous one? If conditions remain unchanged, will blacks and whites soon negotiate as equals in some areas? In short, what is the black man's place in our political system? "Negro domination" was partisan shorthand for the notion that the interests of white men were threatened by the improving political status of blacks, and to men like Simmons, Daniels, and Aycock there could be no more important issue.

George White expressed well the basic issue of the 1898 campaign in a speech to the House of Representatives a few months after the election. American Negroes, he noted, were going through a "peculiar crisis."

It is not necessary . . . to enter into any explanation as to what brought about this crisis. I may say, however, in passing, that possibly more than by any other one thing it has been brought about by the fact that despite all the oppression which has fallen upon our shoulders we have been rising, steadily rising, and in some instances we hope ere long to be able to measure our achievements with those of all other men and women of the land. This tendency on the part of some of us to rise and assert our manhood along all lines is, I fear, what has brought about this changed condition. 9

Simmons, Aycock, Daniels, and their associates saw the same process at work and responded with angry and distorted language. At bottom.

4. Raleigh State Chronicle quoted in Goldsboro Messenger, November 15, 1886.
6. Daniels, Tar Heel Editor, 208.
7. Quoted in ibid., 180.
drained of invective, “Negro domination” meant the same thing as asserting “our manhood along all lines.”

The centrality of the race issue is shown clearly in the words and actions of white Republicans and the Populists—the primary targets (if not the ultimate victims) of the white supremacy campaign. A white “fusionist” living in eastern North Carolina faced exceedingly difficult choices. Motivated by his fear of ostracism, his hatred of ruthless foes, his racial prejudice, his sense of order and purpose in history, he was forced to make a decision as agonizing as the one that confronted the men of 1861. Democrats relentlessly repeated the message that “Negro domination” had been “brought about through a division of the white men at the ballot box,” and if white men had remained united “these things could not have been.”

Even before intense campaigning began, some eastern Populists were having second thoughts. “I was one of the first in this section to join the Populist party and supported it in the thickest of the fight,” wrote an Edgecombe man to Senator Butler. “And have been abused and lied about as much if not more than anyone in this section. And I do not know now what part I shall take in the coming fight but of one thing I am almost sure I shall not take the same course under similar circumstances that I did in the last campaign.” Cooperation with either the Democrats or the Republicans would destroy the People’s party, he feared, whereas a three-way fight would lead to a Republican victory. A Littleton Populist in the spring of 1898 expressed his fear of Negroes’ wielding too much power. “In the eastern counties of N.C. the question of the black man ruling our state and county government is getting to be a serious matter with us just now. Unless the white people take some steps to call a halt to the manner in which things have been managed, they will soon have entire control of the eastern counties, and too great a hold on our state and national government.”

If Butler and other Populist leaders had had their way the 1898 campaign would have been fought on the issue of “white metal” rather than on “white supremacy.” Collaboration with the Republicans had never been easy, and Butler was determined to attempt once again fusion with reform-minded Democrats. Meeting in mid-May, before either the Republicans or Democrats, the People’s party state convention overwhelmingly endorsed “honorable and harmonious co-operation of all who oppose the domination of gold and monopoly, and who favor the overthrow of the National bank and railroad influence in controlling legislation.” A conference committee was established to negotiate with any party “or faction of a party” that might desire a coalition of “reform forces” to elect nine “free silver and anti-monopoly” congressmen, an “anti-monopoly” legislature, and nonpartisan judges. The delegates rejected the proposal of Butler’s rival, Congressman Harry Skinner, that the party simply reaffirm its basic principles and “make no proposition to any party.”

Although some Democrats found the idea of a free silver united front attractive—the Northampton county convention voted 50-9 in favor of cooperation with the Populists, for example—the Democratic state convention brusquely turned down the Populist offer. Meeting May 26 in Raleigh, the convention also instructed the state executive committee to ignore any future proposals for fusion. It was politically unwise to risk splitting the party over economic policy when the Democrats might find unity in the basic issue of “good government” and white supremacy. And as if the Democratic position were not clear enough, the election of Furnifold Simmons as state chairman a month later reemphasized the Democratic strategy for 1898. It was Simmons, after all, who had directed the uncompromising, victorious Democratic campaign of 1892. He was chosen for the chairmanship by a slim margin, defeating another former second district congressman, Frederick A. Woodard.

Although some Populists talked boldly of an independent campaign against both the old parties, political realism pushed the People’s party toward a third conservative election in tandem with the Republicans. The large number of Populist legislators and local officials who had been elected from eastern North Carolina faced certain defeat without the aid of Negro Republican voters. On their own, how could the Populists hope to produce winners in places like Northampton and Halifax? And unaligned, the few hundred Populists in Lenoir would never


12. Raleigh Caucasion, May 26, 1898.
13. Ibid., May 26, June 2, 1898.
14. Tarboro Southerner, June 30, 1898.
have boasted of a Populist clerk of the court, legislator, and chairman of the county board. Democrats wanted to make an issue of the record of fusion, to ask the voters, in the words of the Tarboro Southerner, "Shall North Carolina have another legislature as the last two were?" Such rhetoric also tended to bind the fusion partners together once more, destroying any chance for a campaign based upon clearly articulated economic issues.

