

Black Politics in the Age of Jim Crow
Memphis, Tennessee, 1865 to 1954

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Abstract

ELIZABETH GRITTER: Black Politics in the Age of Jim Crow:
Memphis, Tennessee, 1865 to 1954
(Under the direction of Jacquelyn Dowd Hall)

Because the vast majority of black southerners were disenfranchised, most historians have ignored those who engaged in formal political activities from the late nineteenth century through the 1950s. This study is the first to focus on their efforts during this time. In contrast to narratives of the Jim Crow era that portray southern blacks as having little influence on electoral and party politics, this dissertation reveals that they had a significant impact. Using Memphis as a case study, it explores how black men and women maneuvered for political access and negotiated with white elites, especially with machine boss Edward H. Crump. It focuses in particular on Robert R. Church, Jr., who interacted with Crump, mobilized black Memphians, and emerged as the country's most prominent black Republican in the 1920s. Church and other black Republicans carved out a space for themselves in party politics and opened up doors for blacks in the process.

This study argues that formal black political mobilization constituted a major prong of the black freedom struggle during the Jim Crow era in the South. In the face of the segregation, disfranchisement, violence, and economic exploitation in the region, a small but significant number of black southerners used politics to fight these injustices. They secured improved public services and other benefits that improved their living conditions as well as achieved leadership positions that challenged stereotypes of black inferiority. They not only

ensured that the Republican Party allowed their political participation and took stands for black civil rights, but they also helped change the Democratic Party from a party that embraced white supremacy to one that pushed for civil rights. This study concludes that the political activities of black southerners ultimately helped end legal segregation and laid the groundwork for the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of black voters and black public officials in the South and eventually the election of the nation's first black president.

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List of Abbreviations

BTV	Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South Collection, Special Collections, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina
CA	<i>Commercial Appeal</i>
CD	<i>Chicago Defender</i>
CT	<i>Chicago Tribune</i>
MD	Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
Mfm	Microfilm
MSC	Memphis-Shelby County Room, Memphis-Shelby County Public Library and Information Center, Memphis, Tennessee
MT	<i>Memphis Triangle</i>
NYAN	<i>New York Amsterdam News</i>
NYT	<i>New York Times</i>
PC	<i>Pittsburgh Courier</i>
PS	<i>Memphis Press-Scimitar</i>
SC	Special Collections Department, Ned McWherter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee
SOHP	Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina
TSD	<i>Tri-State Defender</i>
UMOH	University of Memphis Oral History Research Office Collection, Memphis, Tennessee
WP	<i>Washington Post</i>
WTHSP	<i>West Tennessee Historical Society Papers</i>

Introduction

When I traveled to Memphis, Tennessee, in 2000, I fulfilled a dream of meeting and talking with participants of the civil rights movement. A white northerner with little connection to the movement, I had become fascinated by the black freedom struggle when taking a class two years previously on the subject at American University in Washington D.C. Now, as a college senior, I was taking an oral histories of the civil rights movement course, and I traveled to Memphis to interview activists for the major course project.

Little did I know that the short trip would be life changing and lead me to my dissertation topic. I was fortunate enough to conduct oral histories with Maxine and Vasco Smith, H. T. Lockard, and Russell Sugarmon, Jr., all of whom were key leaders in the civil rights movement in Memphis. I was prepared to hear about direct-action protests and legal struggles against the Jim Crow system. I was not prepared to learn that these activists considered formal political mobilization a major part of their struggle in the 1950s. In Memphis, blacks could vote, and they engaged in political efforts with the hope of achieving civil rights. “We saw the ballot as the voice of our people,” Maxine Smith told me.¹ Though I had learned about the voter registration efforts of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and other organizations in the 1960s, my image of the South in the 1950s was one where blacks were disenfranchised and consequently exercised no political power.

¹ Maxine Smith, interview by author, transcript, Memphis, 9 Oct. 2000, Southern Oral History Program Collection (hereafter SOHP), Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, p. 8-9.

Three years after making the fateful trip to Memphis, I entered graduate school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I became interested in looking more broadly at the political mobilization of black southerners at a time in which most were disenfranchised. How and why did blacks engage in formal political efforts in the Jim Crow era? What was the impact of their efforts? This dissertation is my answer.

“Black Politics in the Age of Jim Crow: Memphis, Tennessee, 1865 to 1954” uses Memphis as a case study in order to illuminate the small but significant number of black southerners who retained the right to vote and engaged in formal political efforts from the disenfranchisement campaigns of the late nineteenth century through the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, which overturned the “separate but equal” doctrine. This study is the first to focus on their efforts during this period, and it argues that their activities constituted a major prong of the “long civil rights movement.” In the face of the disfranchisement, violence, segregation, and poverty in the region, black southerners fought these injustices through electoral action. They not only asserted their right to political participation but also secured better public services and other benefits that improved their standard of living. In addition, they achieved political leadership positions that upset social constructions of blacks as subservient. Their activities intersected with the legal, direct action, and labor efforts of other civil rights activists, as they all worked to advance the collective interests of blacks and to press the country to live up to its promises of democracy and equality for all. I conclude that the electoral efforts of black southerners ultimately contributed to the demise of legal segregation and the democratization of southern politics in the 1960s. They laid the groundwork for the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which resulted in a

dramatic increase in the number of black voters and black public officials in the region and eventually the election of the nation's first black president.

I focus on electoral politics, including black voter registration and education activities, black voting behavior and patterns, black candidacies for public office, black activities in campaigns, and black participation in political clubs and party organizations. My emphasis on electoral politics does not mean that I consider politics solely to take this form. One important development in scholarship over the last few decades is a recognition that politics encompasses not only the electoral process and governmental institutions but also broader power relations and struggles. Though such encompassing definitions of politics are useful and important, they can lead historians to lose sight of the crucial importance of the state. My study, by contrast, remains sharply focused on direct efforts to influence the state through the electoral process. It brings into the spotlight the power structure that wields influence over all and, at the same time, examines the influence of black leaders and ordinary people on it. The state's capacity to formulate policy, mobilize resources, and change and shape the course of American life cannot be overestimated. At the same time, the structure of the state ultimately is created by people, put in place by people, and sustained by them.

Black electoral activity took place mainly in cities rather than in rural areas, where blacks remained overwhelmingly disenfranchised until the civil rights activism and federal interventions of the 1960s. Consequently, this dissertation focuses on urban areas. Despite the vigor of rural activism, it seldom took the form of formal politics because rural blacks suffered from less economic independence and faced greater isolation and more violence and intimidation than their urban counterparts. In cities, by contrast, an independent professional

class developed that formed the leadership for electoral efforts and made up a disproportionate number of black voters. The proximity of black institutions and black communities to each other allowed for concerted activities and, in some cases, provided for safety in numbers.² Furthermore, urban blacks enjoyed higher educational and income levels, two factors that correlated with higher voter participation. Black voter registration numbers also correlated with population figures: blacks were more likely to become registered voters if they made up a smaller share of the population than whites, which occurred more often in urban than rural areas. Overall, these blacks seemed less threatening to whites and thus faced less repression and had more room to politically maneuver.³

Memphis cannot serve as a representative southern city for a number of reasons. It was distinctive in serving as the cotton capital of the world and the business center of the Mid-South area. Furthermore, the city, one of the largest in the South, reportedly had more registered black voters than any other community in the region. Memphis is also unusual because of Edward H. Crump. A white Democrat, he was the most powerful political figure in Memphis from the time that he became mayor in 1910 until his death in 1954, and he built the longest-running political machine in U.S. history. Yet, Memphis effectively functions as a case study because of its location and the black political mobilization that took place there. Perched on the Mississippi River just north of Mississippi, Memphis is located in Shelby County of West Tennessee. By straddling the Deep South and Mid-South, it contains

² Michael J. Klarman, "The White Primary Rulings: A Case Study in the Consequences of Supreme Court Decisionmaking," *Florida State University Law Review* 29, no. 55 (fall 2001): 96-101; Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), 32, 103; Paul Lewinson, *Race, Class, and Party: A History of Negro Suffrage and White Politics in the South* (1932, reprint, New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1963), 132-52.

³ Donald R. Matthews and James W. Prothro, *Negroes and the New Southern Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), 177; Steven F. Lawson, *Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South, 1944-1969* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1976), 129-30.

features of both of these regions of the South. Most importantly, the abundance of black electoral action in Memphis offers a window into the range of political activity that occurred in other areas as well.

Even after disenfranchisement swept the South, many black Memphians continued to engage in electoral mobilization. They maneuvered for political access and negotiated with white elites in complex and sometimes conflicting ways. Crump relied on black votes to maintain his power, and a two-way relationship developed that gave black Memphians a certain amount of leverage. They formed political clubs, ran for office, engaged in voter registration and education activities, and sometimes held the balance of power in elections.

Blacks continued to vote in at least twenty other cities as well. These included Nashville, Richmond, Raleigh, Durham, Atlanta, Birmingham, Jacksonville, and Houston. Though thousands of blacks voted in Memphis, no more than a few hundred usually voted elsewhere until the 1930s.⁴ By the end of that decade, however, thousands registered to vote, mainly in large urban areas of the Peripheral South.⁵ More became eligible to vote after the Supreme Court ruled the white primary unconstitutional in its 1944 *Smith v. Allwright* decision.⁶ By restricting the Democratic primary to whites, the white primary had served as

⁴ Henry Lee Moon, *Balance of Power: The Negro Vote* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1948), 176.

⁵ The Peripheral South is defined as Tennessee, Arkansas, Florida, Virginia, Texas, and North Carolina, and the Deep South is defined as Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Mississippi. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 103.

⁶ Scholarship that looks at southern black political mobilization from the late nineteenth century until 1944 includes: Lewinson, *Race, Class, and Party*, Ralph J. Bunche, *The Political Status of the Negro in the Age of FDR*, ed. Dewey W. Grantham (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1973); Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Victory: The Rise and Fall of the White Primary in Texas*, 2d ed. (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2003); Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*; Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2005); Manfred Berg, *Ticket to Freedom: The NAACP and the African American Right to Vote*

the most powerful disenfranchisement measure. Because southern white Democrats held such dominance in the region, whoever won the primary was virtually guaranteed election. Democratic party rules had established the white primary in most southern states except for Texas, which mandated it by state law, and Tennessee and North Carolina, both of which never had a statewide white primary.⁷ After the *Smith* decision, the number of black voters in the South rose from less than 5 percent of those eligible to nearly 25 percent by the time of the *Brown* decision.⁸ Blacks in cities of the upper South and larger cities of the Deep South made up the largest percentage of the black vote.⁹ The number of blacks in elective or appointive office remained small, however: at least one black held elective or appointive office in less than 5 percent of southern cities from 1945 to 1960.¹⁰ Not until the Voting

(Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 2005); Lorraine Gates Schuyler, *The Weight of Their Votes: Southern Women and Political Leverage in the 1920s* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2006).

⁷ Klarman, "White Primary Rulings," 57-8, 70.

⁸ Matthews and Prothro, *Negroes and the New Southern Politics*, 18; Klarman, "White Primary Rulings," 107. For the post-World War II years, civil rights historiography primarily emphasizes legal and direct action, and, increasingly, labor activism. Scholarly works that examine sustained black political mobilization in the urban South include: Lawson, *Black Ballots*; Steven F. Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America since 1941*, 2d ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1997); Kathryn L. Nasstrom, "Down to Now: Memory, Narrative, and Women's Leadership in the Civil Rights Movement in Atlanta, Georgia," *Gender and History* 11, no. 1 (Apr. 1999): 113-44; J. Mills Thornton III, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2002); Robert Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2003); Steven F. Lawson, *Civil Rights Crossroads: Nation, Community, and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2003).

⁹ Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 129.

¹⁰ Matthews and Prothro, *Negroes and the New Southern Politics*, 176. To understand southern black politics in the Jim Crow era, it is crucial to delve into the immense body of work written by social scientists in the 1950s and 1960s. They wrote hundreds of studies speculating on the impact of increased black political activity following the *Smith* decision. In addition to Matthews and Prothro's book, these works include: Hugh D. Price, *The Negro in Florida Politics: A Chapter of Florida History* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1957); Harry A. Bailey, Jr., ed., *Negro Politics in America* (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1967); William R. Keech, *The Impact of Negro Voting: The Role of the Vote in the Quest for Equality* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1968); Harry Holloway, *The Politics of the Southern Negro: From Exclusion to Big City Organization* (New York: Random House, 1969).

Rights Act of 1965 did a large increase in the number of black public officials occur, from only one hundred in 1964 to some fourteen hundred by 1970.¹¹

I not only illuminate black political mobilization but also challenge persisting notions of a “Solid South” of white Democratic control in arguing that black Republicans had more political influence than scholars have assumed. Scholars have largely dismissed or not deemed significant black participation in the Republican Party in the first four decades of the twentieth century even though the vast majority of blacks were Republicans at that time. The Republican Party was most certainly not a bastion of racial tolerance, but it differed from the Democratic Party in allowing southern blacks a venue for participation and leadership and supporting black rights to a limited extent. White southerners dominated the Democratic Party regionally and nationally, and the party largely excluded blacks from its operations and did not take steps on behalf of blacks until the 1930s. While most blacks remained registered Republicans during the 1930s, they voted for Democratic candidates in unprecedented numbers largely because they benefited from Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs.

I focus in particular on Robert R. Church, Jr., a black Memphian who emerged as the country’s most prominent black Republican in the 1920s and remained a Republican until his death in 1952. His father, Robert R. Church, Sr., also a lifelong Republican, involved himself in political efforts as well, and his half sister, Mary Church Terrell, was a nationally known feminist and civil rights activist. Church, Jr., witnessed the imposition of disenfranchisement and legal segregation as a child, and he was determined to regain the lost rights of blacks. He saw the Republican Party as the most fruitful venue for engagement in the two-party system because of its history of liberating blacks from slavery and its limited

¹¹ Julian Bond, “MLK in Memphis” (paper presented as part of the University of Virginia’s Civil Rights South bus tour program, Memphis, Tennessee, March 13, 2010), copy in author’s possession, p. 19.

acceptance of black civil rights. In 1916, Church formed the mass-based Lincoln Republican League in Memphis. Because of its success, he founded the Lincoln League of America in 1919, a move that not only mobilized blacks across the country but also furthered his own rise to power in national politics. The fact that he hailed from Tennessee was crucial to his national prominence because the state had a more viable Republican presence than in other southern states and had fewer barriers to black voting. Because Church, Jr., engaged in local, state, and national political activism across most of the time period of my study, his life serves to illuminate the political activities of black southerners and the impact of their efforts. He was a highly respected leader, and many blacks saw him as reflecting their political aspirations.

My other main character is Edward H. Crump. His political activities also encompass most of the years covered by this study. Because he included black Memphians as part of his political coalition and they took advantage of this access, the interactions between local blacks and Crump serve to further provide a window into black electoral activities. The story of Memphis forces us to acknowledge the important role that white political actors played in black politics. Because southern blacks were essentially barred from holding office during the Jim Crow era, they often had to negotiate with whites in order to exercise political influence. While many scholars have examined Crump and the role of blacks in his machine, this is the first study to focus primarily on his relationship with black political activists. It contends that Crump was unique compared to other white southern politicians in permitting blacks to vote and allowing them a certain amount of political leverage. He also provided public services to black Memphians that were recognized as better than those provided in most other southern communities. Still, Crump was no racial liberal. Like other white

southern politicians, he believed in the Jim Crow system and second-class citizenship for blacks. Blacks received political rewards and improved city services to the degree that they did largely because of their agency. For all his uniqueness, Crump epitomized the social and political conditions in which blacks found themselves in the South.

This study is not a biography of Robert R. Church, Jr., or Edward Crump; rather, it uses their lives as lenses through which to illuminate black political efforts. My decision to focus on these two figures is also pragmatic. Because local black newspapers no longer exist for most of the time frame of this dissertation, the Robert R. Church Family Papers represent the richest source of archival materials on black political mobilization. The papers of other key black electoral figures and related groups either are nonexistent or do not contain as much information on black politics. Similarly, the Edward Crump Papers and those of two mayors of the Crump machine, Walter Chandler and Watkins Overton, include a large amount of information on black politics for the first half of the twentieth century. These officials not only interacted with black leaders and ordinary black Memphians involved in the political process but also monitored developments occurring in the black community. In addition, my study utilizes oral histories, local newspapers, national black newspapers, pamphlets, governmental reports, and other archival materials in order to illuminate the electoral efforts of both well-known and ordinary black political activists.

Most historians have neglected the black southerners who retained the right to vote and engaged in political activities during the Jim Crow era. Rather, scholars see this period as “the nadir,” a time when blacks were politically powerless because the vast majority was disenfranchised. Yet, we know that blacks commonly secured better public services, such as improved parks, recreational, and school facilities, in the places where they could vote in the

South. My dissertation contends that the benefits that blacks received from politics went far beyond even these significant gains, and they participated in politics in meaningful and substantial ways. In contrast to historical narratives of the Jim Crow era that portray southern blacks as having little influence on electoral and party politics, this study reveals that they ensured that the Republican Party continued to support black involvement in party operations and take stands for civil rights. They also helped transform the Democratic Party into a vehicle for civil rights and black political participation. Black southerners envisioned the political process as a means by which to better the lives of the disadvantaged, eradicate racism and discrimination, and achieve the American promises of freedom and equality for all.

In short, a spotlight on southern black electoral mobilization reveals that black life in the “nadir” period was more nuanced and complex than scholars have recognized.¹² In these respects, my dissertation extends the findings of Steven Hahn’s Pulitzer-Prize-winning *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration*. He too examines black political struggles in a time and place in which scholars traditionally have assumed that little political activity took place and shows the importance of such struggles to broader developments in the South and nation.¹³ To be sure,

¹² Leslie Brown also complicates the idea of the “nadir” period by showing a black business elite flourishing in Durham, North Carolina. Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2008). Similarly, Story Matkin-Rawn argues that more black activism was going on in the “nadir” period than scholars have acknowledged. Matkin-Rawn, “From Land Ownership to Legal Defense: The World War I Watershed in Black Arkansan Organizing” (paper presented at the Conference on Race, Labor and Citizenship in the Post-Emancipation South, Charleston, South Carolina, March 11-13, 2010). On ways in which the black community endured and resisted the Jim Crow South, see: William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad, eds., *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell about Life in the Segregated South* (New York: New Press, 2001).

¹³ Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003).

black political mobilization was limited in the South because of widespread disenfranchisement measures and white violence. It is important to recognize the injustices in history and society. Yet, it is also crucial to give adequate attention to black agency. Doing so is important not only for giving a fuller, more accurate picture of the black experience but also for understanding the human condition more broadly. Human beings often have displayed amazing resilience in the face of oppression and worked to better their conditions. Though they have not always seen changes in their lifetimes, their efforts have led to a better tomorrow. These stories, thus, provide us with an essential reason for studying history: its capacity to inspire hope, especially in the face of current injustices.

In exploring the involvement of blacks in both parties, my dissertation also reveals a more complex political landscape than historians have acknowledged. Scholars have recognized the significance of the northern black vote to a much greater extent than the southern black vote. While the vast majority of blacks continued to live in the South during this study's time period, the mass migration of black southerners to the North, particularly during and after World War II, led to a powerful black vote in key urban areas of the North. Blacks increasingly held the balance of power in elections, and Republicans and Democrats were forced to pay attention to them. Like blacks nationwide, northern blacks shifted to the Democratic Party largely because they benefited from Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs. Along with laborites, liberals, and other blacks and whites from all regions of the country, they became part of a new coalition of the Democratic Party that weakened the longstanding power of conservative southern white Democrats and influenced Democrats to

embrace civil rights policies and black participation in party operations.¹⁴ I argue that the impact of black southerners on electoral politics cannot be ignored, and I build on Patricia Sullivan's *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* in contending that they, and not just northern blacks, became a major part of the New Deal coalition.¹⁵

While scholars have focused on the black shift to the Democratic Party in 1936, I also show that many blacks remained committed to the Republican Party because of a strain of racial liberalism that persisted in the party, the party's historical association with blacks, and the Democratic Party's history of propping up the Jim Crow system. Though conservative white southerners became less influential in the Democratic Party, they remained a powerful minority that could block civil rights legislation. They formed an alliance with conservative white Republicans in order to oppose social welfare and fair employment measures. In fact, the Republican Party increasingly turned away from black rights as it focused on anti-communist efforts and business interests. As scholars have shown, the Democratic Party, with its support of New Deal programs and growing embrace of civil rights, proved to be a better alternative for blacks and won most of their support. Nonetheless, a significant number of blacks remained loyal to the Grand Old Party.

This dissertation builds on and challenges Simon Topping's *Lincoln's Lost Legacy: the Republican Party and the African American Vote, 1928-1952*. Topping fills a major historiographical gap in writing the first study to analyze in depth the relationship of blacks to the Republican Party from 1928 to 1952, and he makes a strong case for recognizing the complex process of the realignment of blacks to the Democratic Party. Yet, like other

¹⁴ Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983); Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 30th anniv. ed. (NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1996).

scholars, he largely focuses on the northern black vote and national politics and does not recognize the degree to which black southerners participated in politics. He also dismisses black participation in the Republican Party before 1928. Moreover, he takes a top-down approach, as do other historians who look at black participation in the Republican Party prior to 1933; my study, by contrast, looks not only at leaders but also ordinary blacks.¹⁶ In so doing, this dissertation illuminates grassroots political action and demonstrates why black southerners embraced the Republican Party. It also suggests the meaning that political activity held for black southerners and the impact of their electoral efforts on their communities, the South, and the nation.

Chapter 1 uses the lives of Robert R. Church, Sr., and Robert R. Church, Jr., as a window into political developments in Memphis and the South from 1865 until 1916. During Reconstruction, black men were enfranchised and held public office. However, when federal troops withdrew from the South, white supremacist campaigns led to the ascendancy of conservative white Democrats to office in southern states. From the late 1880s until the early 1900s, southern states passed laws that disenfranchised and segregated blacks, and lynching reached its peak. Black Memphians saw a sharp decline in their political and social status, but they retained the right to vote. Church, Sr., ran for office and helped register blacks to vote. The first black millionaire in the South, he mainly focused on business and black institution building as means of racial advancement. In the 1910s, Church, Sr.'s son, Robert R. Church, Jr., also a businessman, became an important local political leader determined to "regain the lost rights" of blacks. He and his business associates, along with

¹⁶ Simon Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy: the Republican Party and the African American Vote, 1928-1952* (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 2008); Richard B. Sherman, *The Republican Party and Black America from McKinley to Hoover, 1896-1933* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1973); Donald J. Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, & Lily-whites: a Study of Southern Strategies* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1985).

other black Memphians, engaged in political activism and pressed white politicians for public services and other demands. Black Memphians particularly worked with Edward H. Crump, who became mayor in 1910 and began building his political machine. Their electoral efforts culminated in 1916 when Church, Jr., formed the Lincoln League. Though a league-sponsored ticket of black Republicans for local, state, and national offices lost at the polls, they beat their white Republican challengers, and their victory led to the establishment of Church's Republican faction as the "regular Republicans" in the area. Elsewhere in the South, blacks formed political groups and participated in Republican Party politics as well.

Chapter 2 explores the period from 1917 to 1927, showing that the local Lincoln League led to a new era in the political mobilization of black Memphians and had a national impact. The league attracted regional and national attention, inspiring Church, Jr., to form the Lincoln League of America in 1919. As a result of his political successes, he became the most prominent black Republican in the country, held state and national positions within the party, and served as the chief black patronage dispenser in the nation. Black Memphians also expanded their civil rights activism into new venues. Following a local lynching, Church, Jr., and his political associates formed the city's branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). They faced a challenge to their leadership from black clergy who were part of the city's black division of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC) branch. The CIC group became an influential organization that advocated for improvements within the existing Jim Crow system. Despite their differences, both groups were dedicated to racial advancement. While Church, Jr., shifted his attention to national politics and disbanded the local Lincoln League in 1920, he and his associates continued to involve themselves in local elections. Their efforts, and that of other blacks,

were key to defeating a Ku Klux Klan ticket of office seekers in 1923. Four years later, black Memphians united to make their biggest mass political mobilization in the decade: Church and his political lieutenants founded the West Tennessee Civic and Political League. They formed an alliance with Crump and mobilized black Memphians to successfully vote the incumbent mayor out of office and elect the mayoral candidate who offered the most promise for meeting their needs.

Chapter 3 examines the political transformations occurring from 1928 through the 1930s. While the Republican Party had always been limited in advocating black civil rights and accepting black participation in the party, President Herbert Hoover took fewer steps for black rights than his Republican predecessors and alienated many blacks from the party. Church and his fellow black Republicans made sure that the party did not completely disregard blacks. In 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president. Though most blacks continued to identify themselves as Republican during the 1930s, a majority of blacks first voted for the Democratic Party in the 1934 midterm election and even more backed Roosevelt in 1936. They became part of a new coalition of Democrats that weakened the longstanding power of conservative southern white Democrats in the party. In Memphis, Church, Jr.'s power declined with the ascendancy of Roosevelt to office while Crump's power increased. Crump's machine encompassed both city and county politics, and he became the most powerful figure in state politics. Crump cracked down on whites and blacks who threatened his control, including Church. Yet, the decade was not all bleak for local blacks. Like blacks elsewhere in the region and country, black Memphians increased their political activity. Local black Democratic organizations formed, and businessman J. E. Walker emerged as a Democratic rival to Church. Spurred by New Deal legislation, a

powerful biracial labor movement emerged in Memphis and the South that resulted in better working conditions for blacks and put cracks in the Jim Crow system.

Chapter 4 assesses black political activity in Memphis and in the South during World War II. The years 1940 to 1945 signified a time of rising activism for blacks across the region and country as they pressed the United States for the democracy at home that black and white soldiers were fighting for abroad. But, in Memphis, blacks faced Crump. More anti-democratic than ever before, he cracked down on blacks campaigning for the Republican presidential candidate in 1940, leading to the exile of Church and two other black Republicans from the city. Crump also oppressed black labor activists and ordinary black Memphians despite the protests of national leaders and organizations. In a well-publicized incident, Crump even banned black labor leader A. Philip Randolph from speaking in Memphis. Randolph used the moment to press for a more democratic Memphis and South. With Church and his political lieutenant J. B. Martin exiled from the city, black political leadership fell into the hands of local blacks who took a less assertive political approach. They largely did not challenge the Crump machine. But, other blacks joined the local NAACP branch, engaged in individual protests against the Jim Crow system, and continued their involvement in the labor movement. While many black Memphians praised the city for its release of a booklet detailing the city's provisions for blacks, a black lieutenant and his soldiers criticized the local government for its limits. They signified a new generation of black southerners and Memphians who would more aggressively pursue civil rights in the post-war era and take advantage of the *Smith* decision to increasingly engage in political activities.

Chapter 5 examines the watershed years from 1946 to 1954. Black and white Memphians became increasingly disenchanted with Crump. White reformers, black and white laborites, and black political activists came together in 1948 to support the first non-Crump-supported candidates to win public office in more than a decade when Estes Kefauver became senator and Gordon Browning became governor. That year, President Harry S. Truman supported civil rights measures. The Democratic Party fissured as many white southerners, including Crump, supported Dixiecrat Strom Thurmond, who opposed Truman's civil rights stance, for the presidency. The Dixiecrat Party was a splinter party dedicated to the maintenance of the Jim Crow system. After the 1948 elections, a more open political environment developed in Memphis, and Crump's power declined. While the labor movement and NAACP suffered from the wave of anti-communism sweeping the country, black and white Memphians engaged in increased levels of political activity. An independent white leadership group rivaled Crump and his associates, and a white Republican group emerged that challenged the local party organization, which was dominated by blacks. In 1951, black Memphians mobilized behind J. E. Walker when he made the first black bid for local office in decades in a race for the school board. Though he lost, his bid laid the groundwork for growing black political activity during the decade. In 1952, Church, Jr., made an effort to come back to Memphis to regain control of the local party's leadership, but he died before he could come closer to making these plans a reality. His daughter, Roberta Church, carried on the torch by becoming involved in Republican Party politics. In 1954, Crump died. With no successor to take his place, an era of Memphis politics had ended. That same year, the Supreme Court handed down the *Brown* decision, shaking the South to its core.

I end with a brief examination of the 1955 to 2010 period. In 1960, the sit-in movement swept Memphis and the South. Longstanding political activists in Memphis embraced direct action as a new part of their struggle. Like blacks across the region, black Memphians shifted further to the Democratic Party, which spearheaded the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Republican Party, in contrast, became increasingly conservative and turned away from its historical association with blacks. As a result of the civil rights activism and legislation, *de jure* segregation saw its demise in the region, and black Memphians and southerners began to win public office in the 1960s on a large scale. They also saw increased employment opportunities. But, Martin Luther King, Jr., was murdered in Memphis in 1968 after coming to the city to support striking sanitation workers. The gains of black Memphians and other black southerners also were stunted by the persistence of poverty, ongoing racial polarization, white flight, and other factors. Nevertheless, I conclude that the political activities of black southerners in the Jim Crow era succeeded in carving out a space in the political system, ensuring that government served their needs, and paving the way for the post-*Brown* civil rights gains.

