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## About the Article

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# From White Supremacism to Black Liberation: Harry S. Truman, Lynching and Racial Justice

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## Abstract

President Truman transitioned from an initially more conservative policy advocated by white supremacists to a more progressive one that promoted a fairer social justice in the United States society, hitherto seldom heard. Through constitutional articles and debates, editorials, institutional records, and speeches in response to some of World War II's black veteran lynching cases, this paper aims to explore Truman's civil-political commitment to ending the frequent episodes of racial violence.

**Keywords:** Harry S. Truman, lynching, Isaac Woodard, Isaiah Nixon, racial violence

## Introduction

The presidential administrations of the civil rights era addressed the issue of racial equality through the necessity and political gain afforded by espousing, or fighting, the African American cause (Murphy, 1984). Internal factors such as continuous racial and mob violence, as well as the political influence of majority parties, undermined the promulgation of any civil rights laws that could safeguard the constitutional rights of citizens, regardless of their skin color. Indeed, despite being proposed over 100 times to Congress between 1882 and 1951, the anti-lynching law never won the support of the political majority as it would have impacted the racial *status quo* upon which the post-XIII Amendment U.S. society was based (Corvino, 2021; Waldrep, 2000).<sup>[1]</sup>

As evidential from the American presidential historiography, presidential choices regarding civil rights – albeit considered of moral importance – were mostly aimed at not shaking the political equilibrium on which the current administration was established. Even Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal did not really help improve African Americans' living conditions in the short term (Valocchi, 1994). While blacks did receive economic aid in a time of unprecedented crisis, Roosevelt was careful not to clash with prominent white politicians who did not look favorably on racial integration. Indeed, numerous requests from the NAACP addressed to him were never heeded, for example, the sponsoring of *anti-lynching* legislation and involvement in the prosecution of lynching crimes.

The effects of the Great Migration after the 1920s did, however, make the President understand that African Americans would soon become a significant ballot pool. Unquestionably, blacks now lived in more tolerant cities where resistance against their political involvement and ability to vote was becoming much less frequent. Nevertheless, African Americans were reluctant to politically support those who did not "speak out in favor of federal anti-lynching legislation and poll tax repeal bills" (McMahon 2010, p. 101). For this reason and in order to obtain black votes and greater

control over the Democratic Party, Roosevelt proposed FBI intervention, regardless of southern conservatives' support, to resolve all lynching cases, sometimes condemning – even publicly – the brutality of racial violence (McMahon, 2010).

It is in this socio-political context that Harry S. Truman was elected as Roosevelt's vice president (January 20, 1945 – April 12, 1945). He was considered the best possible moderate choice while the President dealt with his health concerns and at a time when fear loomed over the country's political future. It was as early as 1911 when Harry Truman wrote a letter to his future wife Bess, expressing his racial prejudices:

I think one man is just as good as another so long as he's honest and decent and not a nigger or a Chinaman. [...] the Lord made a white man from dust, a nigger from mud, then He threw up what was left and it came down a Chinaman [...] I am strongly of the opinion Negroes ought to be in Africa, yellow men in Asia and white men in Europe and America (Hampson, 1991).

Despite this, he quickly realized that the voting power of African American communities would change the political landscape in subsequent elections. *Almost one million African Americans had migrated to the North between 1941 and 1944, increasing the weight that cities like Chicago or Detroit potentially had in the 1944 presidential elections. Here, blacks could exercise their right to vote, contrary to what had been precluded in the southern states.* For this reason and with the aim of confirming his victory in the 1948 presidential election against Republican candidate Thomas Edmund Dewey, Truman promised the NAACP a more concrete commitment to the defense and promotion of civil rights. This was to be accomplished whilst avoiding publicly any open clashes with the white supremacists and thus risking their votes (McCullough, 1992). After achieving his goal, he ultimately distanced himself from previous racial policies and kept his commitment to a fairer society.

Less than a month after his appointment, Truman met NAACP executive secretary Walter White. He assured him that he would support a permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to fight racial discrimination in the workplace, a commitment he tried to maintain over the following years.

