BETWEEN NORTH AND SOUTH: THE POLITICS OF RACE IN JIM CROW MEMPHIS

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This dissertation, “Between North and South: The Politics of Race in Jim Crow Memphis,” uses the history of Memphis, TN as a case study to argue for the role of place in understanding racial knowledge and politics in U.S. History. Situated near the borders of the Mason-Dixon Line, I argue that Memphis should be considered neither a Southern nor a Northern American city, but a borderland locality. As such, the rules of racial hierarchy that served as the backbone of Jim Crow apartheid operated differently than in Deep South or Northern cities. Between 1910 and 1954, the Memphis city government was led by one of the most corrupt and racially oppressive political machines in American history, headed by notorious political boss E.H. Crump. What makes this story unusual however is that the machine was kept in power not only through the typical tactics of political patronage, the spoils system, intimidation and violence, but also through the explicit support of middle-class black community leaders. My dissertation examines key moments in the history of this strange alliance and unearths a surprising story that positions Memphis as a city that destabilizes conventional wisdom about the nature of what it has meant to be seen as “Northern” or “Southern” in American history. I argue that Memphis’ location has historically made it a hub or “gateway” city. This has allowed Memphis to be an important place not just for the importation and exportation of goods, but racial knowledge as well. My work emphasizes how factors such as geography and migration made Jim Crow Era Memphis into a city of syncretic racial politics. As a border city, Memphis was a place where the overt racism of the Deep South joined with the “polite racism” of North. For example, it was a place where black and white political interests could unite to run the Ku Klux Klan out of town. However, it was also a city
where black political opposition to white supremacy provoked swift and aggressive retaliation from the city government and police. Memphis was a place where the government promoted black achievement and individuality under the banner of Progressivism. And yet, black labor leader A. Phillip Randolph was barred from setting foot within Memphis under the threat of arrest or worse. By highlighting such contradictions, my dissertation contributes to recent efforts in Black Urban History and Black Freedom Studies to assess the role of spatiality in American history. Ultimately, I argue that place is a powerful enough factor to shape both the discrete and large-scale structures of racial hierarchies in America.
Sometimes I wonder if all of this is real. I often feel like I’ve been incredibly lucky in life and that none of this ever should have happened. And yet here I am. Or I should probably say here we are. None of this would have been possible without the support, guidance, patience, friendship and love of so many.

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INTRODUCTION:

RACIAL POLITICS IN THE CITY ON THE BLUFF

On Thursday, October 3, 1991, Willie Wilbert (W.W.) Herenton became the first African-American mayor of Memphis, Tennessee. The mayoral race preceding his election had been hotly contested like no other in recent Memphis history. Herenton, previously the superintendent of the Memphis school board, faced longtime white mayoral incumbent, Dick Hackett. While many similar-sized urban cities with comparable African-American populations had elected black leaders in previous decades, the Memphis political scene remained largely as it had been for the past century, marred by intense racial polarization and African-American disenfranchisement.

Historically, “the city on the bluff,” as Memphis was often called, was a place where blacks and whites very seldom found common ground when it came to politics. This much is evident in the results of the 1991 mayoral election that saw Herenton squeak by Hackett by the most razor thin of margins. In the final election count, Herenton received 122,596 votes (49.44%) to Hackett’s 122,454 (49.39%), a margin of only 142 votes. Post-election estimates showed an astounding 96% of white voters breaking for Hackett, while an equally whopping 99% of black Memphians voted for Herenton.\(^1\) Despite taking office under such auspices, Herenton went on to become a fairly popular mayor for the majority of his time in office, serving for 17 consecutive years over a period of 5 terms before finally announcing his retirement in 2008. After Herenton’s retirement, Memphis then went on to elect yet another African-American, A.C. Wharton, to the mayor’s office in 2009. Lingering racial tensions notwithstanding, the election of Herenton in 1991 marked a turning point in the Memphis

political scene, as, historically speaking, even comparatively minor efforts at black political enfranchisement in 20th century Memphis had always been hotly contested affairs that were at times quite literal struggles of life and death. At the heart of this dissertation lies the belief that the specific challenges of race that still linger today in “the city on the bluff,” as Memphis is often called, cannot fully understood without knowledge of the historical origins of racial-political polarization in Memphis.

Framework and Thematic Concerns

Conceptually speaking, “Between North and South” is a project focused on moments. While this dissertation does follow a more or less linear narrative from the 1920s through the 1950s, it is less interested in simply recapping the history of this period on a point-by-point basis. For example, the 1910s and 1920s receive a fair amount of attention, as this was the period where the parameters of Memphis’ racial-political milieu were first set. By contrast, the 1930s on the other hand are only delved into briefly, as this was a period of relative stability in terms of Memphis’ racial-political power dynamic. In this way, “Between North and South” privileges what might be called a historically impressionistic take on racial politics in Jim Crow Memphis.

It focuses on moments of high drama and conflict between Memphis’ black leadership community and the city’s white governmental power structure– moments of political insurrection, protest and dissent, and where the dominant social order of Memphis threatened to unravel if not fall apart entirely. Particular effort is made to capture the atmosphere, mood and emotion of these moments in Memphis’ history while situating them within a broader framework of spatial and racial-political theory. Thus, by tracing the increasingly contentious ways throughout the Jim Crow Era in which Memphis city officials and black community leaders interacted with one another, “Between North and South” shows how politics, oppression,
progress, and black activism in Memphis came to be inextricably linked in a tangled web of confusion.

At the center of this dissertation stands the idea that Jim Crow Era Memphis was what might be called a “border” community. My use of the word border here has less to do with the specific geographical location of Memphis and more to do with how in a metaphorical sense Memphis “fits” within the traditional Southern/Northern dichotomy that historians have used to conceptualize the Black Freedom Struggle in American history. What I mean by this is that historically Memphis has been a place that has not easily sat within such boundaries. In terms of racial politics, the North has often been cast as a place of opportunity for African-Americans, standing in stark contrast to the routine disenfranchisement that circumscribed the black experience in the South.

I argue here, however that Memphis, an ostensibly “Southern” city, has throughout the 20th century been placed that blurs the line between such distinctions. In Memphis, disenfranchisement often came in the guise of freedom and opportunity. In this way Memphis has been a city of contradictions - a city stuck “between North and South.” As such, Memphis was a place where the overt racism of the Deep South joined with the “polite racism” of North. For example, Memphis was a city where even under the thumb of Jim Crow apartheid, blacks had the right to vote. Yet such enfranchisement came at the cost of political autonomy, as their voting choices were circumscribed through the machinations of white governmental paternalism. Memphis was a place where black and white political interests could unite to run the Ku Klux Klan out of town. However, it was also a city where black political opposition to white supremacy provoked swift and aggressive retaliation from the city government and police. Memphis was a place where the white city government promoted black achievement and racial
harmony under the banner of Progressivism. However, black labor leader A. Phillip Randolph was barred from setting foot within Memphis under the threat of arrest or worse. By uncovering the factors undergirding such contradictions, “Between North and South” contributes to recent efforts in Black Urban History and Black Freedom Studies to assess the role of spatiality in American history.

Historians Kenneth W. Goings and Gerald L. Smith have theorized about what they call the “unhidden transcripts” of racial politics in Jim Crow Memphis. These transcripts or rules consisted of (1.) “overt attempts [by white Memphians] to control an African-American community that seemed to not know its place,” (2.) “a large and ever increasing [black] population base that helped to bolster the assertiveness of Memphis African Americans,” (3.) the fact that “city officials as well as police officers were involved overtly or covertly” in attacks on Memphis’ black community, and (4.) the fact that Memphis black community “continued to grow and assert itself” regardless of organized oppression and violence. Goings and Smith frame these “unhidden transcripts” as the primary factors which shaped the nature of black resistance to white abuse and authority. Both historians are right to argue for the salience of these ideas as such, but they neglect to account for the fact that blacks in Jim Crow Memphis but also chose to cooperate with white authority as a tactical method of pursuing political enfranchisement.²

Taking this into account, there are three themes or transcripts about racial politics in Memphis upon which this dissertation is built. The first of these deals with unspoken agreements about race in Jim Crow Memphis. “There are just certain ways of going about doing things in Memphis” is a common refrain among both blacks and whites in this dissertation. Those “certain things” most often came in the form of racialized hidden transcripts that dictated the terms of

cross-racial interactions. These particularities alone do not make Memphis unique for its time. More or less every city in Jim Crow America can be said to have had its own “certain ways” of negotiating issues of race and racial knowledge. However, there are two things that make Memphis stand out in this regard. First, there is the vehemence with which this refrain was used in public discourse to self-distinguish Memphis from cities in both the North and the South. Next, there was also the unusual fact that both black and white Memphians called upon this idea of unspoken agreements in support of their own individual agendas. Both black and white Memphians often made use of such hidden transcripts often in an effort to marginalize or shut down entirely those with opposing viewpoints and who sought to disrupt the racial status quo in Memphis. As will be shown, there were penalties doled out by both the city’s white power structure and black community leaders against those who (sometimes, quite literally) stepped outside the boundaries set in place by shared ideas of how things “just are” or “are supposed to be” in Memphis.

The second idea running through “Between North and South” revolves around the particularities of black-white coalition politics in Memphis. Specifically, I highlight the unique struggles and challenges presented within a city such as Memphis; a place that was paradoxically bound by traditional Southern mores of racial interaction at the same time as black and white leaders billed it as a “Progressive” city where both races could stand together with common goals and values. This dichotomy simultaneously led middle-class black community leaders and the white city government to form strategically beneficial alliances that nevertheless always filled with antipathy and constantly stood on the verge of total collapse owing to divided priorities and agendas between and within both leadership structures.
The third thematic concern of this dissertation deals with the notion of insiders and outsiders. In other words, I expose how black and white Memphians involved in the Memphis political scene constructed the idea “who “belonged” in Memphis and who did not – who was “one of us” and who was “one of them.” These were ideas that were shaped in large part by the previous two points. As was determined and enforced by both Memphis’ black and white leadership, “insiders” were those who chose to abide by the rules set in place by the aforementioned unspoken agreements. “Outsiders,” in short, were those who did not and brought in “outside” ideas contrary to the unique way of doing things in Memphis. Thus, the “them” or “outsiders” in this case was not purely a matter of one’s birthplace or place of residence. Rather a key point was that anyone, black or white, at any time could be labeled as an “outsider.” Not just a rhetorical term of derision, this label carried with a number of consequences ranging from social and political ostracization to being run out of town (an occurrence that happened surprisingly often) to outright violence. Again, it is important to emphasize that not only could anyone be considered an outsider regardless of race or residence, but also that the labeling of such individuals was often a cross-racial effort as well, a facet of racial politics in Jim Crow Memphis that created frequent intra-racial discord amongst both blacks and whites.

**Historiography Part One: Race and the City**

In writing “Between North and South,” I attempt to situate Memphis within a broader historiographical dialogue concerning black urban history, specifically on the topics of racial politics and spatiality. Within recent decades, there has been growing awareness of the importance of spatiality to the black urban experience. Black urban historians have in recent decades begun to sense a disconnect between how historians traditionally constructed the idea of place in narrative form and how historical actors themselves have constructed such an idea in
terms of lived experience. This notion was particularly important when it came to notions of “North” and “South,” terms which have stood for geographical location, but which also have become a type of shorthand by historians to discuss specific notions about race in 20th century American history, i.e. “A Southern way of doing things,” or “A Northern way of doings things.”

Over the past 20 years or so, a trend has emerged of historians making a concerted effort to deconstruct such easy ideas about the supposed divide between North and South. Historian Thomas Sugrue, for example, has written that when it comes to studying and writing about the black freedom struggle, a degree of spatial awareness “greatly complicates our understanding of the underlying causes of racial inequality, the creative strategies black and white activists deployed to challenge it, and the obstacles they faced.” The earliest works in this movement for spatial awareness focused largely on simply incorporating the North into the discourse of the black experience in America. Thus, in various ways, they all tended to make the case that Northern cities were not, as previously thought, ancillary to the narrative of black life in America vis-à-vis the concepts of “freedom” and “unfreedom.”

These historians meticulously made the case that Northern sites of racial struggle were just as dynamic and historically significant as their Southern counterparts were in terms of how issues of racial knowledge, political economy, access to the voting ballot, interracial cooperation and intra-racial conflict played a part in shaping the narrative of black rights. For example, Sugrue’s monograph, Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North, is a book that maps out the Civil Rights Movement as it occurred over a stretch of time that reaches more broadly than traditional boundaries in terms of both periodization and geography, showing how Northern cities, traditionally seen as being outside the purview of Civil

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Rights history, played an active role in shaping the contours of the movement. While the idea of “the North” in and of itself is perhaps still a simplification, for Sugrue’s purposes, he focuses on states where “the battle for racial equality . . . played out with special intensity,” places such as New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Ohio, Michigan, and Illinois.” Sugrue furthermore argues that “the history of civil rights activism is inseparable from that of national level political and economic history.” In that sense then, it follows that to wall off black urban history into rigidly discrete areas of study/ideology does violence to the inherent dynamism and connectedness of the black urban experience.

Following along in Sugrue’s footsteps is Kimberly Phillips study, Alabama North: African American Migrants, Community and Working Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-1945, (1999) In her monograph, Phillips seeks to document what she refers to as “the synthesis of southern and northern black experiences that converged in Cleveland, Ohio, during the first half of the 20th century,” rooted in black migration across from Southern to Northern states and vice-versa. During the early to mid-20th century, countless numbers of Southern blacks migrated North in search of better social and work-related opportunities. According to Phillips, as one of the major destinations of these southern migrants, Cleveland, or “Alabama North” as new residents soon began referring to it, serves as a microcosm for understanding the public and

4 Sugrue, Sweet Land of Liberty, xxvii
5 Sugrue would later follow up on a few of these ideas in his article “Northern Lights: The Black Freedom Struggle Outside the South.” Here he writes that traditional historiography tends posit the North as being relevant to the Black Freedom Struggle only so much as it was a site where the movement lost its non-violent roots and disintegrated into in-fighting and militantly aggressive ideologies of racial empowerment that were counterproductive to the effort made in the South by the Civil Rights Movement’s “leaders.” Recent scholarship however, he goes on, has begun to challenge the Southern-oriented approach to telling this history, arguing both for a longer narrative of the Civil Rights Movement and one which sees Northern cities are key to that very narrative. In this way, Sugrue draws a few different line of demarcation between Southern and Northern cities, the first of which is based on black access to the voting ballot and the second of which revolves around black resistance to white oppression in the North usually being self-organized as opposed to efforts in the South that often relied upon white allies in the form of clergy and interracial activist organizations.
private dynamics of making such a move. Shunned socially by white racists and northern black elites, and also excluded work-wise from all but the most menial of laborious tasks, Phillips argues that black migrants made use of the various socio-cultural tools that they brought with them from the South to make life livable in a way that fit their specific needs. They, as Phillips asserts, “drew on a variety of cultural and organizational experiences and beliefs created in the South” and in the process “established complex networks of kin and friends and infused the city with a highly visible southern African-American culture.”

Matthew J. Countryman makes similar arguments in his book Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia.” He makes the argument that “racism was never just a southern problem. Nor were civil rights activists ever solely concerned with solving southern variants of racial segregation and inequality.” Countryman writes, “the modern civil rights movement was as much a product of the black experience of racial oppression in the urban North as it was of life in the segregated South.” However, he makes sure to note that there were also key differences in the shape of civil rights activism in the North and its Southern counterpart. Notably, Northern civil rights activism often constituted a critique of liberal and policies for paying mere lip service to black rights. As a result of this critique being a core part of the Northern movement, Northern black activism often shunned such hallmarks of Southern civil rights activism as seeking change through legislative fiats, interracial coalition building and intra-racial respectability policing.”

“Racial oppression,” Countryman writes, “was of course not the same in Philadelphia as it was ‘Down South.’ Both the forces of racial domination – and the means they used against black

7 Phillips, AlabamaNorth, 3.
9 Countryman, Up South, 4.
10 Countryman, Up South, 6.
people – were different than those faced by African Americans in the South. But to live “Up South” was to confront structures of racial inequality and exclusion on a daily basis.”

As another point of reference, there is Davarian Baldwin’s Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life. In this study, Baldwin attempts to expand the idea of what it meant to be part of the “New Negro Movement” in the early 20th century from a perspective that solely privileges intellectual activism to a view, which takes into account the political economy, and “mass consumer marketplace” of black urban existence. In Baldwin’s view, the city of Chicago is a worthy site for examining this thesis because of its history as both a major hub of black migration from the South and as a city with strong ties to industrial production and consumption. Baldwin looks at how these two aspects of Chicago’s history manifested in black consumption of sports, fashion, and film. Through examples such as these, Baldwin is able to show that black consumer culture and black intellectual activism are not opposed to one another. In fact, Baldwin argues that the black urban experience of the interwar period can only be reconstructed through a reconciliation of each of these components.

11 Countryman, Up South, 10.; Also worth mentioning is Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980, edited by Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard. This is a collection of essays that collectively challenge the traditional narrative of Civil Rights that draws a line between the “real” movement in the South and the abnormality of Northern racism, black power and movement activity post-1965. They write in their introduction, “by shielding Northern segregation and the economic and social disenfranchisement of people of color from full examination, these formulations naturalize the Northern racial order as not a racial system like the South’s but one operating on class and culture with racial discrimination as a byproduct.” A more geographically aware history of Civil Rights, they argue, reveals a movement that was more than just a struggle for the right to vote. It was a struggle for economic rights as well. Moreover such an approach rebukes the notion of a black “underclass” responsible for their own poverty by revealing the extent that structural racism in the urban North held people of color back. Ultimately they conclude exclusively Southern histories “take a national struggle challenging the politics and economics of race in the United States and pigeonhole it as a heroic triumph over Southern backwardness between 1954 and 1965.”
13 Baldwin, Chicago’s New Negroes, 6-7.
14 Baldwin, Chicago’s New Negroes, 19.
Historiography Part Two: Tales From the Borderlands

Historians like those mentioned above have made great strides in bringing added complexity to black urban history. However, a case can still be made for certain shortcomings in their approach. For example, in trying so hard to emphasize the importance of the North to the black urban experience, what might be referred to as the old Southern exceptionalism of black urban history has simply been replaced with an equally problematic kind of Northern exceptionalism. Along with this, few have taken the time to theorize about the role of places that for various reasons might not fit into either the Northern-focused or Southern-focused paradigm. What of places that might be said to lie “in-between” North and South? What do their peculiarities and similarities to other locations add to the dialogue concerning the black urban experience? Moreover, within this dialogue, how do we as historians of the black urban experience avoid distorting or marginalizing such urban localities and the people who have inhabited them?

In recent years, a small, but growing contingent of historians have begun trying to answer just those sorts of questions. They have begun telling the stories of what might be called inter-regional localities, or, simply put, borderlands. As one historian has written, “a border can be understood not just as a dividing line but as a space where people, ideas, and experiences overlap and where differences blur.”15 Here it is important to note than when black urban historians speak of “border” cities, it is not necessarily always a case of pure geographic location. Often, a “border” city can be labeled as such because it seems to forcibly resists the sometimes all too facile and rigid notions of being a either “Southern city” or a “Northern city.”

For the purposes of this dissertation, I follow the definition put forth by Tracey E. K’Meyer in In Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South: Louisville, Kentucky 1945 – 1980. Here K’Meyer identifies 5 distinct aspects of a “borderland” locality, including: 1. A fluid system of segregation that may or may not be codified into law but which operates on hidden transcripts nonetheless. 2. A varied industrial economy with unionized workforces involved in the civil rights activism. 3. “The visibility of white sympathizers in religious, civil, labor, and educational organizations.” 4. Political diversity amongst the city’s black population. 5. Atypicality in terms of restrictions on black access to the voting ballot. 6. A general conception amongst the local citizenry that they were not “Southern” or not “Northern” in the same way that similar cities were.”

One of the most prominent examples of this burgeoning trend is Peter B. Levy’s Civil War on Race Street: The Civil Rights Movement in Cambridge, Maryland. In this book, Levy focuses specifically on highlighting the importance of the city of Cambridge, Maryland to the narrative of black Civil Rights. In specific, Levy argues that one notable reason why Cambridge is worthy of study is because while it lies below the Mason-Dixon line, it is nevertheless outside Deep South, areas of the Southern United States that have tended to receive perhaps disproportionate attention in studying the black experience. At first, this appears to be much the same as the other historians above seeking simply to add Northern voices to the discussion of black urban history and civil rights, however, Levy goes a step further by arguing for Cambridge as a border city not entirely Northern or Southern. He writes, “While recent studies have begun to paint a more sophisticated picture of the movement, orthodox histories of the movement, which are the ones most people are likely to know, have divided the United States into neat

16 K’Meyer, Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South, 5, 7-9, 11.
geographical categories, the North and the South, and have largely left unexplored the civil rights movement that erupted in the border states, in communities that were neither northern nor southern, but a combination of both.”

In Levy’s view, then, this is an idea which disrupts the popular narrative of black civil rights by showing that, if one takes into account locality, one can easily see that “The goals of the civil rights movement were not universal, and local varieties and priorities and possibilities governed definitions of civil rights and strategies to achieve them.” He goes on to say, “This study suggest that no single paradigm explains the civil rights movement or white backlash.” Moreover, “the civil rights movement was not neat geographically, chronologically, or ideologically. Its victories and defeats were not as dramatic or complete as they have often been portrayed.” I take this to mean, that in other words, there is room for and perhaps even a need for a middle area of conflict and triumph in these discussions. The focus on only the extremes distorts what in many ways can be seen as the crux of the black urban experience, the day-to-day struggles of everyday life, things that for lack of a better word seem, normal and not extraordinary.

Two further important and influential examples of racial borderlands studies are Black Liberation in the Midwest and Grassroots at the Gateway, by Kenneth S. Jolly and Clarence Lang, respectively. Both take as their focus the city of St. Louis Missouri and attempt to shed light on why its status as a borderland locality matters within the context of black urban history. For Jolly, in looking at St. Louis, he wants to redirect the traditional focus of the civil rights movement from the Deep South, but also provide a counterpoint to studies that have begun to

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place equally too much emphasis on the North as opposed to the Midwest. Both the traditional North and South-focused approaches, Jolly argues, miss the nuance of both Civil Rights and Black Power as they occurred in border regions, where such movements had their own unique setups with regards to issues of race, class and gender.\textsuperscript{20} St. Louis, in particular, as a border city needs study because of what Jolly calls its “unique tradition of segregation and discrimination throughout the early and mid-twentieth century.” A tradition where the boundaries of race were unevenly set by a combination of de jure and de facto practices, versus one over the other.\textsuperscript{21}

For Lang, on the other hand, the conversation is at its core one about class and its effects on the black urban experience in St. Louis. Lang wants to not just put class back at the center of the discussion, but change the very way in which we as historians talk about how class is a central component of the black freedom struggle. He wants to emphasize what he refers to the “collective and institutional” nature of class-based organizing within black communities, in other words emphasizing the ways in which such efforts were an intellectually purposeful process.\textsuperscript{22} Lang talks about the unevenness of the proscriptions of Jim Crow in border cities like St. Louis. This in turn, along with the city’s unique blend of demographics from various immigrant and religious populations, owing to its location along the Mississippi river as a “gateway” city created an environment not typical of Deep South cities, wherein blacks were largely excluded from skilled, constructive labor positions and thusly were more collected in clerical and semi-professional jobs.\textsuperscript{23} Within a “geographically interstitial” city such as St. Louis, Lang argues that more often than not Jim Crow operated under the guise of “polite racism,” a system that

\textsuperscript{21} Jolly, \textit{Black Liberation in the Midwest}, xiv.
\textsuperscript{22} Clarence Lang, \textit{Grassroots at the Gateway: Class Politics and Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936-75} (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2009), 2.
\textsuperscript{23} Lang, \textit{Grassroots at the Gateway}, 10.
“reinforced black subordination under the guise of cooperation, goodwill, and public voluntarism among black and white professionals and elites.” Furthermore, within this system, overt racial conflict when it arose was attributed lower class or “common” individuals who sought to disrupt the otherwise “friendly” race-relations carefully constructed and held together by the city’s white and black elites. 24 Lang furthermore emphasizes how black elites in St. Louis were able to “insist on many of the terms of their subordination” in return for playing the game of “peaceful” race relations and “assum[ing] responsibility for managing the behavior of the black laboring majority.” 25

One final study worth mentioning is Kerry Pimblott’s recent dissertation from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Soul Power: The Black Church and the Black Power Movement in Cairo, Illinois, 1969-74. By focusing on the small border city of Cairo, Illinois, Pimblott primarily seeks to rectify the thought that the emergence of the Black Power movement in the late 60s was in any way incongruous with the black Christian origins and underpinnings of the earlier Civil Rights Movement proper and black activism in general. In particular, Pimblott argues that far from shirking their Christian beliefs in favor of a more “aggressive” stance on black liberation and resistance, devout black activists on adapted their beliefs to support the tenets of Black Power at the same time as they modified the core beliefs and methods of Black Power to fit within a black Christian framework. She writes, “While the changing political and economic realities of the Black Power era were disruptive to the dominant Civil Rights ideology and coalition, Soul Power demonstrates that Black religious discourses and

24 Lang, Grassroots at the Gateway, 7-8, 12.
25 Lang, Grassroots at the Gateway, 22.
institutions continued to provide the basis for a coherent movement culture, unifying ideology, and renewed access to the Black church’s tremendous organizational resources.”

As far as racial borderlands studies goes, Pimblott argues that Cairo’s border location produced “a seemingly contradictory amalgamation of racial practices and customs,” which alternately provided accepted space for black activists to organize and air their grievances but which simultaneously prompted a “gradualist” approach to black liberation for fear of upsetting the delicate balance of racial politics in Cairo. Pimblott uses this dichotomy as a jumping off point to argue not that the distinctions of “North” and “South” in black urban history are entirely collapsible and do not matter, nor to argue that one supersedes the other in terms of importance to understanding the narrative of black civil rights, but to make the case that the only way to truly understand the black experience it is to understand it within the context of geo-location and the ideas, opportunities and experiences proffered by such.

As we see by the above examples, there are a wide variety of applications for thinking about the black urban experience in terms of geographical and racialized borders. It is with this burgeoning historiography as context that I make the case that Memphis was not a traditional Southern city in the ways that such an idea are often understood and that there is historical utility in understanding Jim Crow Era Memphis as a border city. Where I differ from the above historians is in my idea of what can constitute a borderland community. While Memphis’ geographical location near the Mason-Dixon line would qualify it as such using the guidelines the above historians have used, my own definition of a border city is more expansive than this. My idea of a border city takes into account not just physical geography, but what I will term “ideological geography” as well. By ideological geography, I mean the confluence of political

27 Pimblott, “Soul Power.”
ideas and racial knowledge that set the rules by which historical actors operate. What this dissertation shows is that cities like Memphis remind us as historians that the often-arbitrary boundaries that demarcate “place” are not impermeable walls that keep ideas about race and politics in or out. Rather, the boundaries of place serve more as a meeting ground for such ideas to co-mingle in often unexpected and surprising way.

Memphis in Historical Context

Since its founding in 1819 by Andrew Jackson and fellow land speculator business partners, John Overton and James Winchester, Memphis’s economic success and population growth have always been closely linked to two things: slavery and cotton production. Its fertile soil and location midway up the Mississippi River made Memphis a perfect hub city in terms of commerce. Prior to the Civil War, 3/4ths of America’s cotton was grown and harvested in the Memphis area, while Memphis’ location river allowed the cotton to be shipped across the country cheaply and relatively quickly. All of this helped to make Memphis one of the most important economic centers of the country before and after the turn of the century.

At the same time, however, such massive cotton production called for similarly massive workforce to harvest it. Therefore, through much of the 19th century, Memphis was home one of the largest slave markets in the South in the Antebellum Era. Even after the Civil War and the abolishment of slavery, blacks made up nearly 40% of Memphis’ population after, numbering at almost 16,000 by 1870. All of this not only factored into Memphis’ aforementioned ability to flourish economically, but also as historian Michael Honey has argued, specifically linked white

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29 Bond and Sherman, Memphis in Black and White, 75.
30 Bond and Sherman, Memphis in Black and White, 26, 34.
31 Bond and Sherman, Memphis in Black and White, 58.
economic success in the Memphis area with the exploitation of plentiful and cheap black labor.\textsuperscript{32} Even well into the 20th century, this is an idea that would remain influential in shaping the nature of racial knowledge and racial politics in Memphis.

After the Civil War, Memphis saw a massive influx of black migrants moving north in search of better opportunities than they would have further down in the Deep South. Memphis’ sizable black population was mostly limited by custom to residing in the so-called “Negro quarters” of the city, centered on and around the famed Beale Street area. Nevertheless, because of both the nature of the domestic jobs blacks were often limited and also a post-war uptick in white immigration, black Memphians were never entirely separated from their white counterparts. Indeed, the Negro quarters of the city also tended to be the only areas of town where poor immigrants were able to find housing. However, such close proximity between blacks and white immigrants tended to only breed resentment between each group, as they both struggled to cope with substandard, dilapidated and unsanitary living conditions, rising crime rates, widespread poverty, while at the same time competed with each other for the same types of jobs. This racial animosity in turn led to frequent acts of violence between the two groups culminating in Memphis being the site of one of the most violent and bloodiest Southern race riots in the post-bellum period.\textsuperscript{33}

The initial situation that set off the race riot in April of 1866 was an altercation between handful of black civil war veterans and white Memphis police after the soldier took umbrage and resisted orders from the officers that they moves off of the sidewalk to let the police pass. The relatively minor scuffle in which no one was seriously injured nevertheless turned escalated into a full-blown pogrom on the Negro quarters in South Memphis involving police and other white

\textsuperscript{32} Michael Honey, \textit{Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 14.