The Democratic effort to exploit race prejudice gave special prominence to the shrewd, eloquent black man who was a representative of North Carolina in Congress, and the heightened visibility of George White often made fellow fusionists uncomfortable. As the campaign intensified in the summer of 1898, White was firmly in control in his own district. He had been renominated by acclamation in an early district convention in Warrenton May 10, turning aside with apparent ease the effort of W. Lee Person to oust him. At the state Republican convention on July 20 he made a speech that instantly became famous and eventually cost the party thousands of votes.  

White and his Republican audience probably regarded the speech as purely routine. Just before adjournment, in a talk that was not one of the major addresses of the convention, White promised support for the party platform and leaders. He also delivered a mild but cogent attack against the white supremacist spirit building among Democrats. (Perhaps he had read the comments of his hometown newspaper the week before.

"It is time that the color line should be drawn. Those who are not with us are against us," declared the Tarboro Southerner. "In politics the negro has nothing in common with the whites, and the sooner he is out of politics the better it will be for Edgecombe county."  

White discounted Democratic fears of "social equality," saying, "No white man dares enter my home unless invited there, and I dare not enter any white man's home unless invited there. The laws of the land do not regulate social equality. Man regulates the social problem for himself. There's nothing in this social equality plea. It's a scheme to get in on.


Turning to the political side of race relations, White added, "The Democrats are going to say that I am a negro office holder. Yes, and there are going to be more just like me. The Constitution gives me the right to vote and this gives me the right to hold office."  

By inaccurate, sensational reporting Josephus Daniels' *News and Observer* gave White's words a belligerent, swaggering tone. "You dare not enter my door to enjoy social equality," the newspaper had the black congressman saying, "unless I invite you there." The report completely ignored the second half of White's formula, in which he declared he had no right to enter a white man's home "unless invited." According to the *News and Observer*, on the subject of Negro officeholding White said: "I am not the only negro who holds office. There are others. There are plenty more being made to order to hold offices. We are the modestest people in the world and don't hold as many offices as we will. I invite the issue. If you will come into my district we will have a joint debate." But the *News and Observer*, though it was enraged by White's attitude, was casual and inconsistent in reporting the offending remarks. In another place on the same page a different version of White's comments was reported. "Oh yes I am a negro office holder, and there are many other negroes that are going to hold office. They are being built to order. I want to invite the issue of the white man against the negro. I want to meet it in the black belt, and whether they meet me or not, I am going to have them hear me."  

Later in the campaign White told a Democratic reporter that his speech had been misquoted and that he did not favor raising the race question. Fusion campaign literature denied that White made some of the statements attributed to him by the *News and Observer*, even producing affidavits from White's hearers, but the report proved impossible to counteract. The Democratic press was furiously promoting the notion that blacks were the aggressors in North Carolina racial conflict, that, in the words of the *Wilmington Star*, "the negro was never as assertive as he is now," and the remarks attributed to White served to illustrate this contention.  


Even if White had not become notorious in this way, Populists in his district would have been uncomfortable with his House voting record, which revealed his conservative view of economic problems and his rejection of the free-silver panacea. In a maneuver designed to force second district Democrats to vote for a Populist or risk charges of insincerity, the Populist district convention met July 29, before a Democratic candidate had been chosen, and nominated Tarboro Populist James B. Lloyd for Congress. Another Tarboro man, former Populist state chairman W. E. Fountain, was chosen as district chairman. Unless Democrats supported Lloyd, a man who believed in Bryan-style reform, they could be blamed for dividing the white vote and facilitating the reelection of a Negro.

But the Populists themselves were less than unanimous in their support of Lloyd, a close associate of Senator Butler. One member of the state executive committee gave his opinion that second district Populists would divide their votes between Lloyd and White. As late as two months after Lloyd’s nomination, the News and Observer reported: “The minority Populists in his district are opposed to him and declare that White has kept the fusion agreement, is entitled to a re-election and that they will vote for him.”

Democrats met the Populist challenge in their district convention August 31 in Wilson. Benjamin F. Aycock, brother of the future governor, opened the meeting with a “ringing speech” comparing the task of overthrowing Republican-Negro rule in 1898 with the American fight for independence from England and the effort against Reconstruction in 1868. With Northampton and Greene unrepresented, the delegates passed resolutions affirming their support of the 1896 Democratic platform and declaring “that the white race must administer all the laws in North Carolina.” To show their sincere devotion to white supremacy, the assembled Democrats voted to adjourn (subject to the call of the district chairman) without making a nomination. The convention did not formally endorse Lloyd, but as the Kinston Free Press put it, the action left “the race open between the negro congressman, White, and Mr. J. B. Lloyd, the Populist nominee.” “The color line has been drawn.”

