

“License to Do Evil in the Name of Good”: The Legacy of Anti-Electoral Violence and
Organizational Success During the Wilmington Coup of 1898

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Introduction

On the morning of November 10th, 1898, a mob of over five hundred armed White men marched into Brooklyn, a traditionally Black neighborhood of Wilmington, North Carolina, with the intent of burning a newspaper press office to the ground and lynching its owner. As the largest city in the state of North Carolina at the time and nestled within the Black Belt of the American South, Wilmington had a majority Black population and was home to many integrated neighborhoods, from the slums of Dry Pond to the wards of Wilmington proper.¹ Peaceful movement by Whites through Black sections of the town was not unheard of due to the surprisingly high rate of racial integration of Wilmington, but an armed invasion was unprecedented. Ironically, the worst nightmare for Whites during the late 1890s was the invasion of their communities by Black rioters. In Wilmington, as in many cities across the South in the Progressive era, the inverse would happen, with White rioters marching in columns to the offices of the Wilmington Daily Record.²

The mob's first priority was lynching the editor of the Daily Record, Alexander Manly. Manly, a light-skinned man of mixed heritage, was a prominent advocate for the Black community in Wilmington and had published an incendiary editorial in August of 1898 that the state Democratic Party had made an integral part of a statewide Black rape panic to propel them into control of the state legislature against a Fusionist coalition. After no one answered their knocks on the doors of the offices, they proceeded to break into the building and vandalize the premises, with the sacking only ending when a fire broke out from deliberate action on the rioters' parts. As the rioters celebrated in the streets, a predominantly Black fire brigade rushed to the scene to contain the blaze, and the whole affair was laid out in stark relief: a White mob

¹ Leon H. Prather, *We Have Taken a City: The Wilmington Racial Massacre and Coup of 1898* (Wilmington: Dram Tree Books, 2006), 21.

² *ibid*, 113.

firing rifles in the air in celebration of their triumph over “the vilest slander in North Carolina” while Black community members and neighbors fought to stop the consequences of their rage from hurting the homes of all citizens, including the rioters.³

As the Daily Record offices were burnt to the ground, a contingent of the mob marched in columns to the city hall, where the leaders ascended the stairs and demanded an audience with the mayor. After a tense conversation, the leaders forced the mayor and the board of aldermen to resign on the threat of being lynched, and the conspirators were quickly sworn in as the new city government.⁴ The position of mayor fell to former Confederate Colonel Alfred Moore Waddell, who was considered one of the foremost orators of the Democratic Party in North Carolina and who had been involved in Wilmingtonian Democratic politics since the beginning of the 1898 election season.⁵ The new Board of Aldermen read as a who’s who of the Democratic political machine of Wilmington: Frank H. Stedman, Charles W. Worth, cotton magnate Hugh McRae, businessman J. Alan Taylor, and more.⁶ Many of these individuals were members of violent conspiracies organized in the wake of the mayoral election of 1897 who had been agitating for the extra-democratic overthrow of the elected government for a year before the events of November 10th.⁷ The Secret Nine, an alliance between white politicians disempowered by the shift to Fusionist administration and business leaders, made up the bulk of the secretive influence campaign to drive Wilmington over the edge and into full-scale domestic conflict, but the Group of Six, a smaller conspiracy of similar makeup to the Nine,⁸ also contributed in a lesser

³ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 109.

⁴ *ibid.*, 138.

⁵ *ibid.*, 137.

⁶ *ibid.*, 138.

⁷ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 49.

⁸ Including a member of the local Campaign Committee of the Democratic Party of North Carolina, Walker Taylor. Frank Stedman and George Rountree, other prominent Wilmingtonian Democrats who were similarly disempowered by the election of 1897 and who joined with the insurrectionists on November 10th, were also members of the Committee.

capacity.⁹ The conspiracies' goals were complete, and they could now return to the old order of Wilmington and party politics, free from any threat to their rule by virtue of having an army of armed White supremacists at their disposal, who had been given license through the political campaign of the 1898 election to "commit evil in the name of good".¹⁰

Due to a combination of local political machinations, the exploitation of a statewide scandal stemming from the publication of the Manly editorial, and the militant attitude of the Democratic campaign across North Carolina to retake control of the statehouse, Wilmington erupted into a period of violence that was not uncommon in the post-Reconstruction South and shared many hallmarks of other anti-democratic and anti-electoral violence in the region. The overthrow of the Fusionist government in Wilmington came about as a deliberate escalation by multiple Democratic powerbrokers and conspirators, who sought to take advantage of a climate of Black rape panics and militarized white supremacy to achieve a political agenda that sometimes ran contrary to the goals of the state Democratic Party and its affiliated organs. Through analyzing the confluence of cynical political actors well versed in rhetoric and organization, a volatile political environment, and the anxiety of the perpetrators in returning to power and economic security, Wilmington becomes symbolic of the legacy of anti-democratic violence in the American South during the post-Civil War period. The success of the conspirators in Wilmington is important in the context of studying the coup itself, but the role of local political and business elite in coordinating and leading instances of anti-democratic violence in Wilmington is significant in analyzing the trend of political violence aimed at the electoral system in the region.

⁹ Umfleet, LeRae et al, *1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report*, special report prepared at the request of the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission, May 2006, 73.

¹⁰ Gilmore, Glenda. *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 92.

The Study of Wilmington

The first major piece of scholarship post-coup to take the events in Wilmington under scrutiny was *We Have Taken a City* by Prather in 1984, intended as a reckoning of the events nearly a century after the day of rage. Before this time, Wilmington had been allowed to fade away in the memories of those who had committed and supported the coup or understood as a race riot by critical scholars at the time. The political implications of the riot would become more apparent as Prather delved deeply into the events of November 10th, 1898, taking a narrative approach from the time of the Civil War to shortly after the coup. When discussing what could have caused the events in Wilmington to occur, Prather takes a firm race relations-based view, describing the motivations of the mob and the Secret Nine as being primarily driven by White supremacy and the fear of African-American political power.

Prather also argues that political opportunism was a very present motivating factor for members of the Secret Nine, even superseding racism as a motivation for many of the actors involved in overthrowing the city government in Wilmington. Prather argues that “their plan was to...assure the ascendancy of the Democrats”, with “political and economic opportunities [being] merely the tip of the iceberg”.¹¹ He concedes that political anxiety over black enfranchisement intersects with the racist attitudes of the perpetrators, but he makes clear that many in the Secret Nine were primarily concerned with regaining their former professions in city government.¹²

In 1998, on the centenary of the events in Wilmington, Cecelski and Tyson published their collections of essays on Wilmington, *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and its Legacy*. The collection gathered multiple perspectives on Wilmington, including Prather’s, but it also included an essay by Glenda Gilmore, who would later write about

¹¹ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 179.

