



White Domination, Anti-Black Violence, and the Death Penalty in North Carolina: How the Myth of Black Criminality Has Always Justified Violence Against African Americans

By Tim Tyson

On May 25, 2020, a white police officer casually killed George Floyd, a Black man face down in the gutter, hands cuffed behind his back. Officer Derek Chauvin knelt with all of his weight on one knee pressed into Floyd's neck. Onlookers filmed and pleaded with the police, "You're gonna kill him!" Floyd begged for his life repeatedly, even saying, "I'm about to die." Chauvin kept his knee on Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes. Floyd cried for his mother before he spoke his last words, "I can't breathe," and fell silent. Americans became a nation of witnesses to a merciless public execution.

An estimated 2.5 million protesters of every hue thronged the nation's streets under the banner of Black Lives Matter, protests on a scale unprecedented in at least fifty years. Though fueled by police violence, Black Lives Matter became shorthand for racial inequities in wages and wealth, criminal justice, healthcare, and virtually every other route to the bounty of American life. Despite some vandalism, the majority of protests remained nonviolent. "These are just unbelievably large protests at a time of great turmoil in this country, and there is surprisingly little violence given the size of this movement," said J.M. Berger, a scholar of extremist politics.

Although one terrorism scholar reported over fifty vehicular attacks against protestors, most reporters ignored widespread reports of far-right extremists either attacking or infiltrating BLM protests to promote violence. Local authorities arrested at least sixteen members of white-power militias in a dozen or more cities. On May 29, authorities in Las Vegas arrested "accelerationists" seeking to set off a racialized civil war. They taunted police and handed out Molotov cocktails.

Historians were not shocked when the President of the United States accused protestors of "Treason, Sedition, Insurrection!" or by the braying about "Law and Order." In the days following George Floyd's murder, our president cribbed a line from a 1960s segregationist police chief: "When the looting starts, the shooting starts," and vowed to unleash "the most vicious dogs" to deter protestors. In cities around the country, riot police used batons, tear gas, "pepper balls" and rubber bullets to clear protestors from public streets.

This violent repression represented a time-honored tradition of white backlash, often violent, in which white racial conservatives paint Black political power as inherently illegitimate and corrupt. It is a notion as old as slavery itself, and it has yet to leave us. White skin has always been a badge of authority to destroy Black bodies.

In North Carolina, white people have exerted that authority not just through police brutality, but through mob violence, lynching, and the death penalty. All have been used to preserve white dominion.

The death penalty and lynching lived together in braided fashion in North Carolina from the outset, to maintain slavery and subdue those who dared rebel. Between 1748 and 1772, state courts signed death warrants for at least one hundred slaves. In 1802, North Carolina slaveholders executed 24 slaves over a rumored revolt. Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion caused widespread panic among North Carolina slaveholders. In retaliation, white authorities in Duplin County beheaded several slaves, mounting their heads on stakes to warn others of the severe cost of seeking liberty.

The death penalty was piled on top of the usual violence of slavery—whipping, mutilation, branding, ear-cropping, burning alive, rape and sexual humiliation. Iron collars and “n--- boxes,” tiny and almost airless cells with little room to move, persisted on many plantations as long as the “peculiar institution” itself endured. Until the Civil War toppled slavery, the planters continued to castrate enslaved men for repeated escape attempts and the like.

Many slaveholders preferred to think of their plantations as the homes of “my family black and white.” Paradoxically, they also feared that their Black “family” might murder them in their beds. Paternalism also in no way kept them from using harsh physical punishment or, when convenient or profitable, selling their enslaved “family” members, tearing them from their actual families. This paternalism only strengthened the system of white domination by covering its brutal injustices with a patina of friendship.

In 1829, North Carolina Chief Justice Thomas Ruffin issued *State v. Mann*, a decision that cut through the fog of paternalist delusions. The question was: Were masters entitled to commit unlimited violence against enslaved people?