Chapter 1: “To Regain the Lost Rights of the Race”: Black Political Mobilization in the Years of Enfranchisement and Disenfranchisement, 1865-1916

W. Herbert Brewster grew up in a community “with very little opportunity” in rural West Tennessee near the small village of New Castle. As he recalled, it was “like the backside of a desert.”¹⁷ Until a fateful night in 1916, he had never been in an auditorium before and did not even know what one was. When he and other black students pressed their way into Memphis’s crowded Church’s Auditorium that evening, he later remembered that they looked up and saw a beautiful place. After the singing of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” “there strode out to . . . the platform a young man of great personal carriage and personality. We had never seen a man who charmed us like he did.” The man was Robert Reed Church, Jr., whom Brewster called “the new Galahad for black people in the South.” Church introduced Roscoe Conkling Simmons, the speaker for the night who was the nephew of Booker T. Washington and a prominent journalist and civil rights leader. Simmons gave a rousing address.¹⁸ “When I heard that speech and saw [Church, Jr.], [I] resolved that night to be somebody someday,” Brewster said. “That determination . . . was inspired by Bob Church and that crowd of people in that black auditorium. I never knew before that I had a

¹⁷ New Castle was on the borderline of Fayette and Hardeman counties. W. Herbert Brewster, Sr., interview by Charles W. Crawford, transcript, Memphis, 6 Jul. 1983, University of Memphis Oral History Research Office Collection (hereafter UMOH), Special Collections Department (hereafter SC), Ned McWherter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee, p. 2.

¹⁸ Ibid., 5.

chance.”¹⁹ Brewster went on to work with Church in political efforts, and he became a prominent minister in local and national Baptist circles, head of a ministerial school, and a world-renowned gospel songwriter.²⁰

Brewster’s dramatic meeting with Robert Church, Jr., occurred at a rally of the Lincoln League on the night before election day. Church had formed this mass-based Republican organization in order to politicize blacks, support the Grand Old Party, and “regain the lost rights of the race.” During Reconstruction, the Republican-controlled federal government had granted blacks citizenship rights and black men voting rights. White Republicans took charge of southern state governments, and black men registered to vote and occupied public office in Memphis and elsewhere in the region. But, the alliance between white Republicans and blacks was tenuous, and most white Republicans were not committed to ensuring black equality. Former white Confederates resumed control of southern state governments, and Reconstruction ended by 1877. A surge of white activism, compounded by white extralegal violence, led to the stripping of black office holders, the widespread disenfranchisement of blacks, and the enactment of legal segregation across the South by the early twentieth century. Though black Tennesseans retained the vote more than most other black southerners, the number of black office holders in the state and in Memphis declined. The number of Republicans in the South also decreased; a sizeable proportion of the remaining whites joined “lily-white” factions that largely excluded blacks. Blacks stayed involved in the Republican Party in “black-and-tan” factions that included a few whites and often

¹⁹ Ibid., 6. On Simmons, see: Andrew Kaye, “Roscoe Conkling Simmons and the Significance of African American Oratory,” *The Historical Journal* 45, no. 1 (2002): 79-102.

²⁰ “Precious Memories of Rev. Dr. William Herbert Brewster, Sr., 1897-1987,” funeral program, 20 Oct. 1987, Notable Black Memphians Funeral Programs, SC, p. 2.

competed with the lily whites for control of local party organizations while white Democrats monopolized southern politics and excluded blacks from their party organizations.

In 1916, the lily-white faction was the most prominent Republican Party organization in Memphis. Church was a member of the black-and-tan group, and he wanted it to displace the lily-white group as the regular party organization. So, for the November election, he organized a Lincoln League ticket of black candidates to run against the white Republican slate for state and national positions. If the black office seekers polled more votes, the black-and-tans would become the regular Republicans. The Lincoln League mobilized ordinary black Memphians in support of the candidates, and the organization included many of the city's black leaders. One member, in fact, had been the last black person to serve in Memphis's legislature: Lymus Wallace had ended his tenure in 1890, so his very presence provided a reminder of the black office holding that had once been.²¹ Portraying the Republican Party as the vehicle that had delivered blacks from slavery, Lincoln League members believed that their alignment with this political party held the most promise for freeing them from the Jim Crow system. The Democratic Party was dominated by white southerners intent on maintaining black subjugation. While historians have emphasized the ideology and programs of individual blacks during this time and the community building that blacks engaged in to protect themselves from the prevailing environment, the story of Memphis puts the spotlight on how blacks mobilized politically in the region.

²¹ Lymus Wallace was elected to the board of public works (which was part of the city legislature) in 1882 and served till 1890. In addition, he was appointed a member of the school board. Another league member was Fred Savage, Jr. His late father, Fred Savage, Sr., had served as a school board member in the late nineteenth century. Roberta Church and Ronald Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families of Color, 1850-1900*, 3rd ed., ed. Charles Crawford (Memphis: Murdock Printing Company, 1987), 77-8, 100-1.

Elsewhere in the South, even in the dark days of the post-Reconstruction years, a small but significant number of blacks continued to participate in the political process, particularly in urban areas. Hundreds continued to vote in some cities, including Atlanta and Richmond, and a few blacks cast ballots despite facing the white primary.²² Some blacks also voted in nonpartisan municipal elections, bond and tax rate referenda, and occasional special elections. In some cases, they marshaled their forces to secure the passage of measures beneficial to the black community.²³ During this time, the number of urban civic organizations and nonpartisan political leagues increased: the civic groups conducted discussions of public matters affecting blacks, and the leagues coached blacks on how to overcome registration requirements and challenged disenfranchisement in the courts.²⁴ Cities served as the headquarters of black-and-tan Republican committees, and black women petitioned municipal governments for better public services.²⁵ After its founding in 1909, the NAACP began a legal battle to overturn disenfranchisement measures and won a victory when the Supreme Court ruled the grandfather clause unconstitutional in 1915.²⁶

In Memphis, Brewster called Church, Jr.'s father, Robert Reed Church, Sr., the "forerunner" of the 1916 political developments because his rise to prominence from humble

²² Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 103; Moon, *Balance of Power*, 176; Lewinson, *Race, Class, and Party*, 153.

²³ Lewinson, *Race, Class, and Party*, 146-52.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

²⁵ Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 103; Lewinson, *Race, Class, and Party*, 136-7; Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1996), 147-8, 172-4; Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), 138.

²⁶ The decision was *Guinn v. United States*. The grandfather clause was adopted by some southern states in an attempt to disenfranchise blacks and limit voting rights to whites; it exempted from voting restrictions persons whose ancestors could vote before 1867.

beginnings had left a “legacy of inspiration.”²⁷ Church, Sr., certainly was the most influential black person in Memphis from the Civil War until his death in 1912. His life testifies to the frustrations and travails that all black southerners experienced during these years, and the wealth he amassed underscores the opportunities of which only a very small number were able to take advantage.²⁸ Born in Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1837, Church, Sr., was the son of Emmeline, an educated slave of royal Malay descent, and her white master, Captain Charles Beckwith Church, a steamship owner. Contradictory evidence exists as to whether Church, Sr., was a slave. He claimed that he was a slave, but his daughter and granddaughter later unearthed letters and other information from Captain Church stating that Church, Sr., was not a slave.²⁹

In any case, in the 1850s, Church, Sr., served as a steward on his father’s steamboats, which ran up and down the Mississippi River from Memphis to New Orleans.³⁰ He survived the burning of the steamer *Bullet No. 2* in 1855 and later kept a painting of the ship in his home. During the Battle of Memphis on June 6, 1862, a Federal fleet captured the steamboat *Victoria*, but Church escaped. That day, the Confederates lost Memphis to the Union in a naval battle. Union troops occupied the city for the rest of the war. Church stayed in

²⁷ Brewster, interview, 6.

²⁸ For instance, in Washington D.C., considered the center of the black elite, less than one hundred families of a black population of 75,000 were considered members of this group in 1900. For an analysis of the black elite in the South and country during this time, see: Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000). The statistic is from p. 39.

²⁹ Annette E. and Roberta Church, *The Robert R. Churches of Memphis* (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, 1974), 5; Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (1940; reprint with an introduction by Nellie Y. McKay, New York: G. K. Hall and Co., 1996), 2-5; Gloria Brown Melton, “Blacks in Memphis, Tennessee, 1920-1955: A Historical Study” (Ph.D. diss., Washington State Univ., 1982), 59 n. 62.

³⁰ Roberta and Annette Church, interview by Charles W. Crawford, transcript, Memphis, no. 1, 4 Jan. 1973, UMOH, p. 12.

Memphis and secured a position either as a livery stable helper or with a wholesale merchant.³¹ After the war, he became one of the city's first black saloonkeepers when he opened a saloon at the corner of Beale and Gayoso.³²

Church invested his business profits in rental properties, which brought him a steady income, and he came to own more property than any other black Memphian. He succeeded because of his own efforts and those of his first wife, Louisa Ayres, a former slave. She ran a successful hair salon--the first one for black women in Memphis--in the downtown area. With her profits, the Churches bought their first carriage and house, which was located in an interracial suburb.³³ Church accrued a fortune mainly through real estate and serving as an architect and civil engineer for his buildings.³⁴ More than any other person, he transformed the Beale Street area into a commercial center for black Memphians. It became fundamental to the black institution building that occurred in the city as newly freed blacks joined together to develop their own communities free from white repression. Called the "Boss of Beale Street," Church dominated the street's business affairs by 1883. He owned a hotel, restaurant, and other properties on the street and operated several saloons in the area.³⁵ He also owned valuable business property on South Second Street, more than 350 residences in

³¹ Paul R. Coppock, "Bob Church: An Early Believer in Memphis," *Commercial Appeal* (hereafter *CA*), 1 Jul. 1973, sec. 6, p. 7; Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 16.

³² Newspaper obituary of Robert R. Church, Sr., of a white Memphis paper, n.p., n.d., Robert R. Church Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 54, SC.

³³ McKay, introduction to *Colored Woman*, xix.

³⁴ G. P. Hamilton, *The Bright Side of Memphis* (1908; reprint, Tennessee: Lightning Source, 2003), 99.

³⁵ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 33; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 13, 21-4; Charles W. Crawford, "Memphis'[s] First Black Capitalist," *Daily News*, 3 Jun. 1976, Church Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 68; S. Davidson Hill, "The Self-Defined African American Community of Jim Crow Memphis" (senior thesis, Princeton, 2000), 31; George W. Lee, *Beale Street: Where the Blues Began* (New York: Robert O. Ballou, 1934), 24-6.

Memphis, and several hundred acres of land on the city's edge. His real estate empire eventually encompassed properties in other large municipalities.³⁶ Recognized across the region and nation for his success, Church became the first black millionaire in the South and reputedly in the United States.³⁷

Reflecting and symbolizing Church's financial success was his palatial house, which he built in 1884. He and Louisa had divorced around 1867.³⁸ He lived there with his second wife, Anna Wright Church, in a silk stocking neighborhood that included prominent whites and blacks.³⁹ The three-story, fourteen-room Queen Anne-style home at 384 S. Lauderdale ranked with the white mansions of the city. It included frescoes and elaborate lace curtains on bay windows. As was common during that time, the parlor was a showplace of the house: it was hand-painted by French artists and had velvet Brussels carpets and two crystal chandeliers.⁴⁰ The *Commercial Appeal*, a local white daily, noted that the family had earned the respect of their white neighbors.⁴¹

Far from mitigating racial tensions, Church's success often stoked jealousies among whites, even in the city's most exclusive social circles. One day, some white women drove up in their carriage to see his family's storied home. When they knocked on the door, Anna

³⁶ Newspaper obituary of Robert R. Church, Sr., n.p.; Hamilton, *Bright Side*, 99.

³⁷ McKay, introduction to *Colored Woman*, xix; "[Ex-?]Slave's Gift: Church Donates \$1,000 to [Confederate?] Reunion Fund," *CA*, 30 Jan. 1901, Church Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 31; "Souvenir Programme, Dr. Booker T. Washington, Memphis, Tenn.," 24 Nov. 1909, Church Family Papers, Box 2, Folder 33, 2; Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 18; "Wealthy Colored Men," *Chicago Tribune* (hereafter *CT*), 25 May 1890, Church Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 31.

³⁸ For more information on Louisa Ayres Church, see: Terrell, *Colored Woman*.

³⁹ Church and Church, interview no. 1, 4 Jan. 1973, 6-7; Roberta and Annette Church, interview by Charles W. Crawford, transcript, Memphis, no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, UMOH, p. 8.

⁴⁰ Church and Church, interview no. 1, 4 Jan. 1973, 2-3.

⁴¹ "[Ex-?]Slave's Gift," *CA*.

answered in a long blue silk robe. With a haughty air, she called for a servant to show them around, but the women beat a “hasty retreat.”⁴² Accounts of the white women’s visit made the pages of a local white newspaper and the *Chicago Tribune*, the latter of which termed Anna’s action a “deserved rebuke.”⁴³ Indeed, the unsettled social, political, and economic conditions that followed the Civil War led to racial friction. Whites of all classes confronted growing competition from black workers and business owners. For a brief period after the war, whites were even forced to accept the authority of black soldiers stationed just south of Memphis.

In 1866, these simmering tensions exploded into what was the first large-scale urban race riot in the South. It followed a verbal confrontation between members of the Irish-dominated police force and black troops on a Memphis street corner. White rioters targeted black property and businessmen. When Church learned that his saloon was to be targeted, he refused to close it. The members of a white mob shot Church in the back of the head at his business and left him for dead. The injury left a hole in his head where one could insert the tip of a little finger, and Church subsequently suffered from headaches so severe that he sometimes threatened to commit suicide. By the time order was restored in 1866, at least seventy-five people had been wounded, some one hundred blacks robbed, at least five black women raped, and forty-six blacks and two whites killed.⁴⁴ After the riot, no whites were

⁴² Bessie Blanden, “Our Colored Society,” 5 Apr. 1890, [CA?], Church Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 9.

⁴³ Ibid.; “Wealthy Colored Men,” *Chicago Tribune*.

⁴⁴ Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 3; Caplinger, “Conflict and Community,” 29-32; Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee*, 39; Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 16; Terrell, *Colored Woman*, 7.

punished, and no blacks were compensated. Blacks rebuilt their churches and schools and increasingly sought solace and protection in their own neighborhoods and institutions.⁴⁵

Although Church was first and foremost a businessman, he also participated in political movements aimed at advancing the collective interests of blacks. In the late 1860s, the Republican-dominated state legislature passed laws providing for the suffrage of black men, removing restrictions to black office holding, and protecting black voters from economic intimidation.⁴⁶ Taking advantage of these new laws, black Memphians formed political clubs, held elected and appointive office, and built coalitions with whites in the 1870s and 1880s. Black churches hosted important political meetings, and black fraternal organizations encouraged black political participation and office holding.⁴⁷ While whites of both parties competed for black votes, blacks usually were elected from predominately black districts.⁴⁸ Nearly every branch of government included black officials or employees, and blacks served as police officers and firefighters.⁴⁹ In addition, blacks, including Church,

⁴⁵ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 3; Caplinger, "Conflict and Community," 32-3, 132-3; Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee*, 39.

⁴⁶ Caplinger, "Conflict and Community," 33-4; Mingo Scott, *The Negro in Tennessee Politics and Governmental Affairs, 1865-1965* (Nashville: Rich Publishing Company, 1964), 14; Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee*, 35-6; Joseph H. Cartwright, *The Triumph of Jim Crow: Tennessee Race Relations in the 1880s* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1976), 2.

⁴⁷ Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee*, 45; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 15.

⁴⁸ Joe Walk, *A History of African-Americans in Memphis Government* (Memphis: Joe Walk, 1996), 8.

⁴⁹ I have discovered that, from the late 1860s through the early 1900s, blacks served in the following positions: city councilman, county school board member, city school board member, constable, justice of the peace, assistant attorney general, wharfmaster, coal inspector, county registrar, state legislator, U.S. deputy marshal, Shelby County commissioner, federal customs collector, circuit county clerk, whiskey inspector, police officer, and firefighter. Lee, *Beale Street*, 240; Walk, *History of African-Americans*; Walter Adkins, "Beale Street Goes to the Polls" (master's thesis, Ohio State Univ., 1935), 11-2; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 50; Clark Porteous, "A Vow to Citizens by Negro Winners," *Memphis Press-Scimitar* (hereafter *PS*), 4 Nov. 1964, Vertical File: 1964 Elections, Memphis-Shelby County Room (hereafter *MSC*), Memphis-Shelby County Public Library and Information Center, Memphis, Tennessee.

served on the grand jury.⁵⁰ Church also helped blacks to register to vote.⁵¹ Like most blacks of his era, he was a lifelong Republican, and he campaigned for James Garfield, the successful Republican candidate in the 1880 presidential election. In 1882, Church made a bid for the city council, but he was unsuccessful.⁵²

These Memphis developments reflected the revolution in politics and society occurring across the South during Reconstruction. Some two thousand blacks held elective and appointive office at the national, state, and local levels, with the majority at the local level.⁵³ Most black office holders were former slaves, attesting to the social transformation in which enslaved blacks were not only freed but also could occupy political positions.⁵⁴ Black churches especially provided the space for political organizing, and blacks used the political process to secure their rights, better social conditions, and otherwise press for racial advancement. Though not granted suffrage, black women participated in politics outside formal channels through such means as petitioning local officials to hire black police officers.⁵⁵ Black political activists and office holders were full of hope in their struggle for citizenship, but the road was not smooth anywhere. They faced violence, intimidation, and economic repercussions. In addition, they were represented in public office in numbers

⁵⁰ Adkins, "Beale Street," 12; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 51.

⁵¹ Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 17; Roberta and Annette Church, interview by Charles W. Crawford, transcript, Memphis, no. 1, 5 Jan. 1973, UMOH, p. 1-3.

⁵² Church and Church, interview no. 1, 5 Jan. 1973, 1-3; Annette E. Church to William E. Miller, 4 Sept. 1961, Church Family Papers, Box 12, Folder 21.

⁵³ Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 219-20.

⁵⁴ Eric Foner and Olivia Mahoney, *America's Reconstruction: People and Politics after the Civil War* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995), 95, 97.

⁵⁵ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 85-8.

disproportionate to their population size. Whites continued to occupy the most important positions in electoral and party politics. While southern white Republicans generally could be counted on to support black political rights, most did not see racial equality as a priority. In a time in which blacks were constructed as inferior by whites across the nation, it would have been abnormal for most whites to fully embrace black rights. Nonetheless, black political participation signified a radical transformation of society.⁵⁶

Church, Sr., knew many of the elite black political figures of the day and interacted socially with them. Family friends included Governor Pinckney S. B. Pinchback, Frederick Douglass, Senator Blanche Bruce, and John Lynch. Pinchback, the only black governor during Reconstruction, had served as governor of Louisiana. Church and his second wife, Anna, spent part of their honeymoon at Pinchback's New Orleans home and were entertained with an elaborate reception there.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the Churches had longstanding ties to Frederick Douglass: Anna's mother, Jane Wright, had been a friend of his, and he stayed at her home when in Memphis.⁵⁸ Most well known as an abolitionist and orator, Douglass was the first black to have his name entered into nomination for president at a major party convention, the Republican National Convention in 1888. Senator Blanche Bruce of Mississippi, one of two black U.S. senators during Reconstruction, was a friend whom Church met while working on the steamboats.⁵⁹ Church also was friendly with John Lynch,

⁵⁶ *Nation under Our Feet*, 208-11, 237, 249-51.

⁵⁷ Church and Church, interview no. 1, 5 Jan. 1973, 5-8; Church and Church, interview no. 1, 4 Jan. 1973, 11-2; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 37-9.

⁵⁸ Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 42; Church and Church, interview no. 1, 5 Jan. 1973, 7-8; Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 114-6.

⁵⁹ Church and Church, interview no. 1, 4 Jan. 1973, 9-12.

who was speaker of the Mississippi House of Representatives, a U.S. congressman, and a Justice of the Peace. In addition, Lynch was temporary chair of the Republican National Convention in 1884, the only black person to serve in that position in the late nineteenth century.

While Church participated in political and business efforts on behalf of blacks, he retained a love for Memphis, and he used his wealth to help white residents as well. Memphis was severely affected with Yellow Fever epidemics in 1873, 1878, and 1879. Its population fell from more than 40,000 in 1876 to 18,500 in late 1879 because of death and emigration.⁶⁰ As a result, the city lost its charter and became a taxing district run by the state. Into the picture stepped Church in 1881. Having faith in the city's recovery and potential, he bought the first bond for one thousand dollars to restore its charter.⁶¹ Seeing that a black man had taken this action, white capitalists were compelled to purchase bonds.

"The reason why Memphis has epidemics of yellow fever . . . is because the streets are in terrible condition," Church said. "[T]here are big holes filled with great pools of stagnant water, breeding disease. When Memphis is cleaned up . . . there won't be any yellow fever and it will be one of the most healthful and desirable cities in this country."⁶² The city had become a business center in the Mid-South, and he thought that it would regain this status because of its geographical location and river harbors. Some people thought he

⁶⁰ For a personal perspective on the Yellow Fever epidemics, see: Terrell, *Colored Woman*, 36-7.

⁶¹ Church, Sr., made this purchase even though the bonds were first issues, making their market value problematic. Lee, *Beale Street*, 27.

⁶² Terrell, *Colored Woman*, 37. For more on how the city's unsanitary conditions bred disease, see: Gerald M. Capers, Jr., *The Biography of a River Town--Memphis: Its Heroic Age* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1939), 188, 200.

had lost his mind in making this prediction.⁶³ After the epidemics, Church invested in local real estate more heavily than he had previously, and Memphis soon began its recovery.⁶⁴ It regained its financial standing and status as a city, and its population rose to 64,495 in 1890. Recognizing Church's dedication to the municipality, the white *Memphis Evening Scimitar* said that he was "for Memphis first, last and all the time" and called him a "firm believer in Memphis." "[W]ars and plagues have never shaken his faith in her," it said.⁶⁵

Yet, even with his efforts on behalf of Memphis, Church, along with other assertive and economically successful blacks, remained the target of white violence and hatred in the South. Fearful of the new freedoms afforded to blacks in the urban environment, whites in Memphis and other southern cities embraced Jim Crow measures and racist demagoguery as tools for elevating their relative status, controlling black workers, and limiting black economic and political advancement. Extralegal violence emerged as a crucial weapon in this new campaign for affirming white privilege and dominance. Lynching and mob violence reached their height during the 1890s and threatened black progress well into the 1930s.⁶⁶ As black Memphian George W. Lee told the story in his book *Beale Street: Where the Blues Began* (1934): in 1886, a group of white hoodlums were looking at Beale "with envious eyes. They wanted to gain control over the great spending power of [blacks] and . . . found it necessary to put Church 'on the spot.' They selected a corner that he would have to pass

⁶³ Robert R. Church, Jr., "Material for the Carnegie Corporation of New York--Requested by Dr. Bunche," [1938?], Church Family Papers, Box 6, Folder 45, p. 1; Terrell, *Colored Woman*, 37.

⁶⁴ Church, "Material for the Carnegie Corporation," 1.

⁶⁵ Annette E. and Roberta Church, "Robert R. Church, Sr., Memphis'[s] First Black Capitalist," Memphis Sesquicentennial Commission, 1969, Church Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 68.

⁶⁶ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1993).

during the afternoon of a certain day and congregated there with bloody designs.” Their plans leaked out, so Church knew their intentions. Though advised not to go by them, he “put his gun in his pocket . . . and walked boldly down the avenue.” He pulled a white friend from a nearby store to act as a witness, walked by the hoodlums, and “commanded them to shoot if they had the nerve.”⁶⁷ He was not hurt.

While Church was able to protect himself on this occasion, he and other leaders of his generation could not stop the rising tide of disenfranchisement across the South from 1888 to 1908 despite their business successes and their commitment to advancing black civil rights. Conservative white Democrats regained control of all southern state legislatures, and federal troops were removed from the region in 1877, effectively ending Reconstruction. These governmental bodies soon began to enact disenfranchisement measures that dramatically diminished the political power of blacks and that of some marginalized whites, including impoverished farmers and laborers who had occasionally sought alliances with blacks.⁶⁸ The number of registered black voters plummeted to less than 5 percent of those eligible, the number of black elected officials dropped to zero, and the number of white registered voters fell as well. In Louisiana, for example, the number of registered blacks decreased from 130,000 to 5,000. In Virginia, the number of blacks on the voting rolls fell from 147,000 to 21,000.⁶⁹ For presidential elections, overall southern voter turnout dropped from 50.24

⁶⁷ Lee, *Beale Street*, 25-6.

⁶⁸ Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 10-5.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 14-5.

percent in 1872 to 30.18 percent in 1908 while voter turnout increased from 50.37 percent to 64.68 percent in the rest of the country.⁷⁰

Over his lifetime, Church saw the rise of black political activity in Memphis, and he also saw its fall as Tennessee was no exception to this wave of disenfranchisement. Black office holding had peaked in the 1870s but then declined in part because the local government restructured after the Yellow Fever epidemics in a way that reduced electoral positions. The state legislature passed laws that enacted stricter registration requirements, the secret ballot, and the poll tax in 1889 and 1890. These laws affected blacks more than whites.⁷¹ In the general election, voter turnout statewide dropped from 78 percent in 1888 to a mere 50 percent in 1890.⁷² Race-baiting, fraud, intimidation, and hostile press coverage further undermined black political power and elevated growing numbers of conservative white Democrats to positions of power at the local and state levels. The question became not whether blacks would hold office but whether they would be successful in uncovering new means of asserting political influence. With the decrease of political party competition, white Republicans and Democrats no longer sought black votes or gave jobs to black supporters to the extent that they had previously. By 1910, in Memphis, white Democrats

⁷⁰ J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1974), 12.

⁷¹ In contrast to color-coded ballots distributed to voters by ward bosses, the secret ballot required that voters use ballots issued at public expense and have no outside assistance in casting their votes unless they were blind or otherwise physically disabled. Thus, the voting process became more difficult for illiterate voters, affecting blacks in particular. As late as 1900, nearly 50 percent of black Tennesseans were illiterate compared to 14 percent of whites. Caplinger, "Conflict and Community," 46-7; Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee*, 59-60.

⁷² Michael Perman, *Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888-1908* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2001), 59.

had successfully removed blacks from public office and eliminated them from all but the most menial governmental jobs.⁷³

It was no coincidence that these disenfranchisement measures occurred alongside the imposition of legal segregation. After the Civil War, new laws chipped away at the newfound freedom of blacks, and segregation became increasingly common in Tennessee and across the South. After conservative white Democrats resumed control of the Volunteer State's politics in late 1869, they repealed measures that the Radical Republicans had enacted, including laws curbing the Ku Klux Klan, preventing railroad segregation, and protecting blacks' economic welfare. They spearheaded a new constitution in 1870 that prohibited school integration and strengthened the existing statute against intermarriage.⁷⁴ In 1875, Tennessee passed the first Jim Crow law in the South when it legalized the segregation of public accommodations.⁷⁵ Six years later, the state legislature passed the first law in the region to mandate segregation; it required separate coaches with equal accommodations for first-class black passengers in trains.⁷⁶ When the governmental body passed a bill requiring segregation on streetcars in 1905, the law further strengthened the Jim Crow system by separating whites and blacks on a personal level.⁷⁷ Throughout the region, other southern

⁷³ The only blacks retained as city employees were janitors and charwomen. Porteous, "A Vow to Citizens;" Lee, *Beale Street*, 240; Adkins, "Beale Street," 16.

⁷⁴ Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee*, 46-7; Caplinger, "Conflict and Community," 78, 83, 105.

⁷⁵ The state legislature passed a law allowing public accommodations to refuse service to blacks. Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee*, 58-9; Adkins, "Beale Street," 14.

⁷⁶ Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee*, 59; Mary Frances Berry, *My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 28. For a broader look at railroad segregation in the South, see: Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992).

⁷⁷ Caplinger, "Conflict and Community," 112; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 12-3.

states followed the Volunteer State's lead: Jim Crow laws came to fruition in the 1890s and reached into nearly every area of southern life by the early years of the twentieth century. The U.S. Supreme Court legitimated these actions in its 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, ruling that separate facilities for blacks were constitutional as long as these accommodations were equal to those of whites.

Even with the double blow of disenfranchising laws and segregation measures, blacks in Tennessee, especially those residing in large cities, enjoyed greater success in exerting political power than their counterparts in most other southern states.⁷⁸ The Tennessee state legislature left it up to counties to decide whether to adopt a white primary rather than establishing one statewide. In addition, the Volunteer State did not enact literacy and property tests or grandfather clauses, all of which were common measures of disenfranchisement.⁷⁹ Furthermore, the state was unique in having more of a two-party system than the rest of the South; white Republicans dominated the political scene in East Tennessee while white Democrats maintained control of the state government and local governments elsewhere in the state. Intense party rivalries fostered continued black political participation in Tennessee.

Black Memphians proved especially successful in taking advantage of the unique opportunities for political participation available in Tennessee. Shelby County did not have a white primary. The local Democratic Party experienced significant factionalism with different wings running against each other, so politicians often coached illiterate blacks and

⁷⁸ Compared to rural blacks, a higher percentage of urban blacks read and paid the poll tax. Preston Valien, "Expansion of Negro Suffrage in Tennessee," *Journal of Negro Education* 26, no. 3 (summer 1957): 363; Caplinger, "Conflict and Community," 55.