\textsuperscript{33} Bond and Sherman, \textit{Memphis in Black and White}, 57-60.
Memphians out to repay black Memphis for the slight and minor injuries a few of the officers received. Considering the police force at the time was nearly completely made up of Irish Immigrants, (163 out of 180 officers), the scuffle tapped into longstanding racial tensions and escalated into a 3 day assault on Memphis’ black community.\textsuperscript{34} The end result was 46 dead black Memphians, 2 dead whites, dozens of severe injuries, reports of mass larceny and the rape of several black women. Moreover, dozens of black homes, businesses, schools and churches were burned to the ground.\textsuperscript{35} Property damage was estimated at more than $100,000.\textsuperscript{36} Local newspapers, however, brushed the affair off as a simple “nigger riot” and city went on about its daily business as if nothing of importance had occurred.\textsuperscript{37}

Another defining incident that left a lasting mark not only on Memphis’ but its black population was a severe outbreak of yellow fever that occurred in 1878. Highly unsanitary conditions throughout the city, rife with inefficient disposal of garbage and human waste, made Memphis a perfect breeding ground for mosquitoes carrying deadly Yellow Fever.\textsuperscript{38} Thousands of Memphians black and white died as the epidemic lingered throughout the summer into the fall of that year, and over 25,000 mostly white Memphians, fled the city, many never to return. Many blacks lacking the resources to get away were left to stay and fend for themselves. While this resulted in mass casualties of both races, it also further shifted the racial population balance in Memphis once the outbreak had ended.\textsuperscript{39} After the epidemic ended, blacks comprised just nearly half of Memphis’ remaining population.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{34} Wright, \textit{Race, Power and Political Emergence in Memphis}, 15.
\textsuperscript{35} Bond and Sherman, \textit{Memphis in Black and White}, 57-60.
\textsuperscript{36} Wright, \textit{Race, Power and Political Emergence in Memphis}, 7.
\textsuperscript{37} Wright, \textit{Race, Power and Political Emergence in Memphis}, 14.
\textsuperscript{38} Wright, \textit{Race, Power and Political Emergence in Memphis}, 18.
\textsuperscript{39} Bond and Sherman, \textit{Memphis in Black and White}, 62-63.
\textsuperscript{40} Wright, \textit{Race, Power and Political Emergence in Memphis}, 19.
While, compared to many other Southern cities, Memphis had been largely able to survive the Civil War unscathed in terms of infrastructure damage, compared to many other Southern cities, a fact which helped it to maintain economic and population growth at a rapid clip, Memphis was still very much plagued by debt occurred during the war well into the 1870’s. The massive amount of money Memphis owned, adding up to about $3.5 million, brought the city to the edge of bankruptcy. This, along with the fact that so much of the city’s population had died or left, cutting the city’s tax base dramatically, led to the city’s charter was repealed by the state of Tennessee in 1879, turning Memphis into just a “taxing district.” The significance of this in terms of the city’s governmental infrastructure meant that Memphis was now in practice governed by two commissions, presiding over, respectively, Fire/Police and Public Works. It took Memphis until 1900 to regain its city charter, with a population of over 100,000 at the turn of the century. Black Memphians still managed to make up nearly half of the city’s population at 44%. At the time, most black males servings as laborers in the cotton industry, and most black women working as servants of various stripes for the wealthier of the city’s white population.

Early 1900s Memphis, it should be noted, was a city that held on tightly to its legacy of white supremacy and the “lost cause” narrative. In 1905, the same year that Memphis moved to a commission style of government, a monument to confederate general and Ku Klux Klan founder

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41 Wright, Race, Power and Political Emergence in Memphis, 20.
42 Dowdy, Mayor Crump Don’t Like It, x.; Bond and Sherman, Memphis in Black and White, 64.; It should be noted that some historians have questioned whether this decision to revoke Memphis’ charter was entirely due to the devastation wrought by the Yellow Fever outbreak. Historians Kenneth W. Goings and Gerald L. Smith have argued that the charter’s dissolution had the “convenient” side effect of resetting what had been a strong post-Civil War effort at organizing black voters and achieving proportional black representation in the city government., Goings and Smith, “Unhidden Transcripts,” 382.
43 Wright, Race, Power and Political Emergence in Memphis, 20.
44 Bond and Sherman, Memphis in Black and White, 66.
45 Bond and Sherman, Memphis in Black and White, 71.
Nathan Bedford Forrest depicting Forrest sitting atop his horse was erected. Both Forrest and his wife were re-interred underneath the statue in ceremony that brought attendants from all around the south. Just a few years later, Confederate Park was dedicated to the legacy of the confederacy and Jefferson Davis.\footnote{Bond and Sherman, \textit{Memphis in Black and White}, 79-80.}

At the turn of the century, while blacks were still relegated largely to areas around Beale St. Orange Mound, Hollywood and Binghampton, effectively cordoned off from wealthier whites, owing to what historian Laurie Green refers to as an enduring “plantation mentality” amongst Memphis’ white population, racial violence against black Memphians remained a daily threat.\footnote{Bond and Sherman, \textit{Memphis in Black and White}, 80.} Black anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells was run out of town under the threat of death for criticizing institutional white supremacy in Memphis in the 1880s.\footnote{Bond and Sherman, \textit{Memphis in Black and White}, 46.} Thirty years later however, much cannot be said to have changed in terms of the violence black Memphians were often subject to, with two of the most infamous cases occurring in 1912 and 1916 respectively. In the first, a white saloon owner named “Will Bill” Latura shot and killed 6 blacks in an unprovoked attack inside of a black bar, but was easily acquitted. In the second case, Ell (sometimes spelled Eli) Persons, a black logger, was arrested on suspicion of raping and murdering a 16-year-old white girl, Antoinette Rappel, who had disappeared while riding her bicycle to her uncle's dairy farm.\footnote{Bond and Sherman, \textit{Memphis in Black and White}, 85-86.}

Persons, who just so happened to live in the vicinity of the murder scene was arrested after it was discovered by police conducting searches of nearby homes for missing axes that Persons, a woodcutter, did not have in his tool shed. After being held in police custody for 24 hours, Persons reportedly confessed in full to the murder of Antoinette Rappel although
Persons would later proclaim his innocence of all charges. Despite the contested nature of his supposed confession, however, Persons was further damned by the use of what local authorities called a new experimental procedure in which the eyes of the deceased could be photographed and reveal the final image that person saw in his/her final moments before death. Rappel's body was exhumed to undergo this procedure, and according to Memphis police and local media, upon close inspection of photographs taken of her pupils, the forehead and hair of Ell Persons were clearly visible.50

Despite the obvious speciousness of these findings, after this report became public, the outcome of the case was all but a foregone conclusion. Persons was indicted on the charge of murder in the first degree by a grand jury and in a matter of days, after a number of failed attempt to actually find where Persons was being held, Persons was broken out of police custody by a mob of Memphis citizens. The following day, May 22, one local newspaper ran the headline: “MOB CAPTURES SLAYER OF THE RAPPEL GIRL; Ell Persons to be Lynched Near Scene of Murder; MAY RESORT TO BURNING.”51

That morning a crowd of thousands turned out in a wooded area near the area where Rappel's body was found to take in the spectacle, many of whom had camped out in rainy conditions overnight in hopes of getting a front row spot. The crowd included men, women, and children, and most notably members of the Memphis Police Force who were ostensibly there to keep order. After a few words from the mother of Antoinette Rappel, Person's body was tied to a log, doused in gasoline and set ablaze. Persons reportedly did not cry out causing a great furor throughout the crowd. Post-mortem, his ears were cut off. His heart was cut out, and in what must have been seen as eye for an eye justice, he was subsequently beheaded. Later on that day,

Person's head and foot were dumped out of a passing car onto Beale St., Memphis' noted black gathering place, in front of a horrified crowd of black onlookers with shouts of “Take this with our compliments.” Vendors offering sandwiches, gum, and bottled drinks later reported robust sales at Persons' execution.  

While cases such as Persons were certainly the most dramatic examples of prejudice and outright hatred of blacks in Memphis, such prejudice in the early 20th century Memphis also manifested itself in terms of labor as well. As Michael Honey writes, in terms of labor battles, Memphis was “an arena of struggle over the meaning of freedom.” He points out that there is a long history throughout the 20th century of white prejudice against blacks, and fear of blacks ever being seen as the equal of whites in terms of labor, income and social standing, was instrumental in the depressing and devaluing of skilled black labor as white unions fought tooth and nail, often through violent means, to exclude black laborers from joining them, despite blacks making up a significant portion of the skilled labor force as a whole in Memphis. The consequences of this, as Honey posits, were such that “without the right to organize, neither African Americans nor workers as a group could change their conditions, and that right could not be gained without seriously undermining the segregation system”

Focus and Chapter Structure

By the time the focus of this dissertation picks up in the early 20th century, Memphis already possessed a history that was very much fraught with unresolved and barely concealed racial conflict. It is here that we get to the crux of the story that this dissertation focuses on. Memphis’ government was for decades consolidated under the auspices of city mayor and

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53 Honey, Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights, 8.
54 Honey, Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights, 19.
55 Honey, Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights, 8.
nationally known political boss Edward Hull (E.H.) Crump. For all of his time in power Crump managed to stand not only at the center of the Memphis governmental scene but also at the center of racial politics in Memphis as well. Crump’s connections with what I am arguing at the time was a burgeoning population of black leaders and political activists in Jim Crow Memphis necessitate placing him and his interactions with Memphis’s black community at the center of this dissertation’s narrative, as for better or worse, the politics of how race operated in Jim Crow Era Memphis all seemed to run through the Crump regime at one point or another. Thus, this dissertation uses key moments in the tumultuous relationship between the Crump machine and black Memphis to tell a larger story about both the formation of racial knowledge along the borders of the Mason-Dixon line. While doing so, I showcase how Memphis’s position as an ostensibly southern city with strong Northern alters traditional understandings of race in the Jim Crow South.

In an attempt to understand how and why Memphis politics, racial and otherwise, evolved along the path that they did, this dissertation maps out the contours of this unlikely coalition through 3 phases: It’s initial origins in the 1910’s and 20’s, it’s straining in the 1930’s, and it’s outright dissolution in the 1940’s and beyond. The results of this decades-long struggle for power and influence fractured Memphis’ black community along lines of race and class, thereby diminishing their organizing power and potential for decades, leaving the majority of African-Americans in Memphis without a solid organizational structure for handling the often racist caprices of Memphis’ white government. Furthermore, I contend that the story of racial politics in Memphis during the first half of the 20th century is one of compelling necessity for understanding the full scope of race-based conflict in the Jim Crow South and beyond.
In this effort, the structure of Between North and South breaks down as follows. Chapter one looks at the formation of an unlikely and tenuous alliance between the Crump Political Machine and Black Memphis leaders in the 1910s and 1920s, solidifying under the mutual threat of the Ku Klux Klan in 1923. Chapter one examines the factors that forced these strange bedfellows into an uneasy coalition that bucked the racial status quo of the Jim Crow South and argues that this moment set a precedent and marked the beginning of a decades-long symbiotic relationship between the Crump regime and black Memphis at large, as each side believed it could use the strength, influence and organizing abilities of the other for personal gain.

Chapter two uses the story of local black hero Tom Lee as a signifier to show the ups and downs of this relationship throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, this chapter argues that Tom Lee's story serves as a revealing episode in the history of race and the politics of respectability in the Jim Crow South. Defined as an ideology that insisted that African-Americans always be conscious of their public image in order to counter pervasive stereotypes of their being lazy, shiftless, and morally debased, the Politics of Respectability proposed tearing down racial prejudices through attempts to humanize African-Americans in the public eye. However, using Tom Lee's story as a micro-historical vantage point, this chapter emphasizes the salience of remembering that, at their core, such constructed notions of black respectability represented a power relationship that could be used, and in fact was used in Memphis, both by blacks as a tool of political activism and also by white elites who made use of such ideology with for purposes of reinforcing white paternalism and patriarchal authority.

Chapter three examines a critical a breaking point in the relationship between the Crump machine and local black leaders in the early 1940s. As Memphis’ black population slowly began to drift away from the Crump Machine after decades of broken promises and condescending
racial promises, Crump in turn loosed hell upon any who would oppose his political authority and, perhaps more importantly here, his authority on matters of race in Memphis by sending local police to occupy businesses that either were by blacks who were politically active or that served as sites of black cultural production. This chapter, then, examines the divisions within Memphis’ black leadership community created by such tactics of paternalistic terror and argues that this particular moment in Memphis’ history created a deep intra-racial divide within Memphis’ black community that would only become more pronounced over time. The crisis of conscious caused by what the press dubbed the “Memphis Reign of Terror” ultimately nullified the organizing powers of the black community in Memphis and forestalled any real chances at bringing change to Memphis’ racial status quo.

Chapter Four of this dissertation picks up where the events of the previous chapter leave off and follows the now-fractured black activist community in Memphis as it tries to pull itself back together by inviting A. Phillip Randolph to come to Memphis to give a speech. The effort to bring Randolph to town was an attempt on the part of local black leaders to put pressure on the Crump machine and was also meant to inspire a fresh round of political activism amongst Memphis’ black population. What was unforeseen at the time was the further controversy and conflict that Randolph’s scheduled visit would engender not only with the political machine but within the very ranks of Memphis’ black leadership community as well, leading to a six-month long struggle to get Randolph to Memphis.

This chapter argues that this six-month period of both interracial and intra-racial conflict surrounding Randolph’s visit dramatizes two important aspects of the history of black political activism in Memphis. First, it reveals the ways in which competing visions of racial uplift amongst Memphis’ black leaders worked to impede those very efforts at such while
inadvertently bolstering the Crump machine’s political clout. Second, and more broadly, this moment in time marks the beginning of a transition in Memphis from what I argue are Jim Crow Era methods of activism to Civil Rights Era methods of such insofar as local Southern battles over race were now connected to and played out on a Northern national stage as well. This transition was made manifest in a newfound impetus to bring in nationally known figures such as Randolph to resolve local disputes.

Lastly, chapter five acts as an epilogue to the above narratives, examining in turn their lasting impacts in Memphis throughout the Civil Rights Era and beyond. Acting as a final word, this chapter challenges historians of the Jim Crow South to be bold and unafraid to break from traditional paradigms and methods of historical inquiry. I do so by holding up Memphis itself as just one example of a city that poses unique challenges and opportunities for historians to explore in new ways.

One last point worth foregrounding before moving on is that within the context of this dissertation I define the term “racial politics” as the dynamic interplay and struggle between blacks and whites in Memphis vying for influence and authority, relative to municipal, social and cultural benefits. In this definition, I draw on Kevin Mumford’s book Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century which posits race as being made up three core facets: “ideology, institutions and human interactions.” I argue that not only is the idea of racial politics a natural extension of this dichotomy, but I also posit that the interplay between the concepts of racial knowledge and racial boundaries exist as tangible manifestation of Mumford’s categories. Particularly in the case of racial politics in Jim Crow Memphis, I argue that, regardless of one’s race, one’s ability to manipulate the form and content

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of this interplay proved itself to be one of the primary means of attaining and maintaining power throughout the time period that this dissertation explores. This definition of racial politics, while fixed someone around the intellectual and rhetorical construction of race, nevertheless privileges the tangible and material consequences of this covert type of racial warfare throughout reign of Jim Crow in Memphis. At the same time, this definition also allows room for wider implications outside of the singular context of race in Memphis.
CHAPTER ONE:

THE DEVIL YOU KNOW

Of all the chaos that took place in Memphis, TN on November 4th, 1923, the bonfire may have been the height of it all. Ever since the polls in the city’s mayoral election opened that morning, the day had been full of arguments, fist fights and riot alarms ringing out across the city nearly nonstop. However, the apex of it all was perhaps the image of hundreds of jeering Ku Klux Klan members holding election officials hostage and forcing them to re-count ballots by the scorching heat of the massive bonfire. Taking into account all of the turmoil that had gripped Memphis over the previous months, the bonfire was in some respects appropriate for a city that set atop a powder keg of political and racial animus.

Backing up a bit, in the fall of 1923, an unprecedented occurrence took place in the city of Memphis. The local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan made a play for political power and fielded candidates for every available political office in the city’s fall election, including most importantly a bid for the mayorship of Memphis. Throughout the first years of the 1920s, the Klan had slowly amassed a sizeable presence in the city of Memphis, and by 1923, their estimated membership stood at around 10,000 strong. Yet, despite encompassing a vast cross-section of Memphis in terms of class, education level, career type and income, the Klan’s presence in Memphis was not entirely without controversy. Many of the city’s leaders felt the Klan to be a blight on the city’s reputation, one that not only threatened the social order of Memphis but potentially opened the city up to outside influence as well. Tired of being treated as outsiders by those they felt should be naturally embracing them, the Memphis Klan began to eye the election seasons of 1923 as a chance to come out of the shadows and legitimize itself in the
public eye. They would do this by attempting a feat no less grand than the total takeover of the Memphis city government.

In this chapter, I have three primary goals. First, I will map out the state of the racial-political scene in 1920s Memphis. In doing so, I will highlight the major factions across racial lines that vied for power and sought to determine the direction of Memphis’ future, not just in terms of politics but in terms of setting the city’s agenda on issues of race throughout the Jim Crow Era. Second, I will detail the 1923 election campaign process itself, making the case that this election would be a watershed moment in the history of Memphis politics and race relations. The Klan’s foray into the business of city government pitted them face to face not only with a burgeoning class of black political activists in Memphis, but also with Memphis’ storied political machine headed by infamous political boss and former mayor of Memphis, Edward Hull (E.H.) Crump. Taking center stage in this conflict were racialized hidden transcripts that dictated the terms of cross-racial interactions, specifically when it came to the notion of “insiders” and “outsiders.” Lastly, in this chapter I will talk about how this political showdown dramatized Memphis’ peculiar brand of racial knowledge and hierarchy as a city on the border between North and South.

In its broadest concerns, then, this chapter uses the backdrop of this unusual series of events to examine the dynamics of race relations and politics in Memphis during the 1920’s. The unprecedented threat of Klan rule within Memphis highlights what might be termed the strange career of racial politics in Jim Crow Memphis. By this, I mean to show how the process of political coalition building in Memphis was at once both racially progressive yet also regressive in ways that mark Memphis as a unique site of racial knowledge production in the Jim Crow South. The Klan threat to Memphis government was ultimately a temporary one, as Election Day
saw the Klan candidates soundly shellacked in nearly every contested race by the combined strength of the Crump-Paine-black Memphis coalition.

Yet, despite the outcome of the election falling far short of the chaos it portended to bring, I argue that the drama of the run-up to the election itself is what matters most. E.H. Crump and his political machine had relied upon the black vote in the past, but this time was different. Previous cross-racial political efforts were little more than temporary, ill-defined measures. However I argue that this election, more than any other moment, marked the solidification of what would become a decades-long symbiotic and often chaotic relationship between the Crump machine and black Memphis at large. Later chapters will chronicle the peaks and valleys of this relationship throughout the rest of the Jim Crow Era, their goals eventually evolved to become dramatically less reconcilable leading to a split not only between Crump and the black leadership community, but within the leadership community itself as well. It was ultimately this moment in 1923 however that locked these future events into place. From this moment on, as long as Crump remained a major player in Memphis politics, which he did until his death in 1954, each party in this cross-racial coalition would attempt to use the strength, influence and organizing abilities of the other for personal gain in a long campaign that, for historiographical purposes, presents Memphis as a unique site of study within the Jim Crow Era. As I will ultimately show in this chapter, the events that led to both the Klan being so thoroughly rebuffed in Jim Crow Memphis and the solidification of the Crump machine/black politico coalition perfectly encapsulate what made Memphis a city “between north and South” in terms of its ideological geography.
The State of White Politics and Leadership in Memphis

Before getting to the election itself, it is necessary to sketch out in the political environment within Memphis in the years preceding 1923. As a whole, the political scene in Memphis throughout the first half of the 20th century revolved almost entirely around one man, Edward Hull Crump, the city’s political boss. A transplant from rural Hollysprings, MS where he was born on October 2, 1875, Crump moved to Memphis at the age of 17 and started out as a simple bookkeeper. He eventually married into the wealthy and erudite McLean family of Memphis in 1902. Always one with an eye for advancing beyond his current station, Crump used his newfound wealth to buy out his old employers, and then made what he saw as an all-but natural move to politics.  

Crump’s political career started out with relative simplicity as a member of Memphis’ Legislative Council. Over time, however, his wealth and growing connections within Memphis’ business community gradually led to Crump working his way up the political ladder. In the year 1909, Crump achieved a long-held ambition and was elected Mayor of Memphis on a Democratic platform of progressive reform, promising both governmental and social reforms. Chief amongst Crump’s goals were efforts to curb political corruption in the form of backroom dealings between local business leaders and city officials while also erasing Memphis’ reputation as a city of violence and sin. Crump’s ties with Memphis’ business community ran deep however, undercutting his reformist rhetoric at nearly every turn. Eventually, this unwillingness to turn his back on the influential business community that had helped him into office, lead to Crump’s embarrassing removal from the Mayoral office in 1917 at the hands of the Tennessee

57 G. Wayne Dowdy, Mayor Crump Don’t Like It: Machine Politics in Memphis, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), xi-xii.
58 Dowdy, Mayor Crump Don’t Like It, 3-4.
Supreme Court.\textsuperscript{59} Crump’s active refusal to enforce prohibition laws thereby hurting many of his business community allies brought down the full force of the Tennessee legislature, backed by several legislators who never took to Crump’s personality and style of leadership. In particular, Crump’s repeated reliance on the votes of “gin drinking niggers,” as one opponent not so delicately put it, incensed many in Tennessee’s political sphere.\textsuperscript{60}

![Figure 1- E.H. Crump, source: Commercial Appeal](image)

Crump, never one to fully lie down, still carried on in TN politics after his ouster from the Memphis Mayor’s office. Crump’s was elected to the position of Shelby County Trustee no less than 6 months after his ouster from the Mayor’s office. (Miller, Memphis During the Progressive Era, 158-177) As others have written of Crump’s political entrenchment, the Crump organization established a network of grassroots democracy that wound its way from the individual voter a ward organization or civic club to Crump and city hall. The only price a citizen

\textsuperscript{59} Dowdy, Mayor Crump Don’t Like It, 23-24.

\textsuperscript{60} Dowdy, Mayor Crump Don’t Like It, 22.
had to pay was a profession of loyalty to the organization which still had to answer to the electorate and could be defeated if public needs were not met. However, as long as Crump had the basic support of the business community, and gave blacks limited access to the polls, it was very difficult to successfully oppose him.\textsuperscript{61}

Here is it is important to emphasize again just how much Crump’s far-reaching political influence rested upon his control of the Memphis electorate. Like all big city bosses, he relied heavily upon patronage. An estimated 20,000 municipal and county workers, beholden to the machine for their jobs, could be counted on as sure Crump votes on Election Day. Similarly, the machine could rely upon the electoral support of thousands of black voters responding to Crump’s well-publicized paternalism. Crump and his machine officers initially were able to ascend to power in Memphis a decade earlier largely on the strength of being able to buy off the black vote in Memphis. While the thought of blacks voting en masse in other cities in the Jim Crow South was anathema, Crump was an unusual white Southern politician in that he fully embraced the black vote, seeing it as an untapped resource that could bolster his political aspirations.

Thus, the edge that initially put the Crump machine in power was its willingness to cater to black voters by such acts as the paying of poll taxes in exchange for black patronage.\textsuperscript{62} While in terms of policy, Crump was not particularly more racially progressive than the majority of other white politicians in the Jim Crow South, in this way he was able to establish an initial tenuous rapport with Memphis’s black community. The machine had a policy of paying the poll taxes for blacks, sometimes even buying them barbecue and beer; the blacks gratefully voted for the boss whose benign treatment of them contrasted so sharply with the indignities heaped upon

\textsuperscript{62} Dowdy, \textit{Mayor Crump Don’t Like It}, 12-14.
their race by southern white demagogues elsewhere. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that while Crump may have been elected on the strength of connections with Memphis’s black community, these connections were understood by both Crump and by the black leadership community that supported him to nevertheless still be bound by the confines of traditional Jim Crow South social mores.

Simply put, Crump’s progressivism on issues of race in Memphis went only as far the votes they could buy him from a voting bloc shunned by other white Southern politicians. From the perspective of many black Memphians, the limits of Crump’s paternalism were understood. And yet, by virtue of being the sole political figure in Memphis to even attempt to court and cultivate a black voting base, Crump’s offerings, limited and paternalistic as they were, afforded black Memphians entry into an otherwise restricted space where they could air their grievances with the Memphis political scene.

Thus, even with the tarnish on his “brand,” Crump held on to some semblance of his former power after his removal from office, even if that power did not come close to that which he held as Mayor. Even after his ouster, Crump also continued to face relentless opposition in Memphis and throughout the state of Tennessee at large from both Republicans and anti-Crump Democrats. Despite all of these events, however, Crump remained a fixture in the West Tennessee political arena, but at a diminished capacity with Rowlett Paine succeeding him as mayor, a man whom Crump had a lukewarm relationship at best. It wasn’t until the election of 1923 that Crump was given the opportunity to lay claim to the title of true patriarch of Memphis politics, seizing on the election as a chance to return to the stage. The 1923 election provided

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63 Roger Biles, “Ed Crump Versus the Unions: The Labor Movement in Memphis during the 1930s,” Labor History 25 (Fall 1984), 535.
64 Dowdy, Mayor Crump Don’t Like It, 37.
him with a chance to turn things around and not only regain his lost footing, but also to forge his empire anew and stronger than it ever had been in the past.65

The current Mayor of Memphis in 1923, Rowlett Paine was a man who built his political reputation in stark contrast to the machine politics and cronyism that mired the preceding Crump administration. Paine was not a member of Crump’s stable of politicians and city officials and had made it a point of pride to distance himself from and minimize Crump’s influence on his administration as much as possible. Paine had been a simple grocer for most of his life up until he ran for the mayor’s office in 1919. As such, he was able to paint himself as a complete outsider to the machine politics and corruption of the city’s previous decade and as a result handily won the 1919 election.66

Paine’s time in office after his election was not quite as simple, however. Because Paine was elected largely just by virtue of the fact that he was not E.H. Crump or affiliated with him in any close way, he never had a solid base of support as a politician in and of his own right. Rather than supporting anything intrinsic or unique about his political platform itself, his was something of a placeholder, which just happened to be the best option at the time.67 Voters were not so much sold on the idea of Paine himself but were rather sold on the idea that he was anyone but E.H. Crump. This lack of a firm base among the electorate would make Paine particularly vulnerable in future political challenges, such as with the election of 1923.

This was the political dichotomy in Memphis when the specter of a Klan election rout threatened to upend the status quo of city politics. Paine, in short, found himself desperately needing to make use of Crump’s longstanding connections with black voters to ensure the Klan

65 Dowdy, Mayor Crump Don’t Like It, 25-35.
67 Dowdy, Mayor Crump Don’t Like It, 31.
would not be able to win the day. It should be noted that after his ouster from the mayor’s office, Crump was not entirely without power. Nevertheless, he was marginalized to such an extent that he must have been more than happy to broker an arrangement between Paine and his old contacts within Memphis’ black community if it meant once again being able to reclaim a prominent seat at the table of Memphis politics.

The State of Black Politics and Leadership in Memphis

As opposed to its white counterpart, black political leadership in 1920s Memphis was not nearly as monolithic. This is not to say, however, that certain figures within Memphis black leadership community did not tend stand out from the crowd more often than not. For instance, one simply cannot have a meaningful discussion of black leadership in Memphis without a discussion of the well-known Church family and its influence on black politics in Memphis. First and foremost, that was Robert Church Sr., a man often referred to as a “legendary” historical figure. An astute businessman, Church Sr. earned his claim to fame as one of the very first black millionaires in the U.S and among many other accomplishments is notable for helping Memphis to recover financially after losing its charter in the wake of a Yellow Fever epidemic and a debt crisis. Furthermore Church Sr. built a 6-acre park for Memphis blacks to use since they could not use the public parks in the city. So well known and respected was Church Sr. that even President Teddy Roosevelt paid the park a visit in 1902 to give a speech honoring Church and his accomplishments.

Church Sr. was a famously headstrong and independent man of business but who only occasionally dabbled in local politics. On occasions when he did, however, he routinely butted heads with Boss Crump upon Crump’s initial arrival in Memphis and foray into the local

political scene. To Crump, in the process of building a political machine that run on purchased loyalty and/or forceful subjugation of other powerful voices, an independently wealthy and outspoken black Memphian who could not be bought or subjugated made for a natural enemy.

While Church Sr. passed away in 1912, this political animosity between his family and the Crump machine remained very much alive as Church Sr.’s son, Robert R. Church Jr. took over ownership of his father’s business, the Solvent Savings and Trust Company, which at the time was one of the most successful black-owned banks in the country at the time, was passed down to his son, Robert R. Church Jr.\(^\text{70}\)

While the elder Church was content to keep the political world of Memphis at mostly an arm’s length in favor of his own business interests, Church Jr. had exactly the opposite drive and built a reputation as one of the most influential black Republicans in the country.\(^\text{71}\) After receiving an education at Oberlin College, Church Jr. held an apprenticeship for a Wall Street banking firm for 5 years, returned to Memphis and immediately set about making a name for himself in the political arena, a battleground his father had only lightly treaded upon.\(^\text{72}\) For example, Church Jr. was a TN delegate at eight straight Republican conventions between 1912 and 1940.\(^\text{73}\) Much like his father, being independently wealthy afforded Church Jr. many advantages in his chosen pursuits. Church Jr. often refused compensation for his political activities and gained a public reputation among fellow Republican, black and white as a figure of respectability, integrity and fully beyond reproach.\(^\text{74}\)

\(^{70}\) Annette E. Church and Roberta Church, *The Robert R. Churches of Memphis: A Father and Son Who Achieved In Spite of Race*, (Edwards Brothers), 53; Sharon Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*, (Garland: New York), 35.

\(^{71}\) Wright, *Race, Power and Political Emergence*, 35.


\(^{73}\) Biles, “Robert R. Church, Jr. of Memphis,” 362.