22. Kinston Free Press, August 17, 1898; Raleigh News and Observer, September 8, 19, 1898.
25. J. B. Lloyd to Marion Butler, July 22, October 14, 1898, both in Butler Papers.
readers in early August: "The sentiment in favor of white rule in North Carolina is growing. The presence of negroes in important offices they cannot fill, the growing assertiveness and impudence of negro politicians, and the infamous speech of Congressman White in the Republican State convention have aroused and alarmed the white people of the whole State." Any white man who was willing to join the Democrats in the fight for "white supremacy," regardless of previous party affiliation, was eligible to join the union. The plan was to have a White Government Union organized in every county by the end of August, according to chairman Simmons. "Our state," he explained, "is the only community in the world, with a majority of white voters, where the officers to administer the government are the choice of negroes, and not of the whites. This condition has been brought about by an unfortunate division among the white people, and it is likely to continue until that division is removed, and unity again prevails among them as it did prior to 1892." Simmons promised that only "honorable, legitimate and proper" methods would be employed in the White Government Union's effort to restore white supremacy. 27 Obviously the first purpose of the new organization was to overawe and discourage those white men who had cooperated with negroes in an anti-Democratic coalition.

Assuming that Democratic propaganda was aimed at western white counties, not all eastern Populists immediately realized how serious the Democratic challenge was. As Edgecombe Populists negotiated with Republicans in early August for a combined local and legislative ticket, some argued that if Populists supported black Republicans for the legislature "it would be thunder for the Democrats in Western counties." Edgecombe Populist leader W. E. Fountain complained, "Republicans would yield only one member [of the general assembly] in face of the danger in Western counties." 28 Fountain and the Edgecombe Populists would realize before the campaign was over that the real thunder was not in the west, but that white supremacy extremism was most intense in the east.

Fountain wrote a "strictly confidential" letter to Senator Butler on August 9, 1898, which revealed important hidden weaknesses in the Populist ranks. Illustrating how heavily Republicans depended on their allies, the Edgecombe leader noted that local Populists insisted on a favorable division of offices with the Republicans—"otherwise it would be difficult to get them to take the interest in election necessary to secure an honest count." Fountain was not disturbed by the anti-Negro tone of the Democratic campaign, convinced as he was that "we have nothing to lose [sic] even should there be a change in election law whereby negroes would be disfranchised." Democrats had kept Negroes a factor in politics even when the Democracy was in control "for the sole purpose of demoralizing and corrupting them" and using them as a "bug bear to scare ignorant white men, thereby solidifying them in the perpetuation of Democratic machine rule." Populists ought to call their opponents' bluff: "I believe the time has come to force the white man idea in such a way as to compel the Democrats, should they be successful in securing the legislature, to disfranchise the negro as Tilghman [sic] has done in South Carolina." Fountain, who owed his office to substantial Negro support, concluded, "If it is to be a fight between white men, we can next time . . . beat the gold men, leaving us the dominant [sic] party in the state." 29 That Fountain could be unperturbed by the Democratic onslaught, unwilling to defend Negro allies, and confident that the Democrats were falling into a trap—that any major eastern Populist could take such a view of matters goes far toward explaining the Democratic triumph of 1898.

During September and October, Lloyd and White waged an oddly quiet congressional campaign—in the eye, as it were, of the white supremacy hurricane. Neither man made personal attacks upon his rival or resorted to fanatical rhetoric. Lloyd "confined his speeches to national issues" and privately negotiated for a Democratic endorsement. 30 White visited Republicans around the district, urging caution and determination and asking the support of Populists.

In the Northampton County GOP convention the Negro representative "counseled harmony and deliberation and urged the convention to stick to the Populists and give them a fair division of the offices," according to a remarkably fair Democratic newspaper, the Rich Square Patron and Gleaner. White expressed an eminently moderate view of North Carolina race relations: "Congressman White said that he was opposed

27. Ibid., August 10, 1898.
28. W. E. Fountain to Marion Butler, August 9, 1898, in Butler Papers.
29. Ibid.
to negro supremacy and that the effort of the politicians to make people believe that the negro was seeking to control the government was a slander upon the race. He said that all the negro wanted was an equality before the law and a fair division of the offices. To refute the charges of “Negro domination” he pointed to the eastern counties where blacks were in a large majority “and could elect a negro to every office” yet had never done so. Furthermore, the congressman “advised his people not to undertake to do so at this time.” This statement echoed what White had told the Raleigh Morning Star: “No eastern counties are dominated by negroes.”

It was a difficult time to preach restraint. One second district newspaper published a story headed “Nigger! Nigger! Nigger!” which listed the black officials in numerous counties and towns. The New Bern Journal noted with deep indignation that a white man in Craven County was forced to go to a Negro officetholder for a marriage license, for registration of a deed, for the autopsy of a loved one. A white man might be arrested by a Negro and tried before a black magistrate. The Kinston Free Press declared that North Carolina was the only state “in all the Union” that held out to the Negro “the inducement to enter her citizenship and seek her political honors. . . . Let it be proclaimed to the world, after this fierce conflict that the white people of North Carolina have endorsed this Republican policy and that this party is now firmly intrenched in power, and does any one doubt, can any one doubt, that there will be an influx of negroes into North Carolina from Virginia, South Carolina and other southern states that will soon give the negroes the majority in many counties where they are now in the minority?” “Who shall say,” asked this sensational piece of journalism, that when Colonel James H. Young “returns as conquering hero” he may not summon “his race to join him in making North Carolina the San Domingo of the Union.”