⁷⁹ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 9.

paid their poll taxes to secure their votes. It was not uncommon for at least one candidate in close local elections to seek black support at the polls.⁸⁰ Local Democratic officials also knew that a strong voter turnout from the area in state elections increased their power in the Tennessee government. Blacks, who made up between 40 and 49 percent of the population between 1890 and 1910, were a rich source for votes.⁸¹ In addition, there was a degree of tolerance of black political participation, and black voting had become a tradition since the end of the Civil War. “When the Negroes turn out in strength at the polls, it requires only a very few additional votes to elect anyone they support,” the *Commercial Appeal* reported in 1898. “This is, after all, their privilege and we cannot blame them for exercising it.”⁸² According to local black observer G. P. Hamilton in his 1908 book, *The Bright Side of Memphis*, blacks could vote as easily in Memphis as in the North. He said that “political passion is not . . . intensely aroused against” black voting and no “political hocus pocus has been resorted to deprive [the black voter] of his political rights All must meet the simple requirements of the law.”⁸³

Blacks certainly engaged in independent political activity in Memphis in the twenty years following the start of legal disenfranchisement in 1889, though it is difficult to determine how extensively because of the scarcity of sources.⁸⁴ To be sure, the disenfranchising laws and other developments made the environment more hostile and

⁸⁰ Caplinger, “Conflict and Community,” 56-7.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 20, 57; Hill, “Self-Defined African American Community,” 10.

⁸² “News of Bygone Days: 75 Years Ago, Jan. 5, 1898,” *CA*, 5 Jan. 1973, Vertical File: 1898 Election, MSC.

⁸³ Hamilton, *Bright Side*, 24.

⁸⁴ Caplinger, “Conflict and Community,” 47, 56-7, 73-4 n. 87.

difficult. According to G. P. Hamilton, blacks did “not blindly adhere to any political party” though they supported Republicans in presidential elections. In municipal and state elections, blacks were “largely independent and disposed to vote for the man that they consider[ed] least hostile to their interests . . . [and] least likely to deny [them] opportunity or punish [them] because of [their] color.”⁸⁵ While blacks were united in seeing politics as a means of racial advancement, they differed on economic, educational, and religious matters. Some black political leaders thought that it was unfortunate that blacks voted solidly as a bloc because their united force would “always force the white voters to be united under another political banner.” “[T]his division of the races into two opposite and hostile political camps has been the cause of serious misunderstanding and friction between them,” Hamilton reported.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, his account reveals that blacks engaged in “independent power politics” in which they supported the candidate, whether Republican or Democrat, who promised to do them the least harm.⁸⁷ They joined forces to use the electoral system as a tool to better their condition.

The Republican Party was the one avenue that black southerners had for participation in the two-party political system, and they used the party to secure political benefits and access. Local party organizations usually consisted of blacks with some white allies, and blacks headed some local and state Republican organizations. Local Republicans were able to distribute thousands of patronage jobs when their party occupied the White House. Southern mores dictated that whites received the most important positions, but blacks

⁸⁵ Hamilton, *Bright Side*, 24.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸⁷ The term “independent power politics” is from: Holloway, *Politics of the Southern Negro*.

received and could distribute some patronage. In addition, black southerners served as delegates to Republican National Conventions, where they could play a crucial role in determining which presidential candidate was nominated for the election. Especially because Republicans largely occupied the White House from the Civil War through the first decades of the twentieth century, these “Race Republicans” were not without hope that they could make a difference.⁸⁸

In order to do so, black-and-tan factions battled with lily-white groups over participation in the Republican Party in Memphis and elsewhere in the South. By the 1880s, a lily-white Republican movement had arisen in the South. Lily whites wanted to purge party organizations of black leadership and control, and they wanted only whites to distribute and receive patronage. Desiring to attract more southern whites to the Republican Party, lily whites knew their task would be unsuccessful if blacks remained significantly involved in party politics.⁸⁹ They recognized that southern Republican Party politics allowed integration and inverted the social hierarchy of blacks on the bottom and whites on the top by permitting black leadership of black-and-tan factions even though white Republicans nationally remained largely uncommitted to ensuring racial equality. After all, the party had not stemmed the tide of disenfranchisement and segregation that had become entrenched in the region.

Nevertheless, in Memphis and Shelby County, blacks participated in official Republican Party politics at the same time that they vied with the local lily-white faction.

⁸⁸ I have discovered that the *Chicago Defender* sometimes referred to black Republicans as “Race Republicans.” Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, & Lily-whites*, 36-7; Sherman, *Republican Party*.

⁸⁹ Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, & Lily-whites*, 36-7; Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 38; Adkins, “Beale Street,” 12; Lewinson, *Race, Class, and Party*, 110-1.

They occupied positions on the local Republican executive committee, held more than fifty full-time post office jobs, and served as delegates to the Republican National Convention. Church, for instance, traveled to Philadelphia in 1900 to nominate William McKinley for president. He also had enough national political weight to obtain appointments in the Department of State's Foreign Service for two black Memphians.⁹⁰ In 1908, lily whites excluded black Tennesseans as delegates to the Republican National Convention, so blacks of Memphis and Shelby County formed their own slate in order to challenge the opposition for convention seats. They became less enthusiastic as their funds dissipated, so only their leader, J. T. Settle, Sr., went to the convention.⁹¹

The growing hostility that local black Republicans faced was indicative of national developments in the Republican Party. During his first term, Theodore Roosevelt sought a middle ground between appealing to lily whites and black-and-tans. As a result, he took significant measures in support of black Republicans. He infuriated many southern whites, including ones in Memphis, by dining with Booker T. Washington at the White House. Roosevelt also consulted with Washington about patronage matters and southern policies, made a number of black political appointments, and expressed strong disapproval for an exclusively lily-white party in the South. But, in his second term, Roosevelt's backing among blacks dwindled, and he no longer made dramatic gestures in support of them.⁹²

Blacks were particularly incensed by Roosevelt's dishonorable discharge of all 167 members of a black regiment in Brownsville, Texas, in 1906. The black soldiers had

⁹⁰ These men were J. N. Ruffin and W. J. Yerby. Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 38; Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 17.

⁹¹ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 39.

⁹² Sherman, *Republican Party*, 23-82; Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 44.

suffered discrimination from townspeople, physical abuse from federal customs collectors, and harassment from the police. These tensions had reached their peak after a white woman was reportedly attacked, causing outrage among many local white citizens. As a result, the mayor and a major declared a curfew. That evening, a number of unidentified men went on a shooting spree around midnight. They fired shots into businesses and private homes, resulting in the death of a white bartender. A number of white residents claimed that they saw black soldiers undertaking these actions even though they were located a considerable distance away from the scene of the violence. Despite the black soldiers' claims of innocence, the lack of identification of individual culprits, and the failure of a grand jury to return indictments, federal and citizens' investigations assumed that the black soldiers were guilty, leading to Roosevelt's dismissal of the troops. The Senate Military Affairs Committee subsequently found Roosevelt's action justified, but four Republicans on the committee disagreed because they considered the evidence inconclusive. Another minority report, submitted by two Republicans, argued that the soldiers were innocent and suggested that local citizens or outsiders had staged the shooting spree in order to eliminate the black troops from the area. As a result of the Brownsville affair, some blacks turned away from the Republican Party. William Howard Taft, who won the presidency two years later, showed even less concern for blacks than Roosevelt. He supported the lily-white movement in the South and did not make any black political appointments in the region.⁹³

⁹³ Influenced by recent research, Congress changed the dishonorable discharges to honorable discharges without back pay in 1972. The only surviving veteran, Dorsie Willis, maintained that the soldiers were innocent and was granted a pension of twenty-five thousand dollars. Garna L. Christina, "Brownsville Raid of 1906," *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, 1997-2002, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/BB/pkb6.html> [accessed 18 Mar. 2010]; James Leiker, "Brownsville Affray, 1906," *The Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed, An Online Reference Guide to African American History*, edited by Quintard Taylor, 2007-9, <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aaw/brownsville-affray-1906> [accessed 18 Mar. 2010]; Sherman, *Republican Party*, 83-112; Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 44.

W. E. B. DuBois, who became a vocal black critic of the Republican Party, emerged as a civil rights leader during these years and represented an alternative to Booker T. Washington. DuBois founded the *Moon Illustrated Weekly*, the first weekly black magazine, and began its publication in December 1905 in a Beale Street building. Though the magazine only lasted a year, it was part of the increase in black periodicals across the country during this time and served as the beginning of DuBois's journalistic career as an advocate for civil rights. He used the *Moon* to promote the principles of the Niagara Movement, an organization that he formed in July 1905 just outside Buffalo, New York. The Niagara Movement called for civil rights, black enfranchisement, and equal educational opportunities. It eventually was assimilated into the NAACP when DuBois, other black leaders, and white liberals founded that organization four years later. Political rights were part of the NAACP's platform from the beginning, and the *Moon* served as a precursor to the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine.⁹⁴

DuBois coined the term "Talented Tenth," referring to the responsibility of successful blacks to use their wealth and resources to spearhead civil rights and black uplift efforts in order to help the masses. Though in reality the number of well-off blacks was less than a tenth of the population and not all engaged in these endeavors, Church certainly fit within this category, and other members of the black elite in the South often took the lead in movements to establish black institutions, such as schools, as a way of pressing for racial advancement.⁹⁵ Church was closer philosophically to DuBois than Booker T. Washington, to

⁹⁴ Paul G. Partington, "The Moon Illustrated Weekly--The Precursor of the Crisis," *Journal of Negro History* 48, no. 3 (Jul. 1963): 206-16.

⁹⁵ Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 95. For an analysis of the response of the black elite to the imposition of Jim Crow, see p. 300-22.

whom he also had ties. Church and Washington were friends, and Church was one of the first members of his National Negro Business League. They shared a common belief that black economic progress was crucial to improving black conditions. Church disagreed, however, with Washington's accommodationist stance. He did not believe that blacks should forsake political participation or higher education in order to focus on uplifting themselves through industrial work and training.⁹⁶

Among the civil rights activists Church supported were his daughter Mary Church Terrell and anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells. These women were founding members of the NAACP. Wells used her Beale Street-based newspaper, the *Free Speech and Headlight*, to speak out against lynching and other racial injustices. In 1892, she was forced to leave Memphis after she protested the local lynching of three black men by a white mob with impunity.⁹⁷ She moved to Chicago and became nationally and internationally known for her anti-lynching activism; she also fought for black and women's suffrage. Church assisted her financially when she lived in Memphis and after she was exiled from the city.⁹⁸ Born in 1863, Terrell was the daughter of Church and his first wife, Louisa. She became one of the

⁹⁶ Booker T. Washington to Robert R. Church, Sr., 20 Feb. 1911, Church Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 50; "Life Membership: National Negro Business League," Church Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 10; Church and Church, interview no. 1, 5 Jan. 1973, 5-7.

⁹⁷ Fifteen lynchings were documented in Shelby County between 1892 and 1914. During the 1890s, four separate Shelby County lynch mobs murdered eleven black men in a two-and-a-half-year period. Caplinger, "Conflict and Community," 50-1.

⁹⁸ In 1904, Wells asked Church, Sr., for a loan of one hundred dollars "for some work that I am completing," saying that she knew of no other black man in the country to whom she could turn. Recalling that he had generously aided her when she lived in Memphis, she thanked him "for all the help you have given me in the work I have had to do for the race." She does not provide more specific information. Wells to Church, undated but postmarked 22 Feb. 1904, Church Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 26. In a letter to Robert Church, Jr., Wells (now known as Wells-Barnett) confirmed that his father previously loaned her money. Wells-Barnett to Church, 30 Aug. 1918, Church Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 26. For recent biographies of Wells, see: Paula Giddings, *Ida: A Sword among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign against Lynching* (New York: Amistad, 2009); Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely: the Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009).

country's best-known activists for black and women's rights. She also was a pioneer of the women's club movement. Throughout Church, Sr.'s lifetime, he supported Terrell financially. For instance, he financed her trip to Berlin when she was the only black woman invited to speak at the International Congress of Women, a gathering of women's rights advocates, in 1904. Delivering her address in German, she said that she represented "a race which has been free so short a time as forty years" and that she rejoiced "not only in the emancipation of my race, but in the almost universal elevation of my sex." Terrell continued, "If anyone had had the courage fifty years ago to predict that a woman with African blood in her veins would journey from the United States to Germany to address the International Congress of Woman in 1904, he would either have been laughed out of [c]ourt, or adjudged insane." She received a standing ovation from the crowd for her speech.⁹⁹

Though Church helped make civil rights work possible, he compromised his efforts with his one-thousand-dollar donation to the entertainment fund of the United Confederate Veterans Reunion in 1901. Attended by representatives of the country's Confederate associations, the meeting was held in Memphis, and local citizens were required to cover its costs.¹⁰⁰ One of Memphis's most philanthropic citizens, Church was known for his charitable donations to both whites and blacks; he apparently did not turn any worthy cause down.¹⁰¹ He donated to orphanages, bought a fire and patrol wagon for the city, and saved

⁹⁹ McKay, introduction, xix; Terrell, *Colored Woman*, 197-208. The quote is from p. 204.

¹⁰⁰ William A. Gordon was president of the Confederate Veterans Association of D.C. William A. Gordon, Letter to the Editor, *Washington Post* (hereafter *WP*), 29 May 1901, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, The Washington Post (1877-1992).

¹⁰¹ Roscoe Conkling Simmons, "Robert R. Church," *Illinois Chronicle*, 14 Sept. 1912, Church Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 58; Newspaper obituary of Robert R. Church, Sr., n.p.; Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 18; C. R. Bowles to Robert R. Church, Sr., 30 Nov. 1906, Church Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 26.

Beale Street Avenue Church from financial disaster.¹⁰² Yet, his donation to the Confederate fund may have been his most controversial action ever. The only prominent black who ever gave to the Confederate fund, he was among its most generous contributors, and many blacks condemned him for his gift.¹⁰³

Church stated his reasons for the donation in a letter to the chairman of the finance committee of the Confederate Veterans Reunion and in remarks to the *Commercial Appeal*. “I have been a citizen of Memphis all my life, and believe this is a great opportunity [through] which I am sure the people of Memphis will improve,” he wrote the chairman.¹⁰⁴ He told the newspaper, “It is a pleasure for me to make this donation, because the men of the South have been my friends, and I feel it my duty to aid in entertaining those men who fought bravely for the Lost Cause.” Church further explained:

I have tried to be liberal at all times and to help along this city whenever I could I want to see the veterans enjoy themselves and I want to see Memphis do herself credit in the matter of the entertainment. What ever [sic] I have I made here in Memphis and I made it here with these people. My experience has shown that nowhere on earth will the colored man be treated better or be given better opportunity to make something of himself than here in Memphis, in the center of the South. There is nowhere that more is done in a substantial way to elevate the negro than right here. Nowhere is more money spent by the white people for the education of the colored youth than here. No persons on earth are more disposed to their former slaves than are the veterans of the Confederacy; those old men who yet remember the negro in slavery. That is how I find the conditions here; those are the sentiments I feel; and that is why I, for myself, and on behalf of my race, desire to be allowed to make this contribution to the cause in which all the

¹⁰² Ron Walter, “Business/Leaders Provide a Mix of Talent,” CA, 1981, African-American Culture and Life Collection, Box 3, Folder 5, MSC; Roberta and Annette Church, interview by Charles W. Crawford, transcript, Memphis, no. 2, 4 Jan. 1973, UMOH, p. 17.

¹⁰³ D. H. K. Bingham to Robert R. Church, Sr., 16 May 1904, Church Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 4; Newspaper obituary of Robert R. Church, Sr., n.p.; Gordon, Letter to the Editor.

¹⁰⁴ Church, Sr., gave the chairman his “best wishes for complete success.” Church to A. B. Pickett, 28 Jun. 1901, Church Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 34.

people of Memphis are now interested.¹⁰⁵

The *Commercial Appeal* praised him for his gift, saying that he was “acquiring credit for himself and his race by such acts of liberality.”¹⁰⁶

Though Church intended to benefit Memphis and to contribute to harmonious race relations, his donation and statements, in effect, perpetuated the “Lost Cause” myth that had been taking hold across the South since the end of the Civil War. Memoirs, novels, folklore, and historical works painted slavery as an “antebellum Eden,” and the southern landscape became pervaded with monuments, markers, and memorials that glorified the Confederacy and erased any memory of slavery as an evil institution.¹⁰⁷ Black office holding during Reconstruction came to be seen as corrupt and immoral, and the system of segregation and disenfranchisement cast blacks as not worthy of full participation in public life or the fruits of citizenship.¹⁰⁸

The Confederate donation, however, appears to have been an exception to Church’s lifelong support for blacks by his engagement in black institution building through his business and charitable endeavors. One of his most significant contributions was Church’s Park and Auditorium; blacks had no parks at the time because they were excluded from municipal ones. In 1899, he developed the establishment on land aligned with Beale Street.

¹⁰⁵ I have left the word “negro” in lower case, because the newspaper did not capitalize it. “[Ex-?]Slave’s Gift, CA. His quote is reprinted in Gordon, Letter to the Editor.

¹⁰⁶ “[Ex-?]Slave’s Gift,” CA.

¹⁰⁷ The “antebellum Eden” quote is from: Carl H. Nightingale, “How Lynchings Became High-Tech, and Other Tales from the Modern South,” *Reviews in American History* 27, no. 1 (1999): 141. The other information is drawn from: Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: the Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2005).

¹⁰⁸ Hale, *Making Whiteness*; Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black/White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984).

He had hundreds of trees planted in the park, which made it--in the words of one black Memphian--“a sylvan retreat in the midst of a bustling city.” Church also made sure to provide an extensive playground for children.¹⁰⁹ The six-acre, landscaped park was privately patrolled, and it featured peacocks strutting the grounds and rare plants alongside beautiful walkways.¹¹⁰ The auditorium, which seated two thousand, was reputedly the world’s largest black-owned theater. Costing fifty thousand dollars to construct, it was a modern building that included fireproof features and a drop-curtain mural depicting the steamship *Bulletin* from which Church had escaped. This “vast pleasure ground” was the country’s only enterprise of its kind owned and operated by blacks, an achievement all the more remarkable given it existed in the South.¹¹¹

Church’s Park and Auditorium fulfilled recreational, cultural, political, educational, and religious needs for white and black citizens. Local and out-of-town groups of both races used it. With no large theater until this time, the city had been prevented from hosting traveling vaudeville acts and other programs. The auditorium accommodated vaudeville troupes, theatrical performances, concerts, public school graduation exercises, social and civic club meetings, and political rallies and meetings.¹¹² In addition, it housed the private music school of Julia Hooks, a community leader and the grandmother of future civil rights leader Benjamin L. Hooks. She taught black and white pupils, some of whom went on to

¹⁰⁹ Lee, *Beale Street*, 27-8; “[Ex-?]Slave’s Gift,” *CA*. The quote is from p. 27.

¹¹⁰ Church and Church, interview no. 2, 4 Jan. 1973, 10; Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 30; Church and Church, “Robert R. Church, Sr., Memphis’[s] First Black Capitalist.”

¹¹¹ Simmons, “Robert R. Church;” Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 30; Church and Church, “Robert R. Church, Sr., Memphis’[s] First Black Capitalist.” The quote is from “[Ex-?]Slave’s Gift,” *CA*.

¹¹² Church and Church, interview no. 2, 4 Jan. 1973, 6-16.

fame.¹¹³ The grounds were also used for church bazaars, carnivals, picnics, and band concerts. Frederick Douglass, Blanche Bruce, and Booker T. Washington were among the public figures that spoke and W. C. Handy, Duke Ellington, and the Fisk Jubilee Singers were among the national and international artists that performed at the establishment.¹¹⁴

One political meeting held at Church's Park and Auditorium was for President Theodore Roosevelt and Vice Governor Luke Wright in 1902, and it attested to the biracialism in Republican politics at this time. Ten thousand attended the gathering, which marked Wright's return to his hometown after fulfilling Roosevelt's appointment to serve as Vice-Governor of the Philippines. Roosevelt and his party drove into the park in twenty-five horse-drawn carriages for an interracial program. Seated on the platform were a number of distinguished whites, including the Democratic governors of Tennessee and Mississippi, the mayor of Memphis, and the editor of the *New York Sun*. Prominent black ministers T. O. Fuller and T. J. Searcy gave the invocation and benediction respectively. Before leaving the grounds, the procession paraded around the park three times so that those who could not enter the auditorium had a good view of the president.¹¹⁵

In addition to his involvement in the black and white communities, Church, Sr., was devoted to his family, but his private life did not escape public criticism. He and his wife Anna had two children: Robert, Jr., was born in 1885, and Annette was born in 1887, both of

¹¹³ These famous pupils included concert artist Sidney Woodward, blues musician W. C. Handy, and Broadway star Nell Hunter. Pink Palace Museum, *Historic Black Memphians* (Memphis: The Foundation of Memphis Pink Palace Museum, 1978), 9.

¹¹⁴ Annette and Roberta Church to Henry Loeb, 30 Jan. 1970, Henry Loeb III Papers, Series II, Box 16, Folder 3, MSC; W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 254.

¹¹⁵ This letter contains a copy of the program at Church's Auditorium: Church and Church to Henry Loeb, 30 Jan. 1970. For more information on the event, see: Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 17, 51, 80.

whom received private and parochial educations. Anna even moved to Ohio to set up a house with them when they attended school there.¹¹⁶ Though Church, Sr., was self-educated, Anna had been a member of the first graduating class of the LeMoyne Normal Institute, the first black college in Memphis. She then attended Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, where she enrolled for study in the literary department and the conservatory of music. An acclaimed piano player, she was the principal of Winchester School, a black public school in Memphis, until her marriage.¹¹⁷ A number of local blacks, however, criticized Anna and Robert, Sr., for sending their son and daughter to predominantly white schools in the North; they saw this action as proving true a popular rumor that Church, Sr., who had light skin, wanted to repudiate his racial identity. Given his benevolence toward blacks and support of civil rights activists, this gossip may have stemmed from jealousy.¹¹⁸

Growing up at the turn of the century, Church, Jr., was well acquainted with black office holders and prominent black leaders. He not only knew black leaders through his father and mother's associations but also because black public officials lived in his neighborhood.¹¹⁹ This milieu undoubtedly shaped his perspectives and growth as a leader, strengthening his determination to "regain the lost rights of the race" through his political efforts. He remembered, "[A]s I grew up the City of Memphis had Colored Policeman [*sic*], Squires, Magistrates, a Wharfmaster and at one time there were Colored members of the

¹¹⁶ "[Ex-]Slave's Gift," CA; Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 14, 20.

¹¹⁷ For more information on Anna Wright Church, see: Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 27-36.

¹¹⁸ Adkins, "Beale Street," 69-70. For an analysis of the education of the black elite during this time, see: Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 247-71.

¹¹⁹ These black public officials were school board member Fred Savage, Sr., and city councilman Lymus Wallace. Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 100; Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 8.

school board. As time passed and the city grew[,] these Colored men were replaced by White employees.” Church, Jr., also personally suffered from the advent of Jim Crow, and the imposition of the streetcar segregation ordinance in 1905 remained seared in his memory. As he recalled, “[P]rior to the passage of this law, one of my pleasures was that of standing by the motorman as he guided the car, and being permitted to guide it myself as it turned at the end of the line where I boarded it going to and returning from school. This pleasure was ended.”¹²⁰

The Church family refused to cooperate with legal segregation, and they used their wealth to shield themselves from Jim Crow’s indignities. “My father believed firmly that the principle of segregation was unfair and unsound,” Church, Jr., remembered. When they went on trips, they took non-segregated Pullman cars. No family member ever rode on the segregated streetcars; instead, Church, Sr., arranged for them to use their own transportation. By having their meals at home, they avoided segregation in restaurants. “We would eat and drink before we left home and go hungry or thirsty until we returned if necessary,” Church, Jr., recalled. They did not attend any theater, concert, movie, or meeting where separate entrances or segregated seating arrangements existed.¹²¹

Through his travels, education, and early career years outside the South, Church, Jr., broadened his perspectives and realized the peculiarity of the region’s wave of segregation and disenfranchisement. “As a child I travelled [*sic*] frequently with my parents [through] the northern and eastern United States, and we also made a trip to Europe,” Church remembered. “I noticed . . . that it was possible to stop at hotels in the [N]orth and [E]ast

¹²⁰ I have kept the capitalization style that Church used. Church, “Material for the Carnegie Corporation,” 1.

¹²¹ Ibid.

[and] . . . for all children to attend the same schools [T]his was not possible in the [S]outh.”¹²² After receiving his schooling in Memphis and Ohio, he attended Morgan Park Military Academy in Morgan Park, Illinois (near Chicago), and Packard School of Business in New York City. He spent nearly five years on Wall Street gaining banking experience, and he circulated among elite blacks in the city.¹²³ Through a social club, he became acquainted, for instance, with famed entertainers Bill “Bojangles” Robinson and Bert Williams.¹²⁴

In New York, Church, Jr., demonstrated a keen business sense. His father even wrote letters to him there, requesting his professional advice. When Church, Jr., returned to Memphis, he became the cashier of Solvent Savings Bank and Trust Company, the first black-owned and managed bank in Memphis. Church, Sr., had been instrumental in its founding in 1906--which took place at Church’s Park--and had served as its first president.¹²⁵ The bank was located across the street from Church’s Park and Auditorium, where father and son also maintained offices.¹²⁶ The bank’s survival of the financial panic of 1907, when other banks in the city floundered, demonstrated its strength. Heralded as an example of a successful black financial institution outside Memphis, the bank inspired confidence in

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Adkins, “Beale Street,” 70.

¹²⁴ The social club was the Frog’s Club. Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 64. For an analysis of upper-class club life among blacks, see: Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 210-46.

¹²⁵ Hamilton, *Bright Side*, 91; “Memphis Solvent Savings Bank and Trust Co.,” *The Moon Illustrated Weekly*, 2 Mar. 1906, Church Family Papers, Box 2, Folder 10, p. 3.

¹²⁶ They maintained their offices in the auditorium. Church and Church, interview no. 2, 4 Jan. 1973, 12.

blacks in their business ability, encouraged thrift among the masses, and gave credit to black businesses that often was unavailable from white institutions.¹²⁷

Solvent Savings Bank was part of the increase in black business institutions across the South during this time. These included North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance in Durham, North Carolina, and the Bank of Mound Bayou in Mississippi. In fact, R. W. Ware, a cashier of the latter, apparently provided the impetus for the creation of Solvent Savings Bank when he had traveled to Memphis in early 1906 with the determination to organize a bank. He had succeeded in attracting the backing of some of the wealthiest men in the city and Mississippi. Ware's place of residence, Mound Bayou, was a community where southern blacks could politically participate. In 1887, black men Isaiah T. Montgomery, a businessman, and Benjamin T. Green, his cousin, had founded this black town. Racial codes segregating blacks from whites were nonexistent except for at the waiting room of the railroad station. Whereas blacks were denied suffrage and largely held menial positions in other parts of Mississippi, blacks voted in every election and black enterprises flourished in Mound Bayou. Booker T. Washington was a frequent visitor to the town.¹²⁸

Church, Jr., held one of Solvent Savings Bank's most difficult and responsible positions as its cashier, and he took over its presidency from his father at age twenty-four in 1909. One local observer commented that he had "an old head on young shoulders and [had] inherited much of his father's business sagacity." After coming back to Memphis, Church, Jr., who was known as "Bob," had experienced not only business and political successes but

¹²⁷ Ibid., 91-2; Simmons, "Robert R. Church;" Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 30.

¹²⁸ "Memphis Solvent Savings Bank and Trust Co.," *The Moon*; The Delta Center for Culture and Learning, "The Mound Bayou Story," Delta State Univ., n.d., 2. For more on Mound Bayou, see: Neil McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1990).

also social and personal fulfillment. He was popular with all classes and ages. In a petition to President Theodore Roosevelt in 1908, for instance, black and white citizens had endorsed him for the position of surveyor of customs for the Port of Memphis.¹²⁹ Like his father, Church, Jr., was respected for his character and private life. In addition, he was a very active and loyal member of the Elks throughout his lifetime.¹³⁰ In 1911, he married Sara Paroda Johnson, a member of the black elite of Washington D.C., which at that time was the “capital of the colored aristocracy.” Their wedding took place there, and W. E. B. DuBois and his wife sent their congratulations.¹³¹ Sara took a keen interest in her husband’s political activities.¹³² Three years after their wedding, Sara and Bob experienced the birth of their only child, Sara Roberta, and she became known by her middle name.

Solvent Savings Bank, Church’s Park and Auditorium, and the Church family all played influential roles in the rise to fame of blues musician W. C. Handy. Born in 1873 in Florence, Alabama, Handy remembered that “in those days it was the name of Bob Church [Sr.] that drew people to Memphis from all over the South and it was my good fortune to have very pleasant conversations with Mr. Church Sr. and Jr.”¹³³ As a boy, he traveled to Memphis just to see their home. Handy later credited Church, Sr., as among the “colored aristocrats” who inspired him “to do worth while [*sic*] things and be somebody in this life.”

¹²⁹ Apparently, the petition did not meet with success. Hamilton, *Bright Side*, 100-1; Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 58. The quote is from: Hamilton, *Bright Side*, 100.

¹³⁰ Brewster, interview, 18-9; Church and Church, interview no. 2, 4 Jan. 1973, 13.