¹² *ibid.*, 179.

Wilmington in 2020 book, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina*. In her book and her essay, Gilmore takes the view that the Manly editorial was central to the riot and the mob's reasons for participating in the coup were based primarily on backlash to the editorial. The Manly editorial has emerged in subsequent scholarship as a major element in pushing the already radicalized population of Wilmington's Democratic supporters to violence and is one of the central pieces of evidence used to advance a more gendered approach to understanding the events in Wilmington. For decades after *We Have Taken a City*, the racial element was the primary form of analyzing the events in Wilmington, and even the state report published in 2006 referred to the event primarily as a race riot. With Glenda Gilmore's book, *Gender and Jim Crow*, a significant portion of the book is dedicated to analyzing Wilmington as a case study for the violent preservation of Jim Crow gender hierarchy, and the Manly editorial is analyzed for its role as a piece of media that white supremacists believed threatened gendered relations in the South.

While Prather and other historians refer to the Manly editorial, the piece is interpreted through a racial lens, arguing that the fact that it addressed the false panic of Black men specifically raping white women was what incensed white supremacists across the state. Manly's identity as a mixed-race man is the central focal point through this lens of analysis, and Prather goes into detail on the elements of Manly's history where he begins to advocate for his community's advancement despite being a very light-skinned man who could otherwise have passed for white¹³. Gilmore, in her research, instead focuses on the way in which the white supremacists interpreted a document about a rape panic as being pro-rape, and so reacted to preserve the sexual and gendered dynamics of the South. This is not to say that Gilmore ignores the idea of race in her analysis, but the gendered dynamics of the piece are analyzed first and

¹³ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 68.

foremost. Gilmore differs from Prather by choosing to not focus on the political opportunism of the rioters and delving into the minutiae of local politics, instead taking an approach that solely centers larger societal issues and researching their impact on the actions and motivations of the rioters.

In 2006, a commission appointed by the state of North Carolina published an official report on the events in Wilmington, terming them a race riot, but beginning to develop an alternative analysis. The findings of the commission were important in establishing a foundation for the state's reckoning with its history of racial violence, and the authors of the report make clear that, regardless of any reason given by rioters or conspirators, the government in Wilmington would have been overthrown one way or another.¹⁴ Central to this idea is the increasing focus that the report gives to the local politicians in the city that were agitating for a return to white governance for a year before the midterm election occurred, but the report takes the view that the conspirators ultimately served the interests of the broader White Supremacy movement.¹⁵ The state credited the white leadership in Wilmington with "the ability...to develop long-range plans for instigating violence, a strategy to quell that violence and their subsequent ability to call the affair a riot—implying a sudden break in peacefulness rather than reveal its true character, that of a planned insurrection".¹⁶ While the state report lays the foundation for a perspective that incorporates the actions of local political actors as the primary movers of the events in Wilmington, the report still errs on understanding their actions in the context of the broader White Supremacy movement and that the conspirators served its interests. In this way, the state's research is in line more with the tradition established by Prather, but the argument that

¹⁴ Umfleet et al, 5.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 76.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 13.

the White Supremacy movement was of much larger significance than the personal motivations of the rioters falls more in line with the vein established by Gilmore.

I believe Prather, Gilmore, and the state's research misses one of the most important elements in determining what caused Wilmington to occur: the influence of local actors and their skill in utilizing nimble rhetorical adaptation in pushing people towards their goals, which were motivated by anxiety over losing institutional power and economic security. While racism and gendered relations are important in discussing why Wilmington was able to occur, the riot would not have escalated to the point of the overthrow of the city government without the influence of ambitious local actors. The Secret Nine brought together existing power and influence in the city through their prominence in city politics and business, canny campaigning and electioneering from working ward politics in Wilmington, and, most importantly, organizational skills to build towards their goal of overthrowing the city of Wilmington.¹⁷ All the Nine's planning and organizing was for the purpose of bringing themselves back into power and out of unemployment, with the anxiety over power and their dependency on government as a form of income strongly motivating them to establish an operation separate from that of the state Democratic Party. I believe understanding their success in Wilmington builds on the scholarship of the past forty years by adding increased scrutiny of the Nine's tactics and the ways in which they were able to apply their skills in electoral campaigning to the violent overthrow of a government and how local political and business elite acted in their own interests to bring about anti-democratic violence. My approach differs from other researchers by focusing on the cynical motivations of the planners of the coup and their allies, as I believe a valuable perspective is buried when researchers focus on larger societal issues to the detriment of understanding and

¹⁷ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 62.

analyzing the role of individual actors in violent political events in the American South under Jim Crow.

The Secret Nine: Architects of a Coup

In many ways, the Nine were not so different from other Democratic campaigners of their time. In fact, many of them were Democratic campaigners, traveling across the state to extol the virtues of their party and the need for white rule. They were professional politicians, able to incorporate narratives into their campaign strategies effectively and they knew how to appeal to voters.¹⁸ The Democratic Party in North Carolina was keen on producing campaigners like this, as they even partnered with sympathetic newspapers to print favorable narratives to the Democratic Party and do outreach for them in areas where Democrats would not traditionally be heard, such as in small rural communities or among illiterate members of the population through political cartoons.¹⁹

What set the Nine apart from their peers in the Democratic Party was the purpose for which they put their skills to work: whereas many of their counterparts campaigned for success at the ballot box, the Nine used their skills to subvert democracy, push people towards explicit violent action towards the city government, and every narrative they incorporated was all for the purpose of getting as many people as possible to side with them in overthrowing the local democratic institutions.²⁰ Because of their escalation in tactics from the usual intimidation and systemic disenfranchisement of Democratic organizers in the Progressive era, the Nine's interests ran contrary to their partisan and social allegiances in key areas. Notably, the Nine wanted to avoid suspicion as much as possible and wanted to time their coup perfectly to appear as spontaneous as possible, so they pushed back against the elements of the Democratic Party

¹⁸ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 88.

¹⁹ Umfleet, *1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report*, 61.