Former Republican congressman Curtis H. Brogden, now past the age of eighty, denounced White in a letter to the Goldsboro Daily Argus as “an unprincipled, swaggering demagogue . . . who delights in all his speeches to harp on the negro, negro, negro, while at the same time intending an insidious . . . disparagement of the white race.” Brogden said he understood some Populists intended to vote for White instead of Lloyd—a fact that “passeth all my understanding.” White favored gold, monopoly, and high taxes, and the aged statesman thought him “the most objectionable negro in the State as a politician,” citing as evidence the famous convention speech. As an experienced politician in the second district, George White was well aware that Brogden was prone to explosive invective when he became agitated, and he may have remembered with a wry smile the former congressman’s attacks on Humphrey and Hubbs in 1896. Yet it was tragic that a man who had risked something for equal rights during Reconstruction now stood on the other side of the issue.

Keeping his head while all about him others gave way to extremism, White worked to maintain the discipline and morale of his supporters. At the Edgecombe Republican convention he “warned the Democrats against interfering with the ballot.” Denying that he meant any threat, only a statement of facts, he declared “he had as much right to fight for his ballot as he had to protect his home.” The extremely partisan correspondent of the Charlotte Daily Observer admitted: “I saw from the way the crowd of gaping negroes listened to and cheered White’s speech that he could make them do anything. But his speech was not vindictive. It was conservative and full of Republicanism. He did not draw the color line, as he is reported to have done at other places.” The Tarboro Southerner gave a somewhat different version of the speech, saying White was “cheered often and long” as he “drew the color line, but put the blame on the Democrats for doing so.” The Southerner simultaneously recognized the Negro congressman’s talent and expressed contempt for white fusionists: “In White we recognize a man far above the average of his race and by long odds superior to the whites who took part in the convention.”

There was a less favorable reaction when White warned an audience in Kinston of the danger of disfranchisement if the Democratic party were returned to power. The speech was basically “a string of lies and perversions of fact,” according to the Kinston Free Press. White’s calm

31. Rich Square Patron and Cleanner, September 1, 1898; Raleigh Morning Post, September 2, 1898.
33. Goldsboro Daily Argus, September 13, 1898.
34. Charlotte Daily Observer, September 20, 1898; Tarboro Southerner, September 22, 1898.
address to the Bertie Republican convention surprised the Windsor Ledger, though one discreet speech was not enough to convince the editor that White's image as a fiery militant was inaccurate. His speech "was just the reverse nature as the one he made at the Republican State Convention. Undoubtedly he has been advised along that line." When White spoke at the Goldsboro courthouse the local newspaper observed: "His speech was moderate in tenor—surprisingly so for White, and was respectable and decent in tone: every word of it could be given in type without reservation." (This was in marked contrast, alleged the report, to a "vile" and "vulgar" speech by a white Republican candidate.)

One of the major themes of White's speeches was a denial of the Democratic charge of "Negro domination." As one correspondent noted, "Congressman White tells the negroes that inasmuch as he is the only negro Congressman in the United States the cry of the white people about negro domination is an empty sound." 35

The anger and fear set loose by the white supremacy campaign frequently made it impossible for White to express his message effectively. The owners of a vacant lot in Rich Square refused the congressman permission to speak there, "believing that the speech would be devoted largely to the abuse of white men." Rumor quickly created a wildly distorted version of the incident, compounding the misunderstanding. A Raleigh newspaper quoted an unnamed gentleman, "whose veracity and integrity cannot be questioned," claiming "that White counselled the negroes . . . to get their guns and ammunition ready" immediately in order to "demand their rights" at the polls. According to the gentleman informant, as soon as White made these remarks the owner of the land on which he was speaking ordered him to leave.

White quickly denied that he had used any such language, and since he was dealing with the Raleigh Morning Post instead of the News and Observer his response was treated with a modicum of fairness. In a published letter to the editor he said: "I counselled the people to be forbearing, law-abiding, and to avoid everything that might lead to disorder, riot or bloodshed . . . . I made the same speech there that I made in Kinston, Windsor, Goldsboro, Wilson, Tarboro and other points in my district, which have [sic] been pleasantly noticed by the honest Democratic editors of this district." The Post accepted White's statement, saying that the original report attributing "incendiary language" to him had been surprising, "for he is a man of more than ordinary intelligence, and must know that . . . results naturally consequent upon such language falls [sic] most heavily upon his own race." White's record was enough to "unite all white men against him, without violent speeches," concluded the Post. 36