¹³¹ Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 39-68. Roberta and Annette Church, interview by Charles W. Crawford, transcript, Memphis, no. 2, 5 Jan. 1973, UMOH, p. 1-2; Mr. and Mrs. W. E. B. DuBois to Robert and Sara Church, 23 Aug. 1911, Church Family Papers, Box 2, Folder 44; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 65-6.

¹³² “Mrs. Church Dies in Washington, Capital Mourns,” *Chicago Defender* (hereafter *CD*), 8 Jul. 1922, p. 2.

¹³³ Handy to Annette Church, 19 Dec. 1956, Church Family Papers, Box 12, Folder 16, p. 1.

After moving to Memphis, Handy got his start as a band and orchestra leader at Church's Park and Auditorium, where he recalled music and deportment were at their finest.¹³⁴ His experiences there provided him with "unforgettable memories."¹³⁵ He also received instruction in harmony from Julia Hooks.¹³⁶ With a studio in the Solvent Savings Bank building, he formed a partnership with Harry Pace, a director of the bank, and they began publishing music there under the name Pace and Handy Music Company. Handy later said that he was indebted to Church, Jr., for advice that he followed to copyright his compositions under his own name rather than the Pace and Handy firm.¹³⁷

While Church, Jr., and Handy were embarking on their careers, Church, Sr., was on the decline. After an illness of several months, he died at age seventy-four in 1912.¹³⁸ Booker T. Washington was one of the last persons to see him alive.¹³⁹ Solvent Savings Bank passed a resolution in honor of Church, Sr., and local postal employees contributed a floral offering.¹⁴⁰ At his funeral, the Church family's white neighbor, Mrs. Mudge, sang.¹⁴¹ Black newspapers nationwide reported his passing, and both white dailies ran lengthy and

¹³⁴ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 278.

¹³⁵ Handy to Church, 19 Dec. 1956.

¹³⁶ On Handy's move to Memphis and early career there, see: Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 89-136; Handy to Church, 19 Dec. 1956; Hamilton, *Bright Side*, 95.

¹³⁷ Handy to Church, 19 Dec. 1956, 2.

¹³⁸ Church, Sr., may have been in declining health over the last years of his life. T. O. Fuller to Robert R. Church, Sr., 31 Jan. 1907, Church Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 4; Simmons, "Robert R. Church."

¹³⁹ Church and Church, interview no. 1, 5 Jan. 1973, 5-6.

¹⁴⁰ "Resolution upon the Death of Mr. R. R. Church," Solvent Savings Bank & Trust Company, 1912, Church Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 58; "List of the Post Office Employees Who Contributed the Floral Offering in Honor of the Memory of Mr. R. R. Church," 1912, Church Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 57.

¹⁴¹ Church and Church, interview no. 1, 4 Jan. 1973, 7-8.

praiseworthy obituaries even though these papers rarely devoted that much positive coverage to a black person. Even a year after his death, the *Commercial Appeal* acknowledged, “The triumph of Memphis as a great city could not be written without an account of the marvelous career of the late R.R. Church.”¹⁴² Church and his sister Annette inherited the vast fortune left by their father.¹⁴³

Section II

As Church, Sr.’s health weakened, another major personality in Memphis life was coming into his own. The Bluff City was irrevocably changed with the rise to power of Edward H. Crump, who was white. He became the most powerful figure in Memphis in the twentieth century and the longest serving political boss in U.S. history to date. Born in Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1874, Crump was raised by his mother after his father, a planter and Confederate officer, died in the 1878 Yellow Fever epidemic. The young man came to Memphis in 1893 to seek a business position and went from initially struggling to find permanent employment to founding his large and successful insurance firm, E. H. Crump Company.¹⁴⁴ Crump made his foray into politics in 1905 when he won a seat on the public works board, one of two bodies of the bicameral city council. Two years later, he was elected to the other body as the fire and police commissioner. Though Memphis and Shelby

¹⁴² Simmons, “Robert R. Church;” James G. Carter to Robert R. Church, Jr., 30 Oct. 1912, Church Family Papers, Box 2, Folder 15. The newspaper quote is from: Church and Church, “Robert R. Church, Sr., Memphis’[s] First Black Capitalist.”

¹⁴³ Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 11.

¹⁴⁴ G. Wayne Dowdy, “Biography,” finding aid to Edward Crump Papers, Edward Crump Papers, MSC (microfilm, Memphis: Memphis and Shelby County Public Library and Information Center), p. 1. The word microfilm will be abbreviated to mfm in subsequent references.

County elections were nonpartisan, Crump was a lifelong Democrat, and he eventually became a powerful figure in state politics.

In 1909, Crump ran for mayor against J. J. Williams. A campaign official recruited W. C. Handy to compose a song for Crump's bid in keeping with the standard practice in those days for campaigns to have songs.¹⁴⁵ Handy and his band proceeded to open Crump's race by playing "Mr. Crump Don't 'Low No Easy Riders Here." As George W. Lee recounted in *Beale Street*, the "crowd in the streets literally went wild over it. They shouted until they were hoarse, demanding to hear it again and again."¹⁴⁶ The song was not the most flattering portrayal of Crump, and Handy later revealed that he did not think Crump ever heard the lyrics and that he played the song for his opposition as well. Nonetheless, the song caught fire. Crump was elected, and Handy was catapulted to stardom.¹⁴⁷ Three years later, Handy re-wrote the piece as "Memphis Blues," considered the first-ever blues song published and copyrighted. "Handy rode on ['Memphis Blues'] from Beale Street to Broadway," as Lee put it, and the song led him to worldwide fame.¹⁴⁸

Although Handy was employed for his campaign, Crump did not succeed in winning the backing of most blacks. In fact, he used race baiting as a campaign tactic. He also punched a black man, Robert Houston, for an election law violation. Crump was charged with assault, and Houston was charged with illegal election activity, but both dropped

¹⁴⁵ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, x, xiv, 80, 93-4; G. Wayne Dowdy, *Mr. Crump Don't Like It: Machine Politics in Memphis* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2006), 102.

¹⁴⁶ Handy was driven to "creative heights" at least partly because of his desire to out-do the two bands employed by campaign rivals. Lee, *Beale Street*, 133-4.

¹⁴⁷ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 232.

¹⁴⁸ Lee, *Beale Street*, 134.

charges. One of the few sources of black support for Crump was Beale Street. A center of saloons, dance halls, drug trading, gambling places, and brothels, it was one of the vice wards that Crump swept. He captured wards controlled by criminals as well.¹⁴⁹ Crump's engagement with violence and illegality during the campaign foreshadowed the character of his political life. He won over Williams by only seventy-nine votes, with Williams receiving more black support.

As a city councilman, Crump had successfully led the movement to switch the structure of the Memphis government to the commission form of government. Now, he was the first head of this new system and in charge of the third largest city in the South; Memphis had a population of more than 130,000.¹⁵⁰ A Progressive-era reform, commission governance was adopted in more than three hundred cities during this time; it emphasized a managerial style by "experts" in order to centralize authority and increase efficiency. In Memphis, Crump and a handful of commissioners ran the city government by controlling its budget, enacting its policies, and serving as departmental heads. Shelby County followed suit and adopted the commission form in 1911.¹⁵¹

Crump "was a combination of showman, dictator, humanitarian, progressive, and hard-as nails, ruthless administrator," as one historian said.¹⁵² He earned the nickname the

¹⁴⁹ Caplinger, "Conflict and Community," 59; Dowdy, *Mr. Crump*, 5-6; Loyal Tennesseans League, *Edward H. Crump: Public Enemy No. 1* (Memphis: Loyal Tennesseans League, 1932), 8, copy in Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 44.

¹⁵⁰ Only New Orleans, Louisiana, and Louisville, Kentucky, had more people than Memphis. The Memphis population figure is from: Hill, "Self-Defined African American Community," 10.

¹⁵¹ On the commission form of government, see: Laurie B. Green, "Battling the Plantation Mentality: Consciousness, Culture, and the Politics of Race, Class and Gender in Memphis, 1940-1968" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Chicago, 1999), 331; Lamar Whitlow Bridges, "Editor Mooney versus Boss Crump," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* (hereafter *WTHSP*) 20 (1966): 78; Dowdy, *Mr. Crump*, 4-5.

¹⁵² Allen H. Kitchens, "Ouster of Mayor Edward H. Crump, 1915-1916," *WTHSP* 19 (1965): 118.

“Red Snapper” because of his red hair and sharp, snappy eyes. After assuming the mayoral office in 1910, Crump feverishly worked to ensure numerous city reforms and improvements. He often got to work before most people in Memphis had awakened and ended his day after most had gone home from their jobs. He attended to both the large picture and small details of his job, jotting down items in a small memo book and following up to make sure the necessary work was accomplished.¹⁵³ He personally inspected city services periodically, and he made sure that lower taxes were enacted. Like other Progressive politicians, he was successful in achieving improved public services.¹⁵⁴

As soon as he was elected mayor, Crump began building his political machine, and he became the unrivaled political boss of Memphis. By 1914, he was a figure of statewide power. The commission form, which lacked official checks and balances, lent itself well to dictatorship.¹⁵⁵ An inherently elitist governmental system, it could limit democracy by placing control in the hands of a small group. To maintain his power, Crump built a powerful campaign organization that included city and county employees as ward workers. A strong voter turnout was not only a key to his control locally but also fundamental to his statewide influence; many ballots from Memphis in statewide elections provided him with political leverage over other white politicians seeking state office. Blacks continued to represent a large share of the city’s population, between 38 percent and 49 percent during the first two

¹⁵³ “Official Record of Edward H. Crump, During His Incumbency as Mayor of Memphis, Covering a Period of Five Years, Ten Months, and Two Days,” n.d., Crump Papers, Series II, Box 44, Folder: Biography 1917, p. 2-3, mfm, 000998-9.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 2; William Miller, *Memphis during the Progressive Era, 1900-1917* (Memphis: Memphis State Univ. Press, 1957), 166; Kitchens, “Ouster of Mayor Edward H. Crump,” 118-20; Dowdy, *Mr. Crump*, 7-11, 18-9.

¹⁵⁵ Bridges, “Editor Mooney,” 82-3, 85; Loyal Tennesseans League, *Edward H. Crump*, 7-8.

decades of the twentieth century, so they were a potentially powerful base of votes. Crump took steps to secure their support.¹⁵⁶

A two-way relationship ensued between Crump and blacks in which blacks had a degree of leverage. In 1914, for instance, the Citizens Committee of Colored Voters wrote Crump to pledge its support for “candidates who stand for Law and Order.”¹⁵⁷ In order to convince them to vote for his choice for sheriff, Crump sent the group a summary of his accomplishments, including his creation of a juvenile court with a branch for black youth supervised by Julia Hooks as well as his appointment of black doctors in black public schools and black nurses to make home visits to blacks.¹⁵⁸ Crump did not always engage in these efforts just to get black votes. His work to improve the city’s public services for blacks, for instance, fit within his paternalistic philosophy of providing for citizens as the “city father” and helping the disadvantaged.

To a degree, Boss Crump also believed in being civil toward blacks, treating them fairly, and recognizing their citizenship rights. For example, after a black man complained about rude behavior from a city employee, Crump replied, “It has always been the policy of this . . . administration to treat everyone with uniform courtesy, regardless of their station or mission and you were entitled to like treatment.” Similarly, he told T. O. Fuller, the prominent black minister, “We are doing all we can to advance the interests of the city, and

¹⁵⁶ Hill, “Self-Defined African American Community,” 10.

¹⁵⁷ Central Committee of the Colored Voters to Various Candidates of Shelby County, Tennessee, [1914], Crump Papers, Series I, Box 26, Folder: Politics “N” 1914, mfm, 000424.

¹⁵⁸ Crump to E. W. Irving, 27 Jul. 1914, Crump Papers, Series I, Box 26, Folder: Politics “N” 1914, mfm, 000425.

this applies to the interests of the colored as well as the white citizens.”¹⁵⁹ In addition, Crump’s correspondence with blacks appears the same as his letters to white citizens: he addressed them with courtesy titles and wrote in a respectful manner.¹⁶⁰ The political boss also met with black leaders, including Church, Jr., who thanked Crump for the “cordial and generous courtesies extended” to him during the visit.¹⁶¹

Though Crump incorporated blacks into the body politic more than other southern politicians, he only went so far, and his courteous contacts with them masked his derogatory views. Some blacks certainly campaigned for Crump out of their own free will, but he also manipulated black support by “herding” them to the polls, paying their poll taxes, and rewarding them with barbeque and liquor. As with other white southern politicians, he embraced segregation, and he perpetuated black inequality by providing public service improvements and other benefits within the context of the Jim Crow system. Blacks also continued to be excluded from participation in the local Democratic Party and to occupy the lowest rung of government employment.

In other ways as well, machine government had pernicious effects on blacks. Blacks had virtually no chance of winning a seat on the city commission because there were so few slots, these positions were at-large, and whites were largely not willing to vote for members of the other race. As a result of the double blow of disenfranchising legislation and commission government, blacks ceased running for city positions. Because of their inability

¹⁵⁹ G. Wayne Dowdy, “Scope and Content Notes,” finding aid to Crump Papers, ix; Crump to T. O. Fuller, 27 Dec. 1913, Crump Papers, Series I, Box 12, Folder: “F” City Business 1913, mfm, 000604.

¹⁶⁰ This assessment is based on my review of numerous documents in the Crump Papers.

¹⁶¹ The letter does not indicate why they met. Church to Crump, 9 Jul. 1915, Crump Papers, Series I, Box 7, Folder: Personal “C.”

to hold office, they had no direct say in local government, unlike in the late nineteenth century when they occupied municipal positions.¹⁶²

Despite these obstacles, black Memphians took advantage of their opportunity to vote and participate in politics. They ran for county, state, and national positions as well as for spots on the state and local Republican committees. They formed political clubs and used professional, community, and neighborhood organizations for electoral activities. Political and civic groups sometimes overlapped in leadership and membership, providing black electoral activities with unity and cohesion. In addition, blacks endorsed candidates and engaged in voter registration and education efforts. Some expressed their opposition to Crump's manipulative tactics.¹⁶³

Blacks were involved in political activity for various and sometimes-contradictory reasons. They shared some of the goals with other activists of the Progressive era. At times letting Crump know that they had supported him at the polls, blacks asked him for better public services, improved employment opportunities, and other favors.¹⁶⁴ He sometimes granted these appeals. In 1914, for instance, Crump supported the Colored Men's Civic League's request to ban Thomas Dixon's play *The Leopard Spots* from showing in the city because of its negative portrayal of blacks. Crump referred the matter to the board of

¹⁶² Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 8; Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 7-9; Adkins, "Beale Street," 19.

¹⁶³ Central Committee to Various Candidates, [1914]; Eleventh Ward Improvement Club to E. H. Crump, 25 Jul. 1914, Crump Papers, Series I, Box 26, Folder: Politics "N" 1914, mfm, 000422.

¹⁶⁴ For example, see: T. O. Fuller to Crump, 13 Nov. 1912, Crump Papers, Series I, Box 11, Folder: "F" City Business 1912, mfm, 000528; T. O. Fuller to Crump, 1 May 1912, Crump Papers, Series I, Box 11, Folder: "F" City Business 1912, mfm, 000529; Thomas H. Hayes, Sr. et al., Petition from Negro Undertakers to Edward H. Crump and Board of Commissioners, [1910], Crump Papers, Series I, Box 15, Folder: City Business 1910, mfm, 002231; J. T. Settle, Sr., to Crump, Series I, Box 32, Folder: Politics "S" 1915, mfm, 000987; F. W. Watson to Crump, 11 Nov. 1911, Series I, Box 33, Folder: Politics "T" 1911, mfm, 001792-4.

censors, which promptly forbid the play.¹⁶⁵ Black saloonkeepers and underworld figures secured black votes for Crump in exchange for protection of their illicit activities while other blacks asked for the suppression of prostitution and gambling. Yet other blacks called for better care for prisoners, an end to lynching, and the appointment of black police officers.¹⁶⁶

Section III

Robert Church, Jr., began his journey as a political leader during the Crump era. He followed in his father's path as a businessman but differed from him by taking up politics as his primary avocation. Church, Jr., engaged in electoral efforts mainly as a means to secure civil rights and better economic opportunities for blacks. Having faith in the democratic political process, he believed that his goals could be achieved through arousing blacks to political action.¹⁶⁷ During the 1910s, he and his fellow Solvent Savings Bank officials were the most important local black political activists. Perhaps inspired by Church, Sr.'s legacy, these independent black professionals, who were among the richest blacks in Memphis, used their wealth to finance their political efforts.¹⁶⁸ These bank officials included Bert Roddy, the operator of Iroquois Café across from Church's Park; Harry Pace, who ran the publishing company with W. C. Handy; T. H. Hayes, Sr., an undertaker and close friend of Handy and Booker T. Washington; and J. W. Sanford, one of the city's leading contractors. J. H. Settle,

¹⁶⁵ Colored Men's Civic League, Petition to E. H. Crump, 8 Apr. 1914, Crump Papers, Box 22, Folder: "Mc" City Business 1914, mfm, 000623; Caplinger, "Conflict and Community," 62; Dowdy, *Mr. Crump*, 19-20. For another example of Crump granting black requests, see: Crump to T. O. Fuller, 14 Nov. 1912, Crump Papers, Series I, Box 11, Folder: "F" City Business 1912, mfm, 000564. Also see these two letters in Crump Papers, Series II, Box 47, Folder: Politics 1916: Crump to Thomas H. Hayes, Sr., 7 Jul. 1916, mfm, 001776 and Crump to A. A. Kincannon, 7 Jul. 1916, mfm, 001775.

¹⁶⁶ Central Committee to Various Candidates, [1914]; Eleventh Ward Improvement Club to Crump, 25 Jul. 1914.

¹⁶⁷ Adkins, "Beale Street," 88; Church, "Material for the Carnegie Corporation," 2.

¹⁶⁸ Hamilton, *Bright Side*, 92; Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 89.

Sr., a prestigious lawyer and former political appointee, was also part of this group, though he died in 1912. They spanned a generation, from Hayes and Sanford, who were born in the early 1860s, to Church, Jr., and Roddy, who were born in the mid-1880s.¹⁶⁹ As with most other blacks in the region and country, they were Republicans. But, in the nonpartisan local elections, they supported the candidates who promised to be the best choice for blacks even if the office seeker was known to be a Democrat.

For the 1911 election, Church, Pace, and Roddy formed the Colored Citizens Association (CCA), and Church organized a mass voter registration drive of blacks.¹⁷⁰ In a rematch of their race two years earlier, mayoral candidates J. J. Williams and Ed Crump vied for the black vote. Black voter registration numbers increased to levels unseen since the 1870s: majority black wards saw heavy voter registration, and wards that had historically seen only a handful of blacks vote saw significant black registration. The *Commercial Appeal* reported that blacks were registering by the thousands, though it said the police were behind this development in many cases.¹⁷¹ Despite the unity that they displayed in registering to vote, black Memphians were divided in their political approach, whether to press for improvements within a segregated society or fight against segregation altogether. They were particularly concerned with parks. No law forbade blacks from using city parks, but it was known that they were not welcome.¹⁷² Harry Pace, the CCA president, wrote Crump on

¹⁶⁹ For more biographical information on these bank officials, see: Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*; “Souvenir Programme, Dr. Booker T. Washington,” Hamilton, *Bright Side*, 72-5, 130-1; Partington, “The Moon Illustrated Weekly,” Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 40-2, 74-5.

¹⁷⁰ Church claimed in later years to be the first man to organize a mass voter registration drive of black Memphians. Church to George W. Lee, 22 Jun. 1951, Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 41.

¹⁷¹ Caplinger, “Conflict and Community,” 61.

¹⁷² Memphis had embarked on a park building plan in 1899 but had not allowed blacks access to any parks or built a park for blacks.

behalf of the Solvent Savings Bank directors. Acknowledging a movement among blacks for their own municipal park, he said that the CCA believed that separate parks were unconstitutional, that blacks should have access to public parks enjoyed by whites because they paid taxes. To be sure, Church's Park continued to be a space for blacks and whites, but it was privately owned and operated. The CCA also wanted street paving in black neighborhoods. Pace informed Crump that the candidates and their racial attitudes would influence the CCA's mayoral endorsement. After interviewing Crump and Williams, CCA officials recommended that blacks vote for Crump.¹⁷³ "[Williams] promises everything and I fear he'll do nothing," Pace said. "[B]ut this redheaded fellow frankly declines to promise us some of the things we want, but convinced me he will fulfill promises he did make."¹⁷⁴

While the CCA saw Crump as the better of two bad choices, other black voters believed that Crump was "a patriotic citizen working for the best interest of the people," and yet others opposed him.¹⁷⁵ The black *Bluff City News*, for instance, blasted him for rampant crime and police protection of illicit activities.¹⁷⁶ It deemed him incapable and unfit and ran a cartoon portraying him securing the black vote with a clenched fist.¹⁷⁷ Even with such opposition, Crump received most of the black vote and was reelected, capturing at least 59 percent of the ballots in each of the city's precincts and more than 75 percent of the fifteen

¹⁷³ Pace to Crump, 8 Jul. 1911, Crump Papers, Series I, Box 27, Folder: City Business 1911, mfm, 000888-9; Caplinger, "Conflict and Community," 60-1; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 37.

¹⁷⁴ Caplinger, "Conflict and Community," 61.

¹⁷⁵ W. M. Melton to E. H. Crump, 21 Oct. 1911, Crump Papers, Series I, Box 25, Folder: Politics "M" 1911, mfm, 002450-1.

¹⁷⁶ "Can We Afford to Re-Elect Mr. Crump," *The Bluff City News*, n.d., Crump Papers, Series I, Box 25, Folder: Politics "M" 1911, mfm, 002452.

¹⁷⁷ "Public Sentiment Reacts against Mayor Crump," *The Bluff City News*, 22 Oct. 1911, Crump Papers, Series I, Box 25, Folder: Politics "M" 1911, mfm, 002453.

thousand votes cast.¹⁷⁸ The next year, the city opened its first park for blacks despite white opposition.¹⁷⁹

The CCA appears to have discontinued operations after the election, but its former members made an even more ambitious effort the next year. These same Solvent Bank officials supported H. C. Purnell, a prosperous merchant and popular black Memphian, in the county election. His wife, Fannie, was a prominent caterer in the city. Purnell ran for a county commission position in an attempt to achieve black representation in that body.¹⁸⁰ For the 1911 election, he had served as president of the Eleventh Ward Improvement Club, which had endorsed Crump.¹⁸¹ Prominent blacks made up Purnell's campaign committee, including Church and Solvent Savings Bank officials Hayes, Roddy, and Pace. In a letter to Crump in response to his "queries and advice," the committee wrote that Purnell was not antagonistic to but rather supportive of city and county authorities. Quoting the political boss in calling the county office "insignificant," the committee members said that they believed that one black on the county commission did not jeopardize the "dominant race" but rather would help white officials by attending to black complaints; a black office holder could more effectively request better conditions for rural black schools than blacks could as private citizens. Saying that they knew that Crump could ensure Purnell's defeat, the committee members commented

¹⁷⁸ Caplinger, "Conflict and Community," 61.

¹⁷⁹ Dowdy, "Scope and Content Notes," ix; E. H. Crump to P. P. Van Vleet, 6 Mar. 1911, Crump Papers, Series I, Box 35, Folder: "V" City Business 1911, mfm, 002450.

¹⁸⁰ Technically, the commission was known as the county court at this time and he ran to be a magistrate. For biographical information on Purnell and his wife, see: Hamilton, *Bright Side*, 135, 217-8.

¹⁸¹ H. C. Purnell and O. W. Williams to E. H. Crump, 28 Oct. 1911, Crump Papers, Box 36, Folder: Politics "W" 1911, mfm, 000722.

that they were not asking Crump for his endorsement. Instead, they wanted the political boss to allow their candidate a fair chance.¹⁸²

The committee's letter further revealed the changed political climate caused by the rise to power of Crump, advent of commission government, and decline of black office holding. Blacks went from serving as elected officials in the late nineteenth century to begging for the right to make a fair bid for public office. In contrast to blacks' success in previous elections, Purnell ended up losing the race. Moreover, the committee members accommodated to Crump by calling the county office "insignificant" and saying that a black representative would not jeopardize the "dominant race." In making these statements, they may have felt that they needed to appear subservient if they were to have a chance of exercising political influence through elected office.

Crump's quest for power rose to new heights during the 1914 election. He decided to run for county sheriff. Shortly after his announcement, the *Commercial Appeal's* editor, C. P. J. Mooney, a vocal critic of Crump and an astute political observer, called him "the absolute master of all the governmental affairs of Memphis and . . . Shelby County" and the "head of the strongest, most efficient political organization that ever dominated the affairs of any community." He contended that Crump's "power over everything [would] be absolute" if he succeeded in his bid. But, after learning that the city charter forbade any city official from holding two offices simultaneously, Crump withdrew from the race and entered J. A. Reichman instead for the position.¹⁸³

¹⁸² Campaign Committee of H. C. Purnell to Crump, 20 Jul. 1912, Crump Papers, Series I, Box 29, Folder: Politics 1912, mfm, 002136-8.

¹⁸³ Bridges, "Editor Mooney," 85.

As a result of a technicality, Reichman was kept off the ballot, so Crump ran a write-in campaign for him. His cronies set up blackboards on Beale to teach illiterate blacks how to write. According to white political observer R. E. Johnson, blacks “did not write the usual inanities of the kindergarten such as ‘I see the dog’ . . . [but rather] the name of a man--Mr. Reichman. It became known as the ‘Rite it Rick’ campaign and it was engineered by Little Napoleon himself and executed by police.”¹⁸⁴ Reichman won by nearly ten thousand votes even though the two white newspapers and a majority of election officials opposed him.¹⁸⁵ On election day, the *Commercial Appeal* reported its discovery of nearly five thousand registration receipts handled by city firefighters and police officers as well as thousands of poll tax receipts secured by the Crump machine to distribute to blacks at the polls. The paper also found city and county employees soliciting votes, painting campaign signs, and instructing blacks how to vote.¹⁸⁶ All these activities violated the city charter.

After the election, Crump came under increasing attack for his corruption and manipulation of the black vote. A campaign manager for Malcolm R. Patterson, the gubernatorial candidate in 1915, assailed him as the “most baneful influence in politics this state has ever known” and charged him with using “the votes of dead men, fraudulent negro votes and every conceivable and rotten method of ballot box manipulations.”¹⁸⁷ Editor Mooney pounded away at the political machine through editorials, articles, and cartoons.

¹⁸⁴ Loyal Tennesseans League, *Edward H. Crump*, 9.

¹⁸⁵ Acting Secretary to E. H. Crump [name not given] to T. Harbert Taylor, 12 Aug. 1912, Crump Papers, Series I, Box 34, Folder: Politics “T” 1914, mfm, 002002; E. H. Crump to John A. Tipton, 11 Aug. 1912, Crump Papers, Series I, Box 34, Folder: Politics “T” 1914, mfm, 002004.

¹⁸⁶ Bridges, “Editor Mooney,” 86.

¹⁸⁷ W. Hatchman to C. W. Schuyler, 11 Dec. 1915, Crump Papers, Series I, Box 32, Folder: Politics “S” 1915, mfm, 001022.

One cartoon depicted Crump reading a book titled “How To Use 12,000 Registration Certificates.”¹⁸⁸ In early 1916, the newspaper presented the first solid evidence of the illegal use of black voters by publishing photographs of fraudulent registration certificates and poll tax receipts. It also reported that a police employee had handled thirty thousand voter registration certificates during his six years on the force and that black gamblers and dive keepers engaged in illicit activities under police protection.¹⁸⁹

Those public criticisms were not the only troubles that Crump was facing. Two county commissioners resigned after Mooney charged them with graft, and two judges were impeached for corruption.¹⁹⁰ In late 1915, Crump pled guilty to violating state prohibition laws and was convicted for failing to enforce prohibition.¹⁹¹ He was ousted from office in February 1916. Six months later, however, he was elected to the powerful office of county trustee (treasurer). In light of his corruption, why would local citizens vote Crump back into office? He had, after all, provided them with improved city services, lower taxes, and other benefits. The positive aspects of his machine must have outweighed the negative ones for many voters.

As Crump faced the reality of his ouster from the mayor’s office and came to occupy the position of county trustee, Church and his associates took their political activity to a new level. In early 1916, Church founded the Lincoln Republican League of Tennessee for the

¹⁸⁸ Bridges, “Editor Mooney,” 94; Loyal Tennesseans League, *Edward H. Crump*, 9.

¹⁸⁹ Bridges, “Editor Mooney,” 92. For a look at how the Democratic machine in Cincinnati, Ohio, manipulated black voters in ways similar to the Crump machine, see: Nikki Taylor, “The Democratic Machine as a Vehicle for African-American Civil Rights?: The Politics of Peter H. Clark, 1882-1888” (paper presented at the Conference on Race, Labor and Citizenship in the Post-Emancipation South, Charleston, South Carolina, March 11-13, 2010).

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 92-3.