²⁰ Umfleet, *1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report*, 77.

that advocated for immediate action on lynching Manly or instigating a race riot. Once the dust had settled and the old order had returned to Wilmington, their allegiances to the white supremacy movement also began to waver, as they deliberately ignored the white labor unions in the city to prioritize cheap African-American labor over their own supporters. The business magnates among the Nine considered their role in the conspiracy to be economic in nature and profited immensely from the cheaper sources of labor in the Black community, much to chagrin of Irish-American white supremacists who voted for the Democrats in Wilmington and also marched in the vanguard on the day of the coup.²¹

The nimble adaptation of rhetoric was central to their goals, as they quickly incorporated stories on the campaign trail into their plans. Among the Nine, they referred to this practice as “masterful duplicity”, and they believed that only through careful manipulation could their goals be achieved.²² At first, the Nine advocated for the overthrow of the government simply because it put them out of power and they believed that Wilmington was better off under their governance.²³ The business community in the city feared the impact that a Fusionist government would have on their profits after the Fusionist reforms in Raleigh undermined their attempts to build a new textile mill. Among the Nine and even members of the less storied Group of Six were prominent business and political officials in the city, as well as multiple members of the city’s Chamber of Commerce and business elite who would have benefitted .²⁴

Hugh McRae, a cotton mill owner and one of the wealthiest men in Wilmington, was among the more forward-facing members of the Nine, putting his influence in the city to use by securing meeting places and financing campaigns. E. S. Lanthrop and P. B. Manning were the

²¹ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 26.

²² Umfleet, *1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report*, 13.

²³ *ibid.*, 52.

²⁴ Umfleet et al, 73.

go-betweens for the Nine to their allies in ward politics and were instrumental in militarizing the city's ward system into the full-scale military occupation zone demonstrated on November 10th, 1898. Even individuals like J. Alan Taylor and Walter L. Parsley, both members of the Chamber of Commerce, served as crucial points of contact with the clergymen and White labor movement, the latter of which was heavily entwined with the Irish-American community of Wilmington and served as the main recruiting pool for the Redshirts.²⁵

The intersection of the business class and political class in Wilmington in coming to support the coup was fundamentally an economic one, as the prominent businessmen of the city wanted the political system of the city to incentivize investment. The politicians of the group, for their part, agreed with the business magnates that Democratic governance would revitalize the city's business community and bring about prosperity to Wilmington, but their primary concerns remained their own employment and returning to the old order of party and ward politics.²⁶ As the midterm electoral campaign intensified, however, the Nine incorporated hot-button campaign issues into their appeals and strategies, drawing different groups to their banner.

The two most significant adaptations were the co-opting of Waddell's "Declaration of White Independence" and military planning and the backlash to the Manly editorial. With Waddell, the Nine found a sympathetic and like-minded campaigner who held statewide prominence with a massive audience in Wilmington. Comparatively, the Nine were local officials or businessmen with little appeal outside of the city, so the addition of Waddell to their plans was a great public relations windfall for the conspirators. Waddell's local popularity and racial rhetoric encouraged the working-class white base of the Populist Party to defect within

²⁵ Prather, 67.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 52.

Wilmington, and his militaristic attitude attracted the Redshirts to Hannover County, providing the perfect muscle for the Nine's designs on the city government.²⁷

The Manly editorial was used by campaigners across the state of North Carolina, so the backlash drove even more whites to the Democratic banner mere months before the election of 1898.²⁸ Riding the wave of this scandal, the Nine made the lynching of Alexander Manly a crucial element of their plans to mobilize their supporters to march against the government, as they argued that Manly was both still in the city and being protected and enabled by the city to continue propagating pro-rape of white women narratives. The burning of the printing press at the Daily Record's offices is also cited in the state report as an additional reason to bring supporters to engage in violent narratives, which itself sprung from the need to enact extrajudicial violence on Manly and his perceived supporters.²⁹

It is the dedication and planning of the rioters that is significant in studying the Secret Nine in Wilmington, and that they worked not in service of broader ideological concerns but rather they exploited existing societal concerns around race and gender to give the appearance of spontaneity and organic organizing. The Secret Nine's willingness to work against traditionally Democratic organs in Wilmington like the Redshirts and channel the energies of their supporters for the precise moment in which a coup would seem most likely and most plausible from an outsiders' perspective proves their dedication to political opportunism. In this way, the conspirators avoiding a federal response is proof of their success, as they managed to give the appearance of their actions being not only justified but completely spontaneous and without any prior planning, the discovery of which would have surely compromised both their plans and the possibility that they would escape prosecution. This builds upon scholarship on the subject by

²⁷ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 89.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 82.

²⁹ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 109.

bringing together the myriad social conditions that the Nine exploited to bring people out into the streets studied in Prather and Gilmore as well as bringing increasing focus on the political opportunism of local agents behind the violent change in government established in Prather and the state report to a new perspective.

The Search for a “Beginning”

How far back should one go to see the cause for the Wilmington coup? The earliest scholarship on Wilmington came from the day of the event from exiled Black community leader, the Reverend J. Allen Kirk. In the swamps outside of Wilmington, Reverend Kirk collected accounts and details of the event from the exiles of the new regime, with his wife playing a role in documenting the crisis as it unfolded. Due to the proximity of the event, the Reverend Kirk does not list a concrete beginning for where the conditions that led up to the coup could be attributed to, and even the Manly editorial is unmentioned in this early piece of scholarship. For nearly eighty years, the events of November 10th, 1898 were allowed to fade into obscurity, written off by Jim Crow-era historians as no different than any other race riot of the time: a tragic instance of human life lost, but not unusual for the period.

As early as the immediate end of the Civil War, the first Union official to survey Reconstruction-era North Carolina said that “the people talk in such a way as to indicate that they are yet unable to conceive of the Negro possessing any rights at all” and “[they] boast that when they get freedmen’s affairs in their own hands, to use their own expression, ‘the [n-words] will catch hell’”.³⁰ While it is undeniable that the attitudes of white Southerners in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War still held white supremacist positions and would continue to hold

³⁰ David Zucchino, *Wilmington’s Lie: The Murderous Coup of 1898 and the Rise of White Supremacy* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2020), 6.

them for many decades to come, I do not believe Reconstruction to be an adequate starting point for the study of Wilmington due to the significance of local factors over larger regional trends.