\(^{74}\) Biles, “Robert R. Church, Jr. of Memphis,” 363
Black labor leader A. Phillip Randolph once wrote of Church Jr., “There was no person of color in the country whose political wisdom was more highly cherished and sought after, by both black and white Republican leaders, than his. The basic reason for this was that he no only possessed a mind for careful evaluation of political personalities and forces, but he was impeccably honest and could not be influenced by money or political power.” Randolph goes on, “He [Church Jr.] came from a family of wealth and distinction but he made no exhibition of this fact . . . To me, he was Bob, and to him, I was Phil.” Like, the vast majority of Church Jr.’s contemporaries held him in high regard for his reputation for integrity and commitment to black advancement. In describing Robert R. Church Jr., Lt. George W. Lee, a contemporary of Church Jr.’s who will be discussed in more detail later on, spoke of Church Jr. thusly, “He is the most picturesque character on the avenue, and his very name has come to stimulate the imagination of the people, who have great confidence in him. On every occasion when he has asked for their votes, he has received them. As a result he has never been defeated for an office.” Still, despite all of this praise and esteem, it is Important to note that Church Jr. was not without opposition in his time. Memphis Republicans by and large were divided into two separate camps at the time, the “lily whites” who sought to keep their party exactly the same makeup as their name implies, and the “black and tans” who in the 20s favored a more racially open approach to politics by allowing a space for black figures and the proverbial meeting table and paying attention to so-called “black issues.” Naturally, a man like Church Jr. often drew the ire of such “lily white” Republicans and often found himself waging war not only against the Democratic opposition party in Memphis but within his own chose party as well. Of Church’s struggles with this group,

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75 Church, The Robert R. Churches of Memphis, V
76 Church, The Robert R. Churches of Memphis, V
77 George Washington Lee, Beale St.: Where the Blues Began, (McGrath Publishing Company), 250
78 Biles, “Robert R. Church, Jr. of Memphis,” 364.
Lee again writes, “For years he has been opposed by a small group of irreconcilable lily-white Republicans; but in every encounter with them he has emerged from the contest victorious. The story of his political triumph in the Republican Party is indelibly written into the party’s success in Tennessee and in the nation.” Lee’s perhaps hyperbole notwithstanding, as more whites in Memphis tended belong to the Democratic Party at the time than they did to the Republican party, the lily white wing was relatively easy to marginalize, as there simply were not that many of them. This in effect left the black and tans, with a larger domain of influence within their own party than in other cities.79

Their sphere of influence being what it was, then, Church Jr., alongside other prominent black businessmen in Memphis, Bert M. Roddy and Harry Pace, formed the Colored Citizens Association in 1911. It was an organization devoted to improving the conditions of Memphis’ black community by lobbying the city’s government to take a greater focus on improving black areas of town.80 Not content with just this Church Jr. was instrumental in the founding of a number of other black activist groups in the city, including the Lincoln League in 1916, and the first Memphis chapter of the NAACP in 1917. The Lincoln League, founded by Church Jr. along with Roddy, Josiah Settle, Waymon Wilkerson and Leroy McCoy, was an organization dedicated to helping Memphis blacks to be more politically active. They held registration drives, paid poll taxes and endorsed candidates for local and national offices.81 Church Jr. himself described his goal in founding the Lincoln League, and in pressing so hard for black progress in Memphis thusly, “We were simply trying to assert our Republicanism and our right under the American

79 Biles, “Robert R. Church, Jr. of Memphis,” 364.
80 Dowdy, Mayor Crump Don’t Like It, 12.
81 Wright, Race, Power and Political Emergence, 34-35.; Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, 35.
flag to be counted as men.”  

As for the Memphis NAACP chapter, Church Jr. was again joined in its founding by the likes of black businessmen such as Lt. George W. Lee, Bert Roddy, and Waymon Wilkerson. Formed initially in response to the lynching of Ell Persons, but went on to advocate for black issues in Memphis beyond the political sphere, such as lynching, police brutality, and joblessness.  

As mentioned before, however, as influential and involved as the Church family was, they did not stand alone as the sole arbiters of black politics in Memphis. Alongside Church Jr. stood a slew of other black community leaders and Republican allies dedicated to improving the lot of Memphis’ black community writ large. Amongst this leadership there was, for instance, the Reverend Thomas O. Fuller, a highly respected black clergyman who exhorted black Memphians that to believe that peaceful cooperation with Memphis’ white power structure as the best method of black enfranchisement. Rev. Fuller entreated blacks to operate within the system and not take actions that would disturb the “peaceable conditions” between blacks and whites in Memphis. He was furthermore an advocate of black advancement through economic progress and achievement, not directly challenging the status quo. There was also the aforementioned Lt. George W. Lee, a WWI veteran and an insurance executive who also led the West Tennessee Civic and Political League. George Lee was born in Mississippi in 1984 to poor sharecroppers. He was one of small number of blacks to be given a commissioned rank in the military and served in France during WWI as second lieutenant of the 368 Negro Division. After the war, he settled down in Memphis to make his home and fortune as a businessman.  

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84 Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 33.
85 Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 36-37.
of business acumen, by 1920, Lt. Lee, as he preferred to be called, was vice-president of the Mississippi Life insurance company, earning what was then a near astronomical figure for a black businessman of $6,500 a year.\footnote{440 Black Pride} In opposition to Fuller’s stance, Lee, on the other hand, had little love for what he called “apostles of peace at any price.” Lee’s solution to the “Negro Problem,” mirroring DuBois’ “talented tenth” argument called for a stronger black leadership class to guide and show lesser educated and impoverished blacks the way forward.\footnote{Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, 37.}

Other highly regarded and notable black figures with deep pockets and a similarly deep influence amongst Memphis’s black populace included: Bert Roddy, owner of a local chain of grocery stores and the Martin brothers, J.B. and W.S., owners of the local negro baseball team, Waymon Wilkerson, a funeral director.\footnote{Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, 33-36.} J.B. Martin started out as a simple newspaper boy in the late 1890s for a black paper, the Evening Striker. He started a small drug store on borrowed money after graduating from school in 1910, and in 20 years, that store had bloomed into a chain, expanded to a two-story building and had become a fixture of Florida Street and the surrounding black neighborhood.\footnote{Lee, Beale St., 169.} In the words of Lt. Lee, J.B. Martin as “a man of considerable wealth, but [who] never displays it, believing that to do so would arouse jealousy and drive away a large number of his patrons.”

These figures, along with a few others, all came from diverse backgrounds in terms of what it was that made them leaders in Memphis’ black community. While this diversity in terms of each man’s claim to fame was a sign of a vibrant and active leadership, and even with all of their collective accomplishments, in general they still a relatively weak political coalition without much influence in the day-to-day politics of Memphis. The 1923 election then, presented

\begin{itemize}
\item[87] (440 Black Pride)
\item[88] Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, 37.
\item[89] Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, 33-36.
\item[90] Lee, Beale St., 169.
\end{itemize}
an opportunity, more starkly than any that had come before to attempt to gain a seat at the table by pooling their resources together and throwing their weight behind a political machine that had never been more vulnerable. As this chapter will argue later however, the metaphorical Faustian bargain that Memphis’ black leaders made with the Crump machine in this election opened the door to future troubles that would prove to be even more insidious than what would ultimately be a temporary threat from the Klan.

**Memphis and the Klan**

As for the main antagonists of this chapter’s drama, the Ku Klux Klan first began to establish a significant presence in Memphis in 1921. It is nearly impossible however to discuss the Klan’s ties to Memphis, however, without first taking a look at one of the central figures in the Klan’s history, Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest. While today Forrest might be considered a controversial figure in Memphis, 100 years ago, he was all but canonized in the eyes of many white Memphians. As one author has argued, “To many, he was the quintessential Confederate hero, whose rough-hewn, unschooled martial style reflected the virtues of the southern ‘plain folk.’”\(^91\) Though born in rural Tennessee, and becoming a wealthy planter in Mississippi, Memphis was the place that Forrest called home and chose to ultimately settle.\(^92\) When Forrest died in 1877, his funeral was held in Memphis and obituaries in local papers hailed Forrest “as a man who overcame poverty to achieve greatness as a naturally brilliant and spiritually minded warriors who embodied the ideals of self-sacrifice and honor,” as one historian has put it.\(^93\) In 1905, Forrest was celebrated in Memphis with the construction of a 20ft

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\(^92\) Carney, “Contested Image,” 602.
\(^93\) Carney, “Contested Image,” 604.
tall bronze statue, depicting Forrest sitting regally atop his horse.\textsuperscript{94} The remains of Forrest and his wife were both re-interred at the foot of the statue.\textsuperscript{95} It should be noted that about half of the $33,000 that funded the statue came from small, individual donations from white Memphians.\textsuperscript{96} A crowd of 30,000 flocked to see the statue’s unveiling and celebrate Forrest’ memory.\textsuperscript{97} Later on in the 1920s, Forrest birthday, July 13th was made into a state holiday by the Tennessee legislature.\textsuperscript{98}

Of course, Forrest had a side that was less seldom brought up and/or celebrated at the time. Not only was Forrest immense fortune built as one of Memphis’ most prominent slave traders, as a Confederate general, he led a massacre against a battalion of black soldiers who from many accounts were on the verge of surrender.\textsuperscript{99} In some circles, for his actions during the Civil War, Forrest earned the name “the butcher of Fort Pillow.”\textsuperscript{100} Still, for all of these claims to fame, Forrest might be most well known as one of the founding fathers of the Ku Klux Klan. Forrest was chosen as the Klan’s first Grand Wizard in 1867, and while he left the Klan less than a decade later out of a sense that it was beginning to grow too large to manage, Forrest nevertheless remained a central figure of idolization in the eyes of the Klan rank and file.\textsuperscript{101} As the Klan began to make a resurgence in terms of both popularity and membership across the country in the early 1920s, members of the new Klan generation fondly looked back upon

\textsuperscript{94} Carney, “Contested Image,” 602.
\textsuperscript{95} Carney, “Contested Image,” 614.
\textsuperscript{96} Carney, “Contested Image,” 613.
\textsuperscript{97} Carney, “Contested Image,” 616.
\textsuperscript{98} Carney, “Contested Image,” 618.
\textsuperscript{100} Carney, “Contested Image,” 603.
\textsuperscript{101} Carney, “Contested Image,” 603
Forrest as “a powerful symbol that combined selfless individual heroism and civic service with the subtle threat of racialized social control,” as one historian has put it.\footnote{102}{Carney, “Contested Image,” 617.}

With Forrest’s strong connections to Memphis and the high esteem in which he was held by many white citizens there, it is reasonable to assume to that Klan could have expected to see a favorable reaction to their actions and ambitions in Memphis. To a certain extent, this was exactly what happened. At the same time as a larger national resurgence of the Klan was occurring, the Klan first began to make inroads into Memphis in 1920 and 1921. By the Spring of 1923, their local membership had enough members to attain charter status with the larger Klan organization. It was only the third such charter given out in Tennessee up to that point.\footnote{103}{Gary Blankenship, “The Commercial Appeal's Attack on the Ku Klux Klan, 1921-1925.” West Tennessee Historical Society Papers, Vol. 31 (1977), 46.} Having been steadily growing in strength, by the time of the 1923 election, the Klan was estimated to have somewhere around 10,000 members in its Memphis chapter, known as a “Klavern.”\footnote{104}{Dowdy, Mayor Crump Don’t Like It, 38.}

However, as much as many Memphians looked favorably upon the Klan as defenders of a uniquely Southern way of life, their rapid growth of the Klan in Memphis did not go entirely unnoticed and without provoking some measure of ire. While the city government, initially mostly took a hands off approach to them as long as their activities remained within the boundaries of the law and were relatively quiet in terms of local sensibilities, Memphis’ print media did not have such a laissez-faire attitude. For much of the 1920s, local people The Commercial Appeal declared war with the Klan as an organization. This campaign was driven almost single-handedly by the paper’s editor, C.P.J. Mooney.

Mooney took the position that the Klan and its vigilante actions represented a grave threat to the rule of law in the city. “Law and order have not yet gotten to the point where they must
hide behind closed doors and masked faces,” Mooney once wrote. These diatribes continued through the year and were published in tandem with a series of scathing political cartoons by Commercial Appeal cartoonist J.P. Alley that were very critical of Klan activities. The Commercial Appeal’s campaign against the Klan was so thorough, it even netted the paper a Pulitzer Prize in 1923 for “its courageous attitude in the publication of cartoons and the handling of news in reference to the operation of the Ku Klux Klan.”

What is worth noting about this opposition to the Klan in Memphis, and as will be reflected throughout the rest of this chapter, it was not necessarily at this point a coherent opposition based on issues of race until the election of 1923. C.P.J. Mooney himself, as a devout Catholic, seemed to operate mostly out of self-interest and perhaps also a desire to not see the racial status quo of the city disrupted by the violent actions of outsiders. When the Klan ran for election in 1923, both E.H. Crump and Rowlett Paine also appear to have followed this line of reasoning as well in opposing the Klan. Naturally, both politicians were not exactly keen on losing the power that they had worked for years to attain. However, the thought of ceding power to those that were perceived as outsiders to Memphis and its way of life made the Klan threat all the more galling. One scholar has written of the voting demographics in Memphis at the time:

There [was] a strong case for considering the Klan in Memphis as only a slightly exaggerated expression of traditional southern values. The Klan was not the first southern political movement to express a belief in white supremacy, the superiority of rural values, or the need for a Christian orientation in public policy. These themes may have seemed self-evident to a population firmly rooted in the countryside of the deep South, the environment in which most Memphis citizens were raised. If the Klan did not seem particularly exotic or extreme, its electoral appeal should have been undifferentiated, attracting not a particular social fringe but a representative cross-section of the population.

107 Wald, 234.
Thus in terms of their views on race, the Klan, Crump, and Paine actually may not have found their views to be so far apart. White supremacy in Memphis was all but a given dichotomy no matter who was in charge of the city. Klan, Crump or Paine, the political culture of Memphis in the 20s was to intentionally obfuscate the prevailing racism of the day by 1. Saying that racism was a problem of the past. 2. Arguing that the only reason race even kept being an issue was because black in Memphis persisted in saying that it was. As will be a recurring theme in future chapters, when issues of race took center stage in Memphis, as they did in 1923 with the Klan’s foray in politics, the predominant rhetoric used by Memphis’ white elite fell into two refrains. Firstly, Memphis has no race problems, and relations between the races were congenial and friendly. Secondly, those who insisted that race was in fact an issue in Jim Crow Memphis were either outsiders themselves or influenced by outsiders who threatened to bring the chaos and social disruption of other cities to Memphis.

Thus, specifically in this case, it was ultimately an insider/outsider dichotomy that dictated the opposition Crump and others felt to the likes of the Klan. A Klan victory in the election of 1923, it was felt, would threaten to bring about the types of rioting and chaos seen in other American cities where racial tension was ever-present. In other words, while Klan activities in Memphis were largely unwelcome by the white elite establishment, they were mostly unwelcome not on grounds of the Klan’s racial prejudice, but on grounds regarding the hidden and seemingly chaotic way in which they policed race in Memphis.\(^{108}\) To be sure, then, the sin of the Klan in the eyes Memphis’ white power structure was not their racial animosity toward blacks and others, but rather the nakedly open way in which they promoted such beliefs. This, it was felt, was the sin that marked the Klan as outsiders with no understanding of racial

\(^{108}\) Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City*, 47.
politics in Memphis and thus also necessitated the boldest of efforts to see them defeated in the 1923 election, as the next section will detail.

The Road to Election Day

When election season first rolled around in 1923, few could have foreseen the conflict that was to come. Initially, members of the local Klan chapter were fairly supportive of Mayor Rowlett Paine’s administration. Paine may not have endorsed the Klan publicly, but either knowingly or unknowingly, quite a few members of Paine’s administration were either Klan members themselves or sympathetic to the Klan’s goals and rhetoric of racial and religious superiority. The incident that set the Klan and Paine specifically against one another occurred when it was publicly revealed in 1923 that one of Paine’s staffers himself was a member of the local Klavern. Clifford Davis, Paine’s secretary, initially announced his candidacy for city judge as part of Paine’s ticket in the upcoming election, however, his membership in the Klan made Paine wary about being tied too closely to their activities. Again, while the Klan certainly had their supporters in Memphis, as the fight with the Commercial Appeal revealed, there was also a large contingent of Memphians that were staunchly against the disorder and lawlessness they represented as an organization. Thus, fearing the implications of his administration now being openly associated with the local Klavern, Paine fired and publicly repudiated Davis. 109

Given the sizeable Klan population in Memphis and that the idea of white supremacy was all but taken for granted by many in the city, that Paine felt the need to swiftly distance himself from being associated with Davis and the Klan reveals an unspoken agreement about race in Memphis. Yes, white supremacy was the law of the land in Memphis, but it was a law that in all but the most severe cases had to be garbed in the cloak of benign paternalism in order for things

109 Dowdy, Mayor Crump Don’t Like It, 38-39.
to function relatively smoothly. Whether it was failure to fully appreciate and understand this dichotomy, or willful disregard for it, the flamboyancy of the Klan’s racism could not be tolerated in the political sphere.

This act of repudiation on the part of the Paine administration, however, would end up being the opening salvo of a political war the likes of which Memphis had never seen up to that point. Incensed at the slight that Paine had shown them, the Klavern’s top officers decided that it was time for leadership in the Memphis that would not only openly acknowledge the Klan, but that would also work in earnest to further the Klan’s goals as well. Thus the Klavern decided to field candidates in every major race in that year’s election. Klan member W. Joe Wood ran for mayor. Clifford Davis went on with his plans for city judge, while H.A. Roynon went out for tax

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110 Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City*, 50.
assessor. In addition, four other Klan candidates ran for city commission seats.\textsuperscript{111} Campaigning on the slogan “A Bigger and Better Memphis,” the local Klavern had its sights firmly locked on the goal of completely reshaping Memphis politics.\textsuperscript{112}

With the Klan’s formal outing into local politics, the city of Memphis found itself in a state of racial and political turmoil the likes of which it had seldom seen and often prided itself on escaping in comparison to other Southern cities. In the weeks leading up to the election the Klan held numerous rallies all across Memphis in public spaces, aiming not just to fire up their own membership base but to inspire nothing short of a revolt in the city. On October 31st, in a rather dramatic show of force, over a hundred Klan members stormed into the city election commissioner’s office and demanded the removal of specific electoral officials whom they felt were hostile to the Klan’s agenda and/or were in the tank for Mayor Paine. They argued that given Memphis well-known and well-earned reputation for election fraud, the current election commission could not be trusted to carry out the election in a fair way. Therefore the Klan called for new “impartial” officials to be instated as opposed to the “low-browed, sullen, putrid, insignificant skunks and parasites” they argued were currently in charge. When the election commissioner naturally refused their demands, the situation devolved into a near riot, and Memphis police had called to break up the ruckus. The Klan however had made its point that they were a threat to be reckoned with and who would fight tooth and nail to win in the coming election.\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{111} Jackson, \textit{The Ku Klux Klan in the City}, 51.
\textsuperscript{112} Jackson, \textit{The Ku Klux Klan in the City}, 51.
\textsuperscript{113} Blankenship, “The Commercial Appeal's Attack on the Ku Klux Klan,” 54.; Jackson, \textit{The Ku Klux Klan in the City}, 52.
The Commercial Appeal, already wary of the Klan’s growing presence in Memphis, amped up their stream of negative coverage of the organization in the weeks leading up to the election. For weeks, they printed scathing editorial after scathing editorial denouncing both the Klan campaign and also a third Mayoral ticket that had arisen around Lewis T. Fitzhugh, another local politician who originally had ties to other Klan members but splintered off to form his own independent anti-Paine campaign.

“Three feverish days and the people of Memphis will go to the polls to settle the most bitterly contested election fight in the past quarter of a century,” the Commercial Appeal wrote in
exasperation as the election neared.\textsuperscript{114} Their exasperation with the election was born with good reason, as the tensions being raised in the run-up to the election had bitterly divided the city and threatened to tear it apart into virtual warring factions. The paper furthermore spun a tale of economic woe if the city fell into Klan leadership, arguing that other industrialized cities such as Atlanta, Pittsburgh, Detroit, St. Louis and New Orleans would want nothing to do with Memphis business-wise were the Klan to take charge. Memphis would be shunned, in effect by the rest of the nation.\textsuperscript{115}

A Klan win in the election threatened to erode years of effort on the part of city officials and local media to portray Memphis as a place worthy of such an esteemed position. Of note here once again is the point that white opposition to the Klan was not driven based on issues of race, but on issues of supposed Southern propriety. The Klan’s racism and nativism were taken largely for granted in Memphis’ political sphere. Thus, it is worth emphasizing again here that, throughout the electoral campaign, white supremacy in Memphis was never the real issue in the Klan’s electoral bid. It was never even in doubt. Thus, almost all critiques of the Klan by local media and by the Paine administration defaulted to rhetoric criticizing the Klan as a force of instability, illegality and foreignness to Memphis culture. Along these lines, The Commercial Appeal argued,

> The third ticket [the Klan candidates] runs upon an issue imported to Memphis from Atlanta, the leaders thereof now being engaged in a bloody feud among themselves. It has been a source of turmoil wherever it appears. It is undemocratic and un-American. Its gospel is one of hate, vituperation, superstition and credulity. If the men running on that ticket were running on any other issue it would be a calamity to elect them. They are inexperienced, inefficient and so far as their records show have accomplished little even for themselves . . . It would be

\textsuperscript{114} “Eyes of Nation Turn to Memphis Election,” The Commercial Appeal, Nov. 5, 1923.

\textsuperscript{115} “Eyes of Nation Turn to Memphis Election,” The Commercial Appeal, Nov. 5, 1923.
an indecent thing if Mayor Paine and his associates were repudiated by the voters of Memphis.\footnote{116}

In addition to regular columns echoing the above sentiments, the Commercial Appeal also routinely published letters to the editor from Memphis citizens who were critical of the Klan as well. In the weeks before the election a letter of particular note from “an overseas veteran” was published in the Commercial Appeal imploring black Memphians themselves to resist that Klan and that their votes in particularly would be a crucial component in stopping the Klan from winning the election. For any black Memphians who were thinking of sitting out the election or in some delusion actually voting for the Klan ticket, the letter writer emphatically urged Memphis blacks to “Remember that the serpent in the garden told Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit . . . The Klan is not your friend by any means. It only wants your vote, for a colored man’s vote is like his money, you cannot tell it when it is mixed with other money and is of the same value.” The letter writer went on to state that “The better thinking white people have always tried to keep down mob rule” in contrast to the methods of the Klan.\footnote{117}

As one of the very few public critiques of the Klan campaign that explicitly drew on the rhetoric of race, this letter is worth exploring for what it shows us about the somewhat labyrinthine way in which race came into play in the run-up to the election. As pointed out in some detail above, race in Memphis was a city that billed itself as a city of relative racial harmony in that unlike other Southern cities, it had no history of race riots in the Jim Crow Era and it even did what other Southern cities did not by allowing its blacks to vote under special circumstances. Of course, the hidden transcript behind this narrative of racial harmony reveals a racial dichotomy more akin to a harmony of dissonance.

\footnote{116} “For Those Who Will Vote Thursday, CA, Nov. 7, 1923. \\
Even the rival News-Scimitar paper threw its support behind the Paine ticket, distilling the choice down to three options:

You can have the Klan ticket and the things that the Ku Klux Klan stands for . . .
You can have the Fitzhugh ticket – a ticket that started out 40 per cent Klan . . .
You can have Mayor Paine and the present administration for another four years. They have pledged themselves unreservedly against the Ku Klux Klan and the things for which it stands. They have pledged themselves to give a square deal to every decent Memphian, and to do their best to keep Memphis from becoming a hell of hate and a place to be shunned.\textsuperscript{118}

The missive concluded, rather starkly, “You can have – Klan and chaos! Fitzhugh and farce! Paine and progress!”\textsuperscript{119} The Scimitar further editorialized that one thing all three tickets could agree upon was that “the Ku Klux Klan is the issue.”\textsuperscript{120} There was no more salient difference between each ticket than how they viewed the Klan and the direction in which a Klan victory would lead the city afterward. The editors of the Scimitar concluded

We cannot conceive of a greater misfortune and believing that Memphis deserves a better fate. Have no apprehension that the hooded, shrouded apostles of bigotry and hatred will be able to get a stranglehold on this city through the votes of its people . . . The trend is decidedly in favor of Mayor Paine and the administration. It is the result of carefully weighing the issues, and we are confident that the intelligence and sound judgment of the people of Memphis will assert themselves and reelect the present city administration.\textsuperscript{121}

In editorial after editorial, and as the election drew nearer and the possibility of a Klan victory became all the more tangible, the Scimitar continued to excoriate the Klan. “They [the Klan],” the Scimitar wrote, “are not the type of men who would be drawn into an enterprise for civic welfare. Even if they were not of an order repulsive to American ideals, they have no claim

\textsuperscript{118} “Klan and Chaos! Fitzhugh and Farce! Paine and Progress!,” The Press Scimitar, Nov. 3, 1923.
\textsuperscript{119} “Klan and Chaos! Fitzhugh and Farce! Paine and Progress!,” The Press Scimitar, Nov. 3, 1923.
\textsuperscript{120} “It Must Be Honest,” The Press Scimitar, Nov. 2, 1923.
\textsuperscript{121} “It Must Be Honest,” The Press Scimitar, Nov. 2, 1923.
And finally on the day of the election itself, a seemingly exasperated Scimitar opined that

A hectic campaign is nearing its close. The red lights are flaring and the bombs are bursting. The orators are pouring forth their pleas. Vindictiveness is in the air. Back of it all there is one outstanding issue – shall Memphis’ government become part of the Invisible Empire of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan – or shall it continue to a government for all law-abiding citizens, regardless of race, color or creed? . . . “If you are for Memphis and regard Klanism as a danger to her progress, an un-American thing destructive to the harmony and happiness of her people, and a danger that must be stopped – you will vote the Paine and the administration ticket.”

Such soaring rhetoric aside, let us stop once again for a brief moment to peel back the rhetoric being used here a bit to see the truth behind the words themselves and what they really tell us of how white Memphis viewed, the Klan, the election and issues of race and racial equality. More than the all but guaranteed potential for racial strife that a Klan victory would bring, what seemed to gall the white opposition to the Klan the most was the secretive and outside nature of the group. If the Klan were to be opposed on ground of racial belief, the complaint generally rested not so much on their belief in white supremacy, which as other historians have shown was de rigueur for white Memphians, but rather the nakedly open way in which they flaunted their beliefs. White supremacy in Memphis was the law of the land, but it was first and foremost an unspoken law. It was this transgression of the rules that threatened chaos and disorder, not the belief itself.

All of this time, the Paine administration outwardly put forth an appearance of confidence in its electoral prospects. In private though, Paine must have been more fearful of loss than he let on, as contacted E.H. for his help in shoring up the votes needed to win. Despite no longer being mayor, Crump still maintained multiple connections amongst Memphis’ black leadership

123 “If You Are Klan – Vote Klan! If You’re For Memphis – Vote Paine!,” The Press Scimitar, Nov. 6, 1923.
establishment, consisting of doctors, business owners and clergy. If leveraged properly, these connections could be counted on to throw their support and, more importantly, the support of their constituents behind whomever Crump desired. Holding all the cards at this point, Crump bided his time in the weeks before the November election; hemming and hawing whenever asked publically whom he would support.\textsuperscript{124}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{campaign_ad.jpg}
\caption{campaign ad, source: Commercial Appeal}
\end{figure}

For reasons all his own, Crump held back on publicly backing Paine until the very last minute when mere days before the election, he set about publically working to get Paine re-elected.\textsuperscript{125} Arriving at Paine’s campaign headquarters days before the election in dramatic

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{124} Dowdy, \textit{Mayor Crump Don’t Like It}, 38-39.
\end{flushright}
fashion and flanked by an entourage consisting of major players in city government and leadership including the likes of future police commissioner Joe Boyle, Frank Rice, Dave Wells, and Will Logan, Crump signaled that he meant business as far doing whatever was necessary to break the Klan and see Paine reelected.\textsuperscript{126} Having previously obtained power through his connections with Memphis’ black leadership community, Crump was able to broker an alliance between several key contacts in the black community and Paine. These black leaders included prominent druggist, physician and Negro baseball team owner, J.B. Martin, T.H. Hayes the president of Solvent Savings Bank, Bert Roddy, founding member of the activist Colored Citizens Association and prominent black Republican George W. Lee.\textsuperscript{127}

Now having the full backing of Crump and his connections, the Paine ticket hastened to release what was a quickly thrown-together endorsement written by a cadre of local black leaders, like Robert Church, Hayes, Roddy and others. This missive listed in detail the reasons they would be supporting Paine and calling on other blacks to not simply sit out the election and get behind the Paine ticket as well. Worth quoting at length, the reasons listed in the statement were as follows:

\begin{quote}
The colored voters of Memphis are supporting the Paine administration ticket straight. We think it is the best ticket in the field. We believe that they will give us a square deal. We believe that they stand for law and order. We know what they have done in the past. We believe they are going to do better in the future. We want every colored man and woman to vote this ticket. First: Because it is to the best interest of all the people. Second: They are big men who can handle big things. They can and will help our race. Third: They are going to complete our $300,000 high school. Fourth: They are putting bright lights and good streets all over the city. Fifth: They are going to see that every man gets a square deal, whether white or colored. Sixth: They are not Ku Klux.\textsuperscript{128}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{126}{Jackson, \textit{The Ku Klux Klan in the City}, 53.}
\footnote{127}{Dowdy, \textit{Mayor Crump Don’t Like It}, 39.}
\footnote{128}{“Paine Strength Puts Chill in Foes’ Ranks,” \textit{The Commercial Appeal}, Nov. 1, 1923.}
\end{footnotes}
Memphis’ black leaders concluded this missive by stating that they felt they had a duty to carefully consider their options and that more than anything, “We wanted to advise our people right. We wanted to advise them to support men that we could depend upon.”¹²⁹ What was left out of this account, however and what I argue to be no simple coincidence was the fact that Crump had finally publically thrown his weight behind the Paine ticket. Existing scholarship argues that no clear reason can be determine for Crump waiting so long to throw his backing behind the Paine ticket.¹³⁰ I dispute this idea and argue that Crump rarely made any political move without it being a strategically calculated affair. In this, Crump’s actions can be seen as wanting to appear as the savior of the flailing Paine campaign, making it known in no uncertain terms that Crump was responsible for the election’s outcome and Paine would be explicitly in his debt. Before Crump’s public support of the Paine ticket, black leaders were largely silent on the issue of the election with most blacks in Memphis likely planning to sit out the affair entirely. Crump’s endorsement, however, was enough to secure black Memphis’ endorsement, it seemed. In addition to publicly stating their support for Paine in local papers, these black leaders also organized a number of rallies in black neighborhoods to drum up support for the Paine ticket.¹³¹ In this regard, they were instrumental in marshaling the black vote around one candidate and shifting the tide in Paine’s favor, all thanks to Crump.

When Election Day arrived in early November, the day itself was nothing short of total chaos. Riot alarms rang out all throughout the day and night, as all over the city as Klan members got in altercations and contested votes at precinct after precinct.¹³² The Commercial

¹³⁰ Wald, 217.
¹³¹ Dowdy, Mayor Crump Don’t Like It, 39.
¹³² Jackson, The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 53.
Appeal referred to it as “the worst situation with which the police ever had to combat.”\textsuperscript{133} On the night of the election itself, pandemonium broke out, as hundreds of Klan members stormed the precinct where ballots were being counted. Having started a bonfire outside, the Klan seized election officials, took them out to the fire and demanded recount after recount until the numbers went their way. As with the earlier Klan disturbances, given Memphis’ reputation for political corruption, especially with Crump’s involvement, this was done under the pretext of ensuring an accurate and fair counting of the votes.