¹⁹¹ Kitchens, “Ouster of Mayor Edward H. Crump;” Loyal Tennesseans League, *Edward H. Crump*, 8-9.

overarching goals of “regain[ing] the lost rights of a growing race” and achieving “political and economic emancipation” for blacks.¹⁹² As he later said, “It has been my firm conviction that if [c]olored people were instructed in and learned how to actively use the [b]allot . . . their united strength would result in the election on local and national scenes [of] candidates for various offices who would be compelled to adhere to the demands of the voters who elected them.” He continued, “With this in mind I founded and organized the Lincoln League . . . the purpose of which was to get colored citizens to register en masse, pay their poll taxes, get instructions on how to use the ballot, and go to the polls and vote.”¹⁹³

The official founding of the Lincoln League took place on February 1, 1916, when Church called a public meeting in Church’s Auditorium. He already had gathered together a group of black male professionals to form the league, and they had adopted a constitution and elected the organization’s officers, including Church, at age thirty-one, as president. Other chief officials included Solvent Savings Bank officers T. H. Hayes, Sr., and Bert Roddy. Among the league’s eighty-seven directors was Lymus Wallace, the elder statesman of Memphis and the last black person in the city council. Some one thousand black men and women attended the public meeting, including Church’s grandmother, mother, wife, and sister, Annette. The building was so packed that people stood in the aisles. Aiming to gain black Memphians’ approval for the league and its officials, Church told the audience that they would remove any league officers if objections were voiced. Prominent black citizens,

¹⁹² Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 20, 26, 34.

¹⁹³ Church, “Material for the Carnegie Corporation,” 2.

including Wallace, made enthusiastic speeches endorsing the organization and its officers, and the attendees approved the league and its officials.¹⁹⁴

The Lincoln League had a variety of plans for breaking the stranglehold of the Jim Crow system. Tennessee was considering amending its constitution that fall to include a literacy test to disenfranchise black voters, so Church and the other leaders wanted to mobilize blacks across the state in the hope that they would elect delegates to the constitutional convention to serve as a voice against this proposed measure.¹⁹⁵ The league believed that “the cold fact remains: the colored voter must either vote as a unit or continue to be politically expunged as at present.” Inviting both blacks and whites to become members, the organization also wanted “to knock the breath out of the color line in politics.” League leaders believed that “the storms of division” had “kept the Negro down,” so they hoped to unify black Memphians in order to advance their collective interests. “[W]hen Afro-Americans who reside in the South are as safe in life and as secure in their rights as in the North, then the goal of this organization will have been attained,” a profile of the league declared. The organization’s members hoped that their efforts would lead to impartial courts, fair elections, humane treatment of prisoners, and an end to police brutality and Jim Crow laws.¹⁹⁶ Like many other black middle- and upper-class activists at the time, the league’s leaders felt a responsibility to uplift the black masses as well: they wanted to lead the league

¹⁹⁴ “The Lincoln League: What It Is,” [Nov. 1916?], Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 25, p. 3; Robert R. Church, Jr., “Remarks at First Meeting [of the] Lincoln League, Church’s Park and Auditorium,” 1 Feb. 1916, Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 23; “Directors, Lincoln Republican League,” [Jan. or Feb. 1916?], Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 25; Church and Church, interview no. 2, 5 Jan. 1973, 10; “Report on Feb. 1, 1916, Meeting of the Lincoln League,” Feb. 1916, Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 25. For biographical information on Wallace, see: Hamilton, *Bright Side*, 283; Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 100-1.

¹⁹⁵ Church, “Remarks at First Meeting [of the] Lincoln League,” 1-2.

¹⁹⁶ “Lincoln League: What It Is,” 1-2.

members not only in political activities and the “calm assertion” of their constitutional rights but also in “ways of character and intelligence.”¹⁹⁷

Black Memphians saw Church as the appropriate person to head up their endeavor. According to a profile of the Lincoln League, Church was “strong of body and keen of intellect[,] . . . cordial and modest to a degree,” and a “natural political leader for the Negro race.” His wealth placed him “beyond the range of temptation to do anything merely for the sake of money.”¹⁹⁸ Certainly, Church’s status as a well-off black professional gave him a degree of independence, so he was not as susceptible as others to wayward influences employing the use of money or white economic repercussions for his civil rights activities.

The only requirements for Lincoln League membership were to support the Republican Party, pay the poll tax, and register to vote.¹⁹⁹ Praising the Republican Party for having “made the nation free as against the [p]arty that sought to keep it slave,” the league considered the Grand Old Party “neither sectional nor racial” and “born in the fires of political freedom and baptized in the waters of political equality.” Some fifty years after the Civil War, the organization viewed the party as the one that had delivered blacks out of slavery and into Reconstruction and believed that it must continue to serve as a vehicle for freedom and equality. The league saw it as the vessel for achieving their goals.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Church, “Remarks at First Meeting [of the] Lincoln League,” 1; Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham*; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993).

¹⁹⁸ “The Lincoln League: What It Is,” 3.

¹⁹⁹ “Constitution of the Lincoln Republican Club of Tennessee,” Jan. 1916, Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 25.

²⁰⁰ “Platform of the Lincoln Republican League of Tennessee,” 8 Sept. 1916, Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 24.

Church was determined to keep blacks active in the Republican Party as leaders and members even though the lily-white movement had gained strength across the South during the first two decades of the twentieth century. He had become involved with the local black-and-tan Republican faction by 1912. That year, he served as a delegate to the Republican National Convention for the first time. He supported President William Howard Taft in his bid for re-election, but Taft lost the election. Locally, the lily-white Republicans, who made up the official Shelby County Republican organization, would not allow black Republicans to join or align with them. They supported local Democrats by campaigning for their candidates in local elections, and they often did not run Republican office seekers. They also denied blacks patronage.²⁰¹

Despite its limits, the Republican Party remained a better alternative for blacks than the Democratic Party. From 1892 forward, for instance, Democratic Party platforms, unlike Republican ones, contained no statements against lynching or affirming constitutional rights for all.²⁰² Even with the lily-white emphasis of President Taft, the Democratic administration of Woodrow Wilson, a Virginia native who was elected in 1912, further exposed the differences between the two parties. Some blacks, including W. E. B. DuBois, had supported Wilson in 1912 because they thought that he represented a better choice than Taft. They were quickly disappointed, however, by Wilson. The Grand Old Party played on this disenchantment when seeking black votes in 1916. For example, the Woman's [sic] National Republican Campaign Committee, a white organization, pointed out that Wilson had

²⁰¹ Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 4, 13-7; Adkins, "Beale Street," 54-5; Church, "Material for the Carnegie Corporation," 2; Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 44; Sherman, *Republican Party*.

²⁰² Roscoe Conkling Simmons, *The Republican Party and American Colored People, 1856-1936* (Chicago: Republican National Committee, 1936), 26-30.

dismissed all black political appointees except for one and only made two black political appointments. In contrast, during Republican administrations, “many distinguished [c]olored men from all sections of the country, held appointive offices.” Though Republicans had not made a large number of black political appointments, their record was better than that of the Democrats. The women also blamed Wilson for not hiring black civil servants as well as dismissing and segregating black governmental employees and reducing them in rank. Indeed, Wilson had taken all these steps.²⁰³

Through his Lincoln League endeavor, Church wanted to bolster Republican Party strength in West Tennessee; help elect Republican presidential, senatorial, and gubernatorial candidates in the November election; and gain official recognition for his black-and-tan group in the local Republican Party executive committee. As a result, Church decided to run a ticket of twelve black candidates to challenge the lily-white slate of candidates in the November election. He served as the campaign manager of the Lincoln League ticket. Roddy, Hayes, and other black professionals and businessmen sought state and national positions in Tennessee’s Tenth Congressional District, which encompassed not only Shelby County but also Tipton, Hardeman, and Fayette counties. They knew that a win over the lily-white ticket would lead to the establishment of the black-and-tans as the area’s regular Republicans and that blacks would then receive a share of Republican patronage.²⁰⁴

²⁰³ Woman’s [sic] National Republican Campaign Committee, *Reasons Why You Should Work for Republican Candidates* (New York: National Woman’s Campaign Committee, 1916), Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 6. Also see: Sherman, *Republican Party*, 113-8.

²⁰⁴ The Lincoln League ticket was composed of the following candidates: Wayman Wilkerson ran for U.S. Congress. H. H. Bomar and Bert Roddy ran for the position of state senator. T. H. Hayes, Sr., ran for the position of Floterial Senator. G. W. Atkins, Nat Bowles, Arthur E. Clouston, N. F. Clowers, Ed Lewis, J. T. Settle, Jr., O. W. Williams, and J. B. Willis ran for the position of state representative. Church, “Remarks at First Meeting [of the] Lincoln League;” Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 15-9, 26-7; Church, “Material for the Carnegie Corporation,” 2.

The campaign marked the first large-scale movement to organize blacks since the end of the Reconstruction era, and the Lincoln League formed clubs in every black ward.²⁰⁵ Church financed and set up voter education schools. More than one thousand blacks attended the schools held almost nightly in churches. Along with teaching blacks how to vote, the teachers, who were mainly female, educated them about the importance of the Republican Party. Only those who paid their poll taxes and registered to vote could attend.²⁰⁶ The instructors were required to report to the central committee headquartered in Church's Park and apparently were well paid for their services.²⁰⁷ It is unclear whether the Lincoln League mobilized blacks in other parts of Tennessee as Church and the league leaders intended, but their local efforts to politicize blacks certainly met with success.

Church ensured that rallies took place throughout the election season and occurred weekly from August until November in Church's Auditorium. He brought in outside speakers, including Roscoe Conkling Simmons, at gatherings such as the one W. Herbert Brewster remembered so vividly.²⁰⁸ As with the schools, only blacks with poll tax receipts and registration certificates were admitted. News of these meetings spread, and blacks paid their poll taxes in order to come even though most were poor and had little time to spare.²⁰⁹ At these rallies, ministers and league officials condemned Jim Crow laws and lynching.

²⁰⁵ Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 118.

²⁰⁶ Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 19.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 28; David M. Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street* (Nashville: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1971), 70.

²⁰⁸ Church, Jr., undoubtedly got to know Simmons because of his friendship with his father. Roscoe Conkling Simmons to Robert R. Church, Sr., 30 Mar. 1911, Church Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 10; Simmons, "Robert R. Church."

²⁰⁹ Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 7.

Church said that blacks would free themselves from these injustices through their political participation.²¹⁰

The two white dailies took note of these developments: the *Press-Scimitar* said that “heavy black registration” was occurring, and the *Commercial Appeal* planted white and black spies in the schools. The latter reported that blacks were “coming back” in politics and showing an “unequalled interest” in it. Fearing that the white vote would split between the lily-white ticket and Democratic ticket and result in the election of the black candidates, the *Commercial Appeal* called on whites to vote for the Democrats in order to “write the brand of shame across the hideous plot” of the Lincoln League.²¹¹ In taking these measures and making these statements, these white dailies exposed the controversial nature of independent black political mobilization that threatened to upset the social order, revealing how accustomed local whites had become to the lack of black office holders.

At the same time that Church was using the Lincoln League to strengthen the Republican Party locally, the Lincoln League furthered Church’s rise in the party nationally. Even with its turn toward lily whiteness, the national party continued to incorporate blacks to a degree, and it may have helped finance the Lincoln League. In May 1916, Church became the first black since 1892 to gain a seat on Tennessee’s at-large delegation to the party’s national convention. In achieving this position, he desired not only to increase black political representation in the party but also to attain more legitimacy for the Lincoln League. He

²¹⁰ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 70-1.

²¹¹ Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 29.

evidently made a good impression because national Republicans appointed him that summer to an advisory committee devoted to securing black votes for the party.²¹²

That August, Church even met with Theodore Roosevelt at Sangamore Hill, his home in Oyster Bay, New York. Roosevelt believed in the biological inferiority of the masses of blacks, but he enjoyed friendships with some individual blacks. He and Church had a pleasant meeting, and the former president gave him a signed photograph. Either then or at another time, Roosevelt demonstrated support for the Lincoln League.²¹³ After the meeting, Church subsequently courted Roosevelt with praise in writing him that the picture held a prominent place on his wall and that he was the greatest man that he had ever met.²¹⁴ The men went on to maintain a professional and personal relationship.²¹⁵

Even with his national ties and recognition, Church never lost sight of ordinary black Memphians. At the founding meeting of the Lincoln League, he had told the audience, “This club is not going to be an organ of any fraternal or religious body, any business firm, any bank, [or] of any other particular or special corporation. It is distinctly founded for the good of the masses and not classes of men.”²¹⁶ In clarifying to black Memphians the nature of the organization, he fought off any suspicions that he and his fellow Solvent Savings Bank officials were engaging in this political effort for their own self-interest. Church also demonstrated through this statement--along with his use of mass rallies, voting schools, and

²¹² Ibid., 22-5, 28.

²¹³ Adkins, “Beale Street,” 54.

²¹⁴ Church to Theodore Roosevelt, 8 Aug. 1916 and 28 Aug. 1916, Church Family Papers, Box 2, Folder 14; Church, telegram to Roosevelt, 7 Nov. 1916, Church Family Papers, Box 2, Folder 15.

²¹⁵ For example, see these letters in Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 26: Church to Roosevelt, 7 Jul. 1917, and Roosevelt to Church, 12 Jul. 1917.

²¹⁶ Church, “Remarks at First Meeting [of the] Lincoln League,” 3.

voter registration efforts--that he was interested in empowering ordinary blacks. He knew that their support and their grassroots mobilization were crucial to the success of the league.

At a September mass meeting, the Lincoln League adopted a platform that unequivocally embraced civil rights. The league denounced all Jim Crow laws as “a wicked abuse of power” and as “barbarous relics of [the] unenlightened days” of slavery. In response to President Woodrow Wilson’s successful effort to segregate the governmental workforce, the organization advocated the end to racial discrimination in the civil service. The league also called for the integration of labor unions. World War I had begun, and the platform pressed for more blacks in the armed services. In addition, it called for the establishment of integrated federal trade schools, federal aid to supplement inadequate southern state educational budgets, and improvements and higher appropriations for black and white schools within the existing state system. Condemning lynching as “a barbaric attack upon order and a rape attempted upon the law” that “makes a great country the shame of all nations,” the league advocated federal anti-lynching legislation and said that its nominee for Congress would introduce such a measure if elected.²¹⁷

The league’s platform also promoted women’s rights. Though initially opposed to women’s suffrage, Church had changed his mind, perhaps because of the influence of his half-sister Mary Church Terrell, who was involved in the suffrage movement. In 1910, she wrote him while he was a student in New York and said:

Now, my dear boy, you say you do not believe in woman suffrage. You just mean to say you have never thought previously on this subject. I have always been impressed with your sense of justice Whatever *white* men may think about woman suffrage, no *colored* man who believes in suffrage for colored men can consistently oppose it. Unless you believe that all men

²¹⁷ “Platform of the Lincoln Republican League,” 8 Sept. 1916.

who are born colored should because of that accident of race be deprived of the right of citizenship you [cannot] insist that all human beings who are born girls should because of that accident of birth be denied rights which others enjoy simply because they happen to be born boys instead of girls.²¹⁸

Calling suffrage an “inherent” right of every U.S. citizen, the league supported the “immediate extension of the vote to women” and “the equality of the sexes and the equality of men.”²¹⁹ At the same time, while the league involved women, it excluded them from its ranks by making voter registration a criterion for membership and attendance at its rallies and voter education schools. Thus, it contradicted its platform statements in contributing to the belief that women were not suited for full political participation.

Despite the league’s stress on black rights, Church reached out to white citizens as well. In response to false allegations spread during the campaign, the black office seekers took out a full-page advertisement in both white dailies the day before the election, and Church signed it.²²⁰ Faced with a prevailing environment of negative racial constructions, the candidates fashioned a counter-narrative about black identity and expressed their reasons for their endeavor. They identified themselves as the regular Republican candidates and the Lincoln League as “composed of the backbone of labor and industrial supremacy of Memphis.” Assuring white readers that the league members loved their neighbors, city, state, and the South, they tied their cause to Memphis’s economic advancement, saying that the city’s prosperity depended upon mutual cooperation. The candidates emphasized that

²¹⁸ Terrell to Church, 29 Jan. 1910, Church Family Papers, Box 2, Folder 35.

²¹⁹ “Platform of the Lincoln Republican League,” 8 Sept. 1916.

²²⁰ Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 97.

they had conducted the campaign free of bitterness, prejudice, and hate and that they desired an atmosphere of peace and goodwill.²²¹

The Lincoln League ad also appealed to whites by linking the organization's cause with American principles of freedom, fairness, and democracy--values that had special resonance in this era of World War I. Like so many black activists before and after them, the candidates exposed social contradictions of the American creed and pressed for the country to live up to its ideals. The ad stated:

We are citizens. We are taxpayers. We believe in law and order [W]e have sought to conduct ourselves as men worthy of American citizenship. We ask not only for the suffrage of all good citizens, but particularly for a fair chance at the polls--the freeman's battlefield--and for an honest count in the reckoning. More than this we could not ask, less than this no honorable man would ask to accept The present contest will decide the power of the universal claim we live beneath a flag of law and love.

The ad stressed political rights and did not directly confront segregation or lynching. Given the contentiousness of these matters, Church and the Lincoln League office seekers may have thought that doing so might alienate whites from their cause.²²²

By election day, the Lincoln League had reached five thousand members and was credited with registering nearly ten thousand black voters, bringing the black electorate up to nearly one third of the total electorate in Shelby County.²²³ The league ticket won a resounding victory of a four-to-one margin over the lily-white slate in this "red letter day in the annals of the race in Memphis."²²⁴ Church sent Theodore Roosevelt a telegram, saying,

²²¹ Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 26-7.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid., 26, 30; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 40-1.

²²⁴ "The Lincoln League: What It Is," 4.

“For myself and the organization I represent and my people everywhere I congratulate you upon the noble part you took in our victory.”²²⁵ The league helped the Republican presidential nominee Charles Hughes carry Shelby County by sixty-seven hundred votes, though he did not win the state or election. The Republican gubernatorial and senatorial candidates lost as well.²²⁶ Nonetheless, the Lincoln League’s strong showing at the polls succeeded in establishing Church’s faction as the regular Republican organization in West Tennessee.²²⁷ In addition, the state did not enact a literacy test as the league officers had feared.²²⁸

After the election, some white newspapers called on the Lincoln League to dissolve or face dire consequences. An editorial in the state capital’s *Nashville Banner* accused the Lincoln League of inflaming prejudice through manipulating black voters, promoting bloc voting, and perpetuating the color line in politics. According to this leading daily, whites would not “tolerate [Negro voters’] attempt to gain political supremacy.” Instead, the paper said that the main aim of black leaders “should be to make their people capable through character and intelligence for the duties of citizenship and to exercise individual judgment in voting.” The *New York Age* provided a rebuttal by saying that “the spectacle of a southern daily preaching against race solidarity in politics is a bit unusual not to say incongruous.” It

²²⁵ Church, telegram to Roosevelt, 7 Nov. 1916.

²²⁶ Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 33.

²²⁷ Church, “Material for the Carnegie Corporation,” 2.

²²⁸ It is unclear whether the league’s effort had an impact on this development or if the league succeeded in electing black delegates to the constitutional convention.

pointed out that the league's efforts were in response to discrimination that blacks faced and that the Lincoln League would not exist if not for solid white opposition.²²⁹

In addition to the *New York Age*, the 1916 campaign generated press coverage from other black publications across the country.²³⁰ Calling the organization's effort the "most significant phase of the recent election," *Champion Magazine* said:

The Lincoln League is in politics not for the elevation of any individual politician, [or] for the establishment of Negro supremacy, but to regain the lost rights of a growing race. It is not revolutionary, it is not a color line organization, it is not a political Ku Klux Klan, but [it is] the outgrowth of that type of idealism that produced . . . the Sons of Liberty during the days prior to the American Revolution.²³¹

The *New York News* commended Church and the Lincoln League for running a slate of candidates in the South. In Tennessee, "it requires not only political wisdom but [also] physical bravery for Colored men to secure civic recognition," the paper said. "The action of the Colored citizens . . . in naming a Colored ticket is one of the most courageous things that Colored citizens have ever done in this country." It urged black men in New York and New Jersey to pay "special attention" to this "splendid example."²³²

Years later, Church remembered, "The ticket was successful beyond our expectations."²³³ He quoted from the *Western World Reporter*, a local black newspaper, which said at the time: "If the league did nothing more than teach colored men the dignity of

²²⁹ Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 31-2.

²³⁰ Church and Church, interview no. 2, 5 Jan. 1973, 10-3.

²³¹ *Champion Magazine* was a black publication based in Chicago. "Robert R. Church and the Lincoln League," *Champion Magazine*, Jan. 1917, Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 25, p. 238.

²³² I have kept the capitalization style that the paper used. Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 118.

²³³ Church, "Material for the Carnegie Corporation," 2.

the ballot and white men that all colored men cannot be purchased and a great number misled, that is enough for the first time.” The newspaper reported that the leaders and candidates had announced their “determination to go ahead with the fight year after year until the political chains are broken, and colored men are treated as citizens.”²³⁴

Indeed, the Lincoln League served as a milestone for black political activists in Memphis. At a time when most black southerners were deprived of the right to vote and engaged in institution building within their own communities to shield themselves from the indignities of the Jim Crow system, black Memphians used the vote to press for a better tomorrow. They spoke out against Jim Crow laws and lynching and advocated for black political rights and economic advancement. They were not willing to accept the loss of the rights that they had won during the Reconstruction or forsake the life that they remembered before the imposition of segregation ordinances and the abolition of blacks from public office. By engaging in voter education and registration efforts and using the Lincoln League as a forum for independent black political action, black Memphians also protested against and broke free of the manipulation of the black vote, demonstrating that they were not mere pawns in the hands of Crump’s machine.

Church and the Lincoln League operated from the premise that civil rights flowed from political rights. He and league members clearly had faith in the democratic process and pragmatically sought change through formal political channels. Faced with a Democratic Party that excluded southern blacks from its organization, they turned to the Republican Party and urged it to live up to its historical principles of freedom and equality and to reject its lily-white component of prejudice and exclusion. Though the Lincoln League candidates

²³⁴ Robert R. Church, Jr., “Material Requested by Mr. Clarence Kelly for Thesis,” [1952?], Church Family Papers, Box 6, Folder 45, p. 9.

had no chance of winning against the Democrats, their bid for public office and victory over the lily-white slate provided black Memphians with newfound access and leverage. Church could serve as a voice for black concerns through his national political activities and connections, and the establishment of his organization as the regular Republicans in West Tennessee allowed for a degree of influence in party operations and control of patronage when Republican administrations were in power.

Church received the most credit and praise for the Lincoln League effort from the black press, and he certainly was the organizational genius and chief strategist. Yet, the league's success also reflected the efforts of the masses of black Memphians. These ordinary black men and women served to propel Church to prominence by sacrificing their time and money to participate in the campaign and ensuring that votes were cast for the Lincoln League ticket. Like W. Herbert Brewster, they were willing to open themselves to the possibility of politics as a way to improve their lives and were motivated to participate in electoral battles to come.

Chapter 2: “The Fight to Make America Safe for Americans”: Memphis as a Political Model for the Region and the Country, 1917-1927

The Lincoln League’s 1916 victory at the polls inaugurated a new era of political mobilization. Black Memphians also expanded their activism into new avenues such as an NAACP branch and a Commission on Interracial Cooperation chapter. They continued to press for economic opportunities, civil rights, improved public services, political influence, and an end to lynching. At the same time, Robert R. Church, Jr., became increasingly involved on the national political scene and emerged as the most prominent black Republican in the country. He transformed the local Lincoln League into the Lincoln League of America, an influential black political organization that was also part of the upsurge of black activism during the World War I era. The local political efforts of black Memphians culminated in 1927 when they mobilized to vote the incumbent mayor out of office and elect a candidate who had incorporated their demands into his platform. In all these ways, Church and black Memphians upset social constructions of blacks as politically apathetic, carved out a political space for themselves, and influenced the political process to meet their desires.

During World War I and its aftermath, racial tensions were exacerbated across the country. Blacks and whites competed for jobs. Many whites resented the authority that black servicemen represented as well as the dramatic spike in black civil rights agitation.²³⁵ Blacks believed that whites would face the contradictions of the American creed: how could

²³⁵ For an analysis of the relationship between blacks and World War I, see: Adriane D. Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2009).

the United States fight for democracy and freedom abroad and not grant it to a segment of its population at home? But, instead of seeing their hopes fulfilled, blacks saw riots break out in urban areas, with the violence peaking in the Red Summer of 1919. Across more than a dozen communities nationally, these three months resulted in the deaths of 120 whites and blacks and the lynching of fifteen blacks. Despite an atmosphere of fear and tension, no wartime or post-war riots occurred in Memphis.²³⁶

This atmosphere stemmed in large part from the Ell Person lynching of May 1917. Elated over the Lincoln League's success in 1916, black Memphians saw their hopes dashed when Person, a black woodchopper, was burned to death. He had been charged with murdering a white teenage girl on the outskirts of the city even though evidence strongly pointed to a white killer. Law enforcement officials forced him to confess after beating him. A posse of local citizens formed, and the police and governmental officials failed to protect Person. After the white Memphis press published his whereabouts, the posse captured him, and the papers publicized the upcoming lynching. Fifteen thousand local residents, some of whom took their children out of school, came to the lynching site five miles outside Memphis, and vendors sold sandwiches to the crowd. The mother of the dead girl was there, voicing her approval. The mob tied Person to a log, and two men cut off his ears before flames engulfed him. Afterward, many whites mutilated his body, and some, including women with children in their arms, scrambled to get bits of his body and clothing for souvenirs. The mob tied an American flag to the log as a memorial. As a warning and signal to blacks to stay in their place, whites threw Person's body remains on Beale Street.

²³⁶ A riot scare occurred in May 1919, and police officers seized guns from stores frequented by blacks later that year; the police feared violence given the national developments. Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 50-1.

The lynchers were never prosecuted. Only after the tragedy did local white clergymen accept responsibility for failing to warn against mob violence. The white *Memphis Press* called all white citizens complicit and asked them to determine whether they wanted a society of law and order. Engaged in an anti-lynching campaign at this time, the national office of the NAACP spotlighted the tragedy through both a supplement to its magazine, the *Crisis*, and a special report written by field secretary James Weldon Johnson. Robert R. Church, Jr., had driven Johnson, a longstanding friend of his, to the lynching site, and the NAACP official had interviewed the sheriff, journalists, many blacks, and some local whites. The *Crisis* used the incident to highlight the region-wide phenomenon of lynching, reporting that 2,867 black men had died in this manner from 1885 to 1916.²³⁷ Many local blacks responded to the lynching by migrating to the North, joining the ranks of the 1.2 million southern blacks who from 1915 to 1929 left the violence, segregation, disenfranchisement, economic exploitation, and daily indignities that they faced in the region. Better economic opportunities in the North generated by the rise of wartime industries also spurred their movement.²³⁸

Church and his political associates responded to the lynching by forming the first local NAACP branch in Tennessee and using their national connections to battle racial violence. A month after the tragedy, the NAACP organizational meeting was held at Church's Park and Auditorium. Fifty-three people, mainly middle- and upper-class black

²³⁷ My account of the lynching is drawn from: "Memphis: May 22, A.D., 1917," Supplement to *The Crisis* 14, no. 3 (Jul. 1917), Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 28; James Weldon Johnson, "The Burning of Ell Person at Memphis: A Report [M]ade for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People," 1917, Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 28; Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: the NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New Press, 2009), 65-6.

²³⁸ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 159; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 102; Jeffrey B. Ferguson, *The Harlem Renaissance: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008), 4.

professionals, became charter members of the branch, and Annette Church, Anna Wright Church, and Sara Paroda Church were the only women. James Weldon Johnson helped secure these memberships during his time in Memphis investigating the Person lynching.²³⁹ Even though many blacks were afraid to join the NAACP at first, branch membership rose to 1,024 by 1919, in part because of Annette who recruited a large number of members.²⁴⁰ The chapter soon became a forceful presence in the region. It advocated for black unionized trainmen who were denied equal pay to whites for the same work. In addition, the branch acted as a clearinghouse for the reporting of racial violence in the South, and Church and the NAACP national office developed a secret code for telegraphing confidential reports of lynching and mob violence. For example, the name “Fred” was used to mean the Ku Klux Klan. The organization’s national officials also made Memphis a base on their investigative tours of the region. Church attempted to enlist other national figures in his fight against racial violence as well. After at least thirty-nine blacks died at the hands of a white mob in the East St. Louis riots of 1917, he took advantage of his close ties with Theodore Roosevelt to praise him for denouncing the violence and to urge him to speak out further.²⁴¹

²³⁹ Johnson had encouraged Church to form the local NAACP branch. Solvent Savings Bank officials Bert Roddy and J. W. Sanford were also instrumental in the branch’s founding. In fact, Roddy had been working for three years to establish a branch in Memphis. Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 66; Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 46-7; Church and Church, interview no. 2, 5 Jan. 1973, 14-5; “Application for Charter of the Memphis Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,” 11 Jun. 1917, Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 28.

²⁴⁰ Brewster, interview, 20; Church and Church, interview no. 2, 5 Jan. 1973, 15; Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 120-1.

²⁴¹ Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 21; Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 46-51; Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 120-1; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 41; Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 66; Church to Theodore Roosevelt, 7 Jul. 1917; Roosevelt to Church, 12 Jul. 1917. In 1921, Church also commended the *New York World*, the prominent white newspaper, for its exposure of the Ku Klux Klan. Church to *New York World*, 15 Sept. 1921, Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 50.

