

AN AGE OF PROGRESSIVE REFORM, 1890-1920

20.1. CONGRESSMAN GEORGE H. WHITE, EXCERPTS FROM FAREWELL ADDRESS TO CONGRESS (JANUARY 29, 1901)

With the rise of segregation, disfranchisement, and a vicious white supremacy campaign in his home state of North Carolina, Congressman George H. White, the only black Congressman at the turn of the 20th century, chose not to run for a third term, seeing his chances of being reelected as hopeless. He gave his last speech on the floor of Congress on January 29, 1901. It would be another 28 years before another black representative sat in Congress.

I want to enter a plea for the colored man, the colored woman, the colored boy, and the colored girl of this country. I would not thus digress from the question at issue and detain the House in a discussion of the interests of this particular people at this time but for the constant and the persistent efforts of certain gentlemen upon this floor to mold and rivet public sentiment against us as a people and to lose no opportunity to hold up the unfortunate few who commit crimes and depredations and lead lives of infamy and shame, as other races do, as fair specimens of representatives of the entire colored race....

In the catalogue of members of Congress in this House perhaps none have been more persistent in their knowledge of the handicraft of government, had by character, no higher thoughts of civilization, no more perhaps not as much property, with no more exalted estate white man living by his side, with no more or the administration and execution of them, but an illiterate white man making the laws of a sovereign state and participate in making the laws of a sovereign state and otherwise, and... that an illiterate Negro was unfit to circumstances superior to the Negro by inheritance if not that the white race was at all times and under all conditions of this Congress... he labored long and hard to show North Carolina, Mr. Kitchin. During the first session of the right of citizenship than my colleague from and, with a labored effort, to show that he was unworthy of the right of citizenship than my colleague from North Carolina, Mr. Kitchin. During the first session of this Congress... he labored long and hard to show that the white race was at all times and under all circumstances superior to the Negro by inheritance if not otherwise, and... that an illiterate Negro was unfit to participate in making the laws of a sovereign state and the administration and execution of them, but an illiterate white man living by his side, with no more or perhaps not as much property, with no more exalted character, no higher thoughts of civilization, no more knowledge of the handicraft of government, had by

Source: George H. White, speech addressed to the U.S. House of Representatives, on January 29, 1901, 56th Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 34, pt. 2:1635-38.

birth, because he was white, inherited some peculiar qualification....

In the town where this young gentleman was born, at the general election last August..., Scotland Neck had a registered white vote of 395, most of whom of course were Democrats, and a registered colored vote of 534, virtually if not all of whom were Republicans, and so voted. When the count was announced, however, there were 831 Democrats to 75 Republicans; but in the town of Halifax, same county, the result was much more pronounced.

In that town the registered Republican vote was 345, and the total registered vote of the township was 539, but when the count was announced it stood 990 Democrats to 41 Republicans, or 492 more Democratic votes counted than were registered votes in the township. Comment here is unnecessary....

It would be unfair, however, for me to leave the inference upon the minds of those who hear me that all of the white people of the State of North Carolina hold views with Mr. Kitchin and think as he does. Thank God there are many noble exceptions to the example he sets, that, too, in the Democratic party; men who have never been afraid that one uneducated, poor, depressed Negro could put to flight and chase into degradation two educated, wealthy, thrifty white men. There never has been, nor ever will be, any Negro domination in that State, and no one knows it any better than the Democratic party. It is a convenient howl, however, often resorted to in order to consummate a diabolical purpose by scaring the weak and gullible whites into support of measures and men suitable to the demagogue....

I trust I will be pardoned for making a passing reference to one more gentleman—Mr. Wilson of South Carolina—who, in the early part of this month, made a speech, some parts of which did great credit to him.... But his purpose was incomplete until he dragged in the reconstruction days and held up to scorn and ridicule the few ignorant, gullible, and perhaps purchasable Negroes who served in the State legislature of South Carolina over thirty years ago.... These few ignorant men who chanced at that time to hold office are given as a reason why the black man should not be permitted to participate in the affairs of the Government which he is forced to pay taxes to support....

If the gentleman to whom I have referred will pardon me, I would like to advance the statement that the musty records of 1868... as to what the Negro was thirty-two years ago, is not a proper standard by which the Negro living on the threshold of the twentieth century should be measured. Since that time we have reduced the illiteracy of the race at least 45 percent. We have written and published nearly 500 books. We have nearly 300 newspapers, 3 of which are dailies. We have now in practice over 2,000 lawyers, and a corresponding number of doctors. We have accumulated over \$12,000,000 worth of school property and about \$40,000,000 worth of church property. We have about 140,000 farms and homes, valued in the neighborhood of \$750,000,000, and personal property valued about \$170,000,000. We have raised about \$11,000,000 for educational purposes, and the property per-capita for every colored man, woman and child in the United States is estimated at \$75.

We are operating successfully several banks, commercial enterprises among our people in the South land, including one silk mill and one cotton factory. We have 32,000 teachers in the schools of the country; we have built, with the aid of our friends, about 20,000 churches, and support 7 colleges, 17 academies, 50 high schools, 5 law schools, 5 medical schools, and 25 theological seminaries. We have over 600,000 acres of land in the South alone. The cotton produced, mainly by black labor, has increased from 4,669,770 bales in 1860 to 11,235,000 in 1899. All this we have done under the most adverse circumstances.

We have done it in the face of lynching, burning at the stake, with the humiliation of "Jim Crow" cars, the disfranchisement of our male citizens, slander and degradation of our women, with the factories closed against us, no Negro permitted to be conductor on the railway cars... no Negro permitted to run as engineer on a locomotive, most of the mines closed against us. Labor unions—carpenters, painters, brick masons, machinists, hackmen and those supplying nearly every conceivable avocation for livelihood—have banded themselves together to better their condition, but, with few exceptions, the black face has been left out. The Negroes are seldom employed in our mercantile stores....

With all these odds against us, we are forging our way ahead, slowly, perhaps, but surely. You may tie us

join in with that political party, that institution, whether secular or religious, in every community where he lives, which is destined to do the greatest good for the greatest number. Obliterate race hatred, party prejudice, and help us to achieve nobler ends, greater results and become satisfactory citizens to our brother in white.

This, Mr. Chairman, is perhaps the negroes' temporary farewell to the American Congress; but let me say, Phoenix-like he will rise up some day and come again....

The only apology I have to make for the earnestness with which I have spoken is that I am pleading for the life, the liberty, the future happiness, and manhood suffrage for one-eighth of the entire population of the United States.

QUESTIONS

1. According to Congressman White, how did the Democrats manage to push blacks out of office?
2. How, according to the speech, did white Democrats mischaracterize history in order to regain power in North Carolina?
3. How does Congressman White use history to defend the right of black Americans to vote and hold office?

Now Mr. Chairman, before concluding my remarks I want to submit a brief recipe for the solution of the so-called American negro problem. He asks no special favors, but simply demands that he be given the same chance for existence, for earning a livelihood, for raising himself in the scales of manhood and womanhood, that are accorded to kindred nationalities. Treat him as a man; go into his home and learn his social conditions; learn of his cares, his troubles, and his hopes for the future; gain his confidence; open the doors of industry to him; let the word "negro," "colored," and "black" be stricken from all the organizations enumerated in the federation of labor. Help him to overcome his weaknesses, punish the crime-committing class by the courts of the land, measure the standard of the race by its best material, cease to mold prejudicial and unjust public sentiment against him, and my word for it, he will learn to support, hold up the hands of, and