According to many scholars, the decisions taken in that period by President Truman on the advancement of civil rights had an impact on the promotion of social justice which heavily affected the constitutional principles of anti-discrimination, even after the end of the mandate (Juhnke, 1989; Garth, 1999; Sklaroff, 2009). Current historiography however has failed to explain why the lynching of black veterans played a significant role in Truman's presidential decisions. There are two episodes particularly worthy of importance to understand in more detail how the fight against lynching in small towns became a national event that could undermine the credibility of the U.S. image abroad and consequently Truman's presidential leadership. Furthermore, these two cases allow us to explore issues related to maintaining the post-abolitionist racial status quo. The extension of black voting eligibility can then be explored in a society where the citizenship rights of those considered racially inferior were not yet fully recognized.

Indeed, the lynchings of Isaac Woodard and Isaiah Nixon, which occurred in 1946 and 1948, are significant not only for the extreme racial violence itself, which expresses the modus operandi of

mob violence conveyed by post-colonial racial resentment, but also for the fact that the victims were veterans of World War II with the right to vote. The War did, in fact, change the perception of the African American issue in the U.S. both domestically and internationally. Black soldiers were an essential part of the U.S. Army engaged in war across the world. As Walter White, NAACP executive secretary, clearly explained:

World War II has given to the Negro a sense of kinship with other colored – and also oppressed – peoples of the world [ . . . ] the struggle of the Negro in the United States is part and parcel of the struggle against imperialism and exploitation in India, China, Burma, Africa, the Philippines, Malaya, the West Indies, and South America (White, 1945, p. 144).

Therefore, the internal anti-racist campaign became intertwined with the anti-colonialist movement that followed the war during this period (Bloom, 2015). The five most prominent black organizations in the United States were now looking at the discrimination they fought for years from an international perspective.<sup>[2]</sup> As Walter White wrote in 1945: “Allied nations must choose without delay one of two courses [...] to revolutionize their racial concepts and practices, to abolish imperialism and grant full equality to all of its people, or else prepare for World War III” (White, 1945, p. 154). Thanks also to the role played by the mass media, racial problems became a topic of international politics linked to decolonization. President Truman soon understood that his country’s international public image was in danger of being damaged by the internal diatribes of conservatives and progressives over civil rights advancement and the condemnation of racial violence. Thus, the international context of World War II and its legacy contributed significantly to Truman’s clear stance in supporting the NAACP’s demands since there was a risk that the black press would compromise U.S. image abroad.

In the light of the above considerations, Isaac Woodard’s and Isaiah Nixon’s cases prove to be of fundamental importance in understanding how the concepts of social justice, due process, and racial fairness changed following presidential intervention in the wide-ranging fight against racial discrimination, both in the courts and in everyday life. Woodard’s and Nixon’s lynching were two examples of extreme mob violence, but they also became representative of prejudice and stereotypes in the courtrooms. By analyzing the impact these cases had in governmental circles, this paper intends to contribute to that literature, which means reconsidering President Truman’s role in changing the political agenda toward African Americans’ civil rights. From 1946, the lynching of Isaac Woodard and the official institution of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights, a turning point took place in the recognition and expansion of citizenship rights for all Americans. The presidential struggle for a society free of racial discrimination was still in its infancy, but it allowed Truman to lay the foundations for a “second Reconstruction” (Goldzweig, 2005, p. 104). This is observable from the stories of cases in which the sheer level of violence had shocked public opinion, such as the little-known death of Isaiah Nixon, occurring in the years where African American lynching had decreased due to presidential intervention via Federal Government and FBI investigation.

Analysis of the two lynching cases cited above has never before been treated together in a paper, allowing us to contribute to filling the academic gap and transitional period between the interest of President Truman in supporting the advancement of civil rights and his desire to guarantee

himself a second presidential term with the votes of African Americans, to whom he had promised greater social justice by condemning lynching and furthering prosecution.

### **Isaac Woodard's and Isaiah Nixon's lynching**

Isaac Woodard's and Isaiah Nixon's cases present similarities and differences that allow us to explore in-depth the influence that the lynching of African Americans had on the political choices made by Truman after his first presidential election. Both Woodward and Nixon were former war veterans who had fought for the honor of the United States during World War II. While Woodward's lynching occurred in South Carolina in 1946, that of Nixon took place in Georgia two years later. After the end of the nineteenth century, both states had approved laws to sentence lynching perpetrators to up to twenty years in prison if the victim had died during the process. Nevertheless, these laws often resulted in a lack of conviction due to the absence of witness testimony. The sense of solidarity in local communities also compromised the integrity and conduct of investigations by not serving due justice to the victims. From small counties like Montgomery County (Georgia) in the Nixon case to larger counties like Aiken County (South Carolina) in the Woodward case, promoters of lynching enjoyed the support of their fellow citizens. On the other hand, African Americans who knew about or were forced to witness this violence were so terrified of the repercussions their testimony could bring that they preferred to remain silent. As a result, many newspapers found themselves unable to draw satisfactory conclusions to their investigations and ended up rarely allocating any space to incidents of racial violence. The cases of Woodward and Nixon however, unlike many others, did gain wide press attention thanks to the NAACP's decision to investigate the lynching of these two war veterans. The organization's intervention led to the Federal Government and President Truman's involvement and opened the door to resolving lynching-related issues, such as access to a fair trial and the opportunity to vote.