During this time, blacks increased their civil rights activism by joining the NAACP not only in Memphis but also throughout the South. No more than six branches existed in the region in 1916, but the number rose to fifty-eight branches by 1918. That year, Church accepted James Weldon Johnson's invitation to serve on the NAACP national board as its first southern representative. In so doing, Church hoped to give courage to others to join the organization. He represented fourteen states with nearly ten thousand members.²⁴² In introducing Church to the association's membership, NAACP publications mentioned his Lincoln League and Republican Party activities, saying that he had "done much to prove that the disenfranchisement of Negroes in the South can be broken up." The national organization also detailed his business activities, calling Solvent Savings Bank a strong black institution.²⁴³ It praised his late father as "an active and aggressive leader" in Tennessee and his half-sister Mary Church Terrell "as one of the ablest speakers among all American women." Long involved with the NAACP, Terrell was vice president of its Washington D.C. branch and marched in the national organization's silent parade against lynching in New York City in 1917.²⁴⁴

Two-and-a-half weeks after the Memphis NAACP chapter was organized, the Lincoln League held its first gathering since the Person lynching. The meeting signified the

²⁴² Johnson to Church, 29 Oct. 1918, Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 28; Church, "Material for the Carnegie Corporation," 2; Church and Church, interview no. 2, 5 Jan. 1973, 13-5; "Board Notes," *The Crisis*, Jan. 1919, 122, copy in Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 31; "Our New National Board Member," *Branch Bulletin* 3, no. 1 (Jan. 1919): 12, copy in Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 32.

²⁴³ "Board Notes," *The Crisis*; "Our New National Board Member," *Branch Bulletin*. The quote is from the *Branch Bulletin*.

²⁴⁴ Emma Gelders Sterne, *His Was the Voice: The Life of W.E.B. Du Bois* (New York: Crowell-Collier Press, 1971), 121; Terrell, *Colored Woman*, 108. On black efforts against lynching during this time, including those of the NAACP, see: Sherman, *Republican Party*; Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*; Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*; Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*.

first time that a local black leader or group publicly condemned or spoke openly about the incident. More than three thousand blacks, including one thousand women, packed Church's Auditorium. Hundreds were turned away. When Church got up to speak, the crowd's "pent-up feeling . . . found expression in a burst of cheers," according to the *Nashville Globe*, the state capital's black newspaper. Church said, "I would be untrue to you and to myself as your elected leader if I should remain silent against shame and crime of lawlessness of any character, and I could not if I would hold my peace against either the lynching or burning of a human being." Acknowledging the black migration north, he urged the audience to not give up hope and to throw their support behind the NAACP, announcing that the Lincoln League endorsed it.²⁴⁵

When the meeting was held, the Lincoln League was the rallying point of the blacks in Memphis and West Tennessee. It was the mass-based black Republican organization whereas a smaller number of blacks composed the black-and-tan faction involved with official Republican matters. The league continued to serve as a vehicle for politicizing black Memphians and educating them about the Republican Party. In this "nadir" period of race relations, the league gave blacks hope that they could make a difference. Rev. W. Herbert Brewster later called the organization a "bridge over troubled waters for black people" and "the greatest thing that happened among black people."²⁴⁶ He remembered that many blacks followed the league simply because the name of Abraham Lincoln, who had emancipated

²⁴⁵ Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 102.

²⁴⁶ Brewster, interview, 10-2.

blacks from slavery, was attached. According to Brewster, next to the name of Jesus, blacks were most familiar with the name of Lincoln, and many could relate to his poor roots.²⁴⁷

The Lincoln League grew to at least six thousand members by 1919 and expanded its membership to include women after they became eligible to vote that year. The state legislature granted women voting rights in municipal and presidential elections, and more than one thousand black women registered in Memphis that election season.²⁴⁸ The federal government's guarantee of women's suffrage would come a year later. In other urban areas in the South, black women also registered to vote as well as formed and joined black political clubs, including ones aligned with the Republican Party. Black men often supported their political efforts because they hoped that increased black political power would further their chances for civil rights.²⁴⁹

Brewster recalled that for "black people, next to God and the church, was the Republican Party. It was the party of Lincoln. They were by the Republican Party like Moses was by the burning bush. They thought of it as . . . their trip into the land of freedom."²⁵⁰ Blacks felt partial toward the Republican Party because of its history and for other reasons as well. As Emogene Wilson, a black Memphian, remembered, "[T]he Republican Party was the party of blacks in the South because we did not have a dual

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 11.

²⁴⁸ "Our New National Board Member," *Branch Bulletin*; Anita Shafer Goodstein, "A Rare Alliance: African American and White Women in the Tennessee Elections of 1919 and 1920," *Journal of Southern History* 64, no. 2 (May 1998): 237, 242; Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 38.

²⁴⁹ Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*; Schuyler, *Weight of Their Votes*.

²⁵⁰ Brewster, interview, 4.

political set up. It was all Democrat. It was all Democrat.”²⁵¹ The Grand Old Party not only permitted integration in its operations and blacks to hold leadership positions but also allowed them the opportunity to speak out against racial injustice publicly.²⁵² In their roles as delegates to the Republican National Convention, as members of local and state Republican Party committees, and as campaign officials for the Republican National Committee, blacks had the opportunity to influence party and governmental policies. Moreover, the party’s platforms commonly included anti-lynching planks and calls for protecting the constitutional rights of all U. S. citizens. Some national party officials publicly endorsed such measures.²⁵³

In its approach to blacks, the Grand Old Party mainly consisted of two approaches. On the one hand, it affirmed black rights and permitted black participation. On the other hand, it exhibited apathy, neglect, and even hostility toward blacks. The vast majority of blacks resided in the South, where they were overwhelmingly disenfranchised. Some 90 percent of blacks lived in the region from 1890 to 1910. Despite the Great Migration, 79 percent still lived in the South in 1930.²⁵⁴ Blacks made up only a small percentage of the voting population in the North. As a result of these factors, the party had relatively few votes to gain from embracing pro-black positions. Like most white Americans, white Republican Party officials generally paid little attention to black concerns. Though the party and its

²⁵¹ Emogene Wilson, interview by Mausiki Stacey Scales, tape recording, Memphis, 5 July 1995, Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South Collection (hereafter BTV), Special Collections, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

²⁵² Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 81-2.

²⁵³ Simmons, *Republican Party*, 22-30; Sherman, *Republican Party*.

²⁵⁴ Thomas Maloney, “African Americans in the Twentieth Century,” *EH.Net Encyclopedia*, edited by Robert Whaples, 14 Jan. 2002, <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/maloney.african.american> [accessed 29 Mar. 2010].

officials made statements promoting black civil rights and denouncing lynching, Republicans largely failed to sponsor and enact legislation to end disenfranchisement, segregation, and other racial injustices. Reflecting the influence of its two approaches, the party often made token gestures toward blacks. In the 1916 campaign, for example, the Republican Party released public statements endorsing presidential candidate Charles Hughes's promise: "I stand for the maintenance of the rights of all citizens, regardless of Race or Color."²⁵⁵ Hughes, however, had no history of working on racial issues and exhibited little knowledge of these matters, so many blacks doubted his remarks.²⁵⁶

Moreover, the lily-white wing remained a vital component of the Republican Party. The success of the lily whites and black-and-tans for control of local and state party committees as well as for seats to the Republican National Convention varied by state in the South, and the national Republican Party had a mixed record when giving official recognition to party organizations at its conventions. While the lily-white movement gained strength in the 1920s, southern blacks were never fully removed from positions of party leadership. Because of the small number of white Republicans in the region, the national party often depended on blacks to maintain a Republican presence in the South, distribute patronage, and campaign for candidates where blacks could vote. In addition, southern delegates were needed to nominate presidential candidates at conventions. The Republican Party tried to engage in a delicate balancing act that appealed to southern segregationists and northern racists as well as southern blacks, but this strategy proved difficult.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁵ Woman's [sic] National Republican Campaign Committee, *Reasons Why You Should Work for Republican Candidates*.

²⁵⁶ Sherman, *Republican Party*, 121-2.

²⁵⁷ Sherman, *Republican Party*; Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, & Lily-whites*, 36-8; McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 62-71.

Scholars have emphasized the limits of the Republican Party and assumed that blacks had little impact, but this view underestimates the importance of the party's conduct toward blacks, the significance and influence of black Republicans, and the meaning the party held for blacks.²⁵⁸ For southern blacks who wanted a place in the two-party system, the Grand Old Party was the only real alternative. The Democratic Party continued to exclude them from its party operations in the region and to fail to make pronouncements for black rights. No blacks had ever served as delegates to the Democratic National Conventions. Despite the prevailing disenfranchisement in the region, black Republicans asserted their rights to participate in party politics and serve as a voice for black concerns.²⁵⁹ They called on white Republicans to live up to the party's historical ideals of freedom and equality and adopt policies that adhered to the party's official statements denouncing lynching and affirming the constitutional rights of all citizens. Black Republicans also served as a powerful force against the lily-white movement.

The Lincoln League of West Tennessee operated in a time of rising hope that the Republican Party could make a difference for blacks. The black migration north resulted in an increasingly powerful black vote in urban centers, a point that black Republicans made in urging the party to secure black votes by addressing black concerns.²⁶⁰ Republicans regained Congress in 1918 and hoped to capture the White House in 1920. Republican officials recognized that many blacks had become increasingly alienated from their party because of its lily whitism. As a result of all these factors, the party took more concrete steps for civil

²⁵⁸ For example, see: Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy*; Weiss, *Farewell to the Party*; Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 3-25.

²⁵⁹ For a good analysis of these points, see: McMillan, *Dark Journey*, 70-1.

²⁶⁰ Sherman, *Republican Party*, 143-4.

rights. Between 1918 and 1920, a few Republican members of Congress introduced measures to protect black rights, including bills against lynching and calling for an investigation of the country's racial problems. A congressman from a predominantly black Chicago district submitted a bill to ensure equal accommodations and prohibit racial discrimination in interstate transportation. All these bills ended in committee but represented important steps for racial advancement and attested to the impact of blacks in shaping the course of the party.²⁶¹

In Memphis, whites monopolized Democratic Party politics while Church and his black-and-tans served as the area's regular Republicans. A few whites belonged to the black-and-tan faction, but most joined the rival lily-white group. The local lily-white faction competed with Church's group for local power, selection as delegates to the Republican National Convention, and seats on official Republican committees. These fights were noticed not only by blacks involved in Church's faction but also by blacks locally and nationally who supported Church and his group. Among these supporters were his mother, Anna Wright Church; civil rights activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett; businessmen; postal employees; railroad union men; fraternal members; and Beale Streeters in general.²⁶² The *Chicago Defender* and other black publications reported on these battles as well.²⁶³

Despite lily-white opposition, Church held official positions on local and state Republican committees. In 1918, the Lincoln League succeeded in securing his election as

²⁶¹ Ibid., 124, 132-3.

²⁶² Anna Wright Church to Robert R. Church, Jr., 5 May 1920, Church Family Papers, Box 2, Folder 14; Wells-Barnett to Church, 30 Aug. 1918; and the following telegrams to Church that are all in Box 4, Folder 14 of the Church Family Papers: Wayman Wilkerson on 4 Jun. 1920, R. F. Lewis on 5 Jun. 1920, Matthew Thornton on 4 Jun. 1920, J. D. M. and J. H. Eiland on 4 Jun. 1920, and Jacob D. Woods, Jr., on 7 Jun. 1920.

²⁶³ For example, see: "Bob Church Takes His Seat," *CD*, 18 Sept. 1918, p. 3.

the first black member of the Republican State Executive Committee in twelve years.²⁶⁴ By January 1919, he was a member of the Shelby County Republican Executive Committee.²⁶⁵ Holding these positions continually through the 1920s, Church pushed for blacks to have a greater role in the party as members of major committees and as delegates to national conventions.²⁶⁶ In so doing, he worked for more equal political participation within the Republican Party as well as increased the possibility of voices for the collective interests of blacks in its operations.

Tennessee remained unique among southern states in that it had a strong Republican presence although the state government generally remained in Democratic hands and the Volunteer State generally went for Democratic presidential candidates. East Tennessee, a pro-Union region during the war, continued to be heavily Republican. Most blacks were Republican, and a sizeable number voted. All these factors, along with Democratic Party factionalism, made the chance of Republican victories at the state and national levels a real possibility.

On the state level, Church's main ally was East Tennessee Congressman J. Will Taylor. Church later credited him with doing more than any other person to further his rise in political circles. He remembered that Taylor "always firmly and sincerely believed that all men were equal," that he was "an exceptional [w]hite man from the [S]outh."²⁶⁷ Together, they headed the statewide black-and-tan faction, which was the regular Republican

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ "Our New National Board Member," *Branch Bulletin*; Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 37.

²⁶⁶ Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 38.

²⁶⁷ Church, "Material for the Carnegie Corporation," 2.

organization for Tennessee.²⁶⁸ Whereas lily whites contested Church's authority, Taylor and other whites at the state and national levels worked with him and voted to seat his faction at conventions against lily-white opposition. These supportive whites clearly recognized Church's ability to mobilize votes for the Republican Party and submerged any prejudices that they had in order to align with him. By accepting black authority and participation in the Republican Party, they helped loosen the rigid structure of Jim Crowism.²⁶⁹

Church and his adherents remained concerned first with using politics to improve racial conditions and secondarily with converting blacks to the Republican Party. As a consequence, the Lincoln League did not always support Republican office seekers. While it backed Grand Old Party candidates at the state and national levels, the league endorsed Democratic candidates at the local level. Because Republicans had no chance of winning local office, the organization supported Democrats who were thought to treat blacks the most fairly. Elsewhere in the South, the few blacks who could vote saw politics as a means for racial advancement as well. In Atlanta, for instance, black community leaders succeeded in marshaling their forces in local bond elections in 1919 and 1921 in order to secure new black schools.²⁷⁰

In 1919, the Lincoln League exerted its political leverage by supporting mayoral candidate Frank Monteverde and his entire ticket. Church was a friend of Monteverde's and made a deal with him to appoint six blacks to the police department in exchange for his

²⁶⁸ David D. Lee, *Tennessee in Turmoil: Politics in the Volunteer State, 1920-1932* (Memphis: Memphis State Univ. Press, 1979).

²⁶⁹ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 80-1, 84.

²⁷⁰ Schuyler, *Weight of Their Votes*; David Godshalk, *Veiled Visions: the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2005), 248-51.

organization's support.²⁷¹ No black police officers had served since 1895. After Monteverde was elected, he put three blacks on the detective force. Their service collectively lasted only a few months, however. A violent scuffle, apparently provoked by whites, resulted in the death of one and the subsequent dismissal of the other two.²⁷² While the appointment of the black detectives was a victory, their case revealed the opposition to black authority figures during this time and showed the limits of the strategy of seeking favors from white Democrats.

Church also experienced resistance to his political and NAACP activism. Church's enemies tried to have him drafted into the army during World War I. Although the black Republican refused to request exemption, he never received a call to military service.²⁷³ In 1918, a sniper tried to murder him by using a high-powered rifle to shoot into a bedroom window of the Church family home. Church was in his business office, and the gunman narrowly missed his niece, who had been sitting on the bed sewing. Church's daughter, Roberta, was near her.²⁷⁴ "[E]verybody said that she just moved away in time or else she would have been shot," Roberta later recalled. She remembered that her father had been out trying to "calm the waters, so to speak, and get people under control" concerning "some tension in the city." When he returned home following the shooting, Roberta remembered that "he was very, very, very upset and angry, because here he was out trying to keep people

²⁷¹ Roberta Church's annotation indicates that Church and Monteverde were friends. "Lincoln League Sample Ballot," 1919, Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 24.

²⁷² Lee, *Beale Street*, 241; Bunche, *Political Status*, 495; Walk, *History of African-Americans*, 27-8.

²⁷³ Lee, *Beale Street*, 251; Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 35.

²⁷⁴ Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 18; Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 120-1.

under control and his family was being abused.”²⁷⁵ Like his father, Church achieved business success and earned the respect of members of both the black and white communities, but he and his family remained vulnerable. The combination of his elite class status, political power, and interracial support did not shield him from all this fierce opposition.

Church faced hostility not only as a race leader but also as a Republican. Many white southerners saw the party as a threat. They believed that it had shattered their southern civilization during the Civil War and then installed Reconstruction rule with black office holders, allowing former slaves to rein over their former masters.²⁷⁶ The *Commercial Appeal* expressed these views in an editorial titled “The South Republican? Never!” It declared, “[T]he Republican Party always may be relied upon to drive the Southern Democrats back into their party shell.” It explained:

The people of the South may be oppressed by taxes; they may be misgoverned; the affairs of the nation may be mismanaged; they may believe that a Republican administration will be best for the country and for themselves from an economic standpoint, but they will not support a candidate, a ticket or a platform, no matter what it may promise, if to do so means that they must acknowledge the leadership of a negro. This is not an argument, it is just a plain statement of fact.²⁷⁷

The newspaper piece revealed what white author Lillian Smith called the “schizophrenic” mindset of the South--a society so psychologically wedded to white supremacy that its

²⁷⁵ Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 18.

²⁷⁶ G. Michael McCarthy, “Smith vs. Hoover--The Politics of Race in West Tennessee,” *Phylon* 39, no. 2 (2d Qtr. 1978): 156.

²⁷⁷ “The South Republican? Never!” CA, n.d., Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 18.

members were willing to forgo a better region and nation if they had to accept black political leaders.²⁷⁸

Undoubtedly aware of the views expressed by the *Commercial Appeal*, John W. Farley, a local white Republican lawyer, wrote a short book titled *Statistics and Politics* (1920) that apparently reflected the philosophy of his fellow lily whites. Adhering to the widespread belief that black voting threatened to disrupt social harmony, Farley argued that most blacks were politically apathetic and preferred that whites control the government. Farley attributed Church's political participation to his "white blood." In making this claim, Farley tapped into the racial thought that blacks were biologically inferior to whites. Arguing that white Republicans should eliminate blacks from their party organization, he claimed that the Lincoln League had spurred more whites to vote Democratic in an attempt to maintain white supremacy.²⁷⁹

Section II

As the Lincoln League engaged in independent political mobilization, Edward Crump used his position as county trustee to dominate the county political machine and the executive committee of the local Democratic Party behind the scenes. He also worked to regain control of Memphis politics. Though he endorsed the successful mayoral candidates from 1917 through 1923, they lost his favor by not adhering to his demands. As a result, he resorted to bypassing the mayor altogether and exercising influence through other city officials. He ran tickets for public office to place his subordinates in elected positions.

Realizing that grassroots mobilization was crucial to his goals, Crump continued to maintain

²⁷⁸ Lillian Smith, "Addressed to White Liberals," 18 Sept. 1944, in *Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table*, eds. Julian Bond and Andrew Lewis (New York: American Heritage, 1995), 161-3.

²⁷⁹ Church was light skinned. Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 74.

an extensive campaign organization.²⁸⁰ Covering the gamut of organizational life in Memphis, it consisted of a coalition of black and white workers, both male and female. He kept lists, for instance, of the barbershops in Memphis (even to the point of how many chairs there were), workers by ward, and black ministers in order to maximize the number of voters reached. He also targeted existing associations, such as labor unions, for this purpose.²⁸¹ Furthermore, Crump used teachers and other municipal employees to campaign for his candidates, sometimes pressuring them to do so.

Crump continued to secure black support at the polls by ensuring that his political workers paid their poll taxes and by plying them with barbeques and other enticements during election season. In addition, operators of illicit saloons, brothels, and gambling establishments provided a slush fund for registering and mobilizing working-class black voters.²⁸² Through these means, Crump took advantage of widespread black illiteracy and poverty and promoted stereotypes that blacks were ignorant and easily manipulated. By endorsing Crump in 1919 as part of Monteverde's ticket, the Lincoln League, ironically, helped foster what it had expressly opposed--black voter manipulation. At the same time, it needed to endorse candidates to exert local influence.

Despite its support of Crump, the Lincoln League remained a vital organization that attracted widespread attention. Black leaders--including party officials, ministers, union

²⁸⁰ Dowdy, finding aid to Crump Papers, iv; Wayne Dowdy, "E. H. Crump and the Mayors of Memphis," *WTHSP* 53 (1999): 83-5; Edwin Frank, finding aid to R. E. Johnson Papers, SC, 2; Dowdy, *Mr. Crump*, 32-3.

²⁸¹ See: "List of Unions, and their officers," 002067-9; "Barbers," 002071-3; and other documents in Crump Papers, Series II, Box 47, Folder: Voters List 1920, mfm. Also see: "President Parent-Teachers Ass'n of Colored Schools," 001332; "List of all Negro preachers," 001347; "Lady Workers [by Ward]," 001358; and other documents in Crump Papers, Series II, Box 47, Folder: Election 1923, mfm.

²⁸² Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 19.

officials, teachers, and doctors--from across the region and nation visited Church in Memphis or corresponded with him in hopes of learning the secrets of his success at mobilizing black voters. Black leaders in several southern, mid-western, and western states contacted him about organizing their own groups.²⁸³

As a result of the interest in the Lincoln League, Church and fellow black Republicans Roscoe Conkling Simmons and Walter L. Cohen, secretary of the Louisiana Republican State Committee, sent letters in 1919 to black leaders around the country calling for a meeting in New Orleans to consider forming a national organization. With the memory of the political rights that blacks had received during Reconstruction on their mind, they named former Louisiana Governor P. S. B. Pinchback the honorary president of the league. He gladly accepted, though he was too ill to attend the meeting. Saying that the problems of blacks were universal, the organizers wrote that the national organization would “answer to the will of the . . . masses of the people” and that it would address the “restoration of the ballot to the disfranchised; the abrogation of the Jim Crow Law; [and] the redemption of the women from the chains of sex-slavery.” It also would work to protect the dignity of the black soldier.²⁸⁴

Prestigious black Republicans, black professionals, and union officials were among the cross section of black leadership that flocked to the two-day New Orleans meeting that summer at the famed Iroquois Club on Canal Street. Only men participated. While Church and other black men favored women’s suffrage, they also continued to adhere to prevailing social views that politics largely remained a male arena. The attendees officially founded the

²⁸³ Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 102.

²⁸⁴ Church, Cohen, and Simmons, form letter, n.d., Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 23.

Lincoln League of America and nominated Church as its president. He declined, preferring to serve as its director and to chair its executive committee. Roscoe Conkling Simmons became president instead. The participants passed a number of resolutions, including calls for federal aid for black education and an end to black disenfranchisement. Clearly influenced by the violence of the Red Summer and the growing black activism associated with World War I, they demanded federal intervention to stop lynching and declared that the black soldier deserved the citizenship rights for which he had fought. The founding members made plans for a national convention in September and invited black men and women to attend.²⁸⁵

After the New Orleans meeting, the Lincoln League of America's headquarters, located in Church's business office at 391 Beale Street, was swamped with more than one hundred applications for local charters from as many cities. "Letters [e]ndorsing the Lincoln League have simply poured in on us. Everywhere branch leagues are being formed. Old organizations are changing their names to Lincoln League," Church said in announcing in August that league officials had decided to postpone the national convention to allow for more planning time.²⁸⁶ Shortly thereafter, Church told the *New York News* that black labor leaders had asked for the postponement so they could better organize their forces.²⁸⁷ The league's national convention was to take place in Chicago over the date of Lincoln's birthday, February 12.

²⁸⁵ Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 103-4; "Lincoln League Stirs South," 28 Jun. 1919, *CD*, p. 1.

²⁸⁶ "Lincoln League Postpones Meeting," 30 Aug. 1919, *CD*, p. 19.

²⁸⁷ Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 103-4.

The Chicago meeting was billed as a labor and political convention, and topics on the agenda included lynching and segregation, political parties and black Americans, the black soldier and the government, and labor unions and employment.²⁸⁸ Another purpose of the convention was to ensure Republican victories in the fall. The meeting was open to the public, and four hundred delegates came from all over the country, some of whom were members of local Lincoln Leagues. Most, however, were prominent black Republicans from thirty-three states whom Church had invited; they represented most of the southern states. Church encouraged women to attend, and many did, including Ida B. Wells-Barnett.²⁸⁹ Among the black Memphians to come were local Lincoln League members Wayman Wilkerson and Bert Roddy.²⁹⁰ The delegates funded their own trips to Chicago and were members of all classes.²⁹¹

Thousands attended the meeting, which was held over February 11 and 12, 1920, and took place at the South Park M. E. Church auditorium. The facility was draped with U.S. flags and housed a large oil portrait of Lincoln that looked down at the attendees.²⁹² Each session began and ended with prayer and song.²⁹³ Preferring to take a behind-the-scenes

²⁸⁸ “Big Preparations for Lincoln League,” *CD*, 31 Jan. 1920, p. 1.

²⁸⁹ Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 40; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 106.

²⁹⁰ Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 106-7.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 107; “Americanism Is Endorsed by Lincoln League,” *CD*, 21 Feb. 1920, p. 1.

²⁹² “Lincoln League Holds Monster Meeting,” *CD*, 14 Feb. 1920, p. 1.

²⁹³ “Americanism Is Endorsed by Lincoln League,” *CD*, 21 Feb. 1920, p. 1.

organizational role, Church did not have an official part in the program, but the crowd recognized his contributions to the meeting by giving him a standing ovation.²⁹⁴

Prominent black and white speakers regaled the delegates. James Weldon Johnson, field secretary of the NAACP, reported on lynching.²⁹⁵ Simmons inspired the audience with his oratory and paid tribute to Governor Pinchback.²⁹⁶ Three former black office holders spoke, and their presence symbolized the league's desire to reclaim black political rights. Invoking Woodrow Wilson's words about making the world safe for democracy, these black leaders said that "the fight was to make America safe for Americans--safe against disfranchisement, against prejudicial labor organizations, against Jim Crow cars, against mob violence and lynching."²⁹⁷ Prestigious white Republicans also made remarks, including the mayor of Chicago and governor of Illinois. Calling black soldiers among the bravest of the war, Leonard A. Wood, former Major General of the U.S. Army, asked each one in the audience to stand, and he saluted them in turn. He said that all citizens deserved the privileges of and protections guaranteed by the Constitution.²⁹⁸ Republican National Committee Chairman Will Hays, responsible for leading the party to victory in the fall, utilized Church's talking points in making a forceful address for civil rights and against racial

²⁹⁴ Though labor representatives attended the meeting, I have not found evidence that black or white labor officials had speaking roles despite the strong interest of labor before the meeting and its billing as a labor convention. "The Lincoln League Convention," 28 Feb. 1920, *CD*, p. 20; "Lincoln League Holds Monster Meeting," *CD*; "Sidelights on the Lincoln League," *CD*, 28 Feb. 1920, p. 2.

²⁹⁵ Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 108.

²⁹⁶ "Lincoln League Holds Monster Meeting," *CD*.

²⁹⁷ These three speakers were John R. Lynch; J. C. Napier, former registrar of the U.S. Treasury; and Ralph W. Tyler, former auditor of the U.S. Navy. "Delegates Attending Lincoln Meeting: South Park M. E. Church, Chicago Feb. 11," *CD*, 14 Feb. 1920, p. 1.

²⁹⁸ Along with Leonard A. Wood, Governor Frank O. Lowden of Illinois and Mayor William Hale Thompson of Chicago accepted Church's invitation to speak at the meeting. Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 41-2.

violence. The delegates gave him a standing ovation, and the black press commented favorably on his speech. Across the country, white newspapers carried his remarks against lynching.²⁹⁹

Men held the league's top offices, but women served as delegates and planned and hosted social affairs. Commenting on women's involvement, the *Chicago Defender* reported, "No part of the convention proceedings was more interesting than the manner in which the women present pointedly discussed issues as presented." Calling Lethia Fleming of Cincinnati, Ohio, the "leading woman delegate," the paper said, "[W]hile she may be a politician she is also a delightful representative of what we call the 'gentler sex.'" ³⁰⁰ The newspaper's remarks further indicated the limits to the recognition of women's political equality by the Lincoln League of America as did the social roles the organization assigned them during the convention. At the same time that women were included in the convention's proceedings, they also were resigned to tasks that upheld conventional gender norms.

At the closing night session, attended by some three thousand, the delegates unanimously passed resolutions calling for the Republican Party to condemn mob violence and take federal action against lynching. They endorsed women's suffrage and the League of Nations. They urged black workers to join non-discriminatory labor unions. And they demanded that the U.S. president and congressional candidates endorse measures advancing black political and economic equality.³⁰¹ In addition, they identified the Republican Party as

²⁹⁹ "Sidelights on the Lincoln League," *CD*, 28 Feb. 1920, p. 2; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 107-8; "Lincoln League Holds Monster Meeting," *CD*; "Hays Denounces Lynching," *WP*, 12 Feb. 1920, p. 2, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, The Washington Post (1877-1992).

³⁰⁰ "Sidelights on the Lincoln League," *CD*. Also see: Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 109.