This spectacle, unparalleled in its brazenness in Memphis’ political history before or since that day, continued until a massive police presence arrived to break up the situation. The police managed to take the ballots into protective custody and secured them in a riot car. Still, the Klan would not fully concede to what they saw as a literal hijacking of an election that was rightfully theirs to win. Thus, they only consented to allowing the police access to the ballots if their leader Rev. J. Ralph Roberts was allowed to ride with police and the ballots to a secured location in order to make sure that no ballot box tampering occurred. Wishing to avoid a the likely full scale riot they all seemed to be standing on the edge of, local police acquiesced to the Klan leader’s demands and allowed him to ride along. As police withdrew from the area with both Roberts and the ballots in tow, other Klan members trailed them closely in their own vehicles for added insurance and peace of mind.\textsuperscript{134} The entire spectacle was for naught however, as the final vote tally was Paine, 12,000, the Klan, 7,000 and Fitzhugh, 3,000, with many believing the late influx of black voters breaking for Paine helped tip the balance.\textsuperscript{135}

\textsuperscript{133} Jackson, \textit{The Ku Klux Klan in the City}, 53.
\textsuperscript{134} Blankenship, “The Commercial Appeal’s Attack on the Ku Klux Klan,” 54-55.
\textsuperscript{135} Dowdy, \textit{Mayor Crump Don’t Like It}, 40.
In the immediate aftermath of the election of 1923, there was in fact speculation that the election had been stolen by Crump for Paine as some in the local Klan chapter and even a few historians have suggested an “honest” counting of the ballots would have given the Klan victory in many of the races they entered.\textsuperscript{136} However, such accusations were never investigated more than a token effort. The only Klan-backed candidate to win that day was Clifford Davis for city judge, the man whose hidden Klan affiliations and subsequent dismissal from the Paine administration touched off the entire election ordeal. Historians have largely attributed his victory to a last minute effort at separating himself politically from the Klan once again, an irony of history considering his role in first galvanizing the Klan to become politically active in the 1923 election.\textsuperscript{137} Gradually the Klan presence in Memphis dwindled, as its leadership collapsed owing to internal strife, and the chapter eventually dissolved altogether.\textsuperscript{138}

Aftermath and Conclusions

Historian Michael Honey calls the arrangement between black leaders and the Crump machine in the wake of the election a “tacit alliance” that while uneven and open to exploitation on the part of the Machine, “still made [black voters] a power to be reckoned with.”\textsuperscript{139} I both agree and disagree with this assertion. On one hand certainly, this moment represented an opportunity for Memphis’ black political leadership that with the right amount of strategy and savvy they could take advantage of the situation and boost not only their own standings but also to better the situations of their person constituents. However, the criticism can also be made that this alliance was also playing straight into Crump’s hand and ultimately benefitting him and his machine more than anyone in the Memphis black community. While other historians have tended

\textsuperscript{136} Baker, \textit{The Memphis Commercial Appeal}, 259.
\textsuperscript{137} Jackson, \textit{The Ku Klux Klan in the City}, 54.
\textsuperscript{138} Jackson, \textit{The Ku Klux Klan in the City}, 54-58.
\textsuperscript{139} Honey, \textit{Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights}, 45.
to place more emphasis on earlier or later dates and moments in Memphis’ racial-political history, I consciously choose to start here at the election of 1923. This moment, I argue, was the start of something much bigger than just one election or simply beating back the Klan. This was a watershed moment in Memphis racial-political history that would have ramifications for decades to that few were prepared for.

Blacks had certainly played a part in city politics prior to this moment, but it was this moment that paradoxically served as a catalyst for a black political movement in Memphis at the same time as it sowed the seeds for that movement’s eventual downfall. This moment represented a great opportunity for Memphis’ black political leadership community, but they perhaps underestimated the strength beast that was the Crump political machine. There was danger in relying too much on the strength and influence of the Crump machine. Perhaps the risks of doing so were either ignored in favor of the pressing situation at hand, or they were not foreseen at all, however in hindsight it is easy to see that the Crump-Paine establishment needed black Memphis. Black Memphis did not necessarily need the establishment. This is a very fine but significant point that was lost in all chaos and backroom dealings that led up to the election that year. The consequences of this bargain opened up the door for the machine to steamroll over the Memphis black community for years after the election was over and in the history books. The man who could take credit for thwarting the threat of Klan rule could, could use the positive will engendered by such an act to unite Memphis’ black community around a single political ideology. Therefore, as much as the election of 1923 was a battle over control of Memphis, for both Crump and Paine it was also a hidden battle over future control of black Memphis.

As lightly touched upon throughout this chapter, there was in fact a third election ticket that was neither Klan nor Crump affiliated that coalesced around city court judge Lewis T.
Fitzhugh. Surely, just by virtue of being another option, this must have represented a potential middle ground between the poles of the Klan and the Paine-Crump ticket, certainly for black Memphians caught between one organization wholly hostile to their existence and rights and another that had at best only paid lip service to their needs in previous years. Yet, on election day Fitzhugh came in third, receiving less than half the votes of either Paine or Klan candidate, Joe Wood.\(^{140}\) What, then, stopped the Fitzhugh campaign from being the choice for black Memphians?

Initially, Fitzhugh planned to run for mayor as part of a Crump machine ticket that was wholly separate from Rowlett Paine. For reasons all his however, Crump decided that his best chances at success lay with the incumbent Paine over Fitzhugh. Displeased with being tossed aside so casually, Fitzhugh ran his own campaign for mayor.\(^{141}\) As hinted at above, however Fitzhugh’s campaign was never really taken all that seriously amongst the Memphis electorate. Despite having more of a political background than even Rowlett Paine had before he was initially elected mayor, Fitzhugh had yet to prove himself capable of leadership. Furthermore, when it came to courting the votes of black Memphians, Fitzhugh, perhaps due to pure unwillingness, failed to do so. He had no history of black outreach to speak off. Crump however, and by extension Paine, had no qualms about making promises of support to Memphis’ black community. Thus, when given the choice between the devils you do not know and the ones you do, for black Memphians it must not have seemed like a real choice at all.

After the election of 1923, the political landscape of Memphis stood vastly changed from what it was prior. Despite the win officially going to Paine, Crump was the big winner of the day by long-term assessments. Paine’s time in office would come and go, but it was Crump’s name

\(^{140}\) Dowdy, *Mayor Crump Don’t Like It*, 40.

\(^{141}\) Dowdy, *Mayor Crump Don’t Like It*, 38-39
that black Memphis would remember as having staved off the threat of Klan rule in Memphis. This was, of course, not the first time Crump had appealed to Memphis’ black community for their votes. However, I posit this occasion was different and special from those times before Crump’s ouster from City Hall.

The sheer shock and horror at the thought of the Klan coming as close as it did to gaining control over the city of Memphis, whether in hindsight they actually stood a chance of doing so or not, cast Crump and his machine in such a favorable light that he was able to overcome past disgraces and firmly solidify himself within the good graces of the black community. Crump was now the “man who stopped the Klan,” whereas Paine would have come off as weak and ineffectual in doing so without Crump’s aid. It was Crump’s last minute decision to through himself and his resources and connections behind Paine that made the election swing in his favor and broke the possibility of a split anti-Klan vote between Paine and Lewis T. Fitzhugh that would likely have garnered victory for the Klan ticket.¹⁴²

Moreover, I argue that it was specifically the presence and authority of Crump’s backing that allowed black voters to feel they could likewise put their backing behind the Paine campaign. Few other actions could have endeared Crump to black Memphians more than this one. Driving home the idea that it was Crump’s win and not Paine’s, Crump organized his own victory parade through the streets of downtown Memphis after all the votes had been tallied.¹⁴³ As for the Paine administration, with Crump’s backing and established connections, Paine was able to ally himself with black leaders and actively seek out the black vote with promises of listening to concerns that affected their communities. As the next chapter will show, these promises would in time prove to be hollow, however, as Paine went on to not only ignore these

¹⁴² Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City*, 53.
concerns from Memphis's black community, but also, in defiance of the Crump machine method, openly antagonize black Memphis as well.

What of the broader concerns of this dissertation, however? Before moving on to the next chapter let us pull back our focus a bit and examine the larger significance of a few key ideas brought up here in terms of Memphis being a city that was between North and South in terms of racial ideology. After their defeat in the election of 1923, the power of the local Klan order largely dissipated. Despite stilted efforts at once again mounting an organized and sustained political campaign in future elections, they were never again a serious threat to Memphis politics. Scholar Kenneth Wald has written, “by all accounts, the Klan should have done well in Memphis. The city was dominated by the very kinds of social groups with which the Klan was supposed to have had a special affinity – the poor, rural migrants and persons of low education and uncertain employment.” Also, there must be something symbolically significant about the actions of the Memphis Klan in deciding to publicly unmask for the sake of running for public office.

As mentioned previously in this dissertation’s introduction, there were three ideological factors that marked Memphis as a “border” city. 1. When it came to managing issues of race, there was a tacit agreement that there were just certain ways of doing things. Covert racism and was always preferable to the social disruption that invariably came with overt racism. 2. The Memphis city government, while undoubtedly filled with many who held little regard for black people, preferred keeping them control through the guise of Progressive cooperation rather than outright hostility. 3. Those who violated these first two rules tended to very quickly find themselves under attack from those in power.
Memphis, as stated before, was a city of ideological and racial-political contradictions. Only in a Southern city could the Klan be brazen and audacious enough to not only openly make a play for power, but also to believe they could emerge triumphant for doing so. Only in a Southern city could they actually come close as they did to achieving such goals. The majority of those running in the Memphis election held jobs that would otherwise mark them as respectable members of society. That those running had little fear of their identities being known publicly, the incident with Clifford Davis being an abnormal case, speaks volumes about the ways in which racial prejudice operated in Jim Crow Memphis.

At the same time, however, Memphis was not quite so Southern that the Klan could simply get away with anything they desired. The Klan’s brazen acts were simultaneously allowable because of the city they were, and yet those acts also threatened to expose the fragileness of the supposedly “friendly race relations in Memphis.” For all of their repressiveness on race issues, the city’s white power structure nevertheless billed itself as being relatively Progressive, especially compared to other Southern cities. This is evident in the consensus amongst such power players and political rivals as Rowlett Paine, E.H. Crump, and C.P.J. Mooney that Klan agenda was in fact too radical and reactionary to fly in Memphis. Thus, from the moment the local Klavern announced its intentions to run for office, two things happened that one would have to search far and wide to see happen in other Southern cities. Firstly, the Klan was actively painted as an “outside” force representing a threat to the sovereignty of Memphis politics. This argument posited that true Memphians could not support the Klan’s endeavors, and that a win for the Klan was a win for imported values. The second unusual thing that occurred upon the Klan candidacy was that the city’s white elite power structure actively sought the help of its black population in order to maintain their own positions of power and authority. All of
these points mark Memphis being not your average Southern city, but not exactly like a Northern city where the Klan efforts were comparatively weaker and were never a serious challenge to legitimate politics. As the following chapter will touch upon, however, just because race as an ideological concept operated differently in Memphis than it did in other comparable, did not mean for a moment that there was not still racial turmoil bubbling underneath the surface, waiting to come to light. As later chapters will show, the very same factors which here united black and white political leadership under the guise of a mutually beneficial relationship would in time work to undermine the potential for true progress and racial reconciliation.
CHAPTER TWO:
“A VERY WORTHY NEGRO”

On a sunny afternoon in May 1925, a steamboat carrying 72 passengers capsized on the Mississippi River 20 miles south of Memphis, TN. Onboard the boat, the M.E. Norman, were members of the Memphis Engineers Club, a group comprising some of the city’s most politically influential citizens. Passing by at the same time as the ship began to go under in his tiny skiff, the Zev, was a young black levee worker from Memphis named Tom Lee. Seeing the passengers from the steamboat struggling to survive the notoriously heavy currents of the “Mighty Mississippi,” rushed his boat over to where the steamship had capsized. Despite the potential danger to himself and not knowing how to swim, Lee began to survivors out of the water to safety one by one.

A total of 49 passengers survived the accident that day out of the 72 that were onboard the ship. 32 of these passengers, including men, women, and children, were saved single-handedly through Tom Lee’s efforts. As word of Lee’s actions began to spread around Memphis, practically overnight the otherwise unremarkable working-class Lee was plucked from obscurity and thrust into the spotlight. Tom Lee became a local sensation – a hero in the eyes of a city that was thankful for and in awe of his actions.

The Memphis city government was especially impressed with Lee, “the Old River Negro’s” heroics. In the days, weeks, months and even years following the Norman accident of 1925, city leaders bestowed Lee with tokens of gratitude. These ranged ranging from the relatively simple – a watch for example – to gifts and accolades few blacks in segregated Memphis could ever have conceived of receiving from the city’s all-white leaders. Lee was given a new house. He had both a municipal swimming pool and a city park named in his honor. City leaders even sponsored a
trip to Washington, D.C., so that Lee could shake hands with President Calvin Coolidge. All of these accolades and honors were arranged by many of the same white governmental figures that this dissertation has already mentioned along with a few new figures of importance - people such as Mayor Rowlett Paine, his successor Watkins Overton, and of course, political boss E.H. Crump.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 5 - M.E. Norman, source: Commercial Appeal**

In this chapter I juxtapose the story of Tom Lee and his reception by Memphis’ white elites with the story of Rowlett Paine’s downfall as mayor of Memphis and as E.H. Crump’s political standard-bearer. While having only a few direct connections in terms of the historical actors involved, I argue that the narrative of the former allows for a unique insight into the racial dynamics at play throughout the latter narrative. This chapter posits that the story of Tom Lee reads as a stand-in for the story of racial politics writ large in Jim Crow Era Memphis and provides another example of Memphis’ unique ideological geography, as the way in which white
elite Memphis perceived of and responded to Tom Lee reflects the broader ideas of how race operated in a city like Memphis.

The veneer of benevolence that Memphis’ white elites showed towards Lee can be read as exposing one of the hidden transcripts that undergirded the way racial politics and racial power relationships operated in Jim Crow Memphis. In this scenario, white supremacy was enforced not through lynchings or with the barrel of a gun, but through patronage and other means of pacification. Open racial antagonism and aggression had its uses in Memphis to be sure, and Memphis was not entirely free from the racial violence that plagued many cities throughout the South, but the preferred means of racial control was far subtler. On the surface, white elites projected support, sympathy and even some level of admiration for the deeds and struggles of the average black Memphian as embodied in Tom Lee in this case. However, such benign efforts at currying favor with and ingratiating themselves to black Memphians belied a far more uneven, coercive and hostile view of how to “handle” Memphis’ black population.

In this way, I offer up Tom Lee’s story as a mirror to reflect the broader proscriptions of racial politics in Jim Crow Memphis. In doing so, this chapter reveals in intimately discrete detail just how deeply white elite Memphis was committed to obfuscating its belief in white racial supremacy through outwardly benign forms of racial aggression and antagonism. This is abundantly evident in the memorial put together by E.H. Crump and other white authority figures upon Lee’s death from cancer in 1952. Lee lived for 27 years after the day that initially made him a star and a hero, and for nearly all of this time, he had been purposefully kept in the public eye almost solely by members of Memphis’ white elite power structure. Figures such as Crump decided that it was their duty to commemorate Lee’s life. Thus, they commissioned the construction of a monument in the same park that bore Lee’s name and on the banks of the very
river that so many years earlier had become forever a part of Tom Lee’s life on that fateful May afternoon in 1925. At a dedication ceremony on July 9, 1954, a fifteen-foot tall granite obelisk was unveiled before a large crowd eager to see what Crump and the others had cooked up this time. On the monument was inscribed with what would be the city of Memphis’ final and most enduring tribute to the legacy of the man who, according to Crump, had captured the hearts of “the grateful people of Memphis” with his “kindliness, generosity, courage and bigness of heart.”

To Tom Lee, the monument read: “A Very Worthy Negro.”

As undeniably patronizing as this token to Tom Lee’s life was, it was also emblematic of a broader narrative that took place surrounding Tom Lee and the issue of race relations Jim Crow Memphis, one that began 27 years earlier in 1924. Almost immediately upon hearing about Lee’s rescuing of 32 drowning Memphis citizens, various members of Memphis’ white elite community began to construct a public persona and narrative for Tom Lee that would present

Figure 6 - Tom Lee Memorial inscription, source: Commercial Appeal

A Very Worth Mascot

him to the citizens of Memphis as their living ideal of what it meant to be black and respectable during this time period. These portrayals of Lee emphasized such characteristics as his supposed humbleness, timidity, self-sacrifice and obsequious deferential behavior towards whites. The implication to all of this was that the larger black Memphis community should also aspire to and follow such values of heroic self-sacrifice when it came to their interactions with whites, so that they too could be rewarded for their behavior.

Figure 7 - Tom Lee, source: Commercial Appeal

Curiously, to black Memphians themselves, by all accounts, (or rather by the stark lack of accounts in the historical record) Tom Lee barely seemed registered as a blip on the radar. Compare for example the lack of public fanfare and acknowledge Lee received from black Memphians to another local celebrity who had “made it big” in the public eye. Blues legend and Memphis celebrity W.C. Handy once famously wrote that he could scarcely stroll through any
black neighborhood in Jim Crow Era Memphis without being overwhelmingly mobbed by admirers. None of this appeared to be the case when it came to Lee, however. The silence of Memphis’ black community was deafening.

There were no parades in his honor on Beale St. or in other black neighborhoods. When Lee went out in public, there were no throngs of black Memphians seeking his autograph or even a handshake. Compared to the multipage exposes white-owned newspapers ran on Lee’s exploits, the black press largely ignored him. The vast majority, if not all, of Lee’s supporters and boosters came from within the ranks of Memphis’ white elite community. Without their support, Lee likely would have gone back into simple obscurity after and become a minor footnote in the history of a long-since forgotten Memphis Spring. None of this is meant as a criticism of Lee himself or to in any way diminish his life or his extraordinary actions. However, the fact remains that, when viewed critically, it is easy to see that Lee’s celebrity was with built upon motives far more duplicitous than simple admiration.

Despite there being no clear indicator that these efforts at not so subtly policing black behavior and respectability actually succeeded, through this story we see how even after the dramatic cross-racial alliance formed in the wake of the 1923 election, the dynamics of racial power in Memphis remained decidedly skewed. White leaders continued to see the city’s black population as little more than a useful tool to be pulled out of storage whenever the need arose. In the minds of Memphis’ white leaders, as long as blacks were occasionally given the most minute or token attention, they could be carefully molded controlled for their own political utility.

While this chapter is primarily concerned with mapping out the parameters upon which this dichotomy operated, later chapters will reveal in more detail exactly what was at stake in
terms of its effect on black political activism in Memphis. Particularly, for local black leaders who did not acquiesce and play along with the Crump machine’s political strategy of token affections, they would find themselves marginalized and shunned not just by Memphis’ white power structure but also by others within the local black leadership community who cottoned to the Machine’s overtures. Before getting to that particular drama, however, we must first see how the Tom Lee story is essential for understanding the psychological and structural underpinnings of this future conflict.

As the previous chapter showed, after the 1923 mayoral election, the racial-political environment in Memphis seemed to have turned a corner. On the surface, Memphis’s white power structure and it’s black middle class had united to thwart a mutual threat, and in the process set an example for what could be accomplished by urban, interracial cooperation. Underneath this veneer, however, lay a bedrock of mistrust, divided loyalties, animus and unchecked ambition on the part nearly all involved this accomplishment. As discussed earlier, the methods by which such feelings could be acted upon were largely circumscribed, however, due to the hidden transcripts of racial dialogue and interaction in Jim Crow Memphis. Jim Crow Era Memphis was a place that was paradoxically bound by traditional Southern mores of racial interaction at the same time as black and white leaders billed it as a “Progressive” city where both races could stand together with common goals and values. For white elites that were savvy enough to take advantage of it, the Tom Lee incident provided the perfect opportunity to capitalize on this dichotomy.

Thus a peculiar dichotomy was born that would endure for decades wherein Lee would be celebrated for his acts of self-sacrifice towards whites while simultaneously being derided as a figure of curiosity based on his race. Local newspapers, having a longstanding history of acting
as the arm of the city government, covering the story in its immediate aftermath were the first to adopt this dichotomy. One started off by describing Lee as a “40-year-old negro, black and kinky-haired, [who] became a hero in a few hours.” When asked what motivated him to do so, the story quoted Lee saying, “I guess I didn’t do any more than any nigger would have done in my place.” Still seemingly struggling to entirely comprehend Lee as a person, or perhaps sensing that its audience would have difficulty doing so, the article further said of Lee, “Tom is an old river negro . . . He does not own his own home. It is rented. His white friends say he never loses his head when any critical situation arises.” The article also mentions Mayor Paine immediately setting out to get Lee a medal of some sort.145

Another article on Lee went in a similar fashion, making an effort to flesh out the man behind the actions. Again, referring to Lee as “only a black, kinky-haired negro,” the article emphasized repeatedly the benign, meek and simple side of Lee. “I’m goin’ to church Sunday mornin’ an’ evenin.’ I always prays Sunday for forgiveness of my sins foh’ de past week,” the article wrote. In describing the first interaction between Lee and Mayor Paine, Lee again comes off as little more than a simple person, wholly out of his element around his social betters. When shown into the private office of the mayor he hesitated a second.

The thick plush rug under his feet seemed to melt away. There was embarrassment in his face. “Come in, Tom,” spoke Mayor Paine. [They shake hands] Then Tom smiled . . . “You are a hero, Tom.” said Mayor Paine. “Yes suh, thank you, suh,” Tom answered.146

Curiously, the article again ends as the previous one did by mentioning the fact that Lee was friends with or at the very least had made the acquaintance of some white Memphians who could

vouch for his character. The story concluded, “White men who know Tom Lee say he is level-headed of a critical situation comes up. They have tested him and claim they speak the truth.”

The wreck of the M.E. Norman just a few miles outside of town was naturally major news for the city on the bluff. Thus, in addition to reports on the accident itself, the stories ranged from biographies of the more prominent drowning victims, to harrowing narratives of survival, to a page devoted entirely to the “heroes” that the event produced. For example, the Memphis News-Gazette also reported on Clarence Miller, a 20 yr. old fireman aboard the Norman who swam against the current to the shore and then dove back into the water to save a woman and her baby who were reported to be some 300 yards away from him. There was Maj. Douglass H. Gilette, an engineer aboard the Norman who helped pull fellow wreck survivors ashore. And there was also Henry Wiersma who also acted selflessly to pull fellow survivors to safety.148

Again, curiously however, out of all of the various people that the News-Scimitar proclaimed to be heroes that day, it was the sensational tale of Tom Lee, the mysteriously stoic and “kinky-haired, negro hero” with the heart of gold and humble personality which the newspaper gave the most space, attention, and acclaim to, and also placed front and center on the paper’s front page. And it was Tom Lee, not the other heroes of the day, whose story would endure in the city’s limelight and take on almost mythical proportions not just for the next few days but for the next 27 years of Tom Lee’s life thanks to the efforts of local media, Mayor Rowlett Paine, the political machine of Mayor E.H. Crump and various other representatives of Memphis’s white elite community.

How to account for this phenomenon, one might ask? Certainly, Tom Lee’s actions that day would count as heroic and merit acclaim by anyone’s standards. However what is there to

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147 The News-Scimitar, “Tom is Going to Pray – Mayor’s Praise “Fusses” Negro Hero of Tragedy,” May 10, 1925.
148 The News-Scimitar, various sections, May 9, 1925.
explain the disproportionate attention given to Lee over others? Perhaps not so coincidentally, out of all of the heroes of the Norman wreck that fateful afternoon in May, Tom Lee happened to be the only one among them who was black. It may strike some as something of a well-worn argument to make, however, I submit that more than any of his actions that day; it was Tom Lee’s race that was primarily responsible for the many accolades he received both in the immediate aftermath of the Norman’s sinking and for the next 27 years of Lee’s life. However, this was far from any pro bono deal on the part of Memphis’ white elite community. The tacit unspoken price that they would charge Lee in return for his acclaim and celebrity would amount to exactly the cost of his public persona and identity.

From the moment Tom Lee entered the Memphis public eye, his public identity was shaped in a way that would portray him as white Memphis’ notion of the ideally respectable negro – docile, self-sacrificing, self-deprecating, and, in a single word all-encompassing word, Respectable. This caricatured portrayal of Tom Lee as the “respectable negro” would be typical of just about every public mentioning of Lee’s name for the rest of his life. It would be seen in just about every public accolade that Lee would receive. Consciously or unconsciously, in the eyes of Memphis white elite community, Tom Lee’s actions as a hero were nigh inseparable from his status as an African-American, a combination which made Lee the perfect figurehead to use to sweep Memphis’ race-related issues under the rug and portray Memphis as a city of racial harmony. In so many words, Tom Lee would ever feel his two-ness – a negro, a mascot.

Over the course of Tom Lee’s life after the incidents of May 8, 1925, reports such as the one above would become something of a well-worn routine. The pattern is fairly easy to follow: One of the Memphis’ newspapers, The News-Scimitar, The Commercial Appeal, or The Memphis World, would run a special report to check up on what Lee was up to. More often
than not, a member of the city’s government or Memphis Engineers Club would have just
recently bestowed some honor upon Lee and would have their remarks published the article.
And, without fail, every time, the same characteristics of Tom Lee’s persona would be
emphasized over and over again as the impetus for such his receiving such attention and praise.
There would be commentary on things such as Lee’s meekness, his simple and unassuming
demeanor, and his gentle and self-deprecating persona.

In this paradigm of Tom Lee’s racial identity, the line between explicit praise for Lee
himself and implicit praise for the white citizens of Memphis for treating Lee so well would
become intertwined in such a way as to be nigh inseparable. In this dichotomy, “Tom Lee – the
individual” loses his importance in favor of “Tom Lee – the representative of Memphis’ black
community.” The invocation of Lee’s public persona by the local media and the city
government, in effect, became a type of shorthand with which to speak about the city’s racial
divide. In other words, as long as Tom Lee was publicly well taken care of, then Memphis’
black community was seen as being well taken care of also.

And through this dichotomy of public tokenism, well taken care of, Lee was, indeed. In
the years following the sinking of the M.E. Norman, the many gifts and honors bestowed upon
Lee would be enough to make him the envy of nearly anyone. Immediately following the
accident, and upon interviewing Lee about the accident and his role in saving its passengers, the
Commercial Appeal reported that “many of [its] staff, touched by Tom’s unassuming manner,
gave him money” out of their own pockets. Later that same month, the Memphis city
government arranged for Lee to be taken to Washington to meet and to shake hands with
President Calvin Coolidge. For his own part, Coolidge referred to Lee as an “outstanding marine hero.”

The Memphis Engineers Club and the Commercial Appeal would then go on to raise $4,000 to buy Tom Lee and his family a new home. The same coalition of white elites would also establish a trust fund to take care of Lee’s taxes and home maintenance expenses. Subsequently it then became an annual custom for members of the Engineers Club to “play Santa Claus to Tom and his family” every year for by publicly donating to Lee and his family every December to help with food, clothing, gifts and other holiday expenses.

The city government would then go on to provide Lee with a permanent job on its payroll as, of all things, a garbage man. On the 10-year anniversary of Lee’s act of heroism in 1935, the Commercial Appeal ran a story catching up with Lee and his new life in this position. In much the same way as writes-up on Lee did 10 years prior, this one again seems to walk a line between mocking Lee and praising him. The article opened with the image of “An orange-colored garbage truck stopped in an alley back of an apartment house on Eastmoreland Street today and a negro in a corduroy cap and faded overalls swung a tin garbage can upside down into the truck. That negro was Tom Lee.” The article at times seems to find implicit humor in juxtaposing Lee’s new occupation with the many valuable baubles and high accolades he’d received for his actions. “Bang! Went the next can of potato peelings and kitchen refuse into the city truck. Tom Lee smoked his pipe. Someone asked him if he remembered what happened 10 years ago today. “Yas, suh,” Tom replied and pulled out a gold watch on the back of which is engraved the brief story of Tom’s heroism.” One is tempted to wonder even how much articles like these were written for the benefit of Lee himself and how much they were written for the benefit of the

white elites they often mention that come off as benevolent figures. “No, Tom hasn’t forgotten,” the article went on. “He remembers how Mayor Rowlett Paine had him up at his office, how he was hailed as a hero.”

Despite, or perhaps because of the irony of one of the city’s most celebrated heroes being rewarded with a job in one of the most universally mocked professions, the article still makes sure to emphasize what by then had become Lee’s trademark self-deprecation, obsequious submissiveness and generally cheerful good nature. David Tucker points out that the Crump political machine had a well-established M.O. doing this time period of putting blacks that were politically favorable to it on the city’s payroll in one way or another. “Police and fire department positions,” Tucker writes, “to be sure, were reserved for whites at that time, but garbage collection and jobs at segregated public schools were open.”

Thus, Tom Lee may have been given what many saw as one of the city’s most demeaning jobs, that made him only “20 cents an hour . . . when it doesn’t rain,” but, simply by virtue of the fact that he was on the city government’s payroll, Lee was expected to play the part of the happy and grateful garbage man, thankful for what little he had been given. In the years that followed, at the behest of Boss Crump, the Memphis Park Commission working in conjunction with the City Council and mayor approved the naming of a new segregated swimming pool in one of the city’s black neighborhood’s after Lee.

The ceremonial trotting out of Tom Lee would continued on for many years to come, as by 1948, more than 20 years after the Norman incident, the city government would provide Tom

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Lee with a “generous” retirement pension of $75 per month and again investigated the possibility of Lee receiving a medal or other award from the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission. All the while, Lee continued to receive annual Christmas donations and gifts from the Memphis Engineers Club. By 1949, Lee would be diagnosed with terminal cancer, and the Engineers Club along with the city government would raise $619 to pay for Lee’s cancer treatments. In 1950, local newspaper The Memphis World reported on the “cancer-doomed negro hero” donating his own money to a cancer drive put on by the West Tennessee Cancer Clinic. The article reported,

Since that day [of the Norman accident],” Lee had good days and bad days, but he has worked hard all the time . . . He says: “I’m feeling pretty good. I wish more of my white folks would come by and see me.” His “white folks” have helped him through the years. Although he has very little money to spare, Lee answered the plea for the 1950 cancer drive here and sent $2.00. He commented: “I sure wish I could give more. And please tell all my friends that I’m feeling fine.154

By April 1, 1952, Tom Lee would finally succumb to the inevitable and die of the cancer that had plagued him since 1949. The local press coverage and attention Lee’s passing received from city officials at this moment rivaled anything seen since the immediate aftermath of the M.E. Norman sinking, as a wide cross-section of prominent Memphians all took time to consider what Tom Lee has personally meant to them.