The first case of the two to which the NAACP devoted itself and requested the FBI presence was that of Isaac Woodard. Originally from South Carolina, Isaac Woodard was a United States Army veteran who, at 23, was drafted to fight in the Pacific Ocean theater of World War II against the Empire of Japan. He received several medals for his service, guaranteeing him an honorable discharge. After his stay in Japan and about to board a bus back home to his family, he asked the bus driver if he could wait a few minutes while he visited the toilet. According to Woodard's court testimony, this resulted in a small quarrel and some hostility from the driver. The bus eventually departed with no further incident as the driver put in a call to the local police, requesting intervention at the next city. Not long after, Woodard was forced to exit the bus as the driver (falsely) complained about the young war veteran's behavior, which he said to the police was irascible. As Woodard was removed from the vehicle, the young African American was savagely beaten until he lost his sight.

As Woodward's case clearly shows, not even African American war veterans were exempt from racial violence. Indeed, the very recognition of their military service had been a source of social tension, often resulting in acts of extreme physical violence just like this.

Since the end of Reconstruction, African American participation in military service had been considered a threat to maintaining the racial status quo. White supremacists wanted to keep blacks in a position of subordination to preserve the antecedent hierarchical dominance of the

slavery period but giving such a veteran an honorable discharge would make him a holder of honor equal to that of a white fellow citizen. Many incidents of racial violence, including lynching, served to affirm white superiority and eliminate black social prestige and self-respect.

It took months before Woodward's case became widely known and thanks to popular black newspapers, *The Lighthouse* and *Informer* of South Carolina, the news found its way to well-known radio broadcaster and actor Orson Welles. The case then reached President Truman's ears after being discussed in all major newspapers and thanks in no small part to NAACP's nationwide tour with Woodard, publicly exposing the effects of racial violence. According to Frederickson: "Because Woodard was a veteran, because he was maimed, because his attacker was an officer of the law, and because he survived, he became an emblem of what was terribly wrong with the South" (Frederickson, 1997, p. 184).

The National Emergency Committee Against Mob Violence was created in August 1946 on the orders of President Truman in response to the event, in an attempt to shed light on lynching cases in southern states, but it was not enough. Truman requested the intervention of the Justice Department to investigate the Woodard case, following the reluctance of local law enforcement and pressure from the NAACP to find the culprits. However, it did not take many days to find Woodard's assaulters. Because the violence had taken place at a bus stop and the land was federally owned, not to mention the victim being clothed in military uniform, the case was heard at the U.S. District Court in Columbia.

The trial, much like many others at the time, turned out to be bogus, and the bus driver was the only one to be heard by the judge and jury. No other witnesses were contacted. Sheriff Lynwood Shull was the main accused. He admitted to repeatedly hitting Woodard in the eyes, but only in self-defense, because the African American – according to him – had become short-tempered and disrespectful. According to *The Canberra Times*: «Shull struck him with a blackjack for answering "Yes" instead of "Yes sir."» (*The Canberra Times*, November 7, 1946, p. 1). Despite his confession, the violence inflicted was considered proper by the jury. As a result, Shull was acquitted entirely by the all-white jury after only 15 minutes of confrontation (*The Canberra Times*, November 7, 1946, p. 1). Still, loud applause ensued in the courtroom following the verdict (Kluger, 2004, p. 298).

Apparently, the resolution of this case was not significantly different from that of other previous ones, so much so that it ended without a conviction. Its great importance was that it took place at a time linking substantial social changes to the consequences of world conflict. The awareness of African American veterans (now conscious of their national importance), the NAACP's consolidated strength, and the presence of a new president eager to win the next elections made Isaac Woodard – who survived the lynching – the symbolic figure of the black resistance and struggle against racial injustice in those years.