³⁰¹ Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 109; "Americanism Is Endorsed by Lincoln League," *CD*.

the “channel through which the [l]eague activities [were] to be carried out,” leading the *Chicago Defender* to report that “the league, as interpreted by its orators, thinks the Race will get a better hearing fighting in its own backyard rather than by threatening to leave home because everything isn’t pretty.”³⁰² Afterward, the league established a headquarters at the Idlewild Hotel in Chicago.³⁰³

Even before the Chicago meeting, Church had made forays into national political affairs.³⁰⁴ The organization’s founding furthered his prominence. Deft at interpersonal relations, Church cultivated white leaders at the highest level as a way of securing greater political access and leverage.³⁰⁵ Cultured, well mannered, courteous, and frank, he was known for having a quiet disposition and being a man of integrity. All these characteristics served his political agenda well: he was well liked by white Republicans and bold enough to speak forthrightly for black rights. He further earned respect by financing his own political efforts in order to maintain political independence and avoid ties to special interests.³⁰⁶ Through his political activities on the state level, Church knew Republican National Committee Chairman Will Hays, a Republican from Tennessee.³⁰⁷ In December 1919, Church assisted in the selection of the Advisory Committee on Policies and Platform for the

³⁰² “Americanism Is Endorsed by Lincoln League,” *CD*.

³⁰³ “Lincoln League Opens Chicago Headquarters,” *CD*, 22 May 1920, p. 12.

³⁰⁴ For instance, Church had recruited the white speakers for the Lincoln League of America meeting.

³⁰⁵ Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 41-2.

³⁰⁶ This point about Church financing his own political efforts commonly shows up in primary and secondary sources. For a more detailed discussion, see: Church and Church, interview no. 2, 5 Jan. 1973, 16-7, 19.

³⁰⁷ Hays formerly chaired the Tennessee Republican State Executive Committee. When he became Republican National Committee chairman, he contemplated making Church one of his assistants. Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 38-9.

upcoming Republican National Convention, and Hays subsequently consulted him about the group.³⁰⁸ Hays ended up appointing Church and four other Lincoln League of America officials to the committee, and he named Church and two other league officials as directors of campaign activities for black voters.³⁰⁹ Church cited his advisory committee credentials in a magazine article in which he called disenfranchisement a crime that hurt both blacks and whites. Now that the war was over, he said that the battle must be fought inside the country for equal rights and that Republicans must not build up their party in the South at the expense of blacks.³¹⁰

Yet, even with all the support of the Lincoln League of America for the Republican Party, Republican presidential candidates paid little attention to racial matters and the Republican National Convention largely sided with lily-white factions in 1920. For instance, only three of the seventeen presidential primary candidates returned an NAACP questionnaire about their positions on racial issues. One was Warren Harding, but he, like the other responders, was vague in his responses. At the Republican National Convention, no black delegates were seated from five southern states despite the league's battle on behalf of all blacks contesting lily whites for these places.³¹¹ The platform included only a noncommittal statement against lynching as opposed to the lengthier planks dealing with black rights that the party had endorsed in years past. The *Chicago Defender* reported that

³⁰⁸ Eugene Travis, "Bob Church--Tennessee's 'Man of Destiny,'" *Pittsburgh Courier* (hereafter *PC*), national ed., 23 Apr. 1932, sec. 2, p. 1.

³⁰⁹ Church also was assigned to a subcommittee dealing with the tariff and international trade for the 1920 convention. Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 110.

³¹⁰ Robert R. Church, Jr., "The American Republic," *Tomorrow, A Magazine of Racial Problems*, Apr. 1920, 80-2, reprinted in Church, "Material Requested by Mr. Clarence Kelly," 12.

³¹¹ "Lincoln League Worth While [*sic*]," *CD*, 19 Jun. 1920, p. 9.

the party's leaders, including Hays, were "as still as shadows in a deserted graveyard--and as silent--against the plot and plan to rob the Race [of] the South of its place in the Republican household."³¹²

Memphis lily whites were successful in having their delegates and faction seated instead of Church and his faction because they manipulated white anxieties about interactions between white women and black men. In the South, charges of black rape of white women--most often untrue--were used to justify lynching. This hysteria was most prevalent in the region but also occurred nationwide. The popular 1914 film *Birth of a Nation*, for instance, depicted black men raping white women, and President Wilson even screened it at the White House. At the 1920 convention, Mrs. Marshall Priest, on behalf of the lily whites, attacked Church by making false charges that he ran vice operations and was so disreputable that local white Republican women would leave the party if he were seated as a delegate. Knowing the potential volatility of arguing with a white woman, Church refused to reply publicly to her charges. Behind the scenes, however, he did "burn the two men up, who were hiding behind her skirts," as he put it. The party's credential committee voted twenty-three to eighteen to unseat Church.³¹³

When Church had the opportunity to contest the vote against him before the convention delegates, he said that he was entitled to a seat but planned to deal with the matter in Memphis instead. Church's graciousness in defeat increased his standing among national party leaders. According to a political associate, he "extracted from them certain promises

³¹² "G. O. P.--Living or Dying," *CD*, 5 Jun. 1920, p. 11.

³¹³ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 75.

that made his future in the Republican Party secure.”³¹⁴ Afterward, Church and his black-and-tan faction were always seated at national conventions. On behalf of the Lincoln League of America, Church also used his political leverage in 1920 to ensure the seating of Henry Lincoln Johnson, his fellow league official, as a national committeeman representing Georgia. In addition, the league helped ensure that the black-and-tan faction of New Orleans, rather than the city’s lily-white delegation, was recognized as the regular party organization by that convention.³¹⁵ As a result of these successes, national Lincoln League President Simmons said that the organization’s activities were not in vain. Another league official commented that the lily-white victories at the convention further revealed the necessity of the organization.³¹⁶

After the convention, black leaders pushed the Republican Party to take a stand for black rights and anti-lynching legislation, and it is likely the league officials did so as well.³¹⁷ In his NAACP leadership capacity, James Weldon Johnson met with Harding to discuss racial issues, and he also may have done so because he served on the executive committee of the national Lincoln League. Harding was not willing to publicly commit to alleviating racial injustices, but he privately promised to secure black political rights and abolish segregation in governmental departments. Johnson’s *modus operandi*--combining behind-

³¹⁴ Lt. George W. Lee, a black Memphian who was a political associate of Church, characterized the speech as one “of a trained diplomat who was wise enough to sacrifice the glory of the moment for a commanding place in the future.” Lee, *Beale Street*, 259.

³¹⁵ National Lincoln League official Walter Cohen, a longstanding black politician, headed the black-and-tan faction.

³¹⁶ “Lincoln League Worth While,” *CD*.

³¹⁷ Lethia Fleming, for instance, directed the colored women’s bureau for the Harding campaign and may have served as a spokesperson for civil rights. Sherman, *Republican Party*, 15.

the-scenes diplomacy with tangible civil rights demands--reflected strategies deployed by Church and other black political leaders.

For the 1920 national election, Lincoln League of America members worked for Republican victories, and Church campaigned in at least three states. He mobilized his local league in support of Republican candidates, and he furiously worked to register black voters across Tennessee, including women who were now able to vote in presidential elections. In his official capacity with the Republican Party, Church traveled to Maryland and Kentucky to campaign for candidates there.³¹⁸ Harding ended up winning 60 percent of the popular vote in his successful bid for the presidency, and the Republicans continued to hold majorities in both houses of Congress. In Tennessee, approximately 170,000 blacks voted the straight Republican ticket, and the state went for a Republican presidential candidate for the first time since Reconstruction. Further breaking the stranglehold of the largely Democratic South, Tennessee voters elected a Republican governor and five Republican members of Congress. Church's work enhanced his stature in the eyes of national Republicans, and he attracted attention as far away as Delaware for helping to ensure these victories.³¹⁹

After the election of 1920, Church declared that his local Lincoln League had accomplished its goals, and it was dissolved.³²⁰ As a result of the organization, black Memphians certainly had experienced important gains. From its formation in 1916 to its final efforts in 1920, the league politicized thousands of blacks. Their activities resulted in the establishment of the Church faction as the regular Republican organization of West

³¹⁸ Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 59.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 60-1.

³²⁰ Whether the league met to make this decision or he alone had the power to disband it is unknown. Ibid., 43.

Tennessee, the election of Church to local and state Republican committees, and the election of white candidates of choice. In addition, three blacks were appointed to the police force in what admittedly proved to be a short-term victory. Because of his Republican Party activities, Church succeeded in providing local blacks with more civil service positions.³²¹ The league also kept alive the possibility of black candidacies for public office and so did the few other black southerners who ran for office during this time and into the 1920s.³²² In 1920, Wayman Wilkerson, one of Church's political lieutenants and a Lincoln League member, made another bid for Congress. But, as in 1916, he was unsuccessful.³²³

Most importantly, the local Lincoln League served as a forum in which blacks could publicly denounce Jim Crow laws and lynching as well as appeal to whites for their constitutional rights and a more perfect union. It gave black Memphians a measure of hope and inspiration in the wake of the Person lynching and escalating racial violence following World War I. The league's success had a ripple effect in inspiring blacks elsewhere in the country to engage in political activity and in spurring Church to form the Lincoln League of America. All these activities led to Church's rise in national Republican Party circles, providing him with a degree of access and influence unprecedented for a black Memphian and unusual for any southerner either black or white.

Yet, for all the achievements of the Lincoln League of West Tennessee, its founding goals of "political and economic emancipation" and "regaining the lost rights of the race"

³²¹ Blacks were appointed as mail clerks, mail carriers, special delivery men, and bailiff of the federal courts in addition to other jobs. *Ibid.*, 44.

³²² Schuyler, *Weight of Their Votes*, 115-6; Ann Field Alexander, *Race Man: the Rise and Fall of the "Fighting Editor," John Mitchell, Jr.* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2002); Bunche, *Political Status*, 547-8, 554; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 104.

³²³ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 95.

had been far from achieved. It is likely that Church knew this and that he decided that he could not concentrate on both local and national activities. He later apparently expressed his belief that national efforts provided him with a better opportunity for promoting the economic and political interests of blacks throughout the United States than local activities.³²⁴ Similarly, he may have become convinced that the best way to improve social conditions for blacks at the local level was through the national arena. What is arguably more puzzling is why Church did not appoint any of his political lieutenants to take over the leadership of the local Lincoln League. After all, several had years of political experience. Perhaps Church thought that blacks were politicized to the degree to which they no longer needed an organization to guide them. However, the future did not look bright for sustained black political mobilization given the widespread black poverty and illiteracy in Memphis, the geographic mobility of the local black population, and the lack of white liberals and a well-established black middle class.³²⁵

At the same time, Church's decision to focus on national activities made sense in light of the political context and his success. Church was a rising star among Republicans. He had helped pull off a tremendous electoral sweep for Republicans in Tennessee in 1920 and had a close relationship with Will Hays, one of the party's most powerful officials. As executive director of the Lincoln League of America, Church had at his command prominent black Republicans and thousands of ordinary blacks. It was a truly exciting time for Church as he had an increasing amount of influence and access by which to pursue his ultimate goal of using politics as a tool for black advancement. He continued to believe that the ballot was

³²⁴ Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 44-5.

³²⁵ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 43.

the medium through which blacks could obtain power in democracy and that the Republican Party always should be the party of civil rights.³²⁶

After Harding's election, James Weldon Johnson and other black leaders continued to educate him about racial issues. Harding's first message to Congress filled blacks with hope: he called for the elimination of lynching and noted a congressional proposal for an interracial commission to investigate racial problems, though he did not endorse it. W. E. B. DuBois called his message the strongest pronouncement on racial problems ever made by a president in a letter to Congress.³²⁷ DuBois's statement attested to the significance of these presidential remarks at the same time that it bespoke of the Republican Party's lack of commitment to blacks given the limits of Harding's words. Despite these comments, Harding devoted little attention to racial issues and was silent on race in his future messages to Congress. He took no action against segregation, disenfranchisement, or racial violence. He became unpopular among blacks by the end of his first year in office, and his record on black appointments was disappointing to them. Blacks also were alienated by his advocacy in 1921 of a lily-white strategy in the South in an attempt to bolster Republican strength in the region. As a result, some state Republican committees "reorganized," and the number of black members declined.³²⁸

Moreover, Harding's administration successfully conspired to convict Marcus Garvey, the leader of the largest mass movement of people of African descent of the time, of mail fraud in 1923 despite Garvey's innocence. Garvey headed the Universal Negro

³²⁶ Lee, *Beale Street*, 251; Church and Church, interview no. 2, 5 Jan. 1973, 18.

³²⁷ Sherman, *Republican Party*, 147-8.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 149-73.

Improvement Association and attracted millions of followers. He founded the organization in his native Jamaica in 1914. After moving to the United States, he based it in Harlem in 1918. The UNIA advocated black pride, self-reliance, and nationalism and had branches across the country and world.³²⁹ His movement also had a significant presence in the South, with 423 branches in the region by 1926 compared to nearly 500 in the rest of the United States.³³⁰ Though a chapter existed early on in Memphis, its founding and activities remain in obscurity, and Garvey's newspaper, the *Negro World*, was silent on the branch. Its members likely belonged to the lowest economic class as that was the case of Garveyites elsewhere in the South. In addition, the chapter appears to have been small. Garveyism did not take hold in Tennessee to the extent that it did in other southern states.³³¹ UNIA records indicate, for instance, that only 172 members existed in Tennessee for the years 1926 through 1928.³³²

After Harding died in August 1923, Calvin Coolidge became president. Like Harding, he displayed little understanding or concern about racial matters and resorted to platitudes instead of tangible action for civil rights. Even though Republicans remained in

³²⁹ For more information on Garvey, see, for instance: Lawrence W. Levine, "Marcus Garvey and the Politics of Revitalization," in *Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table*, eds. Julian Bond and Andrew Lewis (New York: American Heritage, 1995), 83-103; Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976); U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary, *Mail Fraud Charges Against Marcus Garvey*, 100th Cong., 1st sess., 28 Jul. 1987; Judith Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1986); Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999), 110-41; Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2009), 115-62; Mary G. Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism: the Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920-1927* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2007); Claudrena N. Harold, *The Rise and Fall of the Garvey Movement in the Urban South, 1918-1942* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

³³⁰ Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism*, 3-4.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

³³² *Ibid.*, 200.

control of Congress, anti-lynching legislation was not enacted during the Harding and Coolidge administrations. The U.S. House of Representatives passed the Dyer anti-lynching bill, but southern senators successfully filibustered it. Neither Harding nor Coolidge endorsed the bill.³³³ Coolidge particularly angered blacks by remaining silent about a Ku Klux Klan march in front of the White House. Like Harding, however, Coolidge took some steps on behalf of blacks. He made a few well-received black appointments, and he and his wife went against social norms in dining with black servants while onboard a train--news that made a local black newspaper in Memphis and the *Washington Post*.³³⁴ Largely as a result of vigorous black protest, segregation was ended in some federal governmental bureaus during his administration. Coolidge also did not embrace lily whitism to the same extent as Harding. As a result, more blacks were seated as delegates at the 1924 convention than in 1920.³³⁵

Despite the limits of the Republican administrations, Church and other blacks still had the ability to influence the party's operations; they continued to demand that Republicans embrace black rights. A vigorous black presence undoubtedly prevented the party from turning even more toward lily whitism. The NAACP conducted a campaign to pass the Dyer anti-lynching bill, and the Lincoln League of America supported the bill.³³⁶ While the bill was debated in Congress, the number of lynchings declined.³³⁷ If southern Democratic

³³³ Sherman, *Republican Party*, 195-6, 201.

³³⁴ "Coolidge and Wife Dine with Servants," *Memphis Triangle* (hereafter *MT*), 25 Jun. 1927, p. 1. The paper reprinted the June 15, 1927, story of the *Washington Post*.

³³⁵ Sherman, *Republican Party*, 200-23.

³³⁶ "Chicago Prepares for Lincoln League," *CD*, 2 Feb. 1924, p. 4.

³³⁷ Though it is unclear whether the bill affected this drop, it could have played a role. Sherman, *Republican Party*, 199.

senators had not filibustered the bill, the Republican-controlled Senate may very well have passed it. Harding and Coolidge also made more black appointments than Wilson. In addition, Republicans remained more receptive to black participation in their party organization than Democrats, and they were generally less hostile to blacks than members of the other party. Thus, although blacks were frustrated with the Republican Party, it remained the most powerful political party in which they had a voice.

Church's work on the national political scene remained inextricably intertwined with his local and state Republican activities. As a member of the Shelby County and state Republican committees, delegate to each Republican National Convention in the 1920s, and head of the regular Republican organization in the Tenth District, he had leverage and credibility in official party circles.³³⁸ He continued to battle with the local lily whites, but his black-and-tan group was more powerful overall and apparently outnumbered the white group.³³⁹ Several top Republican officials believed that Church, as opposed to East Tennessee Congressman J. Will Taylor, mainly controlled the dominant state Republican organization. They thought that Church, on whom Taylor relied heavily, was probably his greatest source of strength in national politics. For instance, a *Washington Post* reporter found that Republican politicians in Tennessee believed that Taylor had to go through Church to go to the White House if he was in a hurry.³⁴⁰

³³⁸ Lee, *Beale Street*, 250; Travis, "Bob Church;" Annette E. Church to Miller, 4 Sept. 1961; Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 71.

³³⁹ At the 1920 Shelby County Republican convention, Church's group of one hundred outnumbered the rival lily-white group by three to one. Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 94.

³⁴⁰ Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 63; Lee, *Tennessee in Turmoil*; Arthur M. Evans, "South Seen Ripe for an Effective Republican Party," 16 Sept. 1927, *WP*, p. 4, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, The Washington Post (1877-1992).

One of the key ways that Church exerted influence was through giving out patronage. He became entrenched as the dispenser of all Republican patronage in Tennessee by 1921.³⁴¹ In this capacity, he assisted white Tennessee Republicans who sought federal appointments and appointed at least two white federal judges for West Tennessee.³⁴² Church also became the Harding administration's point person for dispensing black patronage nationally. In recommending him for this position in 1921 to President Harding, Republican National Committee Chairman Will H. Hays pointed out that Church had principally handled the development of the Lincoln League of America and that Church's chief assistants, Charles A. Cottrill of Toledo, Ohio, and Henry Lincoln Johnson of Atlanta, Georgia, had said that he would serve as their voice in "the matter of patronage and other racial considerations." Hays wrote, "[Church] is in a class by himself, in the colored race of this country, as to matters political Church would be the very best man to talk to, because of his own good judgment and because he speaks for these others."³⁴³ Upon assuming this position, Church made frequent trips to Washington D.C. to submit requests for black political appointments through Hays. Although he became frustrated by the fact that the Harding administration did not follow many of his recommendations, Church controlled thousands of jobs, and his influence led to the appointments of black officials across the country. He also appointed whites who he thought would be fair to the black population.³⁴⁴ Though he was invited to

³⁴¹ Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 63.

³⁴² Ibid., 66-7; Lee, *Beale Street*, 267.

³⁴³ Hays to Harding, 27 Apr. 1921, Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 25.

³⁴⁴ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 75-7; Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 61-7; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 21.

serve on federal delegations to Haiti in 1922 and the Virgin Islands in 1924, Church did not accept these political appointments and never sought any.³⁴⁵

One of the proudest accomplishments of Church's career was his ability to appoint postmaster generals in Memphis. He selected whites for this role, adhering to the social convention of whites receiving the most important patronage positions. He perhaps thought that appointing a black postmaster general could cause him to lose credibility in the eyes of the party. In one dramatic case, Church succeeded in overturning the appointment of his lily-white foe, Charles B. Quinn, as the postmaster. In 1921, Quinn had had himself selected by the acting national postmaster general when Will Hays, who had become the national postmaster general, was sick. After Church telephoned Hays, he revoked the commission from his hospital bedside and appointed Church's choice. Quinn received the news via telegram when traveling by train from Washington D.C. to Memphis. Church also made successful postmaster appointments in 1927 and 1932. All these appointments led to more job opportunities for blacks in the postal system.³⁴⁶

In 1924, Church used his national political influence to take a public stand against segregation on the local level. Lily-white Republicans invited Republican vice presidential candidate Charles Dawes to speak in the municipal auditorium. With regional newspapers spreading the word about his visit, lily whites of Alabama, Arkansas, and Mississippi were expected to come. The local lily whites planned to let white attendees occupy the main floor

³⁴⁵ Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 67; Lee, *Beale Street*, 266.

³⁴⁶ According to Church, the Quinn incident was the only case on record of a revocation of a postmaster appointment before the appointee reached his destination. Church, "Material Requested by Mr. Clarence Kelly," 1; Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 64-5; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 175; Lee, *Beale Street*, 260-1. The news of Church's successful postmaster appointment in 1927 made the front page of the local black press. See: George W. Lee, "Church Names Postmaster," *MT*, 25 Jun. 1927, p. 1.

and to seat blacks in the balcony and have them use a separate entrance. Considering this arrangement an insult to loyal Republicans, Church telephoned Republican National Committee Chairman William Butler, a senator from Massachusetts, and explained the situation. Consequently, Dawes canceled the engagement.³⁴⁷

Church became the most prominent black Republican in the country during the Harding administration and held that status for the rest of the 1920s. Black newspapers nationwide covered his activities. During the Harding years, he apparently had full access to the White House, where he would visit with the president, secretary of state, attorney general, and Will Hays.³⁴⁸ A story went around Memphis that Church could call at the White House any time he pleased and enter by the front door.³⁴⁹ He also had close ties with President Coolidge and visited the White House during his administration.³⁵⁰ In addition, Church was the only black person chosen for membership to the exclusive Congressional Country Club of Washington insiders with business interests. It included such prominent figures as publishing giant William Randolph Hearst and auto executive Walter Chrysler. He declined this honor, however, to protest its all-white membership.³⁵¹ Church continued to wield influence in national campaigns and was nicknamed the “roving dictator of the Lincoln Belt,”

³⁴⁷ Church, “Material Requested by Mr. Clarence Kelly,” 2; Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 76-7. Lee, *Beale Street*, 265-6. The public probably did not know that Church was behind the cancellation of Dawes’s speech. The *Washington Post*, for instance, just reported that Senator Butler was criticized in Memphis for preventing Dawes from speaking because “one local boss” said it maybe would provoke a race riot. Evans, “South Seen as Ripe.”

³⁴⁸ Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 68.

³⁴⁹ C. J. Lilley, “Bob Church, Colored Politician, at Home in Memphis, as in Washington,” n.p., 17 May 1927, Church Family Papers, Box 5, Folder 14.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.; “Bob Church Is Visitor at White House,” *CD*, 3 Oct. 1925, p. 1; Evans, “South Seen Ripe.”

³⁵¹ Adkins, “Beale Street,” 75-6; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 211.

an area that stretched north and south from Missouri and through Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee, Indiana, and Ohio.³⁵² Republican officials consulted him about political strategy, and he served as co-director of activities for the black electorate in the 1924 campaign.³⁵³ For presidential elections, the Republican National Committee regularly sent him into states with close races in order to garner black votes for Republican candidates.³⁵⁴ Many black political leaders in other states relied heavily on his advice.³⁵⁵

Church's success inspired many black Memphians and influenced them to join the Republican Party.³⁵⁶ One was Raymond Lymon who later became part of Church's political group. Born in 1913, Lymon was a member of a family that had long supported the Church family politically. "I [was] a convert and a follower of the Church activities, successes and trials ever since I was a lad. Most of us as a boy [*sic*] we always had someone as a hero. He was my hero," he remembered.³⁵⁷ "When we were children, we would ride down Lauderdale Street [and] the Church house . . . was always pointed out." Lymon saw the mansion as a symbol of what could happen to any black person who was successful and "dared to lead."³⁵⁸ "[W]e looked at Mr. Church as our emancipator," Lymon remembered. "Memphis was held in the grip of strict segregation We would read about Mr. Church's exploits and his

³⁵² A writer in Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* gave Church this nickname. Lee, *Beale Street*, 254; "National Affairs: G. O. P., South," *Time*, 18 Feb. 1929, 10.

³⁵³ Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 21.

³⁵⁴ For example, Church traveled to Kentucky and New Jersey. Travis, "Bob Church;" Lee, *Beale Street*, 254-5.

³⁵⁵ L. Raymond Lymon, interview by Charles W. Crawford, transcript, Memphis, 6 Jul. 1983, UMOH, p. 9.

³⁵⁶ Lee, *Beale Street*, 250.

³⁵⁷ Lymon recalled, "We . . . actually loved the Republican Party. We felt it was our salvation." He pointed out that his and other black Memphians' ancestors had been born in slavery and Lincoln had freed them. Lymon, interview, 1-2.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

visits to the White House and at that time it was almost unknown for Negroes to go to the White House. We each felt that if we were to be delivered, Mr. Church would be the one to do it.”³⁵⁹ In 1921, the *Memphis Times*, a local black newspaper, also praised Church for “standing in the forefront of Negro leaders,” and winning “a place among the powers of the [n]ation that but few can claim.” By pressing for constitutional rights, justice, and equal opportunity, Church represented all blacks in his political work, according to the *Times*. Established in 1918, the paper aimed to “[speak] out against injustice and corruption . . . [and] use its influence for equal rights.”³⁶⁰ Other local black newspapers and the national black press advocated for black political rights as well.

Section III

The Lincoln League of America held the second of its quadrennial conventions in 1924; it was similar to its meeting four years earlier. Held in Chicago at Bethel A. M. E. Church on Lincoln’s birthday, February 12, black leaders and journalists from forty-six states attended as did black Memphians.³⁶¹ The league’s ultimate goal continued to be to secure civil rights. Pressing the United States to live up to its ideals of freedom and equality for all, the league’s constitution used Lincoln’s words in proclaiming that a country could not endure half slave and half free. It said that the ballot was the “one great remedy” against disfranchisement and mob violence.³⁶² The same people largely remained in control of the organization with Church as the league’s director and Roscoe Conkling Simmons as

³⁵⁹ Church continued to reside in his childhood home in his adulthood. *Ibid.*, 3-4.

³⁶⁰ “R. R. Church, A Leader,” *Memphis Times*, 26 Mar. 1921, Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 19.

³⁶¹ Nettie George Speedy, “Lincoln League in Session,” *CD*, 16 Feb. 1924, p. 1.

³⁶² Constitution and By Laws of the Lincoln League of America, n.d., Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 25.

president.³⁶³ In electing John Lynch, the prominent black politician of the late nineteenth century, as honorary president, the delegates continued to look to the past as inspiration for moving forward.³⁶⁴ Prominent black and white Republicans spoke, including Republican National Committee Chairman John T. Adams and Senator Medill McCormick of Illinois. McCormick received a particularly warm reception from the attendees for denouncing racial violence and disenfranchisement as constitutional rights violations that “endanger[ed] the rights of every citizen in America.”³⁶⁵

At the convention, the league maintained its support for women’s political rights, and women remained involved in organizational operations. Mrs. Lethia C. Fleming of Cleveland, for instance, served on the organization’s executive and credentials committees.³⁶⁶ At the same time that the league encouraged women’s participation, however, it continued to operate in conventional ways by ensuring that men served as the top officials and made up the ranks of committee members even though Fleming protested that women ought to have a place alongside men.³⁶⁷ In declaring “those who make a home ought to be quick to make a government,” league officials also tapped into longstanding beliefs of

³⁶³ “Chicago Prepares for Lincoln League,” *CD*, 2 Feb. 1924, p. 4.

³⁶⁴ Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 60-1.

³⁶⁵ Speedy, “Lincoln League in Session.” Sen. McCormick said that violence either of a mob or illegally engaged in by the police violated the “rights of free worship, free assemblage, free speech, of every man freely to pursue his lawful vocation, [and] to enjoy his property lawfully acquired or inherited.” Morris Brown, untitled article, written 15 Feb. 1924, n.p., Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 25. (This document is stapled to the Constitution and By Laws of the Lincoln League of America).

³⁶⁶ “Chicago Prepares for Lincoln League,” *CD*, 2 Feb. 1924, p. 4; Speedy, “Lincoln League in Session,” untitled press release, 18 Feb. 1924, Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 25, p. 2-3. (The latter is stapled to the Constitution and By Laws of the Lincoln League of America).

³⁶⁷ The article does not provide details about Fleming’s comment. Roscoe Simmons, “The Week,” *CD*, 16 Feb. 1924, p. A1.

women as social caretakers by tying their political involvement to their domestic duties.³⁶⁸

Nonetheless, at a time in which women's suffrage was in its infancy and many citizens still clung to beliefs that only men were suited for politics, the league displayed foresight in involving women.

By the time of the 1924 convention, the Lincoln League of America had moved its headquarters to Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington D.C. and had taken significant steps for black political rights. It successfully fought against lily whitism and secured black political appointments. In 1923, for instance, Roscoe Conkling Simmons played an important part in ending party proposals that would have undermined black Republicans by reducing southern representation to the Republican National Convention.³⁶⁹ The league also helped secure the place of Henry Lincoln Johnson of Georgia on the Republican National Committee. The only black member of the committee, he faced vigorous opposition from Democrats in his home state. Moreover, the organization successfully supported the appointments of lawyer Perry Howard of Mississippi as assistant attorney general of the United States and Walter L. Cohen as comptroller of customs for the Federal District of New Orleans. In his Republican National Committee position, Johnson advocated for Howard.³⁷⁰ Among the most prominent black Republicans of the time, Cohen, Johnson, and Howard were all patronage dispensers and Lincoln League of America officials.³⁷¹ The league also urged blacks to run for office at

³⁶⁸ Untitled press release, 18 Feb. 1924, 2-3. Also see: Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," in Vicki L. Ruiz and Ellen Carol DuBois, eds., *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 85-110.

