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Timothy B. Tyson: Response on Gov. Aycock's legacy

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Response to 'a question that will not stay settled'

Re: public education, white supremacy, Gov. Aycock's legacy, N.C.'s Fusion movement

By TIMOTHY B. TYSON
Special to the Daily Planet

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following response to Jim Aycock's essay was written Feb. 19 by Timothy B. Tyson, who is state education chair of the North Carolina NAACP under the Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II. He serves as Senior Research Scholar at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University and Visiting Professor of American Christianity and Southern Culture at Duke Divinity School. Tyson included footnotes with this essay, but they were omitted here because of the Daily Planet's space limitations.

Troubled by African-American protests during World War II, Josephus Daniels, 80-year-old patriarch of the Raleigh News & Observer, recounted a profound memory of Gov. Charles B. Aycock, our original "education governor."

Forty years earlier, as they celebrated the triumph of the "Party of White Supremacy," Daniels had congratulated his friend, the most important leader of that cause. Their exchange, reported in Jason Morgan Ward's brilliant new UNC Press book, "Defending White Democracy," includes the most telling words ever uttered by the standard bearer of white supremacy and public education.

"When Governor Aycock was elected... and we adopted the Grandfather Clause," Daniels confided to a friend in 1942, "I said to him that I was very glad that we had settled the Negro question for all times." Four decades later, as black protests shook the racial caste system they had created, Gov. Aycock's response haunted Daniels. "Joe, you are badly mistaken," Daniels recalled the governor telling him. "I hope we have settled it for 25 years. Every generation will have the problem on their hands, and they will have to settle it for themselves."

That question remains both unsettled and unsettling for our correspondent, Jim Aycock, a biological descendant of Charles Brantley Aycock. But he need not feel alone; nearly all native North Carolinians are political descendants of this troubling Tar Heel. I am in full sympathy with Jim Aycock's yearning for a better history of his family and our state other than the one that actually occurred. Given this mixed and painful legacy, how can we feel otherwise? We would rather transcend the past without confronting it.

Denial, however, smacks of hiding the empty cake plate at midnight and hoping to lose weight in the morning. None of us deserve either blame or credit for our ancestors. I wish Jim Aycock well in his wrestling with his own illustrious ghosts. But he has not reported one single error of fact in my work.

Mr. Aycock is correct that "Ghosts of 1898: Wilmington's Race Riot and the Rise of White Supremacy" has found readers; nearly a million copies of have been published. His resentments, however, inflate my influence over the Democratic

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Party's decision to rename the Vance-Aycock Dinner. If it were true, I would accept credit like the rooster crows that he conjured up sunrise. It is beyond ridiculous for a party whose most loyal constituents are African-Americans to invite them to a fundraiser named for the tribune of the white supremacy campaigns that disfranchised them. If the Ku Klux Klan decides to name its annual convention in honor of Muhammad Ali, I withdraw my criticism.

The Wilmington Race Riot Commission Report differs from my "tabloid," as Mr. Aycock calls it, mainly in that mine has 16 pages, while the report runs nearly 500. He protests that, unlike the Commission Report, I fail to include Gov. Aycock's alleged remorse for the massacre in my 16 pages, neglecting to mention that in her almost 500 pages, the careful historian who prepared the report, LeRae Umfleet, mentions this only in a footnote on page 188.

He claims that I unfairly describe notorious demagogue Hoke Smith of Georgia as "braying" when he declared during his 1906 gubernatorial campaign, "We can handle [Negroes] as they did in Wilmington," where the woods were left "black with their hanging carcasses." I use "braying" because, unlike Mr. Aycock, I have read Smith's speeches and others' accounts of his stump style. You might well cross the Atlantic using a smaller windbag than Hoke Smith.

Mr. Aycock insists that President Richard Brodhead of Duke University and I have "refused" to correct factual errors in two student publications. If university professors or presidents were to "correct" student newspapers, they would rightly set off a huge outcry over censorship. I don't read them. Sure, Mr. Aycock sent them to me. I did not read them then, either. I have no more responsibility for the student paper at Duke than Mr. Aycock has for the (Asheville) Daily Planet.

Charles B. Aycock and Josephus Daniels first joined forces to fight the interracial "Fusion Movement" of the 1890s. In 1894 and 1896, the "Fusion" forces, campaigning on free public schools and equal political rights, swept the North Carolina legislature and won the governorship and both U.S. Senate seats. This visionary alliance, cobbled together during a depression that persuaded many whites to put their pocketbooks above their prejudices, was more a matter of the practical arithmetic of politics than any vision of interracial utopia. Yet in the context of the 1890s, it was a bold, forward-looking experiment.

The Fusion legislature quickly set about easing restrictions on voting and regulating the excesses of monopoly capitalism. Conservatives had stayed in power by passing laws that let them appoint local officials, who then supervised elections and threw out opposition ballots in tight elections.