Despite the importance of Woodard's case in presidential decisions supporting African American civil rights advancement, the incidents of lynching did not cease. Even President Truman's speeches failed to curb racial violence. Another Afro-American, Isaiah Nixon, was then lynched in Georgia on September 8, 1948. He had voted in the Democratic primary on that very same day (Bernd, 1982; Campney, 2011).

Given the participation of black war veterans in major civil rights advancement organizations, such as the NAACP, the end of World War II led to a rethinking of voting rights. Specifically, the decision made by the Supreme Court in *Smith v. Allright* (1321 U.S. 649, 1944) was considered unconstitutional as it violated the XIV and XV Amendments. The court ruled that it was unlawful for any state to dispute its authority over elections or allow discrimination to be practiced by parties. Despite this ruling, many southern states did not follow the federal directive, continuing to violate the voting rights of African Americans. In this regard, the 1946 primaries in Georgia were invalidated by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit (*Chapman v. King*, 2154 F. 2d 340, 1946), as they violated the Fifteenth Amendment, which condemned the exclusion of voters for reasons related to race or color. Subsequently, African Americans had a better chance of voting in the political elections that followed. However, there were frequent episodes of violent intimidation to curb, if not outright exclude, black political participation, as Isaiah Nixon's lynching clearly showed.

This was not an isolated case, as the Ku Klux Klan regained strength and support in the South following its peak popularity in the 1920s, when its affiliates numbered about six million. Even though their size had reduced, the clan adopted a new strategy and began perpetrating racial terrorism, especially in rural towns, where white supremacy was stronger. In these places, the network of organizations for the advancement of civil rights could not fully engage in protest and social awareness actions as efficiently as it could in large urban centers where any violence would immediately attract press and law enforcement attention. Thus, the Ku Klux Klan managed to commit lynching in these small towns of few inhabitants, where community silence guaranteed impunity. The death of Elbert Williams, secretary of the NAACP in Tennessee, was one example. The murder was carried out after Williams' attempt to register black residents of Brownsville (Tennessee) in the electoral roll. The KKK lynched him in June 1940. The lynching of Isaiah Nixon had also taken place in a small town like this (Campney, 2020; Horwitz & Anderson, 2009; Pierce, 2016; Schaefer, 1971; Wood, 1906).

The clan and the white supremacists feared that the hierarchies of racial dominance in the southern states would fall by giving African Americans the opportunity to vote. Racial terrorism relied on politicians' willingness to stop the African American political rise, and black voting risked undermining the continuation of the racial status quo. For example, during these years, Georgia governor candidate Herman Talmadge was in favor of the use of violence and never hesitated to express it publicly. During an open meeting, Samuel W. Roper, a KKK member, asked him what he thought was the best strategy to adopt in not allowing blacks to vote. In response, Talmadge, who later became governor of Georgia and then U.S. Senator, wrote unequivocally on a piece of paper one word: "pistols" (as quoted in Quarles, 1999, p. 87).

Despite President Truman's socio-civil commitment to Woodard's case, nothing changed. The racial brutality, investigation, and the perpetrator's confession did not find justice, contrary to what the Constitution supposedly guaranteed. As a result, a presidential policy followed; a clear directive aimed at improving the living conditions of all African Americans on U.S. soil. This led to harsh internal clashes with white supremacists who had voted in favor of Truman during his first election. In December 1946, he established the President's Committee on Civil Rights "PCCR" with the aim of prosecuting all those "who take the law into their own hands and inflict summary

punishment and wreak personal vengeance" (Executive Order 9808, December 5, 1946), violating constitutional laws.

Regarding the lynching of Woodard and others of that period, Truman stated: "I can't approve of such goings on and I shall never approve it, as long as I am here. [...] I am going to try to remedy it and if that ends up in my failure to be reelected, that failure will be for a good cause" (Truman, 1948). A few days after this mission statement, Nixon's lynching occurred.

U.S. racial violence certainly caught the President's attention as one of his country's most serious problems and as something "[...] close to my heart" (David K. Niles Papers, 1945-47) but what strategies did he adopt to face the new political scenarios that threatened to undermine the success of his presidential re-election? Furthermore, how could he reduce lynching cases and at the same time allow African Americans to safely vote and get their official support as a promoter of racial equality?