For more recent history of the period, would the election of 1894 be sufficient for the “beginning”? As the previous major electoral cycle, it swept Republicans back into power across the state and empowered a coalition of Populist and Republican candidates known as the Fusionists. Much of the vitriol of the Democratic campaign of 1898 was aimed at defeating “Fusionism” and bringing white rule back to North Carolina. While much of these talking points influenced the militias and citizens on November 10th, 1898 to take up arms against the city government, the electoral cycle is not sufficient to explain just how much mobilization was done to overthrow a city government. If not the Civil War nor contemporary developments in state government, what could be described as the beginning of the events that would lead to the coup? The beginning of the coup is found in an unexpected place: the mayoral election of 1897.

The Makings of a Conspiracy

Wilmington is located in the historic Black Belt region of the American South, famous for its rich, dark soils and the historical demographic makeup of the region. From the end of the Civil War to the beginning of the Great Migration, the population of the counties that made up the Black Belt were majority African-American. Wilmington was no different, and, as the largest city in the state during the period, it was a bastion of Black life in the South.³¹ Many neighborhoods were integrated, and African-Americans were represented in the upper echelons of the city’s business and political elite.³² Because of this, the African-American community was able to flex their political muscles at a level that many other Black communities in the American

³¹ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 20.

³² Prather, Leon H. “We Have Taken a City: A Centennial Essay” in *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy*, ed. David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 16.

South could not achieve, allowing them to advocate for and protect their interests.³³ However, while the population was majority Black, the city had been under White rule for decades. This was achieved by a mixture of gerrymandering and a local Democratic political machine that kept power within the hands of privileged individuals by abusing quirks of the city's charter.³⁴ Under the Redeemer governments, the General Assembly divided the city into wards and gave itself the power to appoint a five-member Board of Audit and Finance, which gave the Democrats control over the city's budget.³⁵ Through their control of the city's Board of Aldermen, the Democrats controlled every other appointed office in the city, including the police force and fire department.³⁶

When the Fusionist coalition swept into power in 1894, the city's charter was amended to open up appointed positions to popular elections.³⁷ This threatened the power of the Democratic political machine in the city by abolishing the Board of Audit and Finance and, as a sign of the power of the Republicans in Raleigh, a new Police Board was established to head the city's police force and was staffed entirely by Republicans. The Police Board's duties made them an essential part of city government, and all paid city positions had to be approved by both the Board of Aldermen and the Police Board.³⁸ The city officials who maintained the political machine in Wilmington now faced a legitimate challenge by the newly ascendant coalition of Republicans, Populists, and "King Numbers".³⁹ Eight months before the mayoral election, Republican Governor Daniel L. Russel (himself a Wilmingtonian) approved an amendment to the city charter that closed the primary loophole that allowed Democrats to hold onto power,

³³ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 25.

³⁴ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 33.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 32.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 33.

³⁷ *ibid.*, 36.

³⁸ *ibid.*, 34.

³⁹ The nickname for the black voting blocs in Black Belt counties, of which New Hanover County was a member of.

leading to a heated campaign that pitted factions within the Democratic caucus against each other.⁴⁰

The divided caucus led to a Fusionist coalition taking power in Wilmington, with Republican Silas P. Wright ascending to the position of mayor. Immediately following the election, the Democratic Board of Aldermen tried every electoral trick in the book to retain power, resulting in not one, but four different claimants to the mayorship.⁴¹ The issue of who was the rightfully elected mayor wound up in court, where the judge sided with Wright and the duly elected Board of Aldermen, and the city's government was allowed to resume a level of normalcy. The Democratic political machine bet big on the judiciary looking the other way or siding with them, and, having lost spectacularly in their attempts to retain power, turned to extra-legal ways to attain power again.⁴²

It is at this point in the history of the Wilmington coup that one could point to the first instance of a concrete plan to overthrow the city government. The disempowered, incensed, and now unemployed members of the Old Fox caucus formed clandestine groups, the most notable of which was the "Secret Nine" and consisted of an alliance between ward bosses, former aldermen, and business leaders. This conspiracy of local elite looked for any way to suitably weaponize their supporters to intimidate their political opposition into giving them back control of the city, and while they had divergent motives for doing so, they all agreed that Wilmington needed to be under white governance once again, which translated to themselves back in power. However, the Nine were not the only anti-government conspiracy active in Wilmington: in fact, they operated almost completely ignorant of yet another clandestine group of Democratic officials who also

⁴⁰ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 36.

⁴¹ Umfleet, *1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report*, 45.

⁴² Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 48.

wanted to overthrow the Fusionist government and restore white rule.⁴³ This group, the aforementioned Group of Six, was not nearly as significant as the Nine, but it establishes a very prevalent appetite for anti-democratic political action in Wilmington and a struggle to return to power among the city's political elite following the mayoral election of 1897.

Interestingly, it took only a few months before one group became suspicious of the intentions of the Nine. Although formed in secret and with vows of silence from all members, the White clergymen in Wilmington eventually came to suspect that something was afoot. After confronting J. Alan Taylor, one of the members of the Nine, they pressed him on his intentions and discovered that he and eight others were agitating to overthrow the city government. As they pleaded with him to consider the illegality of the Nine's actions, Taylor only affirmed that the group's goal was illegal, but that it would not matter once the Fusionist administration was finished. Instead of taking this information to the police, the White clergy kept their silence and allowed themselves to side with what they saw as the inevitable victors of a brewing conflict.⁴⁴ Even as the conspiracy claimed to operate in complete silence, their ambitions were enabled by willing collaborators, who saw in them the potential to return Wilmington to minoritarian rule.

A Campaign of White Supremacy

The midterm election campaign starting mere months after the debacle with the mayoral election could not have come at a better time for the motivated conspirators. The state Democratic Party decided to wage their return to power in Raleigh as a campaign of explicit white supremacy, saying in the party's handbook on electoral strategy that "this is a white man's country and white men must control and govern it".⁴⁵ Wilmington is mentioned by the handbook

⁴³ Umfleet, *1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report*, 55.

⁴⁴ Prather, 67.

⁴⁵ F. M. Simmons and John W. Thompson, *The Democratic Handbook. 1898. Prepared by the State Democratic Executive Committee of North Carolina* (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton, 1898), 38.

as being a city where "you see negro policemen and negro officers as thick as blackbirds" at the command of the Governor.⁴⁶ The state Democratic Party had an interest in returning Wilmington and the other cities in the Black Belt counties to white minority rule, and this coincided with the desires of the conspirators, who seized on the campaign and eagerly supported it, albeit with their own touches added in Wilmington to better steer the campaign in favor of their eventual goal of retaining power through force.