“It has been my privilege for 27 years, along with men like James M. Wood . . . and Col. Garner W. Miller of the United States Engineers to look after Tom Lee’s welfare,” William B. Fowler, one of the Norman survivors and one of Lee’s biggest white elite supporters said. “Tom was modest and unassuming, and appreciative of everything that was done for him. I am grateful that there was a Negro like Tom Lee,” Fowler followed up. Fowler would then go on to make financial arrangements to take care of Lee’s widow. Along with other members of the Engineers Club and Memphis political boss E.H. Crump, Fowler would also act as an honorary pallbearer at Lee’s funeral.155

For Crump, Lee’s passing brought about fond memories of Lee’s life and persona. “He was a worthy man and he did a noble deed,” Crump said. “He used to come to see me now and then . . . He never boasted or bragged about anything he did. He was always unassuming and very polite.” Crump, never the one to let an opportunity to advertise his political benevolence to black Memphis pass by, also added, “I suggested naming the swimming pool at Ayers and Lane for him.”¹⁵⁶

The Significance of Tom Lee

All of this, of course, begs the question of why Tom Lee matters to the story of racial politics in Jim Crow Memphis. In order to put all of this into a proper context, and to try and get a sense of why Tom Lee remained so prominently in the spotlight, it is necessary to examine a few other notable occurrences in Memphis over this same period of time. As mentioned at the end of the last chapter, after their tandem success in the 1923 election, Rowlett Paine and E.H. Crump eventually went on to have a political falling out, ultimately leading to Crump backing a new mayoral candidate in 1927, Watkins Overton, and once again coralling the black vote to get Overton into office. But what else was going on here, and what might this have had to do in any way with Tom Lee?

One of the major occurrences in the run-up to the 1927 mayoral election was an event known as the Bellomini scandal. John Bellomini was a Memphis bootlegger who got caught by federal agents in a sting in the fall of 1927. In the process, they found a ledge detailing a number of recurring payoffs to members of the Memphis police force and high-ranking officials in the Memphis city government. While mayor Paine himself was not directly implicated in the scandal, there was widespread sentiment amongst his political opponents in Memphis that even if

it could not be proved that he was directly involved in the scandal, at the very least, his administration seemed all but incompetent to fail to notice such widespread corruption inside of the city. As a result, Paine began to lose powerful supporters left and right including most notably E.H. Crump himself who it seemed could not distance himself from the Paine administration fast enough.\textsuperscript{157}

Crump, as previously mentioned, was already thrown out of office once in the wake of an alcohol-related corruption scandal just 10 years earlier. Naturally, he must have felt that the liability of once again being closely associated with an eerily similar case would spell disaster for his political ambitions, as in addition to being the true power behind the power in Memphis, he was now eyeing a run for Congress.\textsuperscript{158} One would think that with his administration in desperate trouble, Paine would do everything he could to recapture the magic of the 1923 election, which saw him reelected largely on the strength of the black vote. However, for reasons all his own, this time refused to chase after the black vote any more, in fact, resorting to openly antagonizing them and doubling down on the idea of white rule in Memphis.

Crump, on the other, as before, seeing an opportunity to capitalize on an optimum situation, once again courted black leaders with an unmatched fervor, painting Paine as a figure who never truly had the black community’s interests at heart, pointing to Paine’s failure to take tangibly any of their needs seriously. Crump instead touted relative newcomer Watkins Overton for mayor. Ironically enough, Crump also backed Clifford Davis for another term as City Judge. If you will recall, it was Davis’ connections with the Ku Klux Klan and his subsequent unceremonious booting from Paine’s political team in 1923 that served as the catalyst for the Klan entering that election. Apparently, however, Davis’ old Klan ties were no longer seen as a

\textsuperscript{157} Dowdy, \textit{Mayor Crump Don’t Like It}, 45-48

\textsuperscript{158} Dowdy, \textit{Mayor Crump Don’t Like It}, 59
liability this time around as again with the help of black leaders like Robert R. Church Jr., and Lt. George W. Lee, the black vote in Memphis was marshaled and was what decisively what put Crump’s ticket over the top.\textsuperscript{159}

Where, then, does Tom Lee fit into all of this? By no means am I suggesting that simply showering one single black Memphian with praise and attention was enough to magically convince all of black Memphis writ large to support Crump and his new slate of candidates. As pointed out before, there did exist in Memphis at this time an established group of black leaders with their own constituents, agendas and strategies for advancing the cause of black progress in Memphis. Moreover, black leadership in Memphis was very clear in the type of changes and improvements they wanted to see happen in Memphis, things like black police officers, better municipal facilities, etc.

What I am arguing, however, that the way Tom Lee was treated by Crump and other influential whites in Memphis was emblematic of the way in which white leadership saw black leadership in Memphis at this specific time– not entirely as a threat that needed to be forcibly pacified as in other Southern cities, but also not entirely as a legitimate interest group that needed their desires taken seriously. Instead, black Memphis leaders and voters were almost a type of commodity. They were thing to be easily bought, and manipulated with token-like attention paid to their wants and aspirations.

According to historian Laurie Green, one local black activist at the time described the situation in Memphis with regards to race relation in the following way: “[Whites] do not use shot gun methods to make the Negro docile and servile workmen . . . [they] control the Negro’s thought and progress . . . by elevating and holding up as examples . . . the so-called best Negro

\textsuperscript{159} Dowdy, \textit{Mayor Crump Don’t Like It}, 48-49
Leaders.” As Green goes on to point out, those who did openly question the racialized political environment in Memphis during this time period were often derided as promoters of “social equality who sought to undermine friendly relations between the races by fomenting black hatred of whites.” Green also describes how Memphis’ black citizenry was divided “over how to respond to the Crump machine’s combination of benevolence . . . and enforcement of segregation,” however, for the longest time they were ultimately left with few political options other than to support Crump in the hopes that their votes would engender some level of communal support from the Crump machine. Cast in this light, then, the Crump regime bestowing favored son status upon Tom Lee falls perfectly in line with its modus operandi for maintaining political power in Jim Crow Memphis. Clearly, the Crump machine was not an organization that was in any real way concerned with empowering or recognizing the black community outside of a paradigm that kept the machine in total power.

By this point in time, however, a number of weak spots had begun to emerge in the armor of the Crump regime. Having been handed its first real political defeat just a few years earlier, the hegemonic political authority of Crump’s regime had begun to slowly crumble by the time of Tom Lee’s passing, as blacks in Memphis more and more began to mobilize politically on their own behalf rather than at the behest of the city’s white leaders. Beverly Bond and Janaan Sherman write,

Following [the 1948] defeat and elimination of the poll tax in 1954, voting drives in the black community pushed across the South during the Civil Rights movement, [however] black Memphians were already registered at roughly the same rate as white Memphians. This voting bloc provided political leverage in an arena where the voting age population was approximately 34 percent black. As

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160 Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, 37.
161 Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, 39.
162 Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, 33.
163 Wright, Race, Power and Political Emergence, 38.
long as they could harness that bloc, the black leadership was able to negotiate concessions from a white leadership needing their support.\footnote{Bond, Sherman, \textit{Battling the Plantation Mentality}, 133.}

In the midst of his political authority slowly beginning to slip out from under his grasp, then, almost immediately after Lee’s death, Crump was the first to call for a monument, “a suitable stone shaft,” to be erected in Lee’s honor. One can only imagine Crump’s feelings were that another public display of support and affection for one of Memphis’ most famous black figures would work in his favor to shore up his faltering support among Memphis’ black voters. Days later after Lee’s passing, an official announcement of plans for the monument was made in a statement released by Crump, countersigned by members of his political machine and members of the Memphis Engineers Club: “Mayor Watkins Overton, Chairman E.W. Hale, Will Fowler, Hugo Dixon, and I will get up money to erect an appropriate monument to Tom Lee – [a] friendly salute to a very worthy citizen.” The official statement went on to remark, “Tom Lee not only risked his own life but he did the work in a kind, cheerful way. Kindness is the key that unlocks all doors. All the world admires and is inspired by the cheerful giver, cheerful loser, and cheerful worker.”

Fueled by money gathered from Crump’s committee and private donations from Memphis citizens, on July 8, 1954 a 15-foot obelisk was erected in Lee’s honor in downtown Memphis on the banks of the Mississippi River. Inscribed at the base of the monument were the following words:

\begin{quote}
Tom Lee Memorial – A Very Worthy Negro – Tom Lee with his boat Zev saved thirty-two lives when the steamer U.S. Norman sank about twenty miles below Memphis May 8, 1925 – But he has a finer monument than this – An invisible one – A monument of kindliness, generosity, courage, and bigness of heart – His good deeds were scattered every where that day and into eternity. – This monument erected by the grateful people of Memphis.\footnote{Favors Tom Lee Monument/; The Commercial Appeal, \textit{“Crump Launches Fund to Honor Hero Tom Lee,”} April 9, 1952.}
\end{quote}
Underneath this inscription were the names of all the important benefactors who had contributed to the monument’s erection, a veritable who’s who of white elite Memphis. By 1954, as one of the final acts of governance before his own death, Crump would suggest the renaming of the park where Tom Lee’s Memorial was placed after Tom Lee himself.166

In the end, this is what ultimately defined the final 27 years of Tom Lee’s life. At the same time as he was publicly celebrated and taken care of by a cadre of Memphis’ most influential and elite white citizenry, Tom Lee was also very much used by that same cadre for its own purposes. In short, from the moment words spread of his acts of heroism on May 8, 1925, Tom Lee’s public identity would no longer be his own. Instead, an entirely new Tom Lee would be constructed, a respectable Tom Lee, a Tom Lee who’s token-like invocation would be used in an attempt to hide the racial discord that was bubbling under the surface in Memphis during this very same 27 year time period. In the next chapter, I will delve more deeply into Memphis’ particular racial-political issues during the 1940s. I will show exactly why Crump and the rest of the white city government were so desperate to try and avert a growing sense of racial unrest in the Memphis and how they ultimately failed to do so.

CHAPTER THREE:

“WE’LL HAVE NO RACE TROUBLE HERE”

In the fall of 1940, black Memphians experienced a prolonged campaign of harassment, searches, seizures, mass arrests, and violence at the hands of Memphis police. These actions were carried out under the direction of Memphis Police Commissioner Joe Boyle, Mayor Walter Chandler, and local political boss Edward Hull Crump in direct response to a growing sense of political mobility among Memphis’ black population. As shown in previous chapters, for decades, Crump, the patriarch of Memphis politics in the Jim Crow Era, and his allies had been able to buy and intimidate their way into political power with the tacit support of Black Memphis. Throughout the 1920 and 1930s the working relationship between the Crump Machine and Memphis’ black elites that had begun so many decades before slowly began to crumble.

As mentioned before, the ideological transcripts that governed race and racial politics in Memphis, privileged conformity, cooperation and silence above all other attributes. In the 1910s and 1920s, black leaders had begrudgingly accepted these rules as being the cost of having a seat at the political table. As the 20s passed into the 30s and passed into the 40s, however, many in Memphis’ black political community began to see these same rules as less of an opportunity for progress and more of a yoke which circumscribed their actions and their personal and political autonomy just as much as any unpayable poll tax or violent lynch mob the likes of which would be found in the types of Southern cities that Memphis had worked so long to pretend it was not like. Conformity, cooperation and silence were the antitheses of the type of loud disruption necessary for societal change to occur. By the time of this chapter’s main focus in the 1940s, more and more black leaders in Memphis had grown overtly dissatisfied with the stagnation
brought about by their longstanding alliance with the Crump machine. Throughout the 20s and 30s, he had comfortably come to rely on their votes while they saw little to nothing in return. Black Memphis wanted black police officers. They wanted better schools. They wanted black political candidates. What they received in return, as the previous chapter showed was token gestures and lip service. Fed up with Crump’s iron-fisted rule and broken progressivism then, a small cadre of black leaders in the early 40s began to seek out and back other candidates that promised to move away from the old “plantation mentality” of Crump and his regime. They began planning for disruption.\textsuperscript{167}

Black business owners, physicians, educators, clergy and community activists, those who made up the bulk of Memphis’ black leadership community, began holding a series of covert political meetings in their homes and in their places of business to debate ways to end Crump’s multi-decade hold on Memphis politics once and for all. Some favored throwing their weight behind Republican candidates to run against Crump’s machine slate of Democrats.\textsuperscript{168} Others felt their best hopes still lay with the Democrats, but more on a national level and wanted to organize black Memphians to vote en masse for a Democratic presidential candidate.\textsuperscript{169}

Crump considered these actions to be a direct assault by ungrateful black Memphians on the well-oiled political machine he had spent his life building, and subsequently ordered Memphis police to begin what local and national press soon dubbed the Memphis “Reign of Terror,” a city government-sanctioned police occupation of black neighborhoods that lasted from

\textsuperscript{167} Laurie Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press); 5-6.
\textsuperscript{168} Laurie Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press); 38-39.
\textsuperscript{169} Green, 37-38.
October to December of 1940. During this time, hundreds of black Memphians were stopped, searched and arrested en masse for infractions that were minor if not outright fictitious.

While politics served as the catalyst for these actions, the stated goal of Crump and his allies in the Memphis city government in flexing the muscle of local law enforcement in this way was the systematic suppression of racial conflict in Memphis. In Crump’s eyes, Memphis was set apart from other Southern cities with regards to issues of race. In Crump’s mind, he was a generous father-type figure to “his” blacks. And like any father, he would provide for them as long as they followed the rules of his house, the prime rule, of course, being that there would be no challenges to his authority. Those blacks that violated this prime directive were not simply causing a disruption, in Crump’s view, they were destroying the peace of his family and the sanctity of his home.

To this end, then, Crump and his allies offered public praise, token benefits and a respite from legal action to black community leaders who were publicly willing to side with him and rebuke other political “agitators” within Memphis’ black population. Those who continued to oppose the Crump machine politically would be shown no such quarter. As a result of these draconian actions, Memphis’ black leaders soon found themselves at odds with one another over how to respond to Crump. Some eventually capitulated to Crump’s demands with the hopes of earning for themselves or their constituents some small amount of favor or material benefits. Others, left lacking communal support, struggled to stand alone against the total might of the Crump machine’s tactics of paternalistic harassment and terror.

171 “Boyle Keeps His Eyes on 19 Negroes: They’re Fanning Race Feeling In Memphis, Commissioner Believes,” The Commercial Appeal, December 11, 1940.
172 “For Safety of All,” The Commercial Appeal, December 12, 1940.
This chapter explores the details and the impact of the Memphis Reign of Terror, first by laying out the key historical actors at the forefront of the narrative, then detailing the events of the three-month police occupation of black neighborhoods and black-owned businesses, from start to finish and finally ending with an examination of the intra-racial political divisions created by and/or exacerbated amongst Memphis’ black leadership community. What I ultimately argue is that this particular moment in Memphis’ history opened up a pronounced and extensive led to a wide schism within Memphis’ black community that would only grow wider and more disruptive to local black activist efforts become more pronounced over time. As this chapter will argue, the crisis of conscious among many black Memphians caused by the Reign of Terror ultimately eroded decades of progress, and delayed by years any real chance at bringing change to Memphis’ racial status quo while at the same time leading to an increased need to for nationally known figures to step in and make racial politics in Memphis a priority.

Principal Players

Though there are a number of principal players to be aware of in this chapter, Edward Hull Crump once again stands at the front of the list. As mentioned in previous chapters, by the 1940s Crump had forged something of a working relationship with Memphis’ black community leaders. While this alliance was mostly imbalanced in terms of power, nevertheless black Memphians were enfranchised to just enough of an extent that over the course of the 20s and 30s they had grown to see political power as not just a privilege, but as a basic right and necessity as citizens. Thus by the time this chapter picks up, tensions between Crump and the black community had become more and more noticeable, as an emboldened black middle class began
to openly challenge the Crump machine’s right to authority after years of broken promises, lip service and regressive actions on the part of the Crump regime.\textsuperscript{173}

Of further significant note for this chapter is a man named Joe Boyle, the police commissioner of Memphis in the 1940s. Hand-picked for the job by Crump himself, Boyle was a very straight-laced authority figure who operated without Crump’s veneer of racial paternalism. Boyle was not a man to stand for disruption to the racial status quo of Jim Crow Era Memphis. He was driven by an unwavering conviction that Communist activity had managed to infiltrate Memphis from within Memphis’s black community and that Communist agents had designs on upending what was in Boyle’s eyes a relatively stable and friendly relationship with black Memphians.\textsuperscript{174}

In his position as Memphis police commissioner, Boyle was the public face of the Reign of Terror, responsible for overseeing the occupation itself and handling relations with local print media. Throughout the entire months-long ordeal as well as afterward, Boyle insisted that the occupation was about fishing out subversive elements within the black community and that aggressive police action was necessary to maintain order, safety and peace within the city. In Boyle’s eyes, the outcome of doing nothing would almost certainly lead to the type of race riots affecting Southern cities around the same time.\textsuperscript{175} In this regard, police monitoring of politically active and/or subversive blacks was of absolute necessity. Beyond the specter of racial warfare, in Boyle’s express view, black activism if allowed to continue unfettered would not stop at politics but would in time escalate to demands for social equality, an absolutely untenable

\textsuperscript{173} “Politics, Says Negro Pastor: Referring to Charges Made in Boyle Letter,” The Commercial Appeal, December 6, 1940.
\textsuperscript{174} “We’ll Have No Race Trouble, Says Boyle: Declares Fanning of Hatred Must Come to End,” The Commercial Appeal, December 12, 1940.
\textsuperscript{175} “We’ll Have No Race Trouble, Says Boyle: Declares Fanning of Hatred Must Come to End,” The Commercial Appeal, December 12, 1940.
demand that threatened to destroy the social order of things and that needed to be stopped at any cost.\footnote{176}{"We'll Have No Race Trouble, Says Boyle: Declares Fanning of Hatred Must Come to End," The Commercial Appeal, December 12, 1940.}

A third historical actor worth foregrounding in this chapter is Dr. J.B. Martin – the black Memphis physician, druggist, and part owner of a Memphis negro baseball team whose pharmacy/general store was a center of black activity and became ground zero for the events of the Reign of Terror. After Martin participated in a number of meetings with other Memphis blacks to discuss supporting Republican candidates over Crump’s Democratic machine ticket he became the primary target of the Reign of Terror during which Crump and Boyle accused him of being everything from a Communist subversive to a dope peddler using his occupation as a druggist to cover up his criminal activities.\footnote{177}{"Boyle Tells Jenkins To Keep ‘Hands Out’: Nashville Republican Protests Policing of Drug Store,” The Commercial Appeal, November 8, 1940.} Throughout the entire ordeal, Martin unwaveringly insisted he was none of these things, and that the only reason he was being targeted was because he had the potential to be a powerful political voice for black Memphians.\footnote{178}{“Customers Searched At Negro Business,” The Commercial Appeal, October 26, 1940.} The events of the Reign of Terror disastrously disrupted Martin’s life, at one point even turning his own brother against him to side with Crump and eventually forcing Martin to leave Memphis entirely for Chicago. Subsequently, in an unheard of action, Martin would be barred from coming back to the city without special permission from Crump himself.

The events of the Memphis Reign of Terror lasted in total from October of 1940 to December of 1940. This chapter divides these events into three separate phases: 1. The initial raid and occupation of J.B. Martin’s store, which made headlines and created a large stir that turned up little in terms of illegal activity; 2. An expansion from a focus solely on Martin and his store into raids on numerous black businesses and neighborhoods in the surrounding area. These
efforts yielded a high number of arrests but also began to provoke a communal backlash that in turn lead to the third phase of the Reign of Terror; 3. The formation of an interracial committee comprised of local clergy and educators set on ending the dispute peacefully; and also a Federal investigation of Crump and Boyle’s activities. These two events eventually lead to the full withdrawal of police officers from the occupied black neighborhoods and businesses.

The following sections of this chapter describes and analyzes each of these phases in detail while also analyzing the ways in which these events help us to understand some of the peculiar racial politics at play in Memphis under Jim Crow. This chapter concludes by examining in close detail the final outcomes and consequences of the Reign of Terror for black politics and activism in Memphis.

**Occupyng Black Memphis**

It started one morning in late October with a police raid on Dr. J.B. Martin’s South Memphis area pharmacy and general store. Martin, a prominent black business owner had recently held a number of meetings with other black business owners and community leaders in his home on the topic of selecting a Republican challenger to run against the Crump machine in the next election thereby breaking away from Democratic rule in Memphis. Martin was a part of a growing class of black activists and community leaders who had begun to endorse and field their own slate of candidates for local political office.

With these actions Memphis’ black community declared in no uncertain terms that they had had enough of Crump’s stagnant attempts at placating their concerns. In turn, these actions provoked a swift and summary reaction from the Crump administration in an effort to maintain its grip on Memphis politics. This, however, was never the official reason given for the raid on and occupation of Martin’s shop. Rather, over the course of the next three months, Martin would
alternately be accused by E.H. Crump and Joe Boyle of being a “race agitator” out to stir up a riot and rebellion, a Communist conspiring with other “Reds” to infiltrate and undermine the sovereignty of the Union, and the operator of a den of vice where black outlaws and thugs congregated to fight, drink and gamble. ¹⁷⁹

It is important to note here the reasons behind this targeted character assassination of Martin. Memphis, as Crump and his machine lieutenants repeatedly liked to point out was not like other Southern cities in terms of race relations between blacks and whites. The nakedly open violence and intimidation of blacks that other Southern cities such as Little Rock, Atlanta, and Birmingham, to name just a few, experienced as a function of day-to-day life by and large did not occur in Memphis during the Jim Crow Era. However, whereas Crump, Boyle, and others in his regime would point to this contrast as a sign of supposed racial harmony in Memphis, in actuality, this idea could not have been further from the truth.

The outward lack of racial violence in Jim Crow Memphis merely masked a more insidious form of black disenfranchisement. Despite the machine’s overtures, Memphis was not a racially progressive city. Yet, Crump’s designs to shake Memphis’ longstanding reputation as a Southern backwater and turn it into a city of national importance necessitated a less open form of racial oppression. The Southern horrors of other cities would not be tolerated under the intense scrutiny of the national spotlight Crump wanted to shine on Memphis. And yet, Crump and his administration could not abide the specter of equality between the races either. It was simply a bridge too far, especially for Boyle who in a moment of perhaps careless honesty while speaking to local reporters remarked that Memphis always was and always would be “a white man’s city”

¹⁷⁹ “Memphis Police,” The Chicago Defender, Jan. 25, 1941; “Memphis Police Sued for $100,000 Damages, Says Officers Malicious In Enforcing Law,” The Chicago Defender, Nov. 8, 1941
and that “any negro who doesn’t agree to this better move on.”\textsuperscript{180} Thus, any and all acts of racial violence and intimidation against Memphis’s black population was either done covertly or intentionally framed in such a manner as to provide a level of plausible deniability that such acts had been motivated solely by race.

Cast in this light, then, such a grand and far-reaching event as the Memphis Reign of Terror called for a similarly grand effort at message control on the part of the Crump regime. It would draw national outrage and condemnation if Crump, Boyle et. al. were seen as explicitly violating the civil liberties and rights of equal protection under the law of political and racial rivals. However, if they were merely conducting a sweep into an unseemly area of town and routing out a few undesirables who just happened to be black and politically active, then that was an entirely different story, one which Crump must have felt would have withstood national scrutiny.

On the first day of the raid, October 25, 1940, about 40 white customers and 200 black customers were stopped and searched by Memphis police officers under the direct command of Police Commissioner Joe Boyle. Turning up no evidence of illegal activity, Boyle ordered his officers to maintain a presence at the location throughout the rest of the night.\textsuperscript{181} Boyle because the de facto face of the Reign of Terror owing to his position as police commissioner, and perhaps sensing that some would argue his actions were motivated by more than an innocuous desire to clean up the streets of Memphis, Police Commissioner Boyle was quick to get out in front of the news in an attempt to shape how its narrative would be told. Boyle declared in no uncertain terms, “The policing [of Martin’s shop] has nothing to do with politics” but instead

\textsuperscript{180} “We'll Have No Race Trouble, Says Boyle,” The Commercial Appeal, December 12, 1940.
\textsuperscript{181} “Customers Searched At Negro Business,” The Commercial Appeal, October 26, 1940.
was related to allegations from undisclosed sources of “dope-peddling” on Martin’s part.¹⁸² Martin, of course, was quick to deny such allegations insisting firmly that political revenge was the sole factor for the occupation of his store.¹⁸³

Undeterred by Martin’s protestations, Boyle stuck to his story, declaring that he was “going to continue policing Martin’s place until this nuisance [by which he meant the alleged illegal drug selling] is cleared up.” “I’ve warned Martin before, and I mean business,” Boyle told local papers.¹⁸⁴ To bolster his claim of Martin’s ill character, Boyle provided local reporters with records of a dismissed case where Martin had once been accused of buying stolen a shipment of aspirin from two other blacks. Furthermore, Boyle alleged Martin had earlier in the year somehow intervened in keeping a black woman from being taken to court over a speeding ticket by bribing the police officer who made the traffic stop.¹⁸⁵ No evidence was provided for these claims, but as a final dig at Martin’s character and integrity, Boyle pointed to a pool hall and restaurant that was neighbor to Martin’s shop as being the site of known drug activity and violence, implying Martin was either directly connected to these incidents or at the very least must have known of them by virtue of his drug store being in close proximity to.¹⁸⁶

The focus on Martin in all of these accusations was made all the more specious considering how prominent Martin was within Memphis’ black community. Not only did Martin’s drugstore stand as a center a social activity, Martin was also the newly elected chairman of a Republican political committee. In addition, Martin was also president of the American Negro Baseball Association and co-owner of the Memphis Red Sox, Memphis’ all-black

¹⁸² “Customers Searched At Negro Business,” The Commercial Appeal, October 26, 1940.
¹⁸³ “Customers Searched At Negro Business,” The Commercial Appeal, October 26, 1940.
¹⁸⁴ “Searchings Continue At Negro Drug Store,” The Commercial Appeal, October 27, 1940.
¹⁸⁵ “Searchings Continue At Negro Drug Store,” The Commercial Appeal, October 27, 1940.
¹⁸⁶ “Searchings Continue At Negro Drug Store,” The Commercial Appeal, October 27, 1940.
baseball team. Any single one of these facts would have made Martin a respected and well-known figure in the local black community. All three, however, made Martin a cornerstone of it.

Clearly, Boyle’s strategy was to attack not only Martin’s livelihood as a reputable physician but his standing within Memphis’ black community as well, making an example out of Martin so that others would see the disruption in his life and cease any and all political activities. In this endeavor Boyle had the express backing of the city’s political machine, as then-current mayor Walter Chandler soon issued a statement of support for Boyle’s activities declaring unequivocally “More power to Joe [Boyle]. I believe he is on the right track . . . Drug addicts cannot hold off long. They have got to have the drug and will come for it sooner or later.”

Ignoring suggestions of ulterior motives for and legal impropriety of the raid and occupation based on Martin’s recent political activities, Chandler went on to state “This is no time for appeasement with law violators and those under suspicion. The man who sells narcotics to the unfortunate victims of the drug habit is entitled to no mercy.”

Police Commissioner Boyle stated numerously that the goal of his raids into black communities was to crack down on “undesirables.” His list of people under surveillance ran the gamut from preachers, doctors, restaurant owners, newspaper reporters, drug store owners like Martin and even an undertaker. They were all potential subversives, and in Boyle’s view it was an “established fact” that “radical labor agitators and subversive agents [had] been working among Southern negroes for a long time.” If anyone was to blame for the trouble that Fall, it was the blacks themselves who had been out “fanning race hatred.”

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187 Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, 38-39.
188 “Mayor Backs Boyle In Antidrug Crusade,” The Commercial Appeal, November 1, 1940.
189 “Mayor Backs Boyle In Antidrug Crusade,” The Commercial Appeal, November 1, 1940.
190 “We’ll Have No Race Trouble, Says Boyle, Declares Fanning of Hatred Must Come To End, Negroes Get Warning,” The Commercial Appeal, December 12, 1940; Joe Boyle, “For Safety Of All,” The Commercial Appeal,
Writing letters to local white papers with regularity, Boyle pointed out the necessity of his occupation by routinely stating that his police force was all that stood between safety and order on one hand, and all-out racial warfare the likes of which other Southern cities were seeing. “We are not going to have any trouble with the Negroes in Memphis if it can be avoided,” Boyle wrote. “A great many cities in the North and South have had serious race riots with tremendous blood-shed. If careful and stern preparation for the defense of peace will prevent it, it will be prevented in Memphis.” If the true intent and meaning of Boyle’s words could be mistaken up to this point, Boyle went clarified more explicitly, “I say again this is a white man’s country, and always will be and any negro who doesn’t agree to this better move on.” It should be noted of course that no evidence of Communist or labor union involvement was ever found in these raids and that despite Boyle’s charged rhetoric, such suspicions were never the true point of the Reign of Terror to begin with. The “evidence” that Boyle and Crump used to justify the raids ranged from local black papers copying stories about racial issues in cities such as Chicago and Pittsburgh. These stores covered topics as wide-ranging as fights between black and white teens after football games, blacks gathering in crowds and cursing whites who drive by, blacks taking up too many seats while riding public transportation. To Boyle and Crump, Northern stories such as these being reported on in the South had the potential to stir up trouble and discontent in Memphis, upsetting the delicate balance of “peaceful” relations between the races. ¹⁹¹

Throughout all of this, however, Boyle repeatedly made a key distinction between blacks who were “patriots” and those who were “dissidents” whose ideological leanings were “selfish”

¹⁹¹ “Police Drive Results Reflected In Court, Only Two Fines For Carrying Weapons Levied,” The Commercial Appeal, Dec. 19, 1940; “We’ll Have No Race Trouble, Says Boyle, Declares Fanning of Hatred Must Come To End, Negroes Get Warning,” The Commercial Appeal, unknown date, 1940; “Boyle’s Crime Fight Is Showing Results, Theft And Homicide Reports Down 50%,” The Commercial Appeal, date unknown, 1940
and, as Boyle pointedly noted, carried a “distinctly Nazi flavor.” The misappropriation of such rhetoric here perhaps verges on the absurd, and yet it was an ideology routinely espoused by the Crump machine, for what better way to portray one’s cause as righteous and detractors as abhorrent than by using what in many regards may be the epitome of such a dichotomy. In this schema, “patriots” were those backed the goals of E.H. Crump and recognized his benevolence. “Dissidents” were, in short, those who did not.