### **Truman's commitment against lynching and in support of black's rights**

The brutal episodes of racial violence involving the two army veterans shook Truman to the point that he cited the cases on many occasions as an example of aggression against members of minority groups. Following these and other reports, he understood that it was necessary to "determine whether and in what respect current law-enforcement measures and the authority and means possessed by federal state and local governments may be strengthened and improved to safeguard the civil rights of the people," regardless of skin color (Executive Order 9808, December 5, 1946). Consequently, the President required all executive agencies to actively engage in working in conjunction with the PCCR with the aim of enforcing the laws and condemning "the action of individuals who take the law into their own hands and inflict summary punishment and wreak personal vengeance" as had happened for decades in the cases of lynching. Notwithstanding this significant achievement for African Americans, not all the black press agreed with Truman's commitment to prosecuting racial violence by establishing a presidential committee. There were many prejudices about his genuine interest in condemning mob violence which also involved white politicians as perpetrators. The *Chicago Defender* wrote with a hint of irony: "If the committee is not hampered in its inquiry and if its recommendations are not circumvented by a welter of administrative procedures, the results should be far more consequential to us than anything that has happened in the United States since the abolition of slavery" (as quoted in McCoy & Ruetten, 1973, p. 31); this thought was also supported by other major black newspapers such as the *Afro-American* and the *Call – Kansas City*.

In the meantime, it is to be considered that the NAACP reached a high level of social influence in most of the United States during those same years. Hundreds of cases, mainly from the South, were reviewed and defended by the NAACP Legal Department, which paid particular attention to the violations of the right to a fair trial, the discrimination against African Americans during jury selection, and the role of law enforcement in attempted lynching cases. The organization mainly worked on cases where blatant violations of constitutional rights occurred, such as Sections 51 and 52 of Title XVIII of the Federal Criminal Code. According to Section 51, conspiracy acts aimed at intimidating or injuring any citizen must be prosecuted, as they are considered crimes. Isaiah Nixon's lynching incident occurred to intimidate the black community from voting, but above all, the murder of an American citizen took place. As a result, this section was clearly violated. Instead,



Section 52 had a double meaning. First of all, it condemned the deprivation of rights guaranteed at the federal level, such as due process, which often did not occur when a court case concerned an African American, as in the case of Isaac Woodard's appeal. Black citizens were normally excluded from the jury, allowing an all-white jury to decree a verdict that could have been different if there had not been only people in favor of white supremacy and protection of racial hierarchies. By leveraging the violation of these two Sections and, when possible, the Amendments' violation, the NAACP fought in the courtrooms for an equal society (Niedermeier, 2019; Watson, 1993). [\[3\]](#)

The NAACP also gave more consideration to the media image of the violence, describing lynching as brutally barbaric and far from the civilized modern ideal that the American Nation wanted to show (Wood, 2009). This helped attract international attention as they became renowned for openly denouncing incidents of racial violence (Blaque, 2012; Feimster, 2009).[\[4\]](#) Consequently, the presidential administration could no longer ignore or limit the presence of such racism toward African Americans in the national political space. Furthermore, Isaac Woodard's lynching was used by the NAACP to nationally denounce the atrocities of racial violence and the federal failure to guarantee constitutional rights for all its citizens, black or white. As a result, action by the presidential administration that was not limited to federal investigations, which often resulted in the acquittal of the accused, was therefore needed.

The President of the United States had to personally express his endorsement in the struggle for the advancement of civil rights if he did not want to lose black votes in the coming elections. Giving a speech to Congress on February 2, 1948, Truman became the first president to turn to the NAACP and strongly support African American civil rights (Sylvia, 1995; Sitkoff, 1971). His President's Committee on Civil Rights (PCCR) published the first government report in which the oppression of blacks was widely documented, and a civil rights reform was recommended in order to avoid other tragedies like Woodard's lynching. Indeed, Nixon's lynching occurred only seven months after the report, corroborating the President's concerns and suggestions. The latter also submitted statements to the Supreme Court to support desegregation, thus attempting to end lynching (Fagelson, 2018). In addition, he issued executive orders aimed at creating racial equality in the hiring of federal personnel to affirm equal rights for whites and blacks. As quoted by the Chicago Defender, President Truman requested the intervention of the Federal Government in respect of all-American citizens, without any distinction:

We can no longer afford the luxury of a leisurely attack upon prejudice and discrimination. [...] We cannot, any longer, await the growth of a will to action in the slowest state or the most backward community. [...] Recent events in the United States and abroad have made us all realize that is more important today than even before to ensure that all Americans enjoy these rights (*The Chicago Defender* July 05, 1947, p. 1).