James B. Lloyd devoutly wished that all white men would unite against George White, but his campaign was forced to seek success by deliberate indirection. Lloyd was unwilling to win a seat in Congress by accepting the Democratic issue of "Negro domination" or by surrendering all local fusion arrangements with Republicans. In Lloyd's own Edgecombe County, the fusion agreement entailed tacit Populist aid for two Negro gold bugs for the legislature, since Populists nominated only one legislative candidate. The cooperation arrangement left open to individual Populists the matter of actually voting for a Negro, but the distinction between this and an outright endorsement was difficult for many voters to see. The final result was certain to be the election of two black legislators—as well as one Populist member the Populists could never have elected on their own—and Populist control of certain key county offices. Democrats refused to allow Lloyd to have it both ways. "You must either renounce your promise to vote for negro legislators from Edgecombe or sit back in silence and see White walk away with the pie," warned the Tarboro Southerner. 37

Undeterred by public criticism, Lloyd worked in private to secure assistance from Democratic leaders. Chairman Simmons passed word to Lloyd, through an intermediary, that the Democrats would not nominate their own congressional candidate—"provided Lloyd remains in the field and makes the fight." He made no promises about printing Lloyd's name on the Democratic ballot, however. In a September 24 letter to Senator Butler, Lloyd explained another approach to the opposition. The Democratic candidate for solicitor of the Second Judicial District told Lloyd


36. Rich Square Patron and Cleaner, September 28, 1898; Raleigh Morning Post quoted in Kinston Daily Free Press, October 6, 1898; Raleigh Morning Post, October 7, 1898.

37. J. B. Lloyd to Marion Butler, September 19, 1898, in Butler Papers. Tarboro Southerner, September 15, 1898. See also September 8, 1898.
that if the black Republican candidate for solicitor “could be forced to withdraw,” leaving the Democrat no opposition, “he would guarantee that I would get the solid vote of this Dist.” Lloyd attempted to get the Negro candidate to drop out of the race, but his efforts were unsuccessful.38

In the final weeks of the campaign emotions ran high—practically out of control—among white voters. The politicians had “stirred the minds and feelings of the people more deeply than they intended,” as one perceptive and cautious white supremacist remarked after the election. Just as few heeded or understood George White’s appeals for calm, so many white men were impatient when Lloyd devoted his stump speeches to national matters, preaching the familiar doctrines of silver and reform. “He did not refer to State politics at all,” noted the report of a Lloyd speech in Warrenton, as if there were something wrong in a candidate for the national legislature “confining” himself to national issues. “He only referred to his running against White one time, and said he was a white man, a W. J. Bryan man and a silver man, and that the people of the district ought to vote for him, because he represented their interests.” Such routine, uncharged rhetoric failed to persuade in the highly emotional climax of the white supremacy campaign. Thanks to the effective work of men like Simmons, Daniels, and Aycock, political discourse was dominated by sensation and vituperation.49

“I do not think it advisable for you to make a speech here,” Lloyd wrote Senator Butler in mid-October, “or in any of the ‘black’ Counties—Threats are daily made here of trouble. They are saying that Mr. Fountain will be killed, and if trouble comes all the Pop leaders will be the first to suffer. The feeling here is intense.” A correspondent of the Charlotte Daily Observer, issuing firsthand reports from the “Negro-dominated” east, had several weeks earlier characterized Fountain, the Populist treasurer of Edgecombe, as “the most unprincipled, mean white man in this section of the State.” Although Fountain had been elected mayor of Tarboro eight times and was active in promoting the town’s cotton factory and the Bank of Tarboro, the “decent white people” of the town were now said to “look upon him as they would a midnight houseburner.” The reporter added, in words that Lloyd echoed: “And, should a riot ever occur, he would be the first man to suffer.”46

A fire-breathing editorial in the Kinston Daily Free Press made clear the frightening position of white fusionists: “If there must be race conflicts, the real white men should select prominent renegade whites, who are inciting the negroes to cause trouble, for proper and sure treatment. They are meaner than the negroes. But for them there would be no danger of race conflicts.” Only if Negroes tried to “force matters,” to “intimidate the white people,” would there be danger of racial strife. “The negroes will not do this unless they are encouraged by their mean renegade white leaders. Any white man who would thus encourage negroes to conflicts with the whites is too mean to live and richly deserves death at the hands of the whites.”41

Democratic newspapers continued to play up incidents of Negro “insolence.” Three traveling salesmen signed a letter complaining about a “young buck negro” who cursed an “elderly white man” and kicked over another man’s valise and a “young half-blood” who crowded next to a white man in order to get a window seat. “Is a Race Clash Unavoidable?” asked the headline over a September 21 article reporting cases of Negro bicyclists refusing to yield the right of way to white female pedestrians, drunken blacks resisting arrest, and Negroes in other ways demonstrating “impudence.” “Such exasperating occurrences [sic] would not happen but for the fact that the negro party is in power in North Carolina,” maintained the newspaper, “and that there are negro magistrates and other negro officials in office, which emboldens bad negroes to display their evil, impudent and mean natures.” The patience of “true white men” was near the breaking point and they were on the verge of taking the law into their own hands to “make negroes behave themselves” by use of “organized force.” It made little difference that some of the Negro “outrages” had little basis in fact. After reporting that a black woman