In this regard, Boyle, and by extension Crump, explicitly attempted to divide the black community into “good” and “bad” members while offering an “out” to those who would take it and publicly rebuke their “bad” counterparts. Boyle’s likening of black agitation to Fascism stands as a self-evident bit of historical irony on one hand. But on the other, such patently absurd rhetoric also highlights the desperation on the part of the Crump machine to fully marginalize such agitation as something innately foreign or outside of the mainstream within the context of traditional Southern society.

Boyle furthermore wrote that any “intelligent” negro knew it to be correct in his or her heart that “for the safety of all Negroes,” a stand had to be taken by their more reasonable counterparts. They should abandon the agitators within their number and stand on the side of order, the side represented by E.H. Crump’s governance. If they rejected this offer of a “sparser deal,” as one commentator put it, they would all “pay harshly” as a group for the actions of the few. This thinly veiled threat of racial violence served as a backup plan should the rhetoric of kindly and benign paternalism fail to meet its mark.

It would seem, however, that some combination of the Crump machine’s carrot and stick offer did work exactly as planned, as one of the most surprisingly open defenders of Crump and

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Boyle’s actions, however, turned out to be J.B. Martin’s own brother, W.S. Martin, a local physician and someone else who would have been looked at as an influential black community member. Writing a personal letter to Crump about a week after the police occupation had begun, the other Martin pleaded with Crump not to lump him in together with the “serious mistake” of his brother’s political actions and was emphatic that in contrast to his brother, he was in fact quite grateful for Crump’s many years of patronage and benefits, including the construction of new schools and playgrounds, and the renovation of three negro housing projects. Reminding Crump of his appointment by a city councilman to a local negro Democratic political board, W.S. Martin promised that he would ask all of his friends and associates to remain loyal to the Democratic ticket from President Roosevelt on down.

Taking pains to remind Crump of the “30 year-long relationship” the two had (one questions the need to so explicitly do so if their relationship was as close as Martin intimates) that began with Martin purchasing a buggy from Crump, Martin closes his letter by once again emphasizing that his intent in writing was to assure Crump that he “appreciate[d] all you have done for the colored people of Memph[is] and Shelby county and that I am one hundred percent behind the entire democratic ticket and that I deem it a privilege and an honor in doing so.”

193 In contrast to the close relationship Martin appeared to believe he shared with Crump, just a few months earlier he had written another letter practically begging Crump for just a “five or ten minute conference” to get Crump’s advice on a business matter.

194 Another revealing example of black leaders flocking to rebuke Martin and his political activities involved black physician, Dr. T.O. Fuller. With Fuller having long been a member of Crump’s inner circle of black community leaders, J.B. Martin wrote to him seeking aid in the
hopes that Fuller could convince Crump end the occupation of Martin’s pharmacy. In his letter, Martin earnestly pleaded his case that he was a man who, despite owning his own shop and being seen as one of the more prominent of Memphis’ black community. In actuality, he was not a very wealthy man, and he could not withstand the loss of business caused by the Memphis Police Department’s occupation for much longer. Martin wrote that “I have been misunderstood, and I am making this for appeal to you to straighten this matter our for me. With all that you have done for the administration, if you can’t, no one else can. If you think my activities in politics has anything to do with the matter, I am willing to cease from now on.”

Whether Martin’s turnaround here represented an actual acquiescence to the machine or simply a desire to see his life swiftly return to some semblance of normalcy, there is no record available of how Fuller responded to Martin’s plea. From what is known of Fuller’s own history, however, one can presume it would not have been the way Martin intended. Fuller, arguably even more so than Martin’s own brother was loyal to and firmly in the pocket of the Crump administration. Fuller, in fact, seemed to enjoy the type of close relationship with Crump and the machine that W.S. Martin so wishfully presumed to enjoy. Routinely, Crump and Fuller would exchange favors with one another. Crump would donate money to the church that Fuller owned, and Fuller would respond in kind by, for example, providing Crump with such items as free passes to see the local negro baseball team, the Memphis Red Sox. Fuller would on other occasions entreat Crump to offer a letter of support to a friend hoping to avoid the draft and also ask Crump for monetary support to bring a black Baptist convention to Memphis, pledging that

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195 Letter to Dr. T.O. Fuller from J.B. Martin, November 7, 1940, Memphis Public Library, E.H. Crump Collection.
such an act of support would make valuable inroads with Southern negroes. In time, Fuller would even go on to personally attempt to persuade Crump of the need to compile lists of loyal members of the black community who could be counted on to pledge their allegiances to Crump in future political endeavors. These negro “Friends of Shelby County” were, on Fuller’s suggestion, to be organized into constituency blocks by occupation, targeting black business owners, teachers, clergy, general laborers, and so forth.

The question must be asked here, what was it that caused so many of Memphis’ black elite to continue to support Crump in the face of the havoc his administration was wreaking on members of their own community? There is the obvious answer Crump’s intimidation tactics were working and that they were simply fearful of being Crump’s next targets if they openly opposed him in the way that J.B. Martin did. However, I argue that this is only half of a broader conclusion that can be reached here. In order to fully understand the somewhat puzzling loyalty that these black elites continued to show the Crump regime, we must think historically about the type of relationship between Crump and his black allies in Memphis.

As mentioned previously, Memphis was unlike the majority of other Southern cities when it came to relations between the city’s white ruling class and its black leaders. For decades up to this point, the two sides had managed to maintain something of a working relationship in terms of quid pro quo benefits. The black elite kept the broader masses convinced that Crump and his regime were their best hopes for political enfranchisement and by doing so likewise prevented Memphis’ black population from causing too much disruption to Crump’s agenda. In

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return, Crump only rarely openly resorted to the types of heavy-handed racial violence found in other areas of the deep South and from time to time would make a token gesture towards addressing one of the many ills plaguing the black community, for example, approving the construction of a segregated swimming pool or public park so that blacks had a public space to congregate that approximated those that white Memphians often took for granted.

Make no mistake however; this relationship was decidedly slanted in Crump’s favor. It was something of an open secret in Memphis that dissenters to white authority in Memphis were taken care of private and under the cloak of darkness rather than in the naked daylight of the public watch. Yet, it must also be understood that as unequal a power relationship as it was, it was still far more beneficial than the racial norms of Jim Crow South writ large dictated. Thus, in this light, many of Memphis’ black elites while perhaps privately none too fond of Crump’s paternalism felt it was either making due with his caprices or nothing at all. The grip on a sliver of racial equality in Memphis was at best always a tenuous one, and the efforts of J.B. Martin and others threatened to render it nonexistent entirely, or in other words, ruining it for everyone. In the moment, then, that fear superseded any supposed ideas of racial solidarity, prompting so many to throw Martin under the figurative bus when the opportunity arose.

The actions of T.O. Fuller’s and W.S. Martin show us that despite Crump’s incursion into black civil liberties, the ties that bound the Crump machine and Memphis’ black leadership community were still quite strong at this historical moment. They were solid enough to the point where voiced political opposition to the machine provoked a virulent response from within Memphis’ black community, as many were fearful of losing the working relationships that they had with the Crump machine.
The Machine Reaches Further

The round-the-clock surveillance and policing of Martin’s store and customers would continue on for weeks with no tangible results in terms of arrests to show for the effort. Now entering its second month, and with local media beginning to openly question the purpose efficacy of the occupation, Boyle ordered his officers to spread out their efforts and search not just Martin’s customers but anyone who happened to be out occupying the vicinity and looked like they might be of suspicious character. These searches quickly escalated into mass arrests. Blacks, Hispanics, the elderly, the young, the working and the unemployed were all fair game to be targeted. They were all rounded up and prosecuted with more than a few tales of injuries being picked up along the way.

The paranoia of the ongoing raid reached a fever pitch when even a white Catholic priest walking through the neighborhood was caught in the dragnet at one point. Father Bertrand Kock, clad in full monk’s robes, was stopped by police, searched and even ordered to remove his sandals and stockings for inspection. Kock was in the area to visit a black parishioner, of which he had more than 700, as he belonged to one of only two Catholic churches in Memphis that served blacks. Kock would note that for the all the impropriety of his search, during his experience he witnessed a number of blacks themselves being treated much more harshly being physically shoved around by police officers stationed in the area.199

Of course, any reasonable person would not have suspected the good Father of engaging in any of the illicit activities of which Martin and others in the black neighborhood were being publicly accused of. And yet, Father Kock was detained and harassed regardless of the respect one would assume his clothing, let alone his race, would have provided him with. The real crime

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199 His Robes No Protection: Police Here Search Priest As he Enters Negro’s Cafe, Commercial Appeal, October 30, 1940.
that Kock committed to warrant such treatment was his traversal onto what was seen as a black space. knowingly or unknowingly, by visiting Martin’s shop, Kock transgressed against Memphis’ hidden racial boundaries. There was a “black” sphere and a “white” sphere, and the two were only meant to intersect under controlled conditions. The fact that Kock routinely ministered to black parishioners in the neighborhood made his transgression all the more severe. Thus, in the moment of his detainment, Kock was no longer seen as a priest or even a white Memphian. Rather, these facets of his identity were forcefully and quite literally in regard to his clothing, stripped from him, and for the moment he became just another person upsetting the racial order of Jim Crow Memphis.

Perhaps the most dramatic action of the Reign of Terror next to the initial raid on J.B. Martin’s store, however, was a mass arrest that occurred around 3 weeks into the occupation in mid-November. All told 65 blacks were rounded up in one fell swoop out on Beale St. Widely noted and even celebrated in song as an area of the city that was the pre-eminent destination for black social activity, the Beale St. represented no less than a full-frontal assault on the civil liberties and freedoms of black Memphians even as Boyle stressed that he had nothing personal against the good and “honest” blacks who frequented the street and its establishments. On the 13th of November, after Boyle announced an expanded initiative to include “all the lawless frequenting and operating on Beale . . . and other sections of the city where lawlessness has been known to exist,” 10 businesses, from cafes, to pool halls, to restaurants and juke joints, were raided in one night by over 20 officers. Making sure to tie the raids in with the ongoing crusade against J.B. Martin, Boyle issued a public statement that the raids were part in parcel with his
agenda of cleaning up Memphis and issued a new attack against Martin claiming that he had once bribed a former police chief with an expensive new suit.\textsuperscript{200}

A total of 65 blacks, systematically, lined up, searched and arrested with each charged with carrying a knife or other illegal item, things like pen knives, switchblades and what was known as an “Arkansas toothpick.” Of the 65, 5 were released the next day because it was decided their weapons did not fit the parameters/description to be considered illegal. The others were all fined $50 each. One man, Roy King, protested that the police had no right to search him without probable cause and was fined an additional $10 on a charge of public intoxication.\textsuperscript{201} Police and local newspapers hailed the mass roundup as a sign that Boyle’s occupation was working as intended and pointed to a subsequent lack of stabbings and arrests for weapons carrying as proof.\textsuperscript{202}

As the occupation stretched on into the month of December, Boyle would continue to proclaim his the need for vigilance, at one point declaring that after months of effort, he had identified a number of subversives within the black community whom he charged with “fanning race hatred.” Boyle’s list included black clergy, doctors, cooks and restaurant owners, newspaper writers and editors, an undertaker and, pointedly, “one negro drug store operator.” List cast suspicion on blacks from all walks of life, with the explicit assumption that anyone could be and most likely was guilty until proven innocent. “Should anything happen in Memphis,” Boyle declared, “These 19 will be largely responsible for it.”\textsuperscript{203}

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\textsuperscript{200} Police Swoop Down On Beale, Other Sections, To Round Up 65 Knife-Carrying Negroes, Commercial Appeal, November 14, 1940.
\textsuperscript{201} Knife-Toting Negroes Fined $3000 In Court, Commercial Appeal, November 15, 1940.
\textsuperscript{202} Ibid., “Boyle’s Crime Fight Is Showing Results, Theft And Homicide Reports Down 50%,” The Commercial Appeal, date unknown, 1940; “Police Drive Results Reflected In Court, Only Two Fines For Carrying Weapons Levied,” The Commercial Appeal, Dec. 19, 1940
\textsuperscript{203} Boyle Keeps His eyes on 19 Negroes: They’re Fanning Race Feeling In Memphis, Commissioner Believes,” Commercial Appeal, December 11, 1940.
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Signs of a Counter-Offensive

With the paranoia escalating and reaching perhaps its zenith with this proclamation and the occupation now dragging on into a third month of police occupation and harassment, an organized backlash began to unfold, as some in Memphis’ community decided that enough was enough. Two significant events happened in the latter stages of the occupation that forced Boyle, Mayor Chandler and Crump’s hands as far as calling off the continued police occupation of black neighborhoods and eventually led to them calling off the occupation entirely. These events showcase both the ways in which the Reign of Terror had begun to change the nature of racial politics in Memphis in some aspects, while reinforcing the status quo in other aspects.

The first event of note, and unprecedented in Memphis history up to this point, was the formation of an interracial council Commission that was comprised of local clergymen and educators. This commission tasked itself with the goal of ending the police that wanted an end to the occupation of black Memphis and in the process, restoring a measure a restoration of peace to in what they saw as a the city in the grip of turmoil. This commission was fairly diverse in terms of its racial make-up. The commission included not only prominent black ministers such as Rev. George A. Long of Beale St. Baptist Church, Rev. Harry B. Gordon of Centenary Methodist Church, and Rev. Howard Perry, but also white ministers clergy who were well-known in the city such as Rev. William G. Gerhl of Grace St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Rev. Alfred Loaring-Clark of St. John’s Episcopal Church., and The diversity of this commission was purposeful insofar as its members wanted to present a racially united front to show the Crump administration that the Reign of Terror was an event that in one way or another affected all Memphis alike, not just black and white. As will be shown, however, given the prevailing racial
climate of Memphis, the commission’s diversity was ultimately both its greatest strength and a source of weakness.\textsuperscript{204}

For weeks after its initial formation in November, the commission attempted to meet with either Boyle, Chandler or Crump in an effort to express their concerns over what they called the harassment, intimidation and persecution of black Memphians. For just as many weeks, however, their efforts for what they perceived to be entirely political reasons, and they were repeatedly denied a face to face with anyone in charge. The Crump regime had no intentions whatsoever of dignifying the commission’s efforts in the public eye, as to even grant them a meeting would have meant that their concerns about racial persecution in the city were valid enough that they even needed to be addressed. Not only that, Boyle went as far as to publicly rebuke their efforts by saying they were dangerously close to promoting full social equality between black and white Memphians, a charge that in the South routinely served as a way to stymie racially progressive activism.\textsuperscript{205} The specter of “full” racial equality in the South invariably played upon deeply rooted fears to the fear amongst many Southern whites that a time would come in the life of America where they would be compelled against their will of not only being not only forced to share public spaces with blacks but, even worse, to envision a future ruled by miscegenation and the “tainting” of the white genetic stock. The term “racial equality” as spoken by Southern whites had carried these connotations for decades by the time of the Memphis Reign of Terror, and Boyle knew exactly the effect his charges would have in the Interracial Commission’s efforts.

\textsuperscript{204} Mass Meeting Is Planned By Racial Groups: Whites, Negroes Will Meet To Further Improvement Of Relations, Memphis Press-Scimitar, November, 1940.; Politics, Says Negro Pastor: Referring to Charges Made in Boyle Letter, Memphis Press-Scimitar, December 1940; Boyle Declines to Meet Interracial Commission: Sternly Rebukes Group in Letter Sent to Dr. Howie, Chairman of Organization, Memphis Press-Scimitar, December 1940.

\textsuperscript{205} “Boyle Issues Strong Rebuke to Group for Racial Charges,” The Commercial Appeal, December 5, 1940.
In a sternly worded letter, Boyle wrote “Lawlessness of this city is our problem, day and night and we suggest you leave it to us. We know what we are doing.” Boyle argued that Memphis blacks had absolutely no grounds to complain given that for such a large percentage of its population their total taxes paid only totaled 5% of the city’s income collection. “We have no race trouble here,” Boyle stated plainly at one point. It was a refrain that would become the go-to defense against any and all challenges to white authority in Memphis. The true source of any perceived discontent came from “selfish and unprincipled negro paper promoters” who were intent on “conducting themselves as if they lived in Chicago, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.”

Moreover, Boyle charged that the black members of the interracial commission, specifically those such as Rev. Long and Rev. Gibson were firmly against the notion of “white supremacy” which was the natural order of things in Memphis. Finally, Boyle concluded by imploring the white members of the commission to rethink their positions, arguing, “Please don’t be disturbed – have no misgivings about the negroes here. Much has been done for them. Mayor Walter Chandler, Mr. H.W. Hale and Mr. E.H. Crump have had their interest at heart for many years – long before a majority of the Interracial Commission came to live in Memphis.”

Never missing a chance to take another pot shot at J.B. Martin, Boyle also argued that the white commission members should be careful of the company they cast their lots in together with, saying that Martin and his wife, being fair skinned, had once passed for white to attend a Barnum and Bailey Circus and gloated about the fact afterward. “It is utterly beyond my

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206 Boyle Declines to Meet Interracial Commission: Sternly Rebukes Group in Letter Sent to Dr. Howie, Chairman of Organization, Memphis Press-Scimitar, December 1940.
207 Boyle Declines to Meet Interracial Commission: Sternly Rebukes Group in Letter Sent to Dr. Howie, Chairman of Organization, Memphis Press-Scimitar, December 1940.
understanding how you white ministers can get in on a proposition of this kind when you are so poorly informed on what is actually going on.”

Knowing the stakes of allowing such charges to stand, this was a charge the council, of course, strenuously denied Boyle’s allegations. Whatever their intentions truly were, to publically admit otherwise would have been tantamount to discrediting their efforts entirely with the majority of Memphis’ white population. Thus, the united racial front that had begun in earnest as an effort to show how the Reign of Terror had disrupted the peace of Memphis for all its citizens, not just blacks, now turned into a liability for the council’s efforts. The popular thinking in Jim Crow Memphis was that the one and only reason an organized interracial group would or even could exist was if it had some grand agenda to fully invert the city’s white, male power structure, what many whites took for granted as the sheer natural order of things. The organized co-mingling of the races in such a manner was otherwise anathema.

For their part, many black members of the Interracial Commission spoke out about what they saw as the true reason for the intrusions into black neighborhoods. Rev. George Long and a number of other black clergy argued that the search for “reds” and subversives was in effect little more than a coded message meant to disguise the political motivations of Crump and Boyle. Upon receiving death threats in the mail, Long pleaded vehemently that he had “never made any statements about Negro social equality . . . The whole thing is over the fact that I was active politically during the recent campaign, but not on the side of the political administration.”

In this statement we see multiple things beginning to happen. While Long and other were very adamant about exposing the police occupation for the politically-motivated farce that it was,
even while defending themselves, many of those very same leaders in no uncertain terms began distancing themselves from the more radical charges of stirring up discontent within Memphis’ black community. This active distancing reveals a thought that many black leaders would come to share, that it was far better and more palatable to be seen as simply exercising one’s political rights than fighting for one’s civil rights. The white members of the Interracial Commission eventually adopted a similar stance.

Denied a face-to-face meeting with Boyle, Mayor Chandler or Boss Crump himself for weeks now, the commission began to moderate its tone and message. This in turn finally led to the council being granted a two-hour meeting with both Boyle and Chandler in early December. The meeting, most tellingly, was held on the condition that only the white members of the commission could be in attendance. Thus, the message being sent was clear. Despite the commission’s efforts to involve blacks in the process, the Reign of Terror would be discussed and planned only on the terms of white authority in the city. This was something that was happening to Memphis blacks. It was not something happening with them, an important distinction.

Somewhat astonishingly, despite it occurring on segregated terms and with no black input whatsoever, the meeting was hailed as a total success and landmark moment in the history of race relations in Memphis by both, as the two sides – Boyle and Chandler, and very specifically the white members of the Interracial Commission. The details of the meeting were not made public; nevertheless, both sides proclaimed victory and publicly stated that any tensions between the two sides were the result of misunderstandings of each other. Rev. Alfred Loaring-Clark of St. John’s Episcopal Church stated “We had a very happy conference . . . From beginning to end,

\[210\] "Politics, Says Negro Pastor, Referring To Charges Made In Boyle Letter," The Commercial Appeal, date unknown, 1940

\[211\] Racial Commission and City Fathers in Harmony, Memphis Press-Scimitar, December 1940
no antagonism was shown and the city stated its intentions of continuing the policy of help and consideration of all negro problems.”

Loaring-Clark went on to describe how “The Interracial Commission stated its objective of better relations between the two races in Memphis. It added that the perfect race relations could better be accomplished by understanding and good will than by force. I think the city agreed in that.” On the question of social equality between blacks and whites, it was stated “No such thing as race equality has ever been mentioned in our meetings. We’re all Southerners.” Rev. W.B. Selah of St. John’s Methodist Church concurred, opining; “I thought we had a very good meeting and have ironed out any differences that may have existed between city officials and the commission. I believe we will be able to work together.”212

For his part, Mayor Chandler was in complete agreement with this assessment. “The ministers who called on us expressed approval of the city’s law enforcement program and assured us that their sole desire is to co-operate whenever possible for them to do so. They expressed the feeling that their membership on the commission might enable them to be of good service to the city government in meeting inter-racial problems arising from time to time. Commissioner Boyle and I thanked them and assured them of our appreciation of their good purposes.”213

Perhaps most telling in the midst of this celebration and back patting, there was no public statement on whether or not the police occupation of black neighborhoods would end. For all the pomp and circumstance in the wake of the meeting, little that was tangible actually occurred in its aftermath. Perhaps content that just by expressing its views to those in charge, even if those views had been moderated to an extent, it had done as much as it could, or perhaps fearful of

212 Racial Commission and City Fathers in Harmony, Memphis Press-Scimitar, December 1940
213 Racial Commission and City Fathers in Harmony, Memphis Press-Scimitar, December 1940
pushing a more radical agenda, the commission no longer took it upon itself to try and end the Reign of Terror. The claim that the basic civil and human rights of black Memphians were being violated by the events of the Reign of Terror would no longer be a tenable argument, as any the easy capitulation of the Interracial Commission to the machine for all intents and purposes rendered any further efforts at discursive protest moot.

Federal Intervention

Even as the efforts of the Interracial Commission to end the Reign of Terror ultimately petered out ineffectually, other avenues for redress had already been set in motion. With the Reign of Terror having dragged on for three solid months of raids, searches, seizures, arrests and beatings, the news of what was occurring down in Memphis eventually filtered out to a national audience bringing more attention to the city than any in the Memphis city government wanted.

Ray H. Jenkins, state manager for the Tennessee Republican party took note in late November and released a statement that the disenfranchisement of potential Republican voters in Memphis was unconscionable, illegal and needed to be brought to a swift end. In his view, the Reign of Terror “amount[ed] to a confiscation of a person’s property,” and “That’s the most deadly way in the world to put a man out of business.” Boyle, in typical blustery fashion, advised Jenkins “to keep [his] hands out of Memphis.” Boyle sent a telegram to Jenkins warning him “When you endeavor to defend J.B. Martin, do you realize you are defending one who is a common fence dealing in stolen property whose police record is notorious in this community and further has been the subject of a narcotic investigation?” As he likewise has

told the Interracial Commission, Boyle went on to write, “If you knew the facts, you are undertaking to defend practices that no honorable man would countenance.”

Here we see multiple things happening at once in regards to the tension between the racial conflicts of Jim Crow Memphis being at once a local concern and also a concern that touched upon larger statewide and national concerns. For all the effort at painting the occupation of black neighborhoods and businesses in Memphis as a routine and necessary measure to stop and deter illicit activity, the scale of such an undertaking and its brazenness was on an entirely new level compared to Memphis’s prior history of racial conflicts. In part, this reaction tapped into a fairly long-simmering schism between West Tennessee politics and East Tennessee politics. The former had been synonymous with Crump and his machine brand of politics for decades at this point, drawing the ire of many of Tennessee’s other politicians and businessmen who viewed Crump as rule-breaking upstart and demagogue. This in part explains why the concern manifested itself in terms of Crump potentially driving Martin out of business, rather than revolving around the machine’s racial antagonism. That stated, while to a certain extent the criticism of Crump played into longstanding political and business rivalries, I argue that the inherent drama of an event such as the Reign of Terror was such that the usual message massaging on the part of the Crump administration failed to keep the Reign of Terror a strictly local affair.

In that regard, if Boyle, Chandler and Crump thought that would be the end of outside investigation into their affairs, however, they were sorely mistaken. On a national level, there was no institution more dedicated to exposing and ending Crump and Boyle’s machinations than black newspaper, the Chicago Defender. Martin and other local blacks reached out to the

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Defender in an effort to get their story out with the hopes that by drawing national attention to it, Crump and Boyle would relent. The editors of the Defender, having a longstanding national reputation as a defender of black rights longstanding grudge against Crump were more than happy to oblige, and ran frequent editorials excoriating the “tyrant” at the head of Memphis politics. Moreover, the paper called on and calling on the both President Roosevelt and the Department of Justice and even President Roosevelt himself to take action to end what the paper dubbed, the Memphis Reign of Terror.218

As if such a large amount of unwanted national attention was not enough, the final nail in the coffin for the events of the Reign of Terror was driven when the U.S. federal government began to get involved. What made this wound the most severe was that it was entirely self-inflicted on the part of the Crump administration. While on a trip to the East Coast, in early December, Boyle had met with FBI authorities and federal Narcotics Division officials seeking aid in his ongoing effort to “clean up Memphis.” Upon his return to Memphis, Boyle offered optimistically “All I can say about it is that I talked with the heads of these two departments and received full assurance of co-operation wherever it is needed.” Boyle added, “There are lots of things we can do by ourselves, but there are other things, naturally, in which we must be assisted. An FBI agent is expected here in about a month to investigate certain of these things. They aren’t going finishing up this cleanup program though. I haven’t started anything I can’t finish, and I’m not going to.”219

These words however would prove to be a bit of an overreach on Boyle’s part however, as within just a few weeks, he shut down the police occupation suddenly and overnight. The normally quite loquacious talkative Boyle merely issued a terse statement that read, said “We are

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218 “Petition FDR to end Tenn. Police Terror,” The Chicago Defender, Feb. 15, 1941.
going to police the store in a different manner.” Moreover, Boyle, Chandler and Crump and stridently,” and refused to comment further on the reasons for the abrupt reversal of position.\textsuperscript{220}

What could have happened to cause such an abrupt turnaround?

We can make an educated guess that the looming Federal appraisal of the situation in Memphis had at least something to do with. Whereas as Boyle initially projected a bold sense of optimism that the federal government would certainly back up his efforts at policing black Memphis, the truth could not have been further from such hubris. U.S. Justice Dept. Attorney Col. Amos W.W. Woodcock visited Memphis after President Roosevelt received a strongly worded letter for help from the Southern Conference for Human Welfare r. regarding the harassment of blacks that had been occurring in Memphis for 3 months.\textsuperscript{221} The letter was particularly damning for Boyle, Crump and Mayor Chandler arguing 6 major points:

1. In retaliation for black community organizing over supporting other presidential candidates than the one Crump preferred, the Memphis police began a systematic campaign designed to drive Martin and other black community leaders out of business “under the guise” of law enforcement. 2. The Memphis police had threatened to “run out of town” “scores” of black Memphians who opposed the Crump regime politically, most notably black newspaper editors and writers. 3. “Scores” of blacks had been arrested solely on a loosely defined charge of “loitering” and nothing else. 4. On segregated streetcars, black Memphians had been routinely provoked to anger by Memphis police in an effort to give the police department “a pretext for wholesale violence.” 5. Memphis authorities stockpiled numerous submachine guns in anticipation of their use being necessary in what they saw as the likely event a full-on race riot. 6. Members of the Interracial Religious Commission had been pressured to cancel a planned conference scheduled for late December because of what police referred to as “reliable evidence” that the conference was meant to be a build-up to a race riot. These conditions do evidence that a race riot situation is being fanned by the authorities of Memphis, including Ed. H. Crump. As to what reasons like behind this series of arrests, threats and intimidations, we are not clear . . . Mr. Crump is apparently fearful that the abolition of the poll tax system in the South

\textsuperscript{220} Police Abandon Store Picketing; Searching of Dr. Martin’s Customers Halted, Memphis Press-Scimitar, December 1940.
\textsuperscript{221} U.S. Investigator Reports On Charges That Memphis Negroes Are Intimidated, Col. Woodcock, Here For Four Days, Gives Findings to Attorney General on Charge of Abuse by Police, Memphis Press-Scimitar, January 8, 1941
will bring a measure of freedom and independence to the citizens of Memphis and make it more difficult for his machine to attempt to herd the voters to the polls to vote for his candidates. He is evidently determined to stamp out any movement for independence in Memphis. By these means, Ed Crump and the city administration of Memphis, which he controls, are seeking to establish an efficient dictatorship which could be used as a pattern to under democracy in other parts of the United States, especially in the South. This situation in Memphis calls for the immediate intervention of federal authorities and the Department of Justice to maintain order and elementary American rights in Memphis. We expect that you will use your high authority to intervene in Memphis to maintain order and preserve peace and liberty for the people of Memphis."