With a promise to remove all barriers and difficulties confronting citizens, he asserted that «there is no justifiable reason for discrimination because of ancestry, or religion, or race, or color» (Truman, 1948). Although, contrary to his words, Jim Crow laws were still in force, his contribution to a more inclusive society had been considerable.

Early on, on June 29, 1947, in his speech at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., he argued that racial discrimination was unjustifiable and without valid grounds. The wife of former President Roosevelt and other prominent personalities also attended the event. On that occasion, Truman stated:

Mr. Chairman, Mrs. Roosevelt, Senator Morse, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen: I am happy to be present at the closing session of the 38th Annual Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. [...] But we cannot be content with a civil liberties program which emphasizes only the need of protection against the possibility of tyranny by the Government. We cannot stop there. We must keep moving forward, with new concepts of civil rights to safeguard our heritage. The extension of civil rights today means, not protection of the people against the Government, but protection of the people by the Government. [...] There is no justifiable reason for discrimination because of ancestry, or religion, or race, or color (Truman, 1947).

With these words, the President condemned incidents of racial violence, school segregation, the lack of work according to skin color, low political participation of African Americans beyond their control, as well as embraced the need for fair trials and black participation in juries. Furthermore, he gave his word that he would do everything possible to ensure these would be upheld under his presidency:

Many of our people still suffer the indignity of insult, the narrowing fear of intimidation, and, I regret to say, the threat of physical injury and mob violence. Prejudice and intolerance in which these evils are rooted still exist. The conscience of our Nation, and the legal machinery which enforces it, have not yet secured each citizen's full freedom from fear (Truman, 1947).

This was the first time a president had ever attended the NAACP conference, and the civil rights event gained immense publicity. Truman's speech attracted over 10,000 viewers, coverage on the big four national radio networks, as well as many independent stations and overseas media outlets. The President's words did not end that day either. The speech was recorded and re-transmitted throughout cinemas for anyone who wanted a second opportunity to listen (Garth, 1999).

Despite these efforts, the discussion did find general agreement in the white population. According to Pauley, the leading international newspapers such as the New York Times and the Washington Post, did not pay particular attention to the event. A complete transcript of the speech was seldom provided, or even commented on (Garth, 1999 p. 233). These newspapers, headed by whites, were sure not to devote any importance to Truman's words or adversely influence the opinions of its pro-white readers. On the contrary, newspapers headed by African Americans did not hesitate to celebrate such an important event in recognition of civil rights. One of the black historical newspapers, *The Kansas City Call*, wrote:

Truman so strongly denounced race prejudice and discrimination based upon race, creed, color, and national origin that even his enemies were convinced that the Missourian in

the White House had left behind him Missouri's tradition of second-class citizenship for Negroes (as quoted in O'Reilly, 1995, p. 145).

In the wake of Truman's re-election and general Afro-American approval, black anti-colonialists pressed the President to adopt a civil rights defense, exploiting the tension between him and the white supremacists. They relied on the votes that he would receive if there were full socio-political support on his part.

On January 7, 1948, Truman decided to send a special message to Congress, showing the African American population that he would be committed to achieving a more inclusive society if he was re-elected. His committee would request legislation against lynching since other similar cases had occurred after Woodard, which unfortunately had not resulted in justice. Furthermore, it would allow all blacks, including those who lived in the South, to vote without risk of consequences. The President declared:

I recommend that the Congress amend and strengthen the existing provisions of Federal law which safeguard the right to vote and the right to safety and security of person and property. These provisions are the basis for our present civil rights enforcement program. [...] A specific Federal measure is needed to deal with the crime of lynching—against which I cannot speak too strongly. It is a principle of our democracy, written into our Constitution, that every person accused of an offense against the law shall have a fair, orderly trial in an impartial court. We have made great progress toward this end, but I regret to say that lynching has not yet finally disappeared from our land. So long as one person walks in fear of lynching, we shall not have achieved equal justice under law. I call upon the Congress to take decisive action against this crime (Truman, 1948).