Central to the latter stage of the Democratic campaign in 1898 was the backlash to the Manly editorial, an inflammatory letter from the editor published in the *Wilmington Daily Record*, the city's only Black-owned newspaper. The editor, Alexander Manly, was a mixed-race man and lifelong Wilmington resident who, according to his contemporaries, would easily pass as white. He was deeply concerned with the state of the African-American community in the city and saw his newspaper as a way to advocate for and empower them.⁴⁷ The editorial in question was published on August 18th, 1898, and was addressed to a "Mrs. Felton from Georgia" who gave a stump speech about lynching being used as a deterrent against the rape of white women by Black men.⁴⁸ Manly's editorial railed against the false claims of Black rape against white women and suggested that "the whites guard their women closely, as Mrs. Felton says, thus giving no opportunity for the human fiend, be he white or Black".⁴⁹ This line incensed the white community in Wilmington and across North Carolina and was used as a cudgel for Democratic campaign officials to beat over the heads of their Populist and Republican opponents. The Secret Nine, for their part, were giddy at the prospect of the Manly editorial picking up statewide

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁷ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 70.

⁴⁸ Alexander Manly, "Untitled," *Wilmington Daily Observer*, August 18, 1898.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

infamy and made the editorial a large part of their plans to weaponize the white community in Wilmington against the city government.

The North Carolinian Democratic Party's strategy in 1898 heavily relied on the newly formed Redshirts militia, which acted as the official militia of the Democratic Party. The Redshirts were formed in South Carolina as a local equivalent of the Ku Klux Klan and practiced similar terroristic tactics.⁵⁰ When the leader of the South Carolina Redshirts heard that the North Carolinian Democrats were looking to retake the state legislature, the Redshirts flooded into the state and began aggressively recruiting.⁵¹ Staging marches, social events, and parades through towns across the state, the Redshirts were presented as the apex of Democratic and, therefore, Southern masculinity.⁵² The effort to integrate a violent militia into the Democratic Party of North Carolina was met with a rather belated proclamation by Governor Russell in October of 1898, mere weeks before the election. In the proclamation, Governor Russell declared that "all ill-disposed persons, whether of this or that party...[are] to immediately desist from all unlawful practices and all turbulent conduct, and to preserve the peace, and to secure all the people the quiet enjoyment of all their rights of free citizenship".⁵³ The proclamation ended with a plea, imploring "all good and law abiding citizens not to allow themselves to become excited by any appeals that may be made to their passions and prejudices by the representatives of any political party whatsoever", signifying that the state government considered the continued recruitment of Redshirts in the state as a deliberate effort to mobilize militant white supremacists.⁵⁴ The Redshirts were active in Wilmington by recruiting from the city's Irish community, who had long competed with African-Americans for labor in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. In

⁵⁰ Leon H. Prather Sr., "The Red Shirt Movement in North Carolina 1898-1900." *The Journal of Negro History* 62, no. 2, 174.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 176.

⁵² *ibid.*, 175.

⁵³ *ibid.*, 176.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 176.

the Wilmingtonian Irish, the Redshirts found ample recruiting ground for racist or prejudiced men to be radicalized into joining a terrorist organization, and the leader of the local Redshirts was, himself, an Irishman.⁵⁵

The Democratic activists and conspirators welcomed the presence of the Redshirts in Wilmington, who saw the organization as the necessary muscle to affect their campaign strategies and, more sinisterly, their plans for overthrowing the city government. However, the goals of the Redshirts and the conspirators often diverged, as evidenced by an interaction between a detachment of Redshirts and one of the Secret Nine shortly before the election of 1898. While out on a walk, the conspirator came across a group of Redshirts making for the area of town where the Daily Record's offices were known to be located and declared that they were going to lynch Alexander Manly. The conspirator, horrified at the prospect of the carefully laid plans of the Secret Nine being compromised by the over-eager Redshirts, desperately pleaded with the militia members and begged them to change their mind, arguing that the Republicans and Populists would be justified in pushing campaign slogans of the Democrats as violent racists if they were to engage in overt acts of racial violence. The mob was assuaged for the moment, but this example shows that not even the Secret Nine could fully control the developments in the city, but they clearly made an effort to steer the strategies of the Democratic Party and their affiliated organizations towards their goal to attain power once again, as evidenced by this interaction.⁵⁶

As the election drew nearer, the Democratic campaign kicked into overdrive. Campaign stops were held in towns across the state, and massive rallies were conducted to whip the local population into a frenzy. Redshirts marched through town streets in rank and column,

⁵⁵ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 89.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 97.

epitomizing Southern Democratic manhood, and the orators yelled from their soapboxes about the mismanagement of the Populists and their ceding of rights to African-Americans. One such orator to emerge during this time was former Confederate Colonel Alfred Moore Waddell. Waddell was lauded among Democratic circles as the “American Robespierre” due to his skills at public speaking, but the nickname would prove ironic when he would emerge as one of the key figures in the Wilmington coup, to the point of even being awarded the coveted position of mayor following the success of the overthrow of the Board of Aldermen.⁵⁷

Waddell was not a member of the Secret Nine, but he quickly became one of their most valuable allies after holding a rally in the Wilmington opera house in the lead-up to the election. His motivations were also similar to the Nine’s: at the time of the midterm campaign, Waddell was officially unemployed and saw the Democratic campaign trail as fertile ground for future employment in a city or state-level administration.⁵⁸ Waddell’s appearance in Wilmington on the campaign trail proved to be very popular for other Democratic candidates across the state, and the fact that Waddell seemed eager to keep campaigning in the Cape Fear region quickly endeared him to the conspirators of the Secret Nine, to the point of making him chair of the ad-hoc committee to declare their intentions to overthrow the city government.⁵⁹ While there is no evidence to suggest that Waddell was inducted into the ranks of the Nine following his success in Wilmington, he became a central figure in the plans that the conspirators had for the city.

As election day dawned, the Redshirts had settled into their role as armed enforcers of the Democratic Party, using their access to firearms in the city to intimidate Black voters.⁶⁰ One Wilmington store owner spoke of how he would only sell guns to whites even though African-

⁵⁷ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 139.

⁵⁸ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 179.

⁵⁹ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 108.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 179.