After visiting Memphis to investigate these claims, the Justice Department concluded that the evidence of black intimidation would not stand up in a court, but very pointedly made sure to remind Commissioner Boyle of Federal Civil Rights laws and the consequences for their violation. 223 The claim that legal charges could not be sustained against Crump, Boyle and others appears to have been based less on terms of legality and more on an unwillingness on the part of the Federal government to get too closely involved in local racial affair. However, even with such a tenuous denouncement of what was occurring Memphis, an important point had been made. Boyle’s belief that federal intervention would in fact bolster his and Crump’s efforts was not only sorely wrong, it also highlighted rather starkly the contrast between how Memphs saw itself and how the city was seen nationally. The Crump regime in Memphis just saw itself as maintaining business as usual with regards to interactions with the city’s black population. The Reign of Terror may have been dramatic, but in the eyes of the Crump regime, it was not outside the boundaries of Southern social mores to make such efforts from time to time in the name of maintaining the racial order. And to a certain extent, the Crump administration was right in this

222 U.S. Investigator Reports On Charges That Memphis Negroes Are Intimidated, Col. Woodcock, Here For Four Days, Gives Findings to Attorney General on Charge of Abuse by Police, Memphis Press-Scimitar, January 8, 1941
223 J-Man Reports on Memphis Negro Inquiry – Here’s Result: Tells Jackson Evidence That Police Violated Civil Rights Wouldn’t Stand In Court – Spoke To Boyle, Memphis Press-Scimitar, January 9, 1941.
regard. In the South, their actions were not out of the ordinary, and even might be considered
tame compared to the racial disquiet of other Southern cities.

The discord, however, lies in Memphis’ aspirations to not just be another Southern city,
but to compete on a national stage. However, as the response from the federal government
indicates, outside of the South, the types of Draconian methods of racial control implemented by
the Crump regime did not fly, and thus, the Southern city with Northern aspirations that
Memphis was at the time was rebuked and publicly scorned for the actions it took, actions that
again, would not be outside of the ordinary in a specifically Southern context. In this case,
however, what might be termed the “Southern-ness” of Memphis’s racial attitudes blinded it to
how its actions would be perceived on a national scale, a platform to which Memphis desperately
wanted access to but was restrained from owing to its nagging Southern DNA. Boyle and
Crump may have escaped legal consequences for their actions, but the message that they were to
cease all overt harassment immediately or face consequences was very clear. And in that way,
the Reign of Terror in Memphis was formally ended, although its ultimate consequences would
linger on for some time to come.

Aftermath and Conclusions

By the time December rolled around, three months since the round the clock occupation
of J.B. Martin’s drug store and the surrounding neighborhood first began, Boyle finally pulled
his police off of surveillance duty. It scarcely mattered at this point, however. The message of
the Reign of Terror had been made and the damage had been done. For months now blacks
passing through and by J.B. Martin’s drug store had been witness to the spectacle of other blacks
being assaulted and hauled off to jail by the dozens each and every day. Many, including Martin
himself, left town hoping for greener pastures elsewhere. Martin eventually abandoned Memphis.
and its racial and political perils altogether for Chicago, leaving behind the pharmacy that had
been passed down to him from his father and placing it in the hands of his own son in turn.

Even years after the Reign of Terror ended, Crump, Fuller and others remained kept an
eye on J.B. Martin’s activities barring him from returning to Memphis unless his activities while
in town could be carefully monitored in order to ensure he would not cause further trouble for
the Crump machine by stirring up political discontent by trying to organize the black vote to do
more than reelect the machine ticket year after year.\(^{224}\) Those who would choose to continue on
and organize would now a much more uncertain future as far as black political activism in
Memphis went. Effecting change in Memphis would never have been easy, but now the effort
must have seemed all the more insurmountable.\(^{225}\)

Recent historical scholarship on Memphis by historians such as Michael Honey and
Laurie Green, among a number of others, has showcased the rigors of daily life under the
oppressive hand of Jim Crow. These scholars have revealed in sometimes shocking detail the
oftentimes brutally violent methods employed by those in power to both politically and
economically disenfranchise black Memphians. Michael Honey has famously described
Memphis during the first half of the twentieth century as a “stronghold of one of the toughest
political bosses ever to emerge in the United States, Edward H. Crump.”\(^{226}\) Green, for her part,
has uncovered what she describes as Memphis’ pervasive and enduring “plantation mentality”
during the Jim Crow Era. The plantation mentality is defined as an explicit desire on the part of

\(^{224}\) Letter to Mayor Walter Chandler from Dr. T.O. Fuller, May 4\(^{th}\), 1942, Memphis Public Library, E.H. Crump
Collection.

\(^{225}\) Police Abandon Store Picketing, Searching of Dr. Martin’s Customers Halted, *The Commercial Appeal*, date
unknown, 1940

white Memphians in positions of authority and public influence to hold on to an antebellum way of thinking, in effect acting as if they were slaveholders without actually owning slaves.\footnote{Laurie B. Green, \textit{Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle}, 6, 21-22.}

Memphis, as these scholars and quite a few others have uncovered, was in terms of racial politics, a gilded city. It appeared harmonious to the casual observer, however, beneath the veneer of racial cooperation between the city's all-white power structure and its black community lay a bedrock of racial antagonism, violence, and political corruption dependent on the coercion of black votes. And yet it was that gilded veneer that was the very livelihood of E.H. Crump and his political machine for four decades. By working to portray Memphis as a city of racial harmony where blacks were happy with their lots in life, Crump and his regime were able to convince voters year after year that Memphis was not like other Southern cities. It was free from the types of rioting or urban rebellions that plagued other cities with large black populations. To maintain this illusion and keep the curtain from falling down, however, sometimes necessitated drastic action on the part of Crump and his lieutenants. And thus the Reign of Terror was born.

After the Reign of Terror was over, it soon became common practice that when black Memphians opposed the draconian measures of the Crump regime, Crump no longer needed to send in his troops like he did in the Fall of 1940. Some of the fiercest opponents of so-called “black agitators” in Memphis became other black Memphians. Those who had accepted Crump and Boyle’s “out” during the Reign of Terror became not only spies but also mouthpieces that could pointed to and called upon whenever “proof” was needed that black Memphians were content with Crump’s policies. For the sake of their safety and security, they had abandoned their allies in a time of need.
On one hand, we can look at this outcome fairly clearly from today and see that this intra-racial conflict engendered a state of being that exacerbated the systematic suppression of black activism and unity in Jim Crow Memphis for decades, denying their efforts any real traction and delaying significant changes and challenges to racial oppression in Memphis by undercutting them at every turn. On the other hand, the question must still be asked, is it entirely fair for us to judge Crump’s “sympathizers” in so harsh a manner based on our own notions of black unity today? Crump provided familiarity. He provided tangible evidence of power and influence. Serving nearly uninterrupted for decades as Memphis’s paterfamilias, whatever the actual merits and qualities of his leadership may have been, the Crump “brand” signified power, order and stability. To a black community besieged by violence and disruption, this proved to be a powerful lure, even if the very source of that violence and disruption was none other than Crump himself.

For those who, chose to continue the fight, the reasons were likewise compelling. The very fact that Crump had to resort to open and prolonged harassment at this juncture whereas in the past such things had almost always been done under the cover of darkness and with hushed voices was a sign of desperation on the part of the Crump administration. It was also recognition of the threat that black political activism represented and recognition of the collective political power held within Memphis’ black community. Black activists and leaders in Memphis recognized this moment as being a prime time to rally their numbers and strike back. For them, submission meant a loss of all gains and momentum made up to this point. The fear was that if the advantage were not pressed, then the chance would be lost or at least significantly delayed. And indeed it seems as if in the final accounting, their fears may have been borne out. Regardless of how we today choose to judge or not judge those black leaders who were lured
away by the promise of safety under the protection of the Crump regime, it must be recognized that their loss and eventual active opposition was felt. It would take decades to regain the kind of traction that black leaders were beginning to attain in 1940.

The Reign of Terror was in some ways the last gasp and wild thrashing of a dying regime, and yet it marks what can be seen as a tragedy in three parts with regards to racial progress in Memphis. Firstly, it marked the beginnings of a fracture within Memphis’ black leadership that would only deepen over the next decades. Where once, there was unity, now there was only discontent and ill will. Secondly, Crump succeeded in achieving exactly what he wanted. By enacting a systematic repression of black political power, Crump ensured himself a prominent role in shaping the course of Memphis politics for another decade and a half up until his death in 1954. Thirdly, and arguably most tragically, the sacrifices and suffering of those black Memphians caught in the middle of Crump’s Reign of Terror went unaccounted for. The thought that their suffering was in vain surely must have been a bitter pill to swallow indeed. The only comfort one can find is that this situation would not endure forever. There would come a day when black Memphians would again unite in the face of overwhelming odds against a political regime that wanted nothing more than their continued subjugation. This fight, as the following chapter reveals however, would be even more fraught with conflict and complications.
CHAPTER FOUR:

DEMAGOGUES OF THE NORTH AND SOUTH

“Free speech does not mean that anyone has a right to holler ‘fire’ in a crowded theatre.”228 These were the words political boss E.H. Crump told to a reporter from the Chicago Defender late in 1943 when asked why he had barred black activist and labor leader A. Phillip Randolph from visiting Memphis and giving a speech on black rights. Arguing that nothing good would come from Randolph giving such a talk in Memphis, Crump went on to say that “[free speech does] not mean that anyone, white or black has a right to incite race trouble. . . . We [have never had] any trouble in Memphis and will not if we run our own affairs and no outsiders ever run them for us.”229 By drawing a line in the sand here and pledging to do everything in his power to keep Randolph out of Memphis, Crump and his political machine fired the opening salvo in what would turn into a months-long battle with local black leaders over Randolph’s right to visit Memphis and speak to its black community.

For decades by this point in the early 40s, Memphis’ self-styled black leaders, a class composed mostly of middle-class business owners, physicians, clergy and educators, (in other words, people with hands in near every aspect of black life in Memphis) had been a part of a quid pro quo voting alliance with the city’s political machine headed by Boss Edward Hull (E.H.) Crump. However, after years of enduring the machine’s racialized paternalism with little to show in terms of racial progress in the early 40s, this coalition began to strain and break down. As described in the previous chapter, following a series of civil liberty violations and violent racial conflicts set in motion by the Crump machine, a cadre of black leaders in Memphis began

strategizing ways to break away from machine rule and bring an end to racial disenfranchisement in their city.

In a pivotal moment in Memphis’ history, one such strategy involved bringing to town A. Phillip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and a nationally known black activist credited with successfully pressuring President Franklin Roosevelt to sign the Fair Employment Act of 1941. The goal of inviting Randolph to Memphis was twofold in that Randolph’s name recognition would bring national attention to the Crump machine’s crooked activities while at the same time Randolph’s message of civil rights and black self-actualization would serve as a banner that would inspire a new wave of local activism amongst Memphis’ black population. What was unforeseen at the time, however, was the controversy and conflict that Randolph’s scheduled visit would engender not only with the Crump political machine in Memphis but inside the very ranks of Memphis’ black leadership community as well.

This chapter argues that the six-month period of conflict surrounding A. Phillip Randolph’s visit dramatizes two important aspects of the history of racial politics in 1940s Memphis. First, it reveals a schism amongst Memphis’ black leaders based around competing visions of what actually constituted black progress in Memphis and exactly how much progress could blacks in Memphis reasonably expect to attain. Secondly, this moment in time marks what I see as the beginning of a transition in Memphis’ black freedom struggle from what I would argue were Jim Crow Era methods of black activism to Civil Rights Era methods of such, insofar as local battles over race were now connected to and played out on a national stage as well. It was perhaps this transition that caused the most consternation within Memphis’s black leadership community, as a new question arose and now needed to be addressed - whether Memphis’ racial problems stood the best chance of resolved locally and in-house or whether the best way forward
was to join together with a broader, nation-wide movement. The ideological geography that had shaped the course of racial politics in Memphis since the turn of the century was slowly starting to give way. As this chapter will show, some amongst Memphis’ black political leadership were eager to shed the trappings of faux-cooperation with the Crump Machine that had kept them shackled to the past with no hope for meaningful progress. Others, however, would fight just as hard to hold on to the past. Cooperation with Crump was at the very least a known quantity, and it was feared that the disruption that would attend any further attempts to defy the machine would send race relations in Memphis past the point of no return.

**Outside and Inside Agitators**

As the previous chapter discussed in detail, one of the main catalysts for the Randolph-Memphis affair began with a police campaign 3 years earlier in the fall of 1940. Dubbed the “Memphis Reign of Terror” by black media outlets across the country such as the Chicago Defender, this campaign carried out by the Memphis police force under the direct orders of the Crump machine involved 3 months of round the clock police surveillance and occupation of black neighborhoods, culminating in searches, seizures, and mass arrests of any black Memphian who “looked suspicious.” By the fall of 1943, Crump and his machine appeared to cross the line one time to often and spurred an organized backlash against his tactics of paternalistic terror. And thus, we enter the A. Phillip Randolph affair. Invited to town by Rev. George Love of Mt. Nebo Baptist Church to speak before a presumed crowd of hundreds of black Memphians, Randolph accepted and hoped to use the opportunity to encourage Memphis blacks to join their local unions.

In the Memphis World, one of two local black-owned newspapers, Randolph’s speech was advertised as a “first” for Memphis. Calling Randolph an “outstanding Negro leader,” the
paper wrote that he “has taken the lead in racial matters not only affecting the Pullman porters, but also those which touched the interests of the Negro worker in other fields. His views and influence have been felt in all the major labor councils of this country, as well as in government circles. He is the idol of the Pullman porter.” “Mr. Randolph’s appearance here should be regarded a milestone in the progress of the Memphis Negro . . . He is not coming here to deal with any particular situation but rather to take advantage of the opportunity to speak a word of inspiration and encouragement.” Even this seemingly innocuous action, however, was a step too far for the Crump machine.

It is pretty well documented that there were at least a few of things E.H. Crump was not a fan of: one was outsiders bringing trouble to his city; another was unions, for fear of them doing the same; and three was dealing with race issues, and mostly for the same reason. And yet here we had with specter of A. Phillip Randolph coming town, a perfect storm of all of these things that provoked Crump’s ire. In the beginning, however, more than anything, Crump seemed personally offended at even the mere notion that anything was wrong with race relations in Memphis. “I would cut off my right arm before I’d let anything or anyone disturb the present friendly race relations between whites and Negroes in Memphis,” Crump stated. “It’s like this,” he went on, “Colored folk here make up about . . . 47 per cent [of the population.] And you know, there’s a lot of mean white folk down here. White folk who don’t like colored people. Can’t stand them. Hate them! Would like to ring off their necks. But me – nobody in the world has ever done more for colored folk than I have.”

It is important to note that there were in fact black leaders in Memphis who sided with the Crump machine at this point. As mentioned previously, Memphis was unlike the majority of

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other Southern cities when it came to relations between the city’s white ruling class and its self-styled black middle-class leaders. For decades up to this point, the two sides had managed to maintain something of a working relationship in terms of quid pro quo benefits. The black elite worked to keep the broader masses convinced that Crump and his regime were their best hopes for political enfranchisement and by doing so likewise prevented Memphis’ black population from causing too much disruption to Crump’s agenda. In return, Crump only rarely openly resorted to the types of heavy-handed racial violence found in other areas of the deep South and from time to time would make a token gesture towards addressing one of the many ills plaguing the black community, for example, approving the construction of a segregated swimming pool or public park so that blacks had a public space to congregate that approximated those that white Memphians often took for granted.

Make no mistake however; this relationship was decidedly slanted in Crump’s favor. It was something of an open secret in Memphis that dissenters to white authority in Memphis were “taken care of” privately and under the cloak of darkness rather than in the naked daylight of the public watch. Yet, it must also be understood that as unequal a power relationship as it was, many local blacks still saw it as far more beneficial than the racial norms of the Jim Crow South dictated. Thus, in this light, many of Memphis’ black elites while perhaps privately none too fond of Crump’s paternalism felt it was either making due with his caprices or nothing at all. The grip on a sliver of racial equality in Memphis was at best always a tenuous one, and the efforts of Randolph and those black Memphians who invited him to speak threatened to render it nonexistent entirely, or in other words, ruining it for everyone. In the moment, then, that fear superseded any supposed ideas of racial solidarity, prompting many to throw Randolph and his local black supporters under the figurative bus when the opportunity arose.
For example, Blair T. Hunt, principal of Booker T. Washington high school was one of Crump’s staunchest supporters within Memphis’ black community and indeed often liked to describe himself as just a “little brown nut in the Crump machine.” Following word of Randolph’s impending visit, Hunt sent letters out to all of the local press outlets solely for the purpose of making sure to distance himself and his constituents from the uproar that was sure to follow, pointing out that he was not involved in this affair whatsoever and begging each paper to make this as clear as possible in its reports on Randolph.

From Crump’s perspective and that of his black supporters, the only problem was the problem of “outside agitators” such as Randolph and his kind stirring up trouble putting crazy ideas into the heads of Memphis’s black community, ideas such as social and political equality. With the talk on course to proceed as planned despite his admonitions, however, Crump and his lieutenants were more than willing to double down on their warnings. “No blatherskite or demagogue of the North or South should be permitted to interfere with the friendly relations between the races that now exists in Memphis . . . If negroes are imported here to make unnecessary fire-brand speeches, then the blame [for what happens] is on them.”

Subsequently, just a few days before Randolph was scheduled to speak in Memphis, the sheriff, under orders from Crump, held a meeting in a local jailhouse with 18 black leaders on all sides of the issue (including figures such as Dr. L.G. Patterson, Dr. W.S. Martin, the aforementioned Blair T. Hunt, George W. Lee, prominent insurance official, Ashton Hayes, principal of Manassas High School, and Rev. George Love, pastor of Mount Nebo where the speech was to be held) The sheriff told them all very plainly “Randolph is not to be permitted to

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234 “Crump Says Memphis Can Run Own Affairs,” The Commercial Appeal,
speak in Memphis, and if you don’t want to meet him at the train and tell him, I will!” Given the setting where this “meeting” took place and the un-subtle “suggestion” that the Randolph situation needed to be take care of or else, it is of little surprise that even those black leaders supportive of Randolph’s visit now had a vested interest in making sure it did not proceed as planned. Thus it followed that on the 12th of November, the day the speech was set to take place, Randolph, upon arriving in Memphis by train, was greeted by the county Sheriff, a contingent of offices and almost all of the black leaders from the prison meeting. As he later recounted, Randolph was very curtly informed that he would not be able to speak because of the he was a radical labor organizer and his mere presence in Memphis threatened to set off a race riot the likes of which Memphis had never seen. Moreover, he was given the directive to leave Memphis as soon as possible.236

It is important to note here the pretext that this was not about denying Randolph the right to speak, but rather about protecting the peace in Memphis. There was a rumor before Randolph arrived spread by Crump officials that blacks were buying guns en masse to prepare for mass rioting after Randolph’s speech was over.237 It is also highly relevant to mark the reasons for the pains being taken to make sure that black leaders were upfront and visible in denying Randolph the chance to speak. Their presence allowed the Crump machine a level of plausible deniability in being able to say, that it was an internal affair within Memphis’ black community that kept Randolph from speaking. Indeed, Crump when asked by the Chicago Defender at a later date about his role in keeping Randolph out, simply demurred by stating that it was “the Negroes

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237 “Randolph Speaks: Defies Boss Crump; Randolph Defies Crump; Makes Memphis Speech,” Fay Young, The Chicago Defender, April 8, 1944.
[who] decided against Randolph.” Crump argued, “the proposition of Randolph’s speaking [was put] squarely up to them,” and “it was all done in a peaceful manner.”²³⁸

Black media outlets such as the Chicago Defender however were quick to call out what had happened here. The Defender explicitly linked Crump’s rebuke of Randolph to the events of the “Memphis Reign of Terror” just a few years earlier when Dr. J.B. Martin had been forcibly run out of Memphis, but made the claim that the tactics used back then by the machine would not pass muster this time, so long as a spotlight was shone on the machine’s activities.²³⁹

As for Randolph, he made a couple of small meetings in Memphis with constituents and supporters, then left with few other immediate options for redress, departed town. He however was not deterred and perhaps was now all the more convinced that it was of the utmost importance that he make future plans to come back to Memphis and finish what had been started.²⁴⁰ He was quoted soon after as saying, “The actions of city officials who forced Memphis negroes to call off the scheduled mass meeting is a challenge to the people to stage a huge public meeting at some future date. Memphians have a moral obligation to invite me to speak at that meeting, otherwise the whole spirit of democracy in Memphis will be dead. To take this insult lying down would be to perform a disservice to progressive forces at work all over our nation and all over the world who are fighting for freedom from fear.”²⁴¹

The Half-Year War

Over the next six months, there was a great deal of political wrangling and barb-firing between the Crump machine, Randolph and black leaders in Memphis on all sides of the issue, with the AFL even becoming involved at one point. Ultimately, Crump did not so much

²³⁸ “Crump Thinks Negroes Given Fair Treatment,” The Chicago Defender, April 8, 1944.
²⁴⁰ “Randolph Plans Memphis Speech,” The Chicago Defender, Jan 29, 1944.
acquiesce as he was simply told by Randolph’s camp, that this speech was going to happen one way or another. Before all of this came to bear, however, the fight over Randolph’s right or lack thereof to visit Memphis and speak before a black audience about black issues would fully dramatize the unique racial-political dynamics at play in Memphis.

Immediately after Randolph’s unceremonious booting from Memphis, Crump went on what might be called a media campaign to defend his right to keep Randolph out. In these interviews and editorials, Crump would routinely downplay the level of racial discord and disenfranchisement in Memphis, arguing that 99% of Memphis blacks were happy and content with how things were in the city, save for the remaining 1% pressing for the unattainable in the form of “social equality.” “The few who want that [social equality] had better give serious thought to this matter as long as they live in this section . . . That unhappy one per cent, with a mistaken sense of their wrongs, usually pass down unwise thoughts to those further down the ladder and then there is mischief,” Crump stated.

For his part, Randolph responded in kind sent an open letter to Crump challenging him to a public debate on the plight of blacks in Memphis and the hardships of Jim Crow. Randolph very openly flouted the social mores governing racial interaction in Memphis, calling Crump out as “Cowardly,” “contemptible,” and a “symbol of Southern fascism that [stood as] a menace and danger to American democracy and hence must be exterminated.” Furthermore, Randolph explicitly laid bare the polite lie of “friendly relations” that for decades were said to set Memphis apart from the rest of the South. Randolph concluded his missive by challenging Crump to a non-segregated public debate and stating,

[Memphians] are tired and sick of you and your police terrorism against law-abiding citizens, white and colored, and your brazen, bold and baneful attack has sealed the mouths and silenced the voices of many honorable men and women who will soon gather enough spirit and courage to blast your regime and relegate it into oblivion from which it ought to never emerge. - Yours for the end of the Crump dynasty, A. Phillip Randolph.\textsuperscript{244}

For his part Crump responded again with own open letter, firstly insisting that there “was no law against mixed gatherings in Memphis. It’s just public opinion that keeps them apart.” He further stated, “I say again, I would walk to Chicago if that would prevent race trouble in Memphis.”\textsuperscript{245} There is some question as to whether Randolph actually believed his challenge to Crump would result in an actual debate or if it was more meant to provoke a discussion in and of itself. This war of words between the two leaders notwithstanding, what might be called the real battle over Randolph’s right to speak, and more broadly, racial politics in Jim Crow Memphis played out on a different battlefield and with a different set of historical actors in play.

In terms of media attention, Randolph and his black supporters in Memphis perhaps had no bigger boosters than The Chicago Defender. The Defender was altogether relentless in its assault on Crump in the wake of Randolph’s ouster, calling Crump “the czar of Memphis.” It also made the prediction that Randolph would win out in the end, and that owing to the national implications of Crump’s “stifling [of] civil liberties,” his aggressions against dissent would not stand this time around. “Memphis will not permit [Crump] to isolate it permanently from the American way of democracy and free speech.”\textsuperscript{246} “The plain truth,” the Defender wrote at one point, “is that Crump is using his political influence to strike down by whatever means those who disagree with his rule as well as those who have the temerity to challenge him politically.” They

\textsuperscript{245} “Randolph Challenges Crump To Open Debate,” \textit{The Chicago Defender}, April 15, 1944.
\textsuperscript{246} “Other Papers Say,” The Chicago Defender, December 18, 1943.
went even further against Crump by stating, “He [Crump] is the exact prototype of the German Fuehrer” and “Crump is more than a mere local figure endangering the security and freedom of the people of Memphis; he is a threat to the processes of democracy in America. He looms today as the greatest challenge at home to the fundamental concepts that underlie the Four Freedoms.” It is interesting to note here the framing of what is happening in terms broader than just Memphis and its local concerns.

Extending the comparison, to those black Memphis leaders instrumental in rebuffing Randolph, the Defender more of less called them out as Nazi sympathizers, writing, “Those leaders who allowed themselves to be intimidated into calling off the Randolph meeting have placed themselves in the unenviable position of being the unwilling tools of a Fascist demagogue.” To those who would not speak up in favor of Randolph and against Crump, the Defender issued its most vehement challenge. “If democracy is dear to us; if it is the only form of government that will keep the chain of bondage from our ankles . . . then it makes no difference whether we fight or die for it abroad or at home. One thing is certain, that is: OUR DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS WILL NOT BE HANDED TO US ON A SILVER PLATTER.”

The Defender further wrote, on the state of Southern politics and its contribution to the nation at large, “the South can proudly boast of having contributed more fools, near idiots, clowns and crackpots to the American political arena than any other section of the country.” Of Memphis politics in particular, it wrote, “Somehow, a jackass has always had some connection with city government of Memphis.” And ever since E.H. Crump had “rode on a mule into town . . . we’ve witnessed a lot of jackass brayings [from] “Boss Crump.” Again predicting imminent defeat, the paper further editorialized that “So long as the Negro race produces A.

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247 “Fascism in Memphis,” The Chicago Defender, December 4, 1943.
248 “Fascism in Memphis,” The Chicago Defender, December 4, 1943.
Phillip Randolph, and alongside of him, the whites produce “Boss Crumps,” we are positively assured that so-called “white supremacy” is definitely dated on the way out.”249

The Memphis-Randolph affair of course did not only play out in the media but it also exposed a split among between national and local labor leadership over the Randolph issue. By and large, the national office of the AFL voiced support for Randolph’s rights and Memphis’ own labor groups joining with the Crump machine and attempting to block Randolph from doing so. Nationally speaking, Randolph had the unwavering support of AFL President William Green. , Green, for his part, was perhaps not only the most vocal ally in Randolph’s corner but also the most powerful. As head of the AFL, Green vociferously defended Randolph’s right to speak in Memphis and continuously advocated for him after Randolph’s initial expulsion from Memphis, seeing the issue as one that at its core about free speech. Green stated publicly at one point, “The interference with the right of free speech and free assemblage in Memphis or elsewhere is unjustifiable. These rights are cherished by all citizens of our republic who regard them as priceless and of vital importance at any cost.”250

Further defending Randolph’s right to speak in Memphis, Green wrote, “Because the American Federation of Labor believes uncompromisingly in freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, we shall uncompromisingly support the exercise of the right of [Randolph] to address the public meeting in Memphis.” Support of Randolph here, Green argued was part and parcel with a broader movement for labor rights in the US. He further stated, “How can we protest this can we protest [unfair practices] if the organized labor movement will join in preventing any man the right to speak and individuals the right of free assembly . . . As president of the

American Federation of Labor, I disapprove the action taken by the Memphis Trades and Labor Organization Council in proposition to free speech and free assemblage.”

Such pronouncements held very little sway in Memphis however, as locally, Randolph and Green were both staunchly opposed by Lev Loring, the white president of the Memphis Trades and Labor Council and a firm opponent of interracial union organizing. Still, the Memphis labor community was not completely monolithic, and dissension within the ranks did exist. On a local level, Randolph’s biggest supporter was arguably Benjamin F. Bell Jr., secretary of Memphis’ Urban League. Calling out other local blacks whom he felt were in the pocket of the Crump machine, Bell provoked a great deal of ire so much so that Memphis blacks such as M.W. Bonner, president of the Urban League and a secretary of the Universal Life Insurance company, along with Dr. J.E. Walker, president of the same and president of the National Negro Business League, along with Blair T. Hunt, what the Chicago Defender referred to as “the local Negro appeasement bloc,” all sought to have Bell forcibly removed from his position in the wake of scathing comments Bell made to the Chicago Defender, giving him an ultimatum that he would be fired if he did not resign first. In their view, Bell was far too “militant” in his approach to seeking racial justice within Memphis. Worth noting in all of this was the fact that the Urban League was in effect bankrolled by the city and the Crump machine, making the threat of withdrawal of financial support if self-policing did not occur. Also worth noting is that Bell was indeed subsequently fired from his position as secretary of the local Urban League chapter.

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251 “Randolph Meeting to be Held as Local Negro Saboteurs Are Prevented in Effort to Stop Rally,” The Memphis World, March 31, 1944.
252 “Memphis Fascists,” The Chicago Defender, April 1, 1944.
While these battles highlighted local and national divisions in terms of labor rights and race, within Memphis itself a different battle entirely was playing out during these six months, one which showcased the widening schisms within Memphis’ own black leadership community. As the previous chapter on the Memphis Reign of Terror showed, by the 1940s, black politics in Memphis were swiftly becoming a fractured affair. When it comes to the Memphis-Randolph debacle, nowhere is this point more clear than in the post-banned clamor amongst Memphis’ black leadership community to assign blame for the matter to others all the while jockeying for position with each and favor with the Crump machine.

In the wake of Randolph’s ouster, much of this came to bear in the form of a judicial inquest into exactly what the impetus for Randolph being forced to leave town was. In sworn affidavit after sworn affidavit, a veritable who’s who of Memphis’ black leadership all attempted to direct the shape of the narrative that would form. Much of the testimony boiled down to determining the nature of the initial jailhouse meeting called by Sheriff Perry warning the black leaders to handle Randolph’s original impending visit in-house, as it were.

W.S. Martin, (brother of J.B. Martin, and both discussed in the previous chapter) asserted that he, Blair Hunt, and the rest of black leaders in attendance “voluntarily attended” the meeting in the Sheriff’s office and that while the merits of Randolph coming to Memphis had been discussed, he had personally “never heard of anyone molesting or interfering with Randolph while he was [in Memphis.]” George W. Lee concurred in his affidavit that he had “not heard of anyone intimidating or abusing [Randolph] while he was in Memphis” and that if there is any

255 Affidavit of Dr. W.S. Martin, February 10, 1944, E.H. Crump Collection, Memphis/Shelby County Public Library and Information Center, Series IV – General Correspondence 1925-1954, Box 215, Folder – Randolph, Phillip, 1944.
black to be laid for the speech’s cancellation, it was “entirely with President Patton of the local union.”