38. J. B. Lloyd to Marion Butler, September 19, 24, 29, 1898, all in Butler Papers.
39. H. C. Connor to George Howard, November 25, 1898, in Henry C. Connor Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Raleigh Morning Post, October 6, 1898. See also Charlotte Daily Observer, October 12, 1898.
40. J. B. Lloyd to Marion Butler, October 14, 1898, in Butler Papers. Charlotte Daily Observer, September 30, 1898. Fountain served as mayor of Tarboro 1887-1889, 1891-1895. Tarboro Southerner, April 26, 1900. On his business activities see Raleigh Caucasian, January 21, 1897. An influential businessman who could have easily assumed “the role of oppressor,” Fountain chose instead to join the Populist attack on “monopolistic rapacity,” according to the Caucasian.
had “whipped one of Dr. Faulkner’s little boys . . . with a buggy whip” and that Dr. Faulkner was “awfully mad,” the Kinston Free Press had to retreat slightly two days later. It turned out that Dr. Faulkner had not been told about the incident by his wife, and that the “mean negro woman” struck the boy only once before being stopped by a “good old negro woman.” Even so the incident showed “the necessity of downing the fusion party . . . the success of which encourages negroes to commit outrages.”

The most sensational “outrage” of the campaign involved the second district’s Negro representative and his conduct at a circus performance in Tarboro on October 8. According to white witnesses, White, “in company with six or eight colored women and children,” sat in the section of the tent reserved for whites, even though “there were other seats, abundant in number and equally comfortable,” set aside for Negroses. In response to white complaints, a circus employee asked the congressman to move to the black section, but White said “he had paid his money, and was as good as the white people up there.” He even refused to move when a town policeman requested it. After a second policeman told White to move he and his party walked out of the circus.

Democrats reacted angrily to this incident, seeing in it a powerful argument for white solidarity. “This ‘big, black, burly’ leader of the fusion forces in North Carolina not only favors negro domination,” charged the Free Press, “but is now demanding social equality. . . . Will not the white men of North Carolina resent this insult and vote to forever quell such negro insolence and arrogance[?]” White well knew that southern social practices condemned actions such as his, declared the Goldsboro Daily Argus, and the incident illustrated the Negro’s seeming “hunger for an elimination of all lines of separation.” Indeed, the article continued, “When an educated negro, a graduate of a college of some standing, one who has attained to a position of some importance, must be forced by a policeman to keep within the bounds set for his race . . .

what may we not expect of the ignorant and more vicious of the race?” White’s behavior made clear “the necessity for the absolute and unqualified domination of the white people in all the departments of government. Nothing but a thorough realization of this complete domination will end such conduct, and the friction tending to serious and dangerous disturbances. . . . A great, a living, an ineradicable truth is involved in this conflict . . . and it must be settled . . . once and for all. In all that involves power, authority or privilege, concerning the affairs of the people and the relations of the races, the white people will rule this State. The necessity for this is but increased by the bad conduct of the colored leader at Tarboro.”

The affair revived old resentments against the talented and proud black man, resentments that had been present long before Democrats pilloried White as a symbol of fusion. J. F. Caldwell, editor of the Charlotte Daily Observer, said he was not surprised by White’s action at the circus. “Quite ten years ago a judge, who had just finished riding the circuit of which White was then solicitor, and telling of the insolence of this worthy, said to the writer, that the white members of the bar were compelled to address him as ‘Mr.,’ adding, if ‘You should address him as “White,” he would call you “Caldwell.”’

The circus incident greatly agitated White’s rival for Congress, Populist nominee Lloyd. “Such conduct as this the Pops can not stand,” he wrote to Senator Butler, noting that there were Negroses on the Republican-Populist cooperative ticket for Edgecombe County. White’s action at the circus was “exceedingly embarrassing,” said Lloyd, “and since White has made himself so obnoxious I have advised Mr. Fountain to notify the County Rep Ex Com that unless they remove all the negroes from the ticket we would have nothing to do with the election.” If the Populists ran an independent slate, cooperating with neither of the old parties, “the negroes might elect everything and then we would be held responsible for it.” In Lloyd’s opinion a Democratic victory in the county would not be worse. “If we attempt to carry the present burden since White’s escape it will destroy us.” Unless the blacks were

42. Ibid., October 19, 1898; Kinston Free Press, September 21, 1898; Kinston Daily Free Press, September 23, 1898. For further examples of “Democratic lies,” see the Raleigh Caucauan, October 5, 1898.
44. Kinston Daily Free Press, October 25, 1898; Goldsboro Daily Argus, October 24, 1898.
45. Charlotte Daily Observer, October 16, 1898. An October 14, 1898, report claimed White had insisted on sitting in a white railroad waiting room during the “past fall.”
dropped from the fusion ticket “we are defeated, for in two large townships we have not sufficient force to hold the election—and the Dems threaten, and I believe, will take these townships if they are necessary for them to carry the county. By continuing the fight now with the negroes we will, I very much fear, destroy our party in the county.” Lloyd noted threats against county leader W. E. Fountain and expressed the fear that “some fiend may assassinate him.” “The conservative anti-machine Dems are not giving us any moral support as they did two years ago, and the feeling is extremely bitter.” Not one word did Lloyd write about his own campaign for Congress, indicating perhaps that he had given up hope of being elected.46