The Fusionists passed laws that let people elect their own local officials, ensured a sufficient number of polling places per capita, and required that officials from all three political parties oversee each polling place and count the ballots together. They also levied heavy fines on anyone assaulting, intimidating or bribing voters and required all candidates to report contributions and identify donors.

Worse still, at least for conservatives, the new Fusion legislature substantially increased spending on public education. For some whites, black citizenship itself — let alone raising taxes to educate the poor — justified any level of resistance. Fueled by Daniels' newspaper and Aycock's oratory, funded by industrialists in exchange for secret promises to slash corporate taxes, the "white supremacy campaigns" overthrew North Carolina's government by terrorism, fraud, and demagoguery. In Wilmington, which Aycock called "the storm center of the White Supremacy movement," business leaders organized mass slaughter in the streets and armed coup d'état in the courthouse. On November 11, 1898, Aycock wrote to Henry G. Connor, calling the 1898 triumph of white supremacy "a glorious victory" but added that he regretted "the Wilmington affair of yesterday greatly."

Furnifold Simmons, one of Aycock's closest allies in the white supremacy campaign of 1898, visited Wilmington that fall and instructed white leaders not to engage in mass violence before the impending election.

Historian Deborah Bekel's new book on interracial politics in North Carolina, however, presents evidence Simmons did "authorize coercion, intimidation, and violence."

That autumn of 1898, "Democratic 'gangs' such as the Red Shirts and the Ku Klux Klan controlled virtually all of the state by unchallenged force," according to conservative scholar William S. Powell. Red Shirts were paramilitary terrorists on horseback, often masked, he writes, and "engaged in direct forms of violence: beatings and whippings of African Americans, assaults on candidates, and murder."

Red Shirts accompanied Aycock to campaign stops and appeared at his rallies. Democratic campaign funds paid the Redshirts, plied them with liquor and armed them with Winchester rifles. "Rather than an accidental byproduct of white supremacy fervor," according to William S. Powell's Encyclopedia of North Carolina, "Red Shirt violence was planned by Democratic officials." Aycock "justified the admittedly criminal acts of 1898 and 1900 as necessary given the 'evil' of black political participation."

Aycock wrung his hands over the bloodbath in Wilmington but praised those who had organized it: "This was not an act of rowdy or lawless men," he declared in a 1900 speech. "It was an act of merchants, of manufacturers, of railroad men—an act in which every man worthy of the name joined." He later boasted in his autobiography that he was headed to the train station with his gun over his shoulder to join the battle when he heard that the forces of white supremacy had been victorious. Aycock owned a Red Shirt himself, though it is not known where he got it or whether he wore it.

In 1903, Gov. Aycock threatened more violence, declaring that "the Negro" must learn "that he may eat rarely of the cooking of equality but he will always find when he does so that 'that there is death in the pot.'"

Gov. Aycock and the disfranchisement amendment both won in the white supremacy campaign of 1900. This election amounted to an armed coup. Aycock and his allies did not bother to deny that they stole the election. They created a one-party state where those who led the coup ruled the state for generations. In many precincts, election officials reported more votes for Aycock than the total number polled. Aycock took 90.7 percent of the vote in Edgecombe County, twice the previous Democratic total. In Halifax County, a black-majority county, Aycock won by 88.3 percent, even though two years earlier the Fusionists had won by 60 percent. The same pattern held in Bertie, Northampton, and Warren. Five of the next six governors had participated directly in the murderous fraud of the white supremacy campaigns.

After the coup, conservatives stripped the vote from black North Carolinians using literacy tests and the "grandfather clause," which exempted all voters whose grandfathers had been eligible to vote; most black grandfathers had been slaves, not voters. Blocking the votes of their adversaries, Democrats created "permanent good government by the party of the White Man," in Daniels's phrase. Aycock was the irreplaceable figure who would consolidate the murderous, fraudulent triumph of white supremacy. "We have ruled by force, we can rule by fraud," Aycock assured an uneasy crowd in Snow Hill, "but we want to rule by law."

Race and public education have always been intertwined in North Carolina history. Our slave codes made it illegal for slaves to read, under penalty of 39 lashes and banned preaching or teaching by blacks slave or free. After Emancipation, the former slaves founded scores of schools, though there was no statewide system of public schools for anyone. Black leaders like Abraham Galloway and A.M.E. Zion Bishop J.W. Hood mobilized for public education, much to the chagrin of Conservative whites. Right after the war, Conservatives in Raleigh outlawed public schools due to fears of integration.

In 1868, North Carolinians who supported public education passed a new state constitution that gave every child an equal right to education. Rev. Samuel Ashley, a white Congregationalist minister, and Bishop J.W. Hood, a black A.M.E. Zion leader, led the state's first public school system. Conservatives at the convention sought to mandate segregation but Bishop Hood won out. "Make this distinction in your organic law," he argued, "and in many places the white children will have good schools at the expense of the whole people, while the colored

children will have none or what will be little better than none.”