For his part, H.F. Patton, of the local Brotherhood of Sleeping Porters chapter, made further excuses for Randolph’s not speaking in Memphis, for example arguing that the church where Randolph was supposed to speak at that simply was no longer available. Others simply denied that the situation had been anything of note to begin with and that Randolph left on his own accord. “I have never heard of anyone intimidating, molesting, or interfering with A. Phillip Randolph while he was here in the city,” Rev. Waverly Johnson testified. Principal Blair Hunt, in the longest and most detailed affidavit, stated that the meeting was held for no other reason but to express everyone’s concern over “the probability of [Randolph] making a highly inflammatory speech” that would “provoke serious trouble . . . [within a] community that was on edge” because of rumors of an impending race riot.” Despite these misgivings, however, Hunt argued insistently “the white officials [present at the meeting] did not ask us to call [Randolph’s speech] off.”

Despite all of the political wrangling and barb-firing between the Crump machine, Randolph and black leaders in Memphis on all sides of the issue, however, ultimately, the Crump machine did not so much acquiesce as he was simply told by Randolph’s camp, that this speech

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256 Affidavit of George W. Lee, February 11, 1944, E.H. Crump Collection, Memphis/Shelby County Public Library and Information Center.
259 Affidavit of Blair T. Hunt, December 21, 1943, E.H. Crump Collection, Memphis/Shelby County Public Library and Information Center.
was going to happen one way or another.\textsuperscript{260} And thus the date for Randolph’s new appearance was set for Friday, March 31.

\textbf{Randolph Returns}

When Randolph finally did return to Memphis in April, his speech was wide-ranging, and he spared practically no one even remotely related to the Memphis racial-political community from his condemnation. In a show of force and support, according to the Memphis World, Randolph was flanked by at least 15 “nationally known” labor leaders, both black and white.\textsuperscript{261} These included AFL president William Green.\textsuperscript{262} Worth noting is that none of Crump’s allies in the black community were present at the meeting, “Crump’s democratic stooges” as the Chicago Defender referred to them.\textsuperscript{263} None would provide comment on their absence save an anonymous high school principal’s wife who told the Defender, “Now you know right well, honey, that we couldn’t dare to go. It would jeopardize my husband’s job.”\textsuperscript{264} The black Memphis leaders who showed up were few, but some did stand next to Randolph and likewise give speeches of their own, with Rev. G. A. Long giving the meeting an opening benediction.\textsuperscript{265}

To the Crump machine, he offered the accusation that “the Memphis political boss [had] out-Hitler[ed] Hitler] in his suppression of free speech in Memphis. To those black Memphians who supported the machine, Crump’s “brown nuts” as he called them, Randolph shamed them for “jump[ing] at the crack of Crump’s whip.” And to the rest of, white and black, he made sure to specify, he urged them to “join trade unions, the same unions, where they may work, fight, suffer and sacrifice together for a common goal.” This, he argued, was the ultimate way to

\textsuperscript{260}“Randolph Ban Lifted, Memphis Leaders Say”, \textit{The Memphis World}, March 24, 1944.
\textsuperscript{261}“Randolph Meeting to be Held as Local Negro Saboteurs Are Prevented in Effort to Stop Rally,” \textit{The Memphis World}, March 31, 1944.
\textsuperscript{262}“Randolph Defies Crump; Makes Memphis Speech, Fay Young, The Chicago Defender, April 8, 1944.
\textsuperscript{263}“Randolph Defies Crump; Makes Memphis Speech, Fay Young, The Chicago Defender, April 8, 1944.
\textsuperscript{264}“Randolph Defies Crump; Makes Memphis Speech, Fay Young, The Chicago Defender, April 8, 1944.
\textsuperscript{265}“Randolph Defies Crump; Makes Memphis Speech, Fay Young, The Chicago Defender, April 8, 1944.
ensure peace, comfort and prosperity in Memphis.\textsuperscript{266} He referred to Crump’s suppression of free speech as “dictatorship with a vengeance.”\textsuperscript{267} Randolph advocated for negro history to be taught in both black and white schools as a countermeasure to the prevailing messages most in Memphis received about blacks.\textsuperscript{268} Randolph noted that there was a “spineless” cadre of “Negro stooges” who did not want him in Memphis but that such equivocating made his presence all the more necessary because, as he put it, “my race needs me here.”\textsuperscript{269}

With that admonition, the speech that had vexed the racial-political scene in Memphis for months now had been given, and despite the rhetoric swirling around on all sides, the world did not come to an end, nor did Memphis descend into racial anarchy. Rather, what happened next was much more predictable, as each side of the affair became more entrenched in their own rhetoric and beliefs that they had taken the educated, moral and proper course of action. The day after the speech, Crump was apoplectic.

Randolph is the upstart, vicious, demagogue type out to create trouble and did not come here with any helpful thoughts . . . No good can come from inflammatory harangues such as Randolph and his imported associates made in that church . . . If the Negroes of this community or any whites insist on these imported rabblerousers, creating hatred, they might as well make up their minds to abide by the consequences . . . including the preacher who gave permission to hold that meeting in his church.”\textsuperscript{270}

Moreover, Crump directly refuted any charges that he had intimidated Randolph out of town in the first place, calling any such accusations by Randolph or others “incendiary” and saying that ill-speak of the jailhouse meeting which started everything was nothing but “race

\textsuperscript{266} Randolph Speaks; Defies Boss Crump: Randolph Defies Crump; Makes Memphis Speech,” Fay Young, \textit{The Chicago Defender}, April 8, 1944.
\textsuperscript{267} Randolph Speaks; Defies Boss Crump: Randolph Defies Crump; Makes Memphis Speech,” Fay Young, \textit{The Chicago Defender}, April 8, 1944.
\textsuperscript{268} Randolph Speaks; Defies Boss Crump: Randolph Defies Crump; Makes Memphis Speech,” Fay Young, \textit{The Chicago Defender}, April 8, 1944.s
\textsuperscript{269} “Randolph Scores Attitude of Memphis Labor Leaders,” \textit{The Memphis World}, April 4, 1944.
\textsuperscript{270} “Crump Issues Comment,” \textit{The Memphis World}, April 4, 1944.
hate” brought about by blacks in Memphis who were ungrateful for all Crump had done for them. Crump stated, “Randolph didn’t tell that the Police Department had cleaned up Beale Street dives that were harboring criminals with pistols and long bladed knives. Nor did he tell that the police were forced to give protection to a gathering of negro bishops in one of the churches where young negroes shot pistols, which created a near panic, and robbed those in attendance. He didn’t tell in his formula for the conduct of negroes in Memphis that the Police Department was forced to give protection at their leading football games where there was shooting and cutting affrays.”

True to his word, then, Crump and his machine would continue to hold a grudge against those black in Memphis who had defied them and continued to take whatever opportunities were available to take potshots at its rivals. In late April, Crump sent the Memphis fire chief to Rev. G A. Long’s church for what was called “just a routine inspection.” When asked why he was there at a place with no history of fire-safety problems, the chief responded curtly, “I’m just looking around” and left it at that. Nothing ever came of the “routine” safety inspection but the message to Long to watch his back was sent loud and clear. This was not the end of Crump’ retaliation, however, as in May, Crump cancelled a birthday celebration in Randolph’s name being organized by the “ladies’ auxiliary” to Randolph’s union, reasoning that the party was set to take place in the recreation hall of a local housing project on the grounds that “outside groups” were not allowed to hold such events on federal property.

There was a flurry of attempts at what might be called damage control in the wake of Randolph’s speech. Multiple public statements and newspaper editorials from black leaders

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271 “Randolph’s Address Denounced By Crump,” The Commercial Appeal, April 2, 1944.
273 “Crump Cancels Celebration To Honor Randolph,” The Chicago Defender, May 6, 1944;
attempting to distance themselves and their constituents from the things Randolph had said. Rev. J.A. Hayes wrote to the Commercial Appeal that Randolph’s speech “left us all feeling as though a thorn had been plunged within our flesh.” He went on, in what would be a common refrain in the majority of these missives, “There have been built up here many and varied institutions and establishments that any city would gladly welcome; and the citizens of Memphis – white and colored – do not appreciate outside interference from anybody, and especially interference that tends to create friction, unrest, and discord within our ranks.” He went on, “Memphis through the years has never had a riot here; and there never will be as long as we have sane-minded officials such as now stand at the helm of our government. We live in Memphis, not because we have to, but because we want to and for the wonderful opportunities which it offers.”

Blair T. Hunt, principal of Booker T. Washington high school, expressed bitterness and even a bit of regret that other black in Memphis were unable to see the racial-political situation in Memphis the way that they did. He wrote to the Commercial Appeal afterward, “Really, to know Mr. Crump is to love him. So many people, even Memphians don’t know him. This modern Memphis is really the shadow of Mr. E.H. Crump…” Hunt furthermore opined, “This is a great big “family we have here in Memphis, and as such, naturally, we don’t want our soiled linens hung on public clotheslines . . . by persons whose interests and stay here were only transitory, and whose utterances apparently served no other end than to stir and unsettle “Family” matters which it has been our concern to seek to handle in our own way and among our own folk.” He concluded by again pleading that “the efforts of Mr. Crump . . . are deeply

274 “Negroes Resent Slander of City,” The Commercial Appeal, April 9, 1944.
275 “Outsiders Resented,” The Commercial Appeal, April 5, 1944.
appreciated by the overwhelming majority of the colored citizens of Memphis” and that only “misinformed outsiders” threatened to undo this relationship.\(^{276}\)

For his part, Rev. J. L. Campbell likewise expressed continued admiration at “all the things Crump has done for us Negroes.”\(^{277}\) Dr. J.E. Walker, president of the Universal Life insurance company was perhaps a bit more circumspect in his defense. “Yes, Crump is a dictator,” he stated, “and the votes are already counted before they are cast . . . but the machine is honest and economical.” In any event, Crump was trustworthy and had done more for blacks in Memphis than a “demagogue” such as A. Phillip Randolph.\(^{278}\) When pressed how whether he felt he had a duty to stand up for Memphis’ black community first and foremost before allegiances to Crump or to his own business dealings and insurance company, Walker demurred further by stating, “We have to think first of our policy holders and that will eventually benefit the Negro race.”\(^{279}\) Defender speculated at the time that Crump’s black contacts were organizing to run Long out of Memphis for allowing Randolph to speak at his church.\(^{280}\)

At one point, after Randolph’s speech, a trio of black leaders in Memphis penned a letter in the Memphis Press-Scimitar, expressing their disapproval of Randolph and their scorn for the aspersions he had cast on Memphis. In addition to being signed by Rev. J.L. Campbell, and Rev. James H. Pugh, most surprisingly this letter was also endorsed by Rev. Roy Love, the man who initially invited Randolph to Memphis back in November and whose church was set to be the site of the original intended speech. “Did the speech delivered on Friday by one Phillip Randolph, in which he lambasted and vilified E.H. Crump, the city and county administration, represent the

attitude of the colored people of Memphis and Shelby County? We, the committee appointed by
the Baptist Pastors Alliance, representing more than 70 per cent of the negro population [in
Memphis] . . . take the position to say NO.” The letter went on, “Many things have been done for
the colored people of Memphis. They speak for themselves: Good schools, increase in salaries
and more to come; good housing conditions . . . wading pools, playgrounds, parks, health
centers, and more of these in the making. These we think are evidence of good leaders and good
city and county government. We think that any sane person will agree that these are signs of
progress . . .” “Things don’t just happen. The leaders, Mr. E.H. Crump, E.W. Hale, Mayor
Chandler, Sheriff Oliver Perry, General Gerber, Commissioner Boyle and Commissioner
Andrews, city and county commissioners, with their efficient help, made these things possible,
and the negroes of Memphis appreciate your efforts and services in our behalf.” They concluded
by stating, “We may be called stooges and white folks lovers. The gospel we preach and the
Christ we represent commands that we love everybody, do good for evil and to do unto others as
we would have them do to us. Upon this truth hangs the hope of the world. Knockers will never
win and winners never have time to knock.”

Sheriff Perry was practically irate in the wake of Randolph’s speech, releasing a
statement blasting Randolph and putting Randolph’s local black supporters on notice to watch
themselves in the future and that there would be consequences for their actions. Perry wrote,
“Had I known the negro Randolph from New York City and those be brought with him were to
make blackguarding speeches defaming this community and speaking ill of my friends, Mr. Hale
and Mr. Crump, I would have pulled them all out of the pulpit in Preacher Long’s Beale Street
Church.” Perry continued, “Mr. Crump and Mr. Hale have done too much for Memphis and   

Shelby Country all these many years for some wide-eyed publicity seeker like Randolph to belittle their efforts. They have helped the negroes of this community in so many ways. I know plans are on foot to do more for them. But the Memphis negroes do not show their appreciation by encouraging a man like Randolph to come here and find fault – ridicule what has been done.”²⁸²

Long, for his part, seemed both content and defiant of any ire provoked by playing host to Randolph. He wrote, “I do not encourage hate for the white group, some of my best friends are white, for whom I am ready to give my last drop of blood. I would have Mr. E.H. Crump to know I am an ambassador of Jesus Christ and take my orders only from Christ . . . I did not ask Mr. Crump could I come to this town and I am not going to ask him if I may stay.”²⁸³

In regards to the inspection of his church and any further attempts at intimidation or retaliation by Crump, Long stated, “I am just a humble negro . . . I shall observe the laws of Memphis, respect white and colored, but I shall not live in fear.”²⁸⁴ “I feel safe in saying all who listened to A. Phillip Randolph and other speakers . . . left there with love, respect and good will for white and colored in Memphis, Tennessee, America and the world. A spirit of loyalty was reborn in every heart. Memphis shall see a spirit of love and not hate as the result of that meeting.”²⁸⁵

After all of this, moreover, there was a concerted desire and effort on the part of many to simply move on and forget any of the discontent Randolph’s speech may have stirred up. The Memphis Press-Scimitar opined in an editorial “Our peace and prosperity are dependent on

²⁸² “Randolph’s Speech Arouses Perry’s Ire,” The Commercial Appeal, April 4, 1944.
²⁸³ “Randolph Meeting to be Held as Local Negro Saboteurs Are Prevented in Effort to Stop Rally,” The Memphis World, March 31, 1944.
²⁸⁴ “Negro Church is Inspected,” Memphis Press-Scimitar, April 6, 1944.
harmonious race relations. These relations will be right if leaders of both races keep their heads. . . The Press-Scimitar does not believe any good will come to Memphis from any further discussion of the Randolph affair by our politicians or by anyone else . . . Let us consider the Randolph meeting and opinions concerning it a closed chapter. Let white and negro citizens work together as friends to win the war and build a better Memphis in the spirit of the Lord whom they both serve.”

The Chicago Defender, however, one of the staunchest opponents of Crump’s rule in Memphis declared Randolph’s visit nothing less than a total success. “The Crump machine is crumbling,” it editorialized after Randolph’s speech. “This is the only conclusion that can be reached from the events which have recently taken place in Memphis. . . Crump has ruled Memphis for years through terror and hate. White as well as colored citizens have despised him but in the past have feared him to such an extent that they tolerated his rule rather than face his revengeful “Gestapo.” No one dared challenge him until . . . A. Phillip Randolph was invited to speak in Memphis. Then for the first time Crump found that blustering threats didn’t work. He couldn’t scare Randolph and then because on man showed courage others have followed his example. . . Thus the foundation is laid for white and Negroes to work together to break Crump’s power. His armor is cracked. With proper courage, it shouldn’t be long until it is rendered useless.”

286 “Consider Randolph Incident Closed,” The Memphis Press-Scimitar, April 4, 1944.  
Aftermath and Conclusions

How do we make sense of all of this – the conflict and the controversy? How do we make sense of the sheer animosity between Memphis’ blacks leaders in the face of the seemingly obvious and overwhelming threat that the Crump political machine posed to them all in terms of racial oppression? How do we make sense of everyone walking away from this incident somehow feeling that they had been right in their thoughts and actions? There are multiple angles that can be explored with a story such as this: There are issues of black labor and political economy. There are issues related to the policing of black bodies and black speech. There are class issues at play, as it is very significant that the black Memphians involved in this affair are all ostensibly well educated, wealthy and middle-class. For the purposes of this essay, however, what I find to be the most interesting aspect of this affair is what it tells us about changing nature of black activism in Memphis as the Jim Crow Era slowly melted away to give rise to what call today the birth of the Civil Rights Era. I want to talk about what effect that transition had on black politics in 1940s Memphis.

To do this, firstly, we must understand here that despite A. Phillip Randolph being ostensibly at the center of this conflict, the whole affair was never entirely, or even mostly, about Randolph himself. Rather, it revolved around just exactly what his visit to Memphis portended for the future of black activism and racial uplift in Memphis. This story, at its core, revolves around a conflict of ideologies amongst a non-monolithic black leadership community in Memphis at odds over a locally oriented or nationally oriented approach to curing Memphis’ racial woes.

On one hand, there was what might be called the progressive faction of black leaders in Memphis, those such as the two Georges, Love and Long, to name a few. These were the ones
who, by the 1940s, had long-since grown weary of both the Crump political machine’s near iron-fisted rule of the Memphis political machine and also the snail’s pace of racial progress in Memphis. They had tried to work with the Crump regime for a number of years for decades by this point, using their influence and positions of authority within Memphis’ black communities to minimize black protest and rally support for Crump and his political allies.

All of this was done in exchange for the promise of communal benefits for black communities in Memphis and with the tacit agreement that Crump would never resort to the types of draconian methods of racial control practiced in many other Southern cities. However, after years of this arrangement, these community leaders began to question there was actually anything tangible to show for their efforts. Moreover, in recent years, as the machine became more and more entrenched in the local political scene, and less fearful of opposition and losing power in Memphis, it routinely began to violate this last agreement, as the aforementioned “Memphis Reign of Terror” shows us.

To many in Memphis’s black leadership community, acts like these were unacceptable in the current climate. Civil rights issues were beginning to be at the forefront of the national discussion. And while, there was certainly much more work to be done, and many more battles that would be fought, a sense that the tide was slowly beginning to turn with America’s racial status quo was pervasive. And many felt that the time was now where more could be achieved in Memphis than would be allowed by continuing to beg for scraps at the feet of the Crump political machine. Crump could not be trusted any more, nor, given the formidableness of his control of the city, could black Memphians be able to stand up to him and his regime without equally big guns. And thus, the campaign to bring Randolph to town was born.
On the other side of things, we can also see that, for what might conversely be called the conservative wing of Memphis’ black leadership community, (people such as Blair Hunt, J.L. Campbell, Dr. J.E. Walker, W.S. Martin…) despite the oppressiveness of his machine, Crump not only provided familiarity, he provided tangible evidence of power and influence. Serving nearly uninterruptedly for decades as Memphis’s paterfamilias, whatever the actual merits and qualities of his leadership may have been, the Crump “brand” signified power, order and stability. To a black community besieged by disruption and violence, this proved to be a powerful lure, even if the very source of that violence and disruption was none other than Crump himself. Moreover, despite the slow pace of change in Memphis, the argument could be that it was better than nothing (at least we’re not Mississippi, right?). For better or worse, racial issues in Memphis had to be taken care of locally. No one, they felt, could possibly understand the power dynamics in play, and the delicacy of racial politics in Jim Crow Memphis better than Memphis’ own. To invite a foreign element into the mix in the form of Randolph, one that was unfamiliar with the precariousness of the position blacks had in Memphis, risked destroying all the effort put into shaping Memphis into at least a livable, if not equal or perfect place, for black Memphis. This was, they argued, a long march toward progress, not a short sprint, and the situation had to be handled with the utmost care to prevent the ground from falling out beneath them.

At some point, however, one has to wonder whether there was a disconnect between black leadership and the broader black community in Memphis in terms of how they perceived the Crump machine and the racial status quo of Memphis. The turnout for Randolph’s speech, numbering in the thousands, presents an image of a black population in Memphis not as solidly
“appreciative” of Crump’s patriarchy as many in Memphis’ black leadership community would have you believe.

While passing judgment from today on the actions and motivations of any of the historical actors involved in the Randolph affair, is naturally a somewhat dicey proposition, there are still things we can learn simply from the nature of the conflict in and of itself. At this historical moment, the nature of racial politics in Memphis stood at a crossroads. For historians of race and civil rights, the schism created by the Randolph affair adds a layer of complexity to the process of mapping out the ideological geography of the black freedom struggle. Historians often ask questions such as “was the movement primarily a series of small and local affairs coming together to form something much larger?” Or “should the broad and national aspects of the movement be seen as the backbone supporting and gave strength to those local struggles?” Historians like Aldon Morris have argued that rather than being a series of disorganized or otherwise unconnected events, the modern civil rights movement was a highly systematic and organized effort that continually learned from and built off of previous black activist efforts. Alternatively, historians like John Dittmer have argued in favor of the idea that the local is of absolute importance. One has to consider it and all its specificities regarding race that it has to offer before one can understand any aspect of Civil Rights.

Perhaps, all of these ideas are true. However it might also be true that during the transitional phases from Jim Crow to Civil Rights, where ideas about the nature of racial politics and racial activism were influenced by ideas of both so-called “era,” maybe this process was more give and take or, maybe push and pull than we often think about as historians. It is difficult to say with certainty that anything was resolved at the end of the Randolph affair. Crump remained in power until his death a few years later, and the opposing sides of Memphis’ black
leadership remained as staunchly combative with each other as ever. The only certain thing was that Memphis had at long reached a decisive turning point in terms of the ideological geography that defined it as a “border” city for so long. While the unwritten rules of racial politics would remain in place for some time to come, from this point on, they would never again circumscribe black political progress as they had done throughout the Jim Crow Era. The bell had been rung, and it could not be unheard. Progress has been delayed, perhaps even more so than in cities with an overtly racist and violently regressive sense of racial politics. However, progress could not be stopped, and the stage was at this point set for the wars to come that would usher Memphis into a new era.
CONCLUSION:

BETWEEN NORTH AND SOUTH

The effects of Jim Crow Era racial politics in Memphis have lingered in throughout the 20th century and beyond in the city’s historical memory. This history has loomed large over and exerted pressure on nearly all of the major moments of racial tension and conflict that have since taken place. As such this dissertation has made the case that in order to understand the problems Memphis has faced up to the present day, one must first understand how deeply rooted the origins of these problems are.

For example, even though E.H. Crump died in 1954, his influence on Memphis politics remained for decades to come. For nearly half a century at this point, there effectively was no Memphis city government without E.H. Crump. His iron-fisted style, racially polemic style of governing Memphis had proven to be overwhelmingly effective in terms of amassing and maintaining power, and the years after his death saw numerous political figures trying to position themselves as the proper successor to his machine. By the 1960s, the man who most closely approximated this goal was Mayor Henry Loeb. Governing Memphis for almost the entire decade, Loeb was at the forefront of the city during its most infamous moment in the national spotlight - the 1968 sanitation workers strike that saw the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. take place in Memphis.²⁸⁸

During this time, Loeb who was doggedly determined to cement a place for himself in the annals of Memphis history, in the same way that Crump had done, by being unwaveringly tough when issues relating to race arose. Loeb saw himself as having something to prove in this regard. Thus when black sanitation workers went on strike to protest unfair treatment, poor wages,

²⁸⁸ Sharon Wright, Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis, (Garland: New York), 39-40,
discriminatory behavior on the part of management, Loeb was especially uncompromising and
determined to stamp out any hint of racial trouble. This in turn created an environment that was
overwhelmingly hostile toward the black strikers and any sympathizers. Memphis was a powder keg of racial animus, waiting for a spark to inflame all of the various racial-political tensions that had been building up for so long. Tragically, this spark came in the form of King’s assassination, which led to rioting and all-out racial chaos, forever scarring not only the city’s reputation, but its people as well.²⁸⁹

Another legacy of Memphis’s Jim Crow Era history was the fact that Memphis’s black activist and political community came out of the Crump Era entirely fractured. Prominent figures such as Robert R. Church Jr. and Dr. J.B. Martin had of course been run out of town during the height of the Crump machine’s time in power, and those prominent black figures that remained were not only getting older but also struggling to connect with a new generation that had little to no patience for the game of compromises and broken promises that these leaders played a part in throughout the latter years of the Crump era.

Thus, throughout the 50s, 60s and 70s, black Memphis was without any sort of organized and stable leadership to lobby for and guide it through moments of racial turmoil and strife. There were of course a number of figures that made names in this period - people such as Benjamin Hooks, Russell Sugarmon Jr., Rev. Roy Love and others. However, as important as these figures were and are, they were nevertheless limited in their ability to unite Memphis’s black population under a common political agenda in the way that past figures such as Church Jr.

had done. It was not until the 80s at best that Memphis’ black political structure began to truly rebuild itself and coalesce into a united force.\textsuperscript{290}

At the same time, Memphis found itself steadily moving towards becoming a majority black city. In the 70s, 80s and 90s, Memphis found itself widely affected by the issue of “white flight” where wealthy and affluent white citizens began to exit the city in droves in favor of starting their own communities out in the unincorporated suburbs of East Memphis. This mass exodus of wealth in turn led to a dichotomy beginning to be seen in many other cities throughout the country at the time where the city’s economy began to nosedive, leading to a very prominent schism in terms of racial and wealth disparities between jurisdictions under the Memphis city government and these new suburban areas forming their own county government. In Memphis, however, white flight had the added effect of further polarizing race relations within the city itself, as those white who for various reasons were unable to take part in this mass exodus began to suddenly find themselves in the minority in terms of the city’s racial demographics. This in turn bred a sort of hyper-polarization as Memphis’ white population fought to prevent this shift from becoming too pronounced and Memphis becoming a “black city.”\textsuperscript{291}

Both this hyper-polarization and the ultimate futility of this struggle were represented in the 1992 mayoral election mentioned in this dissertation’s introduction, which as stated before, saw the African-American city schools superintendent W.W. Herenton defeat white mayoral incumbent Dick Hackett in an election that saw whites and blacks vote almost exclusively along racial lines, with black Memphis emerging victorious to elect the first African-American mayor in the city’s history. This moment perhaps more than any signaled the death knell of racial politics in Memphis existing in the same form as it largely had since the beginning of the

\textsuperscript{290} Wright, Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis, 39-40, 45-49, 87-89, 127-129.
\textsuperscript{291} Beverly Bond and Janaan Sherman, “Memphis in Black and White,” (Arcadia: Chicago), 139.; Wright, Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis, 66.
century. Memphis’ black leadership community suddenly found itself scoring more and more electoral victories over the next two decades and into the present. Having existed on the outside looking in in terms of the city’s governance for so long, Memphis’ black leadership had at last gone mainstream. Yet, despite outward appearances of shrugging off its old history, racial tensions in Memphis did not begin to ease. In the new millennium, Memphis has continued to confront old ghosts from the Jim Crow Era of racial politics. In the past 10 years, Memphis has seen not only a renewed debate over the historical legacy of Tom Lee but also, more troubling, a resurgence of Klan activity and visibility.292

In 2003, a very powerful windstorm swept through Memphis causing power outages and widespread destruction. One of the casualties of this storm was the monument to Tom Lee that had stood for almost exactly 50 years. In the aftermath of its destruction the now almost exclusively African-American city government debated whether to repair it or let it fall by the wayside as an aberrant anachronism of racial paternalism. It was ultimately decided that no matter how difficult the past is to look at sometimes, it is nevertheless vital to not forget it. Thus, the monument was repaired in its original form, however the mayor and city council decided it should no longer stand alone. With its repair came the construction of a new monument to Lee which would was seen as better serving to encapsulate not only Lee’s legacy but also Memphis’ new racial dynamic. Thus a new monument was erected in the same park as the original - this time a bronze sculpture depicting a young, heroic-looking Tom Lee reaching over the side of his small boat to pull a drowning figure out of the water. In this vision of Lee’s story, he is cast no longer as the “kinky-haired negro hero” with a heart of gold and an “aw shucks” persona, but as strong, courageous, and altogether powerful black Memphian, selflessly risking life and limb

simply because it was in his nature. For lack of a better term, Lee is cast in this vision as a “race hero,” an almost mythic figure that contemporary black Memphis can point to as a pioneer and founding figure of Memphis’ current racial status quo of black empowerment. In this way, Lee’s legacy continues nearly a century later to be molded the perfect figure to have public identity shaped to fit the dominant racial of Memphis.  

On the other end of the spectrum, serving as a grim reminder that the tortured past Memphis holds claim over is not so easily forgotten, Memphis has been the site of 2 major Klan rallies in recent years. In January 1998, the Klan announced that it would hold a March through downtown Memphis, ostensibly as a protest over the January Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. Memphis’s history with both the Klan and King being what they are, tensions flared and the event turned into a minor riot a crowd of nearly 2000 angry counter-protesters confronted the Klan members. Police clad in full riot gear and on horseback fired canisters of tear gas into the crowd in an effort to break up the conflict, only managing to cause more chaos on the scene as windows were broken, stores were looted and fights broke out. At the end of the affair, approximately 20 black counter-protesters were arrested on various charges, and Memphis was left reeling from the entire ordeal. This would not be the last time the Klan would use Memphis as a staging ground to protest what they felt was their erasure from the city’s history, however.  

In March 2013, the Klan threatened to hold “the largest Klan rally” in history in Memphis to protest the city council deciding to change the names of local parks that for a century had been named after Klan leaders Jefferson Davis, and Nathan Bedford Forrest. This time around, the event was decidedly less chaotic and significant as the Klan itself predicted. Only about 75 Klan members were at the rally. This time around, no violence broke out. No arrests were made.

Virtually the only audience the Klan had was the small group of local police assigned to the rally to keep peace and prevent a repeat of 1998. Instead, city leaders decided to hold a festival across town at the same time as the Klan rally, channeling the city’s frustration at continually being reminded of its past in the worst possible ways into an event that focused on the future, promoting peace, harmony and reconciliation.

This dissertation opened by positing that Memphis was not a Southern city in the traditional sense. Throughout the Jim Crow Era, Memphis was a city of contradictions as far as the ideological geography race was concerned. Racial progress and oppressed were woven together into a near-inscrutable knot in such a way as to confound easy interpretations of Memphis’ history. The seemingly progressive policies of cross-racial cooperation that bucked the trend for Southern cities in the early days of Jim Crow over time became the hidden chains that held Memphis back for decades from truly meaningful growth and progress. As the brief examinations recent Memphis history above show, Memphis has come a long way since the days of the Crump Machine, but throughout the 20th century, the battles waged against it and also within Memphis’ black leadership itself have continued to be felt. There are many challenges remaining in present-day Memphis when it comes to the intersection of race and politics, however as this dissertation has hopefully demonstrated, the only way to chart a path forward towards a better tomorrow is to begin to reconcile the contradictions of the past.\(^{295}\)

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DISSERTATIONS