Americans were looking for any way to defend themselves and their families before the election.⁶¹ The intimidation of voters and officials was not limited to purely African-Americans and Fusionists in Wilmington: Governor Russell, on his way back from Wilmington to Raleigh, was stopped aboard a train by a mob of Redshirts, who demanded to have the Governor delivered to them for lynching. Governor Russell barely escaped death and North Carolina only just avoided a coup of the state government when an aide hid the Governor in a cargo car, convinced the Redshirts to search passenger cars, and then disconnected their cars from the train and sped off towards Raleigh.⁶²

The following morning, newspapers across the state trumpeted the victory of the Democratic Party statewide, sweeping them back to power and heralding the end of the Fusionist coalition in North Carolina. That same day, a meeting of white citizens was held in Wilmington and a resolution was adopted that the city government was to resign or be overthrown.⁶³ The insurrectionists gave their demands to two prominent Black citizens, who were told to give a response to their demands before midnight or risk violence. When the two men chose to flee the city rather than return to a nest of armed white supremacists who wanted to exile or lynch them, the mob took this as their demands not being met and they elected to begin their bloody campaign the following morning.⁶⁴

Organizational Success in the Coup of Wilmington

The very first action of the clandestine conspiracy was to draft a “city-wide protective campaign that was to be conducted [and] coordinated with the statewide ‘White Supremacy’ movement”.⁶⁵ The plan involved every block being overseen by armed squadrons, and the city’s

⁶¹ Zucchini, *Wilmington’s Lie*, 15.

⁶² Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 104.

⁶³ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 108.

⁶⁴ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 111.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 49.

wards being converted into occupation zones. The supervisors of individual blocks would report to officers in charge of neighborhoods, who would report to the higher-ranking officials in the ward, who would then funnel information back to the central command. Information would flow down the ranks from central command through this same process, which would allow for comprehensive and detailed plans being executed at the street level.⁶⁶

The magnitude of the plan and its implications would not be felt until after the coup was initiated, when the plan was implemented citywide. Almost immediately, the militia members rounded up white families and shepherded them to safety in a centralized location and began going door to door in their jurisdictions, looking for political dissidents and community organizers that had been deemed enemies of the new regime by the coup plotters. These figures were run out of town or held under house arrest, but in the few instances where a targeted individual fought back, the punishment was lynching or summary execution.⁶⁷ The conspirators directly benefitted from removing their competition for political and economic power, and the fact that many of them were African-American was more reason to exile them from the new Wilmington.

The Reverend Kirk explains in his accounting of the city that all Black people had to be accompanied by armed guard when they left their homes, and they could only do so with the possession of a permit granted by the occupying forces.⁶⁸ Through this system, the militia controlled the movements of citizens they considered undesirable and further restricted their organization to limit resistance against them. Any guns owned by the African-American community were confiscated, and Black men were held captive at their places of work to prevent

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 49.

⁶⁷ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 125.

⁶⁸ Rev. J. Allen Kirk, *A Statement of Facts Concerning the Bloody Riot in Wilmington, N.C., Of Interest to Every Citizen of the United States*. 1898

them from returning to their families and keep the businesses of the coup plotters running smoothly during the crisis.⁶⁹ With the means to defend themselves and organize politically removed from them, most Black men's sole activity under the regime was to work in the businesses of wealthy White men, many of whom supported the coup and their efforts to make the old order ascendant.

This level of dedication, organization and planning brings the events in Wilmington far above the classification as just a race riot with unique political consequences. Rather, the plans drafted for the implementation of Wilmington's new order were those of a conquering force; an occupying army with goals of subjugating the population and bringing dissenters and undesirables to heel. In this way, the plans drafted by the coup plotters and Waddell represent much of the reason for the approach taken so far in analyzing the actions of the Secret Nine and why they are significant to discuss in addition to other factors like racism and Southern gendered dynamics. While not absent from the scholarship of the event, the fact that the coup was meticulously planned by local actors and then implemented with cold calculation upon the city speaks to the impact that local actors had on shaping the conflict and the ways in which the year-long plans of the conspirators ultimately came to fruition with the occupation of the city.

As the coup unfolded, various organs of city government that could have responded to the crisis, such as the police and firefighters, were deliberately held back by sympathetic actors within those departments.⁷⁰ The National Guard stationed in Wilmington was mobilized hours after the riot began in Brooklyn and the Board of Aldermen had been overthrown, and the men in charge were sympathetic to the goals of the state Democratic Party. The National Guard were equipped with a gatling gun, a piece of equipment specifically requisitioned for the possibility of

⁶⁹ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 115.

⁷⁰ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 114.

violence around Election Day; the Guard was trained in its assembly and use, and while they feared the mighty weapon for its lethal potential, the gun was ultimately never used. In fact, the Guard began to respond to areas where Black men had taken up arms to defend themselves and ignored areas where white rioters were enacting their systematic destruction of Wilmington's Black community.⁷¹ The mismanagement of the response to the coup is described in later oral accounts as causing the Cape Fear River to become choked with corpses, although the veracity of the statement has been disputed in reports at the time.⁷² Regardless of the accuracy of the claim of bodies clogging the river, the fact is that the memory of bodies piling up while the National Guard was negligent stands out in the minds of the survivors and adds to the pain experienced by those affected by the violence.

While the carnage unfolded across the river, Waddell and the leaders of the coup, among them multiple members of the Secret Nine, marched with a contingent of rioters to city hall. Once the mob had been posted outside, armed and with the full intent of taking the building by storm if their demands were not met. Ascending the steps, Waddell and his fellow conspirators met with the mayor, who listened to their demands and initially refused to step down. When the coup architects threatened the mayor with lynching if he refused their demands, the city government acquiesced and delivered their letters of resignation to the conspirators.⁷³ Minutes later, a revolutionary government was sworn in and positions on the Board of Aldermen were granted to the architects. While the city burned and violence still rocked the streets, the revolutionary board concerned themselves not with the defense of the city, but rather with enacting an ordinance banning the sale of alcohol for four days.⁷⁴ The deliberate inaction of the

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 123.

⁷² *ibid.*, 134.

⁷³ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 136.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 137.

new Board of Aldermen is further evidence of the political opportunism coming before larger societal concerns as motivation for overthrowing the city government, as even with unfettered power brought about by a violent coup, the conspirators were solely interested in returning to the way Wilmington was run before the rise of Fusionism.