It is not possible to know for certain if the circus segregation “outrage” actually occurred as Democratic sources describe it. An intriguing bit of evidence suggests that the event was greatly exaggerated and distorted in the retelling. Two years later the Free Press alleged that George White and his private secretary, a Negro, had taken seats in the white section of a railroad car on a recent trip, refusing to move when the conductor told them to go to the Negro compartment. Only when a group of white men announced that they “would take pleasure in throwing the scamp off the train,” did the two black men gather up their luggage and retreat, according to the newspaper.

“This impudent negro, it seems will never learn his place,” commented the Free Press. “He tried to sit with whites at a circus at Tarboro a year or so ago. He is a mean negro.” White wrote to the editor two days after the story appeared, insisting that “your editorial does me, inadvertently [sic], perhaps, a grave injustice.” “At least a dozen” men of both races could prove that the facts of the case were far different. White and his secretary had gotten on the train at Goldsboro and sat on the Negro side of the partition. No whites were present in this section of the car. When the train stopped at New Bern, White and the secretary went off to speak with friends but left their satchels and umbrellas in their seats. They returned to the Jim Crow compartment on the return trip only to find it filled with whites. The conductor advised them to move to the rear car, but “I thereupon remonstrated upon the humiliation of going through several crowded cars when I was already riding in the compartment provided by law for colored people.” The conductor made a lame remark about not liking to ask people to move, and the two Negroes moved to the car in the rear. White said he heard no remarks about throwing him off the train. “I have never had, have not now, nor do I ever expect to have any hankering to push myself among any class of people where I am not wanted. The circus incident to which you allude was started in much the same way as the incident now under discussion and had no foundation in truth.”47

A few days after the circus incident, another sensational story involving George White appeared in the press. The Wilmington Messenger, citing the word of “a gentleman who arrived in this city last night,” claimed that White had been met by “about one hundred and fifty of Lenoir county’s ‘Rough Riders’” when he arrived in Kinston to deliver a speech. Upon being informed that he “couldn’t slander and vilify the white race at Kinston without being put under the sod,” White quietly went on to the next station “where he was not booked to speak.” White responded by publicly denying “that he had been intimidated at Kinston,” and the Free Press branded the report of “Kinstonians stopping White” a “fake.” “The Messenger has been imposed upon by a liar.”48

If this particular report were false, there were many other examples of closed minds, plugged ears, and vile tactics as election day drew near. The editor of the Tarboro Southerner urged town authorities to refuse Negroes permission to use the town commons for a “big political meeting” just before election day. “The negro has more than his right in this county,” reasoned the editor, “and it is high time they [sic] were taught their place.” A week before the election the News and Observer employed large type and a front page box to charge that Mrs. George H. White had received an express package containing rifles and that the congressman’s daughter was circulating a petition “asking all colored people to refuse to work for white people.”49

As the campaign entered its final days, the Populist congressional campaign fell into complete disorder. A reluctant, discouraged candidate, Lloyd spent most of the last three weeks before election day in Raleigh.

49. Tarboro Southerner, October 20, 1898; Raleigh News and Observer, November 1, 1898.
On October 2, the Populist district committee met in Rocky Mount to consider an offer from the Democrats which entailed the withdrawal of Lloyd and selection of a candidate who could unite white voters. Despite the urging of district chairman Fountain, the committee decided to defer action until Senator Butler and state chairman Cyrus Thompson could be present. Lloyd wrote to Butler the next day requesting that he come to Raleigh for a meeting with Fountain. "I can not write the situation as it is too serious," he said. A newspaper man noted Lloyd was "remarkably reticent" that day, and Lloyd told another reporter: "The charge that the East is under negro domination is not true." 50

Democratic strategists planned an immense mass meeting for October 28 in Goldsboro as the high point of their effort to suppress political diversity among white men, particularly those in eastern North Carolina. Convening just a day after the chairman of the Populist and Republican parties had warned that "the adoption of South Carolina methods is in the event of Democratic success to be followed by a system of government under which only the machine and the bosses are to exercise power," the meeting showed the power of the white supremacy theme. William A. Guthrie, Populist nominee for governor in 1896, and Furnifold Simmons were among the speakers who addressed the group. Former governor Thomas J. Jarvis introduced a set of resolutions declaring that conditions had become intolerable in those communities where local offices were held by Negroes, that such "deplorable conditions were brought about through a division of the white men at the ballot box," and appealing to all honest white men to unite in peacefully ending "negro domination." Republican Senator Pritchard's published suggestion that federal troops be sent to the state to preserve the peace was roundly denounced.

