

Documentary Review of “American Coup: Wilmington 1898”

There are many lessons to learn from the violent overthrow of Reconstruction during the late 19th century

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Region: [USA](#)

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A recently aired Public Broadcasting Corporation (PBS) documentary as part of the “American Experience” series examined the history of the white supremacist coup which ousted a multiracial coalition municipal government in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1898.

The coup was aimed at the complete disenfranchisement, disempowerment and dislocation of thousands of African Americans who had played a leading role in the civic and economic life of the Wilmington area.

This incident was one of a long list of white-led terrorist operations which expanded across several post-antebellum states including Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, Oklahoma among others between the late 1860s and the early decades of the 20th century. Within many of the former slave states, people of African descent constituted near-majorities statewide and majorities within certain municipalities, counties and regions.

Upholding the 14th and 15th Amendments to the United States Constitution would place African Americans in direct competition with whites for land, agricultural production, employment, wages, commercial endeavors, education and other aspects of the society. Segregation laws on a state level which were allowed to be in complete defiance of the Reconstruction amendments and civil rights acts were on the ascendancy by the close of the 19th century. Wilmington represented the continuation of the most progressive holdovers from the Reconstruction period of the late 1860s through the elections of 1876 and the subsequent Supreme Court decisions of 1883 which essentially nullified federal civil rights law. See [this](#).

During the last decade of the 19th century a coalition of Republicans and Populists brought together African Americans and white political forces. The movement was called “Fusionist” and began to wield significant influence in North Carolina. With Wilmington being the largest city in the state during the late 1890s, it held the potential for establishing a trend towards a more inclusive political culture.

On the [sceneonradio.org](#) website it says of the period in Wilmington [that](#):

“In November 1898, an armed White supremacist mob—supported by most White elites in North Carolina—murdered untold Black Wilmington residents and drove the city’s elected Fusionist government from power, installing Democrats in their place. The coup in North Carolina’s then-largest city violently snuffed out some of the last flickers of multiracial democracy in post-Civil War America.... In November 1898, North Carolina

Democrats won a sweeping victory at the polls – confirming the success of their campaign based on white supremacy, intimidation, and fraud. But in Wilmington, the state’s largest city, white supremacist leaders were not satisfied. This episode tells what happened on November 10, 1898, in Wilmington: a massacre of Black men, and the only successful coup d’etat in U.S. history.

The methodology utilized in Wilmington followed a similar pattern across the South and other regions of the U.S. There was the false claim of losing control of political and economic structures to African Americans.

Using this formula for analyzing racist violence against African Americans, the Colfax massacre of 1873 fits a similar pattern where political divisions over the control of the Louisiana state government led to a white supremacist coup against the ascendancy of a Reconstruction administration. See [this](#).

Such exaggerated notions were in response to the burgeoning presence of African Americans numerically and socially. There was the proliferation of independent churches, schools, newspapers and social organizations.

These institutions were answering forcefully the racist propaganda from the then Democratic Party stalwarts and their allies within the white supremacist militias. When the fears of Black political domination did not gain the necessary resonance, it was soon advanced that there was a real threat to the safety of white women. As Ida B. Wells had already argued in the early 1890s based on developments in Memphis and later her travels throughout the South, that the myth of the sexually uncontrollable dangerous Black man was merely a false pretense for the lynchings and disempowerment of the African American people.

In reference to the triple lynching of three African American men in Memphis during July 1892, Wells continued to speak out against racist violence while condemning the false rationales under which these acts of terrorism were carried out. Due to an editorial she published while outside of Memphis in 1892, the courts ordered her arrested and the offices of the Free Speech and Headlight newspaper which Wells owned, destroyed.

The Howard Center for Investigative Journalism [wrote of the](#) situation in Memphis:

“Death threats followed, fast and furious. Four days later, a mob ransacked the office of The Free Speech and Headlight and destroyed the building that housed it. Creditors took possession of any assets left. Wells-Barnett, who was out of town at the time, never came back to Memphis. She was running away from that city, but running toward a greater calling that also was personal. “They had me an exile and threatened my life for hinting at the truth,” she wrote in ‘Crusade for Justice.’ ‘I felt that I owed it to myself and my race to tell the whole truth.’ The investigative reporter in her took Wells-Barnett to Chicago. She continued her quest to debunk the big lie about lynching and rape. In 1895, she published a seminal work, ‘The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States.’”

Similarly in Wilmington just six years later the offices of the African American owned Daily Record were destroyed when the white terrorist group known as the “Red Shirts” staged a coup to put down the Fusionist electoral movement. Alexander Manly and his brother Frank owned the Daily Record where articles were published and circulated statewide debunking

the accusations of a conspiracy to dominate whites and assault white women.



Source: Abayomi Azikiwe

[According to an](#) article on the [ncpedia.org](#):

“The whites demanded that Manly and his newspaper cease to publish and that Manly be banned from the community. Manly escaped from Wilmington because he was mistakenly thought to be white. African Americans armed themselves and whites began to hunt and gun them down. The mob of whites included clergymen, lawyers, bankers, and merchants who all believed that they were asserting their rights as citizens. When the riot ended the next day, it was reported that twenty-five African Americans had been killed. However, it was strongly suspected that hundreds of African Americans had been killed and their bodies dumped into the river. In addition, hundreds of African Americans were banished from the city of Wilmington. This event, the Wilmington Coup, marked a turning point in North Carolina’s history because more restrictions were placed on African American voters.”

Consequently, this form of a fusionist government went down in flames. The pictorial symbol of the Wilmington coup was the image of a burned-out Daily Record building surrounded by Red Shirts brandishing their arms.

The PBS documentary examines the events of 1898 through archival records as well as the oral histories of the descendants of those involved on both sides of the struggle. This incident, like many others, has been covered up and hidden for well over a century.

Considering the political character of the incoming administration of **former President Donald Trump** along with numerous state governments in the U.S., even further restrictions will be placed on the research and teaching of the actual history of the country.

The reasons behind the concealment and distortions of U.S. and world history stems from the refusal to accept responsibility for past and ongoing injustices. While at the same time the perpetrators of racism and social injustices are just as committed to strengthening their grip on the workers and oppressed domestically and around the world.

Lessons From the Wilmington Coup

Right-wing, racist and neo-fascist tendencies still exist in the U.S. and are prepared to use violent repression to impose their objectives of a white supremacist government. The recent November 2024 national elections illustrated clearly that propaganda and psychological warfare based upon unwarranted fears and hatred of nationally oppressed peoples, class conscious workers, women, migrants, etc., can be the lynchpin to advance a political agenda which takes the U.S. back to the atmosphere which created the Wilmington Coup of 1898.

The violent phase of the coup in 1898 was initiated even after the white supremacists had evoked racist stereotypes along with ballot stuffing to win the elections. In the U.S. on January 6, 2021, a mob instigated by the current incoming administration attempted a violent overturning of an election in which millions of people of color and workers would have been disenfranchised. Over the last four years state governments have passed legislation which placed restrictions on the ability to vote. Even though the difference within the popular vote calculations between Trump and Vice President Kamala Harris was less than two percent, the media has spread the belief that the Republican White House has a broad mandate to implement its right-wing agenda.

These historical convergences call for the independent organizing of African Americans and other oppressed peoples. As the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the second half of the 20th century drew upon the mass sentiment of the workers and farmers, any renewal of the fight for liberation and social emancipation will set its own course irrespective of who is in the White House and Congress.

Watch the trailer below.

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