Before the night was out, Alfred M. Waddell was sworn in as the next mayor of Wilmington, and the old order had returned in a wave of violence and blood. Statewide, the news of the coup galvanized Redshirts and Democratic supporters, and townships began pledging men from militias to support the rioters in their goals. While there is little to no evidence to suggest that the events in Wilmington were planned by state-level officials due to the role local actors played in shaping the events that led to the coup, it is undeniable that once the gambit was undertaken, they were eager to exploit the immediate swell in support to push for Governor Russell to step down.

The Aftermath and the Battle for Memory

Immediately after the conspirators had gotten their way and the town was firmly in the hands of the old Democratic order once more, newspapers across the region proclaimed the riot a victory for the white man. Many newspapers in the state were sympathetic to the Democratic Party or were organs of the party itself, and so the elements of violence and anti-democratic actions were overlooked or ignored in immediate coverage of the events in Wilmington.⁷⁵ The true victims of the coup were ultimately the city's African Americans, who were forced into exile in the surrounding swamps or held under military occupation in the city. Many of their community members were killed and their leaders lynched, the latter as part of a deliberate campaign by the occupying forces to remove problematic individuals from the new Wilmington.

⁷⁵ Haley, John "Race, Rhetoric, and Revolution" in *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Consequences*, edited by David S. Cecelski & Timothy B. Tyson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pg. 209.

As night fell over a city on fire, the shocked refugees of the massacre in Brooklyn and other neighborhoods collected their stories and unified their accounts, coming together to reckon with the events of the day. Central to almost every piece of critical scholarship on Wilmington in the past forty years is Reverend Kirk, the first accounting of events in Wilmington ever published. It came not from the excited newspaper editors in Raleigh, nor from the revisionist accounts of the conspirators, but rather from the mouths of the oppressed and the victimized on the same night as the coup unfolded.

When the dust had settled, Mayor Waddell claimed that there was nothing improper about the ascension of the reactionary Board, claiming that while the form of government was revolutionary in nature, no laws were broken. Waddell and the Board began to distance themselves from the very mob they'd roused, calling any instance of violence an example of "self-appointed vigilantes" and "overzealous" individuals causing trouble.⁷⁶ The effort to recast the events of November 10th, 1898, immediately after they happened was a deliberate effort to control the narrative around Wilmington and to dissuade federal authorities from getting involved. To that end, the coup plotters succeeded beyond a shadow of a doubt. President McKinley refused to intervene, even after letters from exiled Black community members were written to him speaking of the conditions they had been forced to endure. One letter signed anonymously issued a chilling cry for help: "please send releif [sic] as soon as possible or [sic] we perish".⁷⁷ While McKinley was aware of the coup, he elected not to pursue any federal response, as he believed the events in Wilmington to be spontaneous and without further

⁷⁶ Haley, "Race and Rhetoric", 208.

⁷⁷ Anonymous to President William McKinley, 13 November 1898, box 1117A, file 1898-17743, Year Files, 1884-1903, General Records of the Department of Justice, RG 60.3.2, National Archives, Washington DC.

violence.⁷⁸ Ultimately, the gambit paid off and the McKinley administration backed down, ensuring that there was no reckoning and no justice in the lifetimes of those affected by the coup.

The election of 1898 had signaled the end of the Fusionist coalition with the overwhelming victory of the Democratic Party statewide, but Wilmington acted as the symbolic death knell of the most prominent period of reform in North Carolina until the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Two years later, Governor Russell lost his reelection bid to Charles Aycock, a Democratic campaigner who heavily pushed the black rape panic stemming from the Manly editorial and worked alongside the Redshirts. His reputation already weakened by the lack of a response to the Wilmington coup, Governor Russell's Fusionist administration was brought to an end and the old order of Jim Crow and white supremacy returned to North Carolina after less than a decade of reform. Many of the individuals involved in the coup would go onto state government, including positions in the state legislature. The memory of the coup would be allowed to fade away as the 20th century dawned, and while the trauma of the day of rage would live on in the minds of those who were forced from their homes or lost loved ones that horrible day, the state refused to reckon with the consequences of a violent overthrow of a sitting city government. The memory would live on in novel form, with David Bryant Fulton's 1900 novel *Hannover; or the Prosecution of the Lowly: A Story of the Wilmington Massacre* and Charles W. Chestnutt's 1901 novel *The Marrow of Tradition* both centering the tragedy of November 10th, 1898 in their narratives.⁷⁹ It would be nearly a century until critical scholarship of the event took place, with Prather leading the charge in the 1980's and Cecelski and Tyson's centennial collection of scholarly essays on Wilmington solidifying the approach to studying the coup in an

⁷⁸ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 152.

⁷⁹ Jones, Derrick C. and Emily Ruth Rutter, "'The rights and privileges all people should enjoy': Reflections on Archival Collaboration and Black Women's Epistolary Resistance" in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* vol. 40 no. 1 (Tulsa: The University of Tulsa Press, Spring 2021).

intersectional and multi-faceted way. In 2006, the state of North Carolina published its own official report on the coup in Wilmington, referring to the event as a ‘race riot’, but also focusing on the political ramifications of the coup and the motivation to exploit racial violence to enact radical political change.

Conclusion and the Value of Studying Wilmington in the 21st Century

It is undeniable that the Secret Nine benefitted from their organizing beforehand, as their deftness in maneuvering political events in their favor shows across the timeline of the coup. When researchers look at Wilmington and focus on larger social issues, they overlook the impact of these local actors and elites, which detracts both from analyzing larger societal issues and the micro-narrative around Wilmington. On the micro-level, the Nine were the architects in motivating the Democratic population of the city to violence, and they intended from their first meeting to enact a military occupation over the city. The Secret Nine also drafted the resolution for the city government to step down after the election and led both the rioting in Brooklyn and the march on city hall and are extremely important to discuss in the timeline of events in Wilmington, and the fact that many of them became members of the new Board of Aldermen after the coup is difficult to ignore. On a macro-level, however, the planning becomes less important and the roles that the members of the Secret Nine played in society becomes much more significant.

As illustrated previously, the Nine were veterans of the Democratic political machine before 1897 and wealthy businessmen that benefitted from the same system; they were the city elite, and their reason for organizing anti-democratic resistance to the city government was predicated on them losing access to the keys of power. The members of the conspiracy who were political operatives were career civil servants, relying on government to provide a source of income for them. A system of patronage ensured career advancement and higher wages in

exchange for loyalty and service, and the loopholes enshrined in the city charter by the state government allowed them to retain power into perpetuity.