Ironically, Ruffin clearly saw the enslaved as human beings with their own bonds and aspirations. A slave, he writes, is “doomed in his own person, and his posterity to live without knowledge, and without the capacity to make anything his own, and to toil that another man reap the fruits.” People could not be expected to accept such an existence except under dire threat.

Ruffin wrote: “Such obedience is the consequence only of uncontrolled authority over the body.... The power of the master must be absolute to render the submission of the slave perfect.... This discipline belongs to the state of slavery.” Ruffin spoke the ruthless truth: Unrestrained violence to control Black bodies was the essence of slavery.

If Black people hoped that slavery's end would halt the violence against them, they were sorely disappointed. The passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments during Reconstruction promised a new, more equal society, and interracial governments held power for a small handful of years. When President Ulysses S. Grant pulled federal troops out of the South, the Ku Klux Klan seized political power.

A paramilitary arm of the Democratic Party, Klan nightriders burned the barns, houses, and schoolhouses of freed people. Murders were frequent but whippings were their most

common form of attack. The hooded terrorists routinely assaulted and raped Black women. Klansmen forced a Black man in Raleigh to cut up his genitals with a knife. After the interracial Republican Party won the 1870 state elections, violence skyrocketed. In Rutherfordton County alone, the Klan committed hundreds of whippings, all of the victims Republicans and all of the assailants masked.

In the years between 1865 and 1900, all of the former states of the Confederacy saw interracial “fusion movements” arise and, in Tennessee, Virginia and North Carolina, win control of state governments. In the 1880s and 1890s, poor white farmers in North Carolina turned to their African American counterparts and organized the “Fusion Movement,” an interracial political force that in 1894 captured the entire state government and seemed unbeatable at the polls.

Unable to abide Black citizenship or interracial cooperation, white conservatives organized the White Supremacy Campaigns of 1898 and 1900. To get white men to vote against their own interests, they fabricated accounts of Black rapists menacing white women.

Their time-tested method preyed on white fears of Black criminals, which organizers of the White Supremacy Campaigns used to justify any level of violence to restore “law and order.” Their tools included intimidation, beatings, murder, and massive electoral fraud. In Wilmington, the stronghold of the Fusion Movement, white conservatives committed mass murder in the streets, killing dozens of Black citizens. [The massacre and coup in Wilmington](#) ended an historic experiment in interracial democracy, and cemented Jim Crow rule across North Carolina well into the twentieth century.

This undemocratic history created a society accustomed to a government that condones violence against its own citizens. Its legacy is police brutality, mass incarceration, and the death penalty — as well as an enduring belief in Black inferiority, Black criminality, and Black inhumanity.

When an unarmed Black man or woman is killed by the police, white authorities slander the victim, release the deceased’s criminal, medical or school histories to the public, and selectively leak “facts” like the presence of a knife under the floorboard that the authorities knew nothing about when they fired the fatal shots. When Black people face execution, we are assured they are no more than the worst thing they’ve ever done.

In the wake of George Floyd’s murder, however, racial murder and police violence seemed to backfire. Americans were horrified by videos of police and federal agents attacking citizens.

After two weeks of protests, 74 percent of Americans supported the protests. D’Atra Jackson, national director of Black Youth Project 100, a Black progressive organization on the front lines of national protests, called this a “unique moment.” She warned, however, that the end of the story was still to be written.

Public sympathy must be transformed into political action against white supremacy. “It is one thing to be hopeful and believe that new things are possible,” Jackson said. “It’s another to build power.”

*Tim Tyson is Senior Research Scholar at the [Center for Documentary Studies](#) at Duke University. His award-winning books include *Blood Done Sign My Name* (2004) and [The Blood of Emmett Till](#) (2017). His *Ghosts of 1898: Wilmington's Race Riot and the Rise of White Supremacy* won the 2006 Excellence Award from the National Association of Black Journalists.*