Truman's recommendation was based on Title XVIII of the Constitution, which offered protection to all American citizens, regardless of skin color. According to him, this right should also be extended to everyone who lived in the United States, even non-citizens. Furthermore, Title XVIII had a major limitation. It only applied if there was a conspiracy of two or more people to harm the life of another individual. Hence, it had to be extended to incorporate racial violence in which one acted individually, for example, in the event of personal revenge. It followed that section 52 of Title XV also had to change, as it was too general in its form. This section offered protection to people according to their federal rights. Unfortunately, it was often the case that violation of these rights originated from those who were serving to protect, essentially police officers who failed to intervene or intervened in an improper way, standing by the belief that they were doing their job correctly. The lynching cases involving law enforcement were examples of Woodard's blindness and Nixon's murder. Hence, the President proposed to establish several principal rights to be protected by this section, explicitly condemning violations and including appeals. Truman publicly denounced the restriction of citizens to vote, even though it was their right, something which had resulted in Isaiah Nixon's lynching. He expressly referred to acts of intimidation like assault or similar acts of violence, which prevented many African American citizens from being able to vote. Poll taxes were also a subject of debate. At the time, as many as seven states required economic contribution, and many blacks could not afford to spend the little money they had on voting. The President proposed that Congress make the right to vote free from any tax constraint so that the exercise of one's rights was not subjected to economic power, affirming:

Under the Constitution, the right of all properly qualified citizens to vote is beyond question. [...] We need stronger statutory protection of the right to vote. I urge the Congress to enact legislation forbidding interference by public officers or private persons with the right of qualified citizens to participate in primary, special and general elections in which Federal officers are to be chosen. This legislation should extend to elections for state as well as Federal officers insofar as interference with the right to vote results from discriminatory action by public officers based on race, color, or other unreasonable classification (Truman, 1948).

Being governed and controlled by the white majority for centuries, acts of racial discrimination would continue to perpetuate themselves until there was a change in the political sphere. The most effective way to bring about the change desired by blacks and civil rights advocates was the greater political participation of African Americans through voting. Only in this way the social equilibrium could be changed.

The President's speech aroused a consensus among African Americans. He harshly criticized the lynchings, suggesting increased federal protection, condemning the inability of many to vote, and proposed a series of legislative maneuvers to improve the social conditions of blacks and minorities living in the U.S. With such important promises, Truman secured victory. The NAACP did not hesitate to congratulate him in November 1948, recalling the promises he had made to achieve this victory:

Your triumph, achieved over both the extreme right and extreme left, is a mandate under which you and the new Congress can proceed to carry out the program you outlined so clearly and courageously to the people, including housing, labor legislation, civil liberties inflation, all of which were cavalierly rejected by the 80th Congress. We especially urge you to continue to maintain your forthright position, by giving your full and complete support to your legislative and administrative program for civil rights (*Atlanta Daily*, 1948, p. 1).

A few months after this NAACP statement – in July 1948 – Truman desegregated the U.S. armed services by executive order (Lautier, 1948, p. 2). He also created the President's Committee of Equality of Treatment and Opportunities in the Armed Services to defend all cases of discrimination related to race, color, religion, or national identity reported by black American citizens serving in the army. In the same year, the President asked Congress to create a permanent Fair Employment Practice Committee<sup>[5]</sup> – FEPC (Collins, 2001; Henderson, 1976; Reed, 1980), initiated by his predecessor Roosevelt, to continue helping African Americans enter industries, companies, and jobs that they otherwise could not get. The *House of Representatives* approved a permanent Fair Employment Practice Committee two years later, but as expected, the Senate opposed it and won this time too. Regarding racial violence, Southern Democrats still had a strong influence over Congress, so much so that they rejected the request for an anti-lynching law without difficulty.

Overall, these measures had positive results, as in the 1950s, civil rights movements reached a broad social consensus (Aldon, 1999; Blumberg, 1990; Shattuck, 1995), thanks also to the media's role (McElroy, 2013; Lott, 2017). Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, and Ohio established their own state-level FEPC laws to counter the Senate's decision (Kersten, 1994).

## Conclusions

With proper political support, new economic opportunities, and a more significant Federal Government presence across the territory, lynchings became less frequent during the second half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, death sentences increased in the courts and were rarely successfully appealed. This saw a move from “rough justice” (Pfeifer, 2006) to a false due process, often supported by forced confessions and no respect for FBI investigation (Niedermeier, 2019).