When the Fusionist administration amended the charter to remove the loopholes and opportunities for patronage as well as opened up many of their once protected city positions to popular vote, the members of the Nine feared, for the first time in their political career, the prospect of losing power and their livelihood. The businessmen among the Nine feared a similar fate, as contracts struck up with the political machine that was favorable to their business enterprises could be threatened under a new administration, and they feared the economic impact reform could have on the city. The political and business elite among the Nine feared unemployment and economic downturn, and they viewed the institution of government as central to their continued well-being and economic security. However, these anxieties over power are not unique to Wilmington; in fact, they are altogether common for the period.

In Eufaula, Alabama, a white supremacist terrorist group known as the White League ambushed a parade of African-American men on their way to a polling place, killing nearly forty men.⁸⁰ The same night, members of the White League, which included prominent local officials, stormed into a barn where votes were being counted and processed for official tabulation and killed the poll workers, allowing them full control over the counting of the vote in addition to who cast them in the first place. The prominent local officials in question were a powerful family that had long “owned” the county and sought to preserve their influence by subverting the democratic process that could rob them of their power. They would later be rewarded for their efforts by having one of their number become Governor of the state of Alabama decades later.⁸¹ The Battle of Liberty Place in New Orleans also rings similar to Wilmington, with local

⁸⁰ Kyle Whitmire, “Ambushed in Eufaula: Alabama’s forgotten race massacre,” in *AL.com*, January 16, 2022.

⁸¹ Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Rise of New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), pg. 36.

politicians affiliated with the White League battling National Guard troops and occupying government buildings, including the state capitol and city hall, for three days. The leaders of this putsch were state-level Democratic politicians and their allies in New Orleans politics, and while they were all members of the White League, they feared the influence that African-Americans and Creoles had over the city and the political power they wielded, comparing their situation to an inverse of slavery.⁸²

While the insurrectionists in New Orleans ultimately failed in their attempts to overthrow the Governor of Louisiana, the terrorists in Alabama succeeded in their bid to hijack the electoral apparatus of their county. The Election Massacre has a higher casualty rate than Wilmington, and the Battle of Liberty Place was a direct attempt at overthrowing a state government in addition to a city government, and both utilized planning and the leadership of local officials or allies to enact their plans. In all of these cases, political violence was committed with the explicit purpose of interfering with or overthrowing the democratic electoral process, and all of them were organized by local actors seeking to return to or preserve an existing order that benefitted them. White supremacy played a factor in all of the examples mentioned, but the anxiety over power and the fear of losing that power to a political system they could not fully control is an important piece of analysis in the study of Southern political violence, of which Wilmington is a part. In this way, Wilmington is not a singular event in American history, and the perception of Wilmington should not be that it stands out in American history as a unique instance of anti-electoral violence; rather, Wilmington was just one of many violent political actions aimed at destroying democracy in the South. In this sense, I argue that historians studying this topic should step back and see the larger picture of Southern political life and incorporate the long

⁸² Jacob L. Wasserman, "Big Trouble in the Big Easy: The Battle of Canal Street and the Independence of Black Political Power" in the *Penn Historical Review* vol. 44, no. 1, pg. 120.

history of local officials and figures fighting to preserve or return to the systems that benefit them.

While it would be reassuring to say that all of the circumstances that enabled the coup to succeed have gone away since then, the truth is that the methods for radicalization and organizing violent political action have only grown more ubiquitous with time. In the internet age, planning between actors across the country or, indeed, the world can be done instantaneously and propagandizing information to radicalize supporters can be shared far and wide. For scholars in the age of social media and radicalization through those mediums, understanding the potential for violent political action not just through a lens of broader analysis but through an individual lens to gauge the potential for charismatic individuals to push crises to their goals is more important now than ever before. Movements now can be global, but their impacts can be felt tremendously throughout all rungs of society. Due to the more efficient messaging offered through the internet, the integration of members into violent groups is made easier than ever, and it also provides the cover of anonymity that the Nine depended so dearly on to every member.⁸³

The rhetorical nimbleness of the Wilmington conspirators can be emulated with the speed of information flow over internet spaces as well as the ability to quickly develop rhetoric and ideological development of members.⁸⁴ Whereas in 1898 a conspiracy of the magnitude in Wilmington would have been kept secret through word of mouth and strict control over the members of the group, in the modern day these same control mechanisms are baked into the very nature of online radicalization projects. It is impossible to tell how many of the people who marched on January 6th or who participate in violent political action in the modern day received

⁸³ Koehler, Daniel, "The Radical Online: Individual Radicalization Processes and the Role of the Internet" in the *Journal for Deradicalization* no. 1 (Winter 2014/15), pg. 118.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 120.

their views from the internet alone, but the system that made Wilmington succeed in bringing down democracy has, ironically, become democratized. The resources for making a violent conspiracy are extremely cheap, and the only limiting factor is the determination of each conspiracy's membership.

My initial reasoning for taking interest in Wilmington stemmed from the shock I had experienced on January 6th, 2021 when supporters of President Donald Trump stormed the United States Capitol to overturn the democratic results of the 2020 election. What had started as a curiosity about watching the final attempts by Trump and his allies in government to delay or derail the certification of the election turned to horror as I watched live feeds of the insurrectionary mob entering the Capitol complex. Information on those few hours of rage, hate and blood would trickle out in the proceeding days, weeks, and months, and now, nearly two years out from January 6th, we still are learning new facts every day about the extent of the organizing, the motivations of the participants, and how much of it can be attributed to deliberate instigation by the President of the United States. It is a developing story with developing scholarship, and while I would love nothing more than to point to tidbits of information and say that one could look to the past for a perfect answer for how to best move forward, that is not possible at this time. History is not a linear tale of concrete causes and effects and studying Wilmington has taught me how nuanced major events can be.

Even with January 6th, however, one can see the same motivating anxiety over power that led the Secret Nine and the White League to engage in anti-electoral violence. When faced with the prospect of losing institutional control and being forced out of his position as President of the United States, President Trump instigated an attempted self-coup of the federal government. As more information has emerged of Trump's motivations and thoughts before and during the insurrection at the capitol, the more the public sees of a President acting in a final, desperate

gambit deeply anxious not only over the possibility of losing power but of facing legal consequences for actions committed in office. While he was not successful and democratic institutions survived the invasion of the Capitol, the fact remains that historical parallels can be drawn between January 6th and the events in Wilmington and other instances of anti-electoral and anti-democratic violence in the American South.

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