In a dramatic turnaround W. E. Fountain announced his support of the white supremacy movement. Both speaker and audience seemed to forget the heated abuse and threats of violence that had recently been directed toward Fountain, as he told the mass meeting that there was indeed "negro domination in Eastern North Carolina." This man, who had been state chairman of the Populist party and was now sup-

50. Raleigh Morning Post, November 5, 1898; J. B. Lloyd to Marion Butler, October 21, 22, 1898, in Butler Papers. Charlotte Daily Observer, October 25, 1898; Raleigh News and Observer, October 25, 1898. For F. M. Simmons' version of events, see the Kinston Daily Free Press, July 10, 1900.
Lloyd of offering to resign and then preventing action by the district committee, and he assured his fellow Populists that "by this conduct Mr. Lloyd has released us from any obligation to vote for him." Lloyd wrote bitterly to Butler that he considered Fountain a Democratic candidate and complained: "Mr. Fountain did not state that the Committee declined to allow me to withdraw." But Fountain's announcement had come too late to change the outcome of the election. In the five days remaining before election day he could do little more than notify voters that he was running and make certain that his ballots were available in the precincts. Even this limited campaign was incomplete by November 8, as two precincts in Lenoir reported that they did not receive any Fountain tickets.54

In spite of all the excesses of the white supremacy campaign, George White was able to win a second term in Congress. More than 35,000 voters turned out to cast ballots in this off-year election and nearly half of them voted for White. The Negro incumbent's 49.5 percent of the vote comfortably outdistanced Fountain's 42.1 percent and Lloyd's hard core of 6.9 percent. White carried the district's four northern counties, Bertie, Northampton, Halifax, and Warren, amassing landslide margins of 65 percent in Warren and 67.9 percent in Halifax. Fountain carried all of the counties with white majorities and captured Edgecombe County by a 13-vote plurality. The Republican failure in Edgecombe, a predominantly black county, can be attributed to the complete collapse of the local Republican-Populist alliance in the final week of the campaign—the result, partly, of the Lloyd-Fountain feud.55

Considering the unmeasured denunciations that had been visited upon him by Democratic propagandists, White did remarkably well. Only in Wilson County did he fall below 40 percent of the total vote for the three major candidates. In three of the four white counties he received more votes than he had in the presidential year of 1896. At the same time his vote declined in four of the five black counties of the district, falling over 1,300 votes in Halifax alone, despite the fact that he carried the county by a huge percentage. Perhaps pressure against black registration and voting was weaker in areas with safe white majorities.

54. Ibid., November 5, 1898; J. B. Lloyd to Marion Butler, November 4, 1898, in Butler Papers; Kinston Daily Free Press, November 9, 1898.
55. The percentages are my own computation. See Raleigh News and Observer, November 1, 2, 1898, on the confusing denouement in Edgecombe.
here.” Over the state the Populist party was reduced to ruins, electing only 6 members to the 150-member general assembly, plus 1 congressman. After an election contest in the ninth district was resolved in the spring of 1900, there were 3 Republican representatives and 5 Democrats. The 134 Democrats in the legislature were nearly three times the number the party had elected in 1896.57

Two conservative second district lawyers, fancying themselves men of honor, reflected on the state of things in North Carolina in the days following the election. “The campaign was in many ways distasteful to me,” wrote Henry G. Connor, soon to preside over the North Carolina house, “altho’, as I saw the state into which we were drifting I felt more strongly the necessity for pressing it to a successful termination.” Although he had recognized the need to “destroy the local conditions here,” Connor did not make “incendiary” speeches. “The crop of fools and knaves always flourishes under such conditions as we have been dealing with. I could not stand Fountain and many of us refused to vote for him. I think his attempt to fasten himself on us was an outrage.” Writing to his Tarboro friend George Howard, Connor declared: “I dread the work before me. . . . The situation is far from pleasant and the problem full of complications.”

“I suppose anything must be justifiable to preserve a woman’s virtue, a man’s honor, and our Christian Civilization,” wrote Howard in reply. “I have just read again [Benjamin] Kidd’s Social Evolution (the most comforting book to me outside of the Bible) and in its light, the ‘late unpleasantness’ was simply Providential natural evolution—an evil preventing a much greater evil.”

Two and a half weeks after the election Connor wrote again to Howard. “I am determined that, with my consent, no law shall be passed, having for its purpose or permitting frauds,” he said. Connor was prepared to place “every possible constitutional restriction” upon registration, “but when the vote is cast it must be counted, and honestly returned.” If possible, the Wilson representative hoped to “secure the permanent and undivided political supremacy of the white man” through a constitutional change. “We must take the responsibility and must have


58. H. C. Connor to George Howard, November 11, 1898, Howard to Connor, November 14, 1898, Connor to Howard, November 25, 1898, all in Connor Papers. Richard Hofstadter has described Kidd’s Social Evolution (1894) as “a peculiar mixture of obscurantism, reformism, Christianity, and social Darwinism.” Richard Hofstadter, Social Darwinism in American Thought (Boston, 1955), 100–101.