The efforts expressed by Truman simultaneously constituted a political opportunity for a new action movement, which was evident in the Federal Government’s support of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case (September 1952 – May 1954) up until the beginning of Eisenhower’s presidential term in 1953 (Dadisma, 1994; Lester, 2004; Ward, 2004). Accordingly, it is undisputed that President Truman contributed significantly to a fairer, equal social justice. He is credited with desegregating the armed forces thanks to the prohibition of discrimination in the civil service that not only allowed blacks to feel part and parcel of the United States by serving in the military, but also provided many of them access to financial gains which would have been hard to come by in states where racial dogmas remained dominant. Truman supported African Americans socially through public speech, political proposals, and new legislative actions, fighting for the abolition of poll taxes, economically desegregating public administration places, and allowing equal employment. Above all, he did everything possible to keep the election promises that led him to victory over the Republicans in 1948.

Unquestionably, the historical period of his presidential term did not play entirely in his favor. After the end of World War II, he had to make crucial decisions whilst trying not to upset the balance of his greatly divided party, where conflicting ideas bounced between progressives and conservatives from the South. He had to do everything in his power to maintain the consensus of the southern conservatives on which his first election was based whilst also satisfying the demands of the progressives, securing their votes for future elections. Truman was initially cautious in seeking a meeting point between the two opposing political thoughts – like Roosevelt towards the end of his term – listening to the demands of African Americans and avoiding clashes with white supremacists. Despite this, his role in advancing civil rights was more significant than his twentieth-century predecessors, especially his support for allowing all citizens to vote, regardless of skin color, while simultaneously fighting to end lynching.

The relationship between lynching and voting access is still being studied and analyzed today and requires further investigation. According to Williams: “Using county-level voter registration data [...] southern counties that experienced a higher number of historical lynching have lower voter registration rates of blacks today,” (Williams, 2017, p. 1), but the lynching did not impact political participation of other minority groups or among white Americans. As proof of this criticality, the 2019 *Voting Rights Advancement Act* aims to provide a broad in-depth review of all voting changes that have occurred nationally in the various jurisdictions to understand whether electoral discrimination measures have historically occurred as denounced by African American historiography.

Already the 2015 version of the Act highlighted blacks’ under-representation in political participation in important government decisions, such as new human rights laws like the federal

anti-lynching law. Specifically, the Act denounced the effects that nineteenth- and twentieth-century racial violence still have today in dissuading blacks' political participation through voting. Cases of lynching such as those of Nixon and Woodard have shaken the black community so much that even today, many African Americans living in those states where there has been a high rate of lynching in the previous two centuries do not participate in voting – and political life in general – for fear of experiencing painful racist experiences. Consequently, the interests and needs of African Americans are not carefully considered today, as the decisions that the current Government makes are based on registered voters, i.e., a white majority.

Therefore, further investigations into the effect that lynching had on black political participation choices are necessary. It can help promote new inclusive policies aimed toward a greater expression of African American thinking and help implement the measures needed to attain a truly equal society. This is what President Truman was aiming for over his two presidential terms.

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### **Notes**

[1] This essay defines «lynching» as an act of group or mob racial violence perpetrated by at least two or more people against a single person, often resulting in a murder.

[2] They were the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*, the *National Urban League*, the *National Negro Congress*, the *National Council of Negro Women*, and the *March on Washington Movement*.

[3] Unfortunately, although the organization increased social consensus, it was not ready to assist all the South African American defendants who asked for its help as victims of racial bias or forced confessions following torture. As a result, a greater selection of cases was needed, so much so that the NAACP would only support cases where the accused was a victim of racial prejudice, and on these bases, there was reason to believe that he/she was actually innocent. Moreover, it seems that the organization opted for the decision of not defending those who were potentially guilty of rape, attempted murder, or other crimes by fearing damage to the public image of the NAACP. Aiming at greater political feedback, they could not afford a negative antecedent.

[4] Many newspapers, especially black and southern ones, began reporting lynching cases in great detail and trying not to convey any thought, remaining as loyal as possible to the objective account of what happened. In this regard, the work done by the black journalist Ida B. Wells was fundamental. She used her newspaper "Free Speech" to provide another version of the lynchings stories that were being told. Indeed, she shed light on dozens of cases based on false accusations and racial prejudices. In this way, she raised awareness in the black community in the U.S. and abroad in standing against racial violence.

[5] It was established by President F.D. Roosevelt in 1941 to ban discriminatory employment practices.

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