This interracial cooperation laid the groundwork for the Fusion coalition of the 1890s, whose victories provoked the white supremacy campaigns. After white Conservatives seized power in 1898 and 1900, Gov. Aycock shifted from revolutionary firebrand to paternalist figurehead, parting from the hard-line Conservatives and making public schools his signature issue. The hard-liners favored defunding black schools. Aycock refused. Though 1890s North Carolina had spent similar amounts on black and white children, under Aycock's leadership the state allocated three times more on each white child. According to William S. Powell, “his enthusiasm for education was based in part on his desire to create more literate white voters.” Aycock's decision to become the “education governor” was his unique fusion of white supremacy, racial paternalism, and public service.

His achievements in public education, though a cooption of the appeals of Populism and Fusion for public education and an expression of racial paternalism, cannot be diminished. While Aycock was governor, North Carolina founded 1,100 public schools, an average of more than one per day of his administration. He originated the Textbook Commission. And yet the legacy of white supremacy, racial violence, black disfranchisement, electoral fraud, and one-party domination of the state for sixty years cannot be dismissed either. Nor has North Carolina ever entered even the top forty of the fifty states in any measure of school quality.

As in the 1890s, our conflicts now include the success of a new “Fusion coalition” that many North Carolinians found promising. The NAACP, led by Rev. Dr. Barber, organized the Historic Thousands on Jones Street Coalition in 2005. “HKon J” brought dozens of progressive organizations into coalition with the largest NAACP in the South. This “Fusion coalition” won same-day, on-site voter registration and early voting laws, which the GOP seeks to appeal. Senator John McCain and former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, the Republican candidates, actually took North Carolina on election day in 2008, but lost it during the two-week early voting period. With funds from Americans for Prosperity, Tea Party extremists mobilized opposition to the Brown decision as a rallying cry to “take back” North Carolina. The outcome is not clear, but one thing is: the Fusion movement, not the “spirit of Aycock,” points toward our brightest future and what President Abraham Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature.” A new Fusion movement, black, brown and white, is the only way to save public education in North Carolina.

Governor Aycock's warning that “every generation will have to settle [issues of race and public education] for themselves,” seems prophetic today. Tar Heels seem to be fighting the battles of the 1950s-1970s all over again. The new segregationists spout old slogans borrowed from old South demagogues. Winston-Salem, Greensboro, Wake County, and New Hanover County have all seen schools move backwards. In Charlotte, the Christian Science Monitor reported in 2008, about half the elementary schools are nearly all-white or nearly all-black. “Charlotte is rapidly re-segregating.”

In Wilmington, where the “neighborhood schools” Republicans have taken power, Snipes Elementary downtown is now 95 percent African American and 93 percent poor; eight miles away, Wrightsville Beach Elementary has become 93 percent white and only six percent of the students come from poor families. When school board chair Ed Higgins told parents “we did nothing to create segregated schools intentionally,” the Star-News reported that “his comments were greeted by laughter from the audience.”

Some rural counties like Wayne and Halifax, have wholly re-segregated; Goldsboro, the Wayne county seat, is half black and half white, but Goldsboro High is 99 percent black and 80 percent poor. “We have apartheid education in Wayne County,” says Rev. Dr. Barber, who pastors Goldsboro's Greenleaf Christian Church and leads the statewide battle against re-segregation as president of the state NAACP.

Insisting that “North Carolina is in a war,” then-Gov. Beverly Perdue told reporters, “I applaud every single thing [Rev. Dr. Barber] is doing” to stop

re-segregation, she continued. "If it takes going to the Supreme Court of this great country, from Wayne County and for Wake County and for other counties in North Carolina, so be it."

On the merits, school resegregation is not a tough call; that diversity and excellence are inextricably intertwined remains "one of the most consistent findings in research on education," according to Gary Orfield, professor of education at UCLA, and Susan Eaton, research director at Harvard Law School. Four decades of research shows that schools in which large majorities of poor children are segregated become failing schools.

Virtually all of the 40 or so failing schools in North Carolina fall into this category. Even though it destroys school systems, far-right ideologues across North Carolina push "neighborhood schools." This turns some public schools into private academies, where the cost of admission is the ability to pay a huge mortgage; it transforms others into high-poverty, racially-isolated schools that inevitably become pools of misery and failure where school systems drown. If we cherish our children, black, white, Asian or Latino, wealthy or otherwise, we cannot turn back toward segregation.

We must resist the trap of pitting "diversity" versus "parental responsibility" or "school excellence," as if rejecting diversity will make parents responsible or schools excellent. Diversity is necessary, but not sufficient. We need excellent and constitutional schools for all our children.

Aycock was right: every generation must settle this question of race and public education for themselves. And now is our time.

We need to stop worrying about where our difficulties originated and starting looking to the wellbeing of all of our children. In the words of Charles B. Aycock, for which I thank his cranky descendant, "You cannot do the best for your child unless you also do the best for my child."



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