³⁶⁹ "Lincoln League Hears Simmons, Abbott, Church," *CD*, 8 Sept. 1923, p. 2; Kaye, "Roscoe Conkling Simmons," 94.

³⁷⁰ "Chicago Prepares for Lincoln League," *CD*; "Nation Pays Tribute to Henry Lincoln Johnson," *CD*, 19 Sept. 1925, p. 1; "Lincoln League Hears Simmons, Abbott, Church," *CD*, 8 Sept. 1923, p. 2.

³⁷¹ Adkins, "Beale Street," 53-4; Kaye, "Roscoe Conkling Simmons," 88.

every opportunity and to register to vote.³⁷² In fact, John Mitchell, a Richmond newspaper editor and Lincoln League of America member, ran for the gubernatorial seat in Virginia in 1921. On his ticket was businesswoman Maggie Lena Walker, who became the first black woman to bid for statewide office in Virginia when she ran for the superintendent of public instruction post.³⁷³

The 1924 meeting marked the last of the Lincoln League of America's conventions, however. The league appears to not have operated past 1925 though it is unclear why. In the *Chicago Defender*, the last mention of its activities occurred in March 1925. Throughout the tenure of the league, the paper had given it extensive coverage in part because its editor, Robert Abbott, served on its executive committee. The Chicago paper reported that the league planned to hold an executive committee meeting and that its leaders and members had made a strong showing for Coolidge's inauguration. The newspaper also briefly mentioned that the league planned to propose that Coolidge give blacks more political recognition.³⁷⁴ The organization may have ended operations in part because of the death of Johnson, an important league leader, later in the year. In addition, the league may have received less support from its members; in the mid-1920s, blacks became increasingly alienated from the Republican Party because of its lily whitism, its failure to live up to its campaign promises to

³⁷² "Lincoln League Hears Simmons," *CD*.

³⁷³ Schuyler, *Weight of Their Votes*, 115-6; Alexander, *Race Man*.

³⁷⁴ The paper does not give more specifics about the league's planned proposal to Coolidge. "Lincoln League Holds Its Inaugural Meeting," *CD*, 14 Mar. 1925, p. A5; "Lincoln League Drafts Political Program," *CD*, 14 Mar. 1925, p. 3. The *Washington Post* reported that the Lincoln League, along with the National League of Republican Colored Women, were among the black citizens participating in activities incidental to the inaugural week. These activities included organizational meetings and social festivities. "Colored Citizens Plan Inaugural Week Program," *WP*, 2 Mar. 1925, p. 1, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, The Washington Post (1877-1992).

blacks, and its inaction on civil rights.³⁷⁵ The organization may have experienced a lack of funding as well. It is unknown how the league was financially backed throughout its duration, but its members may have continued to do so. Though many were middle- and upper class, they lived in a society that economically discriminated against blacks, making their financial status precarious. If they suffered economic losses, they may have been unable to support the league.

The *New York Amsterdam News* later criticized the Lincoln League of America for disbanding after placing its officials in political positions.³⁷⁶ While no evidence exists this was a reason, Howard and Cohen's roles as federal officials may have limited their ability to remain involved with the league. And, the newspaper could have been at least partially right in its charge. Though Church did not accept or seek political appointments for himself, he did use his influence to ensure that his political associates received these positions. Church was widely seen as a man of unselfishness and integrity, but, in assisting his associates in this manner, he arguably contributed to widespread charges that nationally prominent black Republicans were self-serving and not interested in the welfare of the people.³⁷⁷

Despite the decline of the Lincoln League of America, Church maintained his national influence and political operations. His political involvement was not his occupation as some supposed; he continued to make a living in real estate and was a millionaire. He worked out of two offices, a modest brick building on Beale Street and an unmarked office in a rickety old building on Pennsylvania Avenue, one of many unidentified Republican

³⁷⁵ Sherman, *Republican Party*, 224.

³⁷⁶ "W. L. Cohen Dies; Was G. O. P. Chief," *New York Amsterdam News* (hereafter NYAN), 31 Dec. 1930, p. 1.

³⁷⁷ McMillan, *Dark Journey*, 69; Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, & Lily-whites*, 100-1; Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, 78.

headquarters throughout Washington D.C. In his D.C. office, the walls were literally covered with autographed photographs of practically every prominent Republican politician of the past fifteen years. Church never had to ask for them. “These men appreciate what I do for them,” he said. According to a May 1927 profile, he was perhaps better known in Washington than in Memphis, but this statement likely was an exaggeration given Church’s roots in Memphis and longstanding prestige there. Nonetheless, it attested to his reputation and influence in national political circles. “He seldom makes a trip to Washington without calling [at the White House],” the profile said. “[H]e gets in to see the President and shakes the chief executive by the hand.”³⁷⁸

For all his accomplishments, access, and influence, Church was limited in his rise in the Republican Party, however. “Had I not been a [c]olored Republican, many, many opportunities and avenues would have been open to me in the [p]arty,” he later said.³⁷⁹ Church faced battles not only against lily-white Republicans but also to get his message heard and acted upon by the more progressive members of the party. For instance, Church had pressed Will Hays to advocate that Harding make more black political appointments, but he apparently did not spread the word to the president.³⁸⁰ Still, Church’s voice and presence were in these circles of power, and he met with some success. Though the Lincoln League of America disbanded, it had increased the stature of Church and other black Republicans in the eyes of party, led to the placement of blacks in leadership positions, and served as a vital

³⁷⁸ Lilley, “Bob Church, Colored Politician.” For more discussion of these photos, see: Travis, “Bob Church.”

³⁷⁹ Church, “Material for the Carnegie Corporation,” 3.

³⁸⁰ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 76-7.

force against lily whitism. It also empowered blacks around the country to engage in political activity in their own communities.

Section IV

Even though Church shifted his attention to national activities, his Republican faction continued to represent the backbone of black political activity during election time and in partisan organizations in the 1920s.³⁸¹ Church controlled a large number of black votes, so he could swing elections for his white candidates of choice; he was so shrewd politically that he never backed a candidate for local office who lost.³⁸² Church served as the master strategist and organizer for political campaigns, and his lieutenants remained black business leaders and independent professionals.³⁸³ They continued to engage in grassroots mobilization. Largely conducting his political and business operations out of the public's eye, Church entered and exited from the rear entrance of his office and used the backroom for meetings. He rarely gave interviews or speeches.³⁸⁴

Lt. George W. Lee became one of Church's most important political lieutenants in Memphis in the 1920s. Born in 1894, Lee grew up poor in rural Sunflower County in the Mississippi Delta. His family moved to the county seat of Indianola after his father died. In 1902, local whites demanded a white person replace the town's black postmistress, Minnie Cox. President Roosevelt ordered the office closed, paid Cox her regular salary, and had the mail sent to the town of Greenville, twenty-five miles away. Roosevelt eventually

³⁸¹ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 94-109; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 79.

³⁸² Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 79; Lilley, "Bob Church, Colored Politician;" Lee, *Beale Street*, 250.

³⁸³ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 53-4, Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 5.

³⁸⁴ Travis, "Bob Church."

succumbed, however, to appointing a white in her place fourteen months later. Even with this outcome, Lee viewed Roosevelt's actions positively, and he later said the incident lingered in his mind like a "strumming banjo."³⁸⁵

Encouraged by his mother to pursue an education, Lee entered Alcorn College, the state college for blacks, but World War I interrupted his schooling. He successfully applied to a very selective training school for black officers in Des Moines, Iowa, which was his ticket out of Mississippi and into the future. He became a lieutenant. Afterward, he traveled back to his home state while on leave. He stopped in Vicksburg and walked around town in his uniform. After a false rumor spread that he had forced a white soldier to salute him, local whites formed a posse to lynch him. Lee decided to remain for the night at a black rooming house, figuring that leaving by night made him an easy target. He kept watch at the window all night, and he left town unhurt the next morning.³⁸⁶ After Lee returned to military service, he was sent to France, where he commanded a black regiment and narrowly escaped death.³⁸⁷ The war exposed him not only to combat experience but also the possibility of racial transformation. Observing that the French had stereotypes of black Americans, he saw them change their views after he and others became friends with them.³⁸⁸

Lee returned to the states and secured an appointment in 1919 with Church, who he knew was man of "unusual power."³⁸⁹ Aware that Church had national political connections,

³⁸⁵ George W. Lee, interview by Aaron Boom, transcript, Memphis, 17 Apr. 1966, UMOH, p. 3-4.

³⁸⁶ Lee, interview, 17 Apr. 1966, 10-4; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 31-3; McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 30.

³⁸⁷ Lee, interview, 17 Apr. 1966, 16-7.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 20; George W. Lee, interview by Aaron Boom, transcript, Memphis, 24 May 1966, UMOH, p. 4-7.

³⁸⁹ Lee, interview, 17 Apr. 1966, 19.

the lieutenant sought his help in securing a lifetime military career.³⁹⁰ Lee told him about his army experience and near lynching, and Church was immediately taken with him.

Encouraging the lieutenant to use his fighting spirit not to serve the military but to improve race conditions, he said that Lee could help him tremendously. “You need to get on the firing line of racial activities and racial progress,” Church told him.³⁹¹ Lee moved to Memphis, and Church secured him a position as manager of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company’s branch. Lee and Church worked on the same block on Beale Street.³⁹² They also became close personally. Church would have Lee over for dinner--even at Christmas--and the lieutenant would regale his family with stories of World War I. Most significantly, Lee became Church’s political protégé. Involved in local electoral activities and the Lincoln League of America, Lee got his start in national campaigns in 1924 when Church convinced the Republican Party to appoint him to secure black votes in the Midwest.³⁹³ Throughout these years, Lee developed what would become a lifelong admiration for Church, whom he later characterized as the “great crusader, the great civil rights battler long before any civil rights laws had been passed, and a man of unusual courage.”³⁹⁴

Church was the driving force behind a group of black businessmen and professionals

³⁹⁰ Ibid., Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 40.

³⁹¹ Lee, interview, 17 Apr. 1966, 19.

³⁹² Church knew Alonzo Herndon, founder of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company. The city’s branch became the largest black business in the city by 1926. Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 53; George Schuyler, “Aframerica Today: Memphis--Cotton Metropolis,” *PC*, national ed., 27 Feb. 1926, p. 3.

³⁹³ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 79-83.

³⁹⁴ Lee, interview, 17 Apr. 1966, 24-5.

--of which Lee was a key figure--that engaged in a nonpartisan voter registration movement for the 1923 city election.³⁹⁵ Black Memphians faced a new challenge then because the Ku Klux Klan ran a ticket for city offices, apparently arriving on the local political scene for the first time. The 1920s was the height of the Klan's influence nationally. Composed largely of lower- to middle-class white native-born Protestants, the organization displayed not only anti-black prejudice but also xenophobic views toward others not sharing its members' race, citizenship, or religious beliefs. Black minister W. Herbert Brewster remembered that the Klan was "raging" in rural West Tennessee when the Memphis NAACP formed.³⁹⁶ One estimate placed the city's Klan membership at ten thousand in the early 1920s.³⁹⁷ In 1923, the Klan tried to appeal to black voters by campaigning in Church's Park and stressing that blacks had a right to citizenship and civic participation. (The city had purchased the park from Church by this time and turned it into an amusement center for blacks.) But, blacks stepped up their political efforts as a protest against the Klan involvement.³⁹⁸

Despite the Klan's large membership, many white citizens opposed it and so did the *Commercial Appeal*. The daily won a Pulitzer Prize for its three-year campaign against the Klan through editorials and other coverage. It spotlighted its use of violence and the secrecy of its operations as opposed to its anti-black views.³⁹⁹ During the 1923 election, the

³⁹⁵ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 98; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 79-80.

³⁹⁶ Brewster, interview, 20.

³⁹⁷ The Klan's founder, Nathan Bedford Forrest, had been a slave trader in Memphis, and the Klan had been an influential organization in West Tennessee and throughout the South after the Civil War. It, along with other white terrorist groups, inflicted violence on blacks as a form of social control. Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 96.

³⁹⁸ Adkins, "Beale Street," 39.

³⁹⁹ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 97-9. For a profile of the Memphis Klan during these years, see: Kenneth Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967). For a broader look

persistence of the black vote and presence of black powerbrokers had a significant impact on the white politicians who came out against the Klan candidates. In his bid for re-election, incumbent Mayor Rowlett Paine, along with the candidates on his ticket, officially denied Klan affiliation or sympathy. The other mayoral candidate, Judge Lewis T. Fitzhugh, filed a fifty-thousand-dollar lawsuit against the *News-Scimitar* for publishing the charge that the Klan had picked the candidates on his ticket.⁴⁰⁰ Both Mayor Paine and Judge Fitzhugh appealed for black ballots by appointing black campaign managers. Lt. Lee worked in this capacity for Paine.⁴⁰¹ Because Paine did not associate with the Klan and promised street improvements and a new black high school, the Church faction ended up supporting him.⁴⁰² Crump, who saw the Klan as a threat to his control, endorsed Paine at the last minute.

Paine was reelected, and Cliff Davis, who ran for city judge, was the only victorious Klan candidate. One white political insider, R. E. Johnson, later charged, however, that all the Klan office seekers had won. Not affiliated with the Klan, Johnson claimed that the Crump machine had rigged the election in favor of the Paine ticket and burned the ballots in the heating plant in the courthouse basement; Crump allowed Davis to win as a concession to Klan supporters and to stymie any outcry.⁴⁰³ All in all, the election marked the peak of the Klan's power locally, and black voters played a role in its demise by mobilizing to defeat its

at the Klan, see: Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1991).

⁴⁰⁰ "News of Bygone Days: 50 Years Ago, Oct. 19, 1923," *CA*, 19 Oct. 1973, Vertical File: 1923 Election, MSC.

⁴⁰¹ Adkins, "Beale Street," 39.

⁴⁰² Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 96.

⁴⁰³ Loyal Tennesseans League, *Edward H. Crump*, 12-3.

slate: the organization soon became a hardly influential force.⁴⁰⁴ Plagued by internal scandals and public opposition, the Ku Klux Klan nearly collapsed nationally by the end of the decade.

Church and his associates were victorious in 1923, but their efforts never were easy because they faced constant white resistance. Many white Memphians resented Church's national political standing. In addition to constant battles with the lily whites, Church was the object of negative newspaper coverage, editorials, and cartoons. His foes strung banners across Main Street appealing to voters to "Stop Church and his associates."⁴⁰⁵ In 1921, during the days of Klan influence, Church received a noosed rope anonymously sent through the mail.⁴⁰⁶ When one of Church's friends and political associates, Dr. Oswald B. Braithwaite, decided to move to a nice house in the suburbs, the property was shot at and vandalized. Church and a political associate brought their pistols for self defense and stayed with Braithwaite at the house all night for some two weeks in an attempt to spot the license plate numbers of the agitators. They did not use their guns and apparently experienced no problems, so Braithwaite and his family moved into the house.⁴⁰⁷ To be sure, this incident could have stemmed from white anger over housing integration, but Braithwaite's political activity also could have been a factor.

Church had to overcome not only white but also black opposition. Some members of his black-and-tan group deserted and betrayed him. Saying that he should make public

⁴⁰⁴ Schuyler, "Aframerica Today;" Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 99.

⁴⁰⁵ Lee, *Beale Street*, 251-2, 281-2.

⁴⁰⁶ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 96.

⁴⁰⁷ Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 18-20.

appeals instead of conducting his political activities behind closed doors, some blacks criticized his leadership style. Others thought his advantages were due to his light skin, and yet others disliked him for his wealth.⁴⁰⁸ Still others feared that their white friends might disapprove of their associations with Church and shunned him for that reason.⁴⁰⁹

Church also faced the challenge of maintaining his local political activities in the early to mid-1920s even with the success of the 1923 campaign. When his wife, Sara, became ill, he abandoned business and politics. They traveled to Washington D.C. in January 1922, where she convalesced, and he stayed there at least until she died in July.⁴¹⁰ Church never remarried. Instead, his sister, Annette, became his housekeeper and the caretaker for his daughter, Roberta, to whom he was very devoted.⁴¹¹ Church's focus on the national level also came at the expense of local activism. In addition, despite the NAACP's promising start, its activities decreased substantially early in the decade. It revitalized with the Ku Klux Klan activity in 1923, and women secured memberships. The next year, Church and his lieutenants ceded leadership of the branch to women. Mrs. Wayman Wilkerson became president, and the organization took significant steps for civil rights: it supported the Dyer anti-lynching bill, for instance.⁴¹² By 1926, however, local blacks saw the branch as powerless. That year, George Schuyler, the famed columnist of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the

⁴⁰⁸ Brewster, interview, 8-10.

⁴⁰⁹ Lee, *Beale Street*, 251.

⁴¹⁰ "All Memphis in Grief," *CD*, 8 Jul. 1922, p. 2; "Mrs. Church Dies in Washington, Capital Mourns," *CD*, 8 Jul. 1922, p. 2.

⁴¹¹ Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 10-1; Travis, "Bob Church."

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, 74-5; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 120.

prominent black newspaper, even charged black Memphians with being politically apathetic.⁴¹³

The Inter-Racial League stepped into the breach and became the most powerful local organization for racial advancement in the mid-1920s. It was a branch of the Atlanta-based Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC), an interracial organization formed in 1919 to defuse post-war racial tensions, promote peaceful black-white relations, and engage in black uplift and protest efforts. Local committees and women's auxiliaries formed across the South, and the CIC became a major interracial reform movement by the mid-1920s. The organization worked to oppose lynching, and it advocated better housing, equal educational opportunities, a more equitable justice system, and black voting rights. Like other liberal organizations, the CIC did not directly attack segregation. It embraced a paternalistic stance in which its middle-class white members often determined the best ways to improve black conditions.⁴¹⁴

Memphis was one of the first southern cities to have a CIC branch. The white Chamber of Commerce, which had publications that painted a picture of harmonious race relations in Memphis, supported the formation of the chapter. Prominent blacks, both men and women, made up the membership of the black wing of the branch. Though it appears that the black group did the most work, a white wing also existed. The black organization grew to twelve hundred members by 1926. By this time, the CIC branch was the largest in

⁴¹³ Schuyler, "Aframerica Today."

⁴¹⁴ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1944), 842-50; Jacquelyn D. Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Campaign against Lynching*, revised ed. (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993), 59, 62-5, 102; Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 18-9; Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008).

the South and one of the most active. Middle- to upper-class blacks filled the ranks of the executive committee of the black division, and women played a vital role in the organization through heading and serving on its committees.⁴¹⁵

The black group engaged in a variety of strategies for racial advancement. In addition to protesting lynching, it pushed for interracial understanding and public improvements. It met with a number of successes, including educating the *Commercial Appeal* editor about derogatory press coverage and spurring the city administration to make improvements to black playgrounds and to construct five new school buildings and a high school. Black and white businesses and individuals, including Crump, also financially contributed to its campaign to erect a wading pool for black children in Church's Park. Through its programs, the black Inter-Racial League division reached some twenty-five thousand local citizens. It was among the thirty-five organizations in the city engaged in black welfare and uplift work that supplemented the efforts of the some two hundred black churches, some two hundred black lodges, black public and private schools, black Tri-State Fair, and Rosenwald Fund, a northern philanthropic organization that built schools using the funds raised by local blacks for this purpose.⁴¹⁶

The black Inter-Racial League organization enjoyed the backing of pastors of all denominations, teachers of county and city schools, the Federation of Women's Clubs, hotel and railroad employees, social workers, and business and fraternal organizations. Individual supporters of Church served on the executive committee, including T. H. Hayes, Sr., his

⁴¹⁵ Memphis Inter Racial League, *The Inter Racial Blue Book* (Memphis: Inter Racial League, 1926), 3-4, 9; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 44, 65.

⁴¹⁶ Memphis Inter Racial League, *Inter Racial Blue Book*, 1-3; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 68.

long-time political associate.⁴¹⁷ But, Church and his faction, a smaller group than the league, criticized the organization though both groups shared similar goals in pressing for public improvements, equal justice, and racial advancement. Recognizing that businessmen and professionals who embraced a Booker T. Washington philosophy were involved with the interracial group, Church and his associates considered the league an organization of “Uncle Toms” and disagreed with its cooperationist and uplift approach to racial matters. Church and his group engaged in partisan politics and spoke out against the Jim Crow system, but the Inter-Racial League avoided partisan politics and pushed for improvements within segregated conditions. The league also was limited in receiving funding from and cooperating with whites intent on maintaining the Jim Crow system whereas Church and his associates financed their own political efforts.⁴¹⁸ Church’s faction particularly clashed with two prestigious black ministers, T. O. Fuller and Sutton Griggs, who were members of the Inter-Racial League. Fuller and Griggs formerly served as two of the eighty-seven directors of the 1916 Lincoln League campaign but had parted from Church and his group.⁴¹⁹

T. O. Fuller had organized the black Inter-Racial group, and he served as its president and the most prominent black minister in Memphis. Born in Franklinton, North Carolina, in 1867, Fuller had parents who formerly were slaves but had purchased their freedom shortly before the Emancipation Proclamation. Fuller worked his way through Shaw University and became a member of the North Carolina State Senate in 1898, the last black legislator elected before disenfranchisement resulted in the removal of the black office holders. Arriving in

⁴¹⁷ Memphis Inter Racial League, *Inter Racial Blue Book*, 3.

⁴¹⁸ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 58-9; David M. Tucker, *Black Pastors and Leaders: Memphis, 1819-1972* (Memphis: Memphis State Univ. Press, 1975), 64.

⁴¹⁹ “Directors, Lincoln Republican League,” [Jan. or Feb. 1916?].

Memphis in 1900, Fuller soon became principal of the Howe Institute, which was part of the industrial education movement that was promulgated by Booker T. Washington and prominent across the turn-of-the-century South. It was “founded for the moral, industrial and intellectual training of the colored race.”⁴²⁰ One of the most highly educated black Memphians, Fuller wrote books and articles on black history and life that praised black achievements, criticized slavery, and extolled black participation in Reconstruction.⁴²¹ Shaw conferred upon him a Master of Arts degree in 1893 because of the eight books he had already written and a Doctorate of Divinity degree in 1910. Alabama’s A and M College granted Fuller an honorary Doctorate of Philosophy degree in 1906.

Fuller aimed to promote peaceful interracial relations throughout his career even if that meant acquiescing to segregated conditions. When the new streetcar segregation law took effect in 1905, Fuller pled for peace and cooperation instead of joining the blacks protesting the measure in Memphis and other Tennessee cities.⁴²² Local black observer G. P. Hamilton described Fuller in 1908 as “a man of good judgment, prudence and fearless action in the right. He is not radical or extremist in any respect but on the contrary his mind leads toward conservatism and toleration of other people’s opinions besides his own.”⁴²³ In 1922,

⁴²⁰ The Howe Institute offered an academic education as well as training and courses in music, clerical work, industrial work, printing, domestic science, and ministerial and missionary work. Fuller to Church, 31 Jan. 1907. Also see: Randolph Meade Walker, “The Role of Black Clergy in Memphis during the Crump Era,” *WTHSP* 33 (1979): 36; T. O. Fuller, *The Story of Church Life among Negroes in Memphis* (Memphis: T. O. Fuller, 1938), 39; August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1963); Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 34; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 58.

⁴²¹ Fuller’s *Pictorial History of the American Negro* (1933) particularly focused on these themes, and he shrewdly appealed to white audiences by enlisting a former Confederate General to write its introduction and using judicious and cautious language. Tucker, *Black Pastors and Leaders*, 65-6.

⁴²² Caplinger, “Conflict and Community,” 59.

⁴²³ Hamilton, *Bright Side*, 140.

Fuller gave a speech, covered in the *Commercial Appeal*, in which he said, “Let the races find a way to advance along separate and distinct parallel lines, each race reaching its highest possibilities and cooperating in matters that are mutually helpful.”⁴²⁴ Throughout his career, the minister also cultivated close relationships with Crump and Memphis mayors as a way of securing benefits for blacks, including improved job opportunities.⁴²⁵ He campaigned for the Crump machine as well. Fuller came to oppose Church’s use of race-based bloc voting, believing that political organization along racial lines inflamed white prejudice.⁴²⁶

Rev. Sutton Griggs, a member of the executive committee of the black Inter-Racial League division, started his career as a militant advocate of racial equality, but he came to embrace an uplift approach. Born to a former slave in 1872 in Texas, he graduated from Bishop College in Marshall, Texas, and Richmond Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, in 1890 and 1893 respectively. He served as the minister first of a Baptist church in Berkeley, Virginia, and then one in Nashville. One of the few southern pastors to join W. E. B. DuBois’s Niagara Movement, he wrote books promoting civil rights, including *The Hindered Hand* (1905), which castigated lynching and white racism in repudiating Thomas Dixon’s *The Leopard Spots*. In 1907, he published *The One Great Question: A Study of Southern Conditions at Close Range* that argued that racial equality was the path to peaceful interracial relations. Few copies were sold of his books, however, and Griggs became frustrated by his lack of influence among blacks. He decided the best approach for achieving racial advancement was to appeal to whites and to engage in uplift efforts. He even came to

⁴²⁴ Walker, “Role of Black Clergy,” 44.

⁴²⁵ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 34-5. For examples of Fuller’s mayoral correspondence, see: Fuller to Crump, 13 Nov. 1912; Fuller to Crump, 1 May 1912.

⁴²⁶ Fuller to E. H. Crump, 23 Apr. 1942, Vertical File: T. O. Fuller, MSC.

espouse Social Darwinist beliefs about black inferiority. In 1913, Griggs moved to Memphis to pastor the Tabernacle Baptist Church. Like many other middle- to upper-class blacks, particularly women's club members, who engaged in uplift efforts during this time, Griggs worked to equip blacks with practical skills and change the behaviors of working-class blacks considered detrimental to the race. His church, for example, taught domestic science to help black women serve as better cooks for their white employers. Its swimming pool and gym were designed to divert blacks from hanging out in gambling joints and pool halls as well as to keep them employed and out of jail.⁴²⁷

Griggs believed that blacks could advance only if they abandoned the Republican Party, ended criticism of the white South, and cooperated with the white elite.⁴²⁸ He sought to explain away signs of white racism, including lynching. He supposedly went so far as to repeat the white justification for lynching by saying, "Now suppose some colored man is lynched. You all know that man must have done something, if he hadn't they wouldn't lynch him."⁴²⁹ Whites funded Griggs's publications and made financial contributions to his church, and Griggs campaigned for Crump during election time. In addition, Griggs headed the Industrial Welfare Committee, an organization established by the Memphis Chamber of Commerce after the war in order to promote racial harmony and to keep blacks from migrating to the North. An alliance between the white civic elite and black churches and

⁴²⁷ For biographical information on Griggs, see: Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 60-3; Tucker, *Black Pastors and Leaders*, 71-86; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 33-6; Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1978); Walker, "Role of Black Clergy," 42-4; James W. Byrd and David M. Tucker, "Sutton Elbert Griggs," *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, 1997-2002, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/GG/fgr85.html> [accessed 18 Mar. 2010].

⁴²⁸ "Directors, Lincoln Republican League," [Jan. or Feb. 1916?]; Tucker, *Black Pastors and Leaders*, 80-1.

⁴²⁹ Tucker, *Black Pastors and Leaders*, 81.

community groups, the committee funded black welfare organizations and gave a six-thousand-dollar contribution to Griggs's church. The Industrial Welfare Committee's activities waned in the mid-1920s, however, and its members voted that the Inter-Racial League should handle the effort to promote peaceful race relations in the community. In 1917, Griggs had organized the all-black Public Welfare League, an Urban League affiliate. Supported mainly by white philanthropists, the Urban League, formed six years earlier in New York City, focused on improving economic opportunities and living conditions for blacks rather than civil rights. Supporters of both Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois were involved in the organization. In Memphis, Fuller also served as a leader of the Public Welfare League.⁴³⁰

Griggs reached thousands through the pamphlets, lectures, and books distributed through churches, schools, and other black community institutions for the Public Welfare League. He used these publications to promote his theory that the black community must unite to engage in moral development of its members before they could advance as a race. For example, his book *Guide to Racial Greatness: or the Science of Collective Efficiency* (1923) enumerated thirty-three characteristics that blacks must adopt to move forward, including courtesy, persistence, self-respect, and honesty. It is unclear to what degree black Memphians accepted his views, but school principals did not adhere to his request to use his publications as textbooks and Griggs admitted that whites backed his ministry more than blacks.⁴³¹

⁴³⁰ "Date of Lyric Meeting," n.d., Crump Papers, Series II, Box 45, Folder: 1923 Election; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 43-4, 66-7; Sherman, *Republican Party*, 130.

⁴³¹ Memphis Inter Racial League, *Inter Racial Blue Book*, 17; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 71-3; Tucker, *Black Pastors and Leaders*, 82-5.

Church's group disagreed with the view that blacks were responsible for their own subordination, and they engaged in public debates with the black Inter-Racial League group. For instance, after Memphis gained a reputation as the world's murder capital, the black CIC organization led a city-sanctioned campaign to decrease black crime.⁴³² Focusing on black behavior as the reason for crime, it called on blacks to stay away from "bad company," obey the law, discourage idleness, and abstain from alcohol and carrying dangerous weapons.⁴³³ In response, Lt. Lee pointed out structural reasons for black violence, including the fact that the city did not provide adequate recreational facilities that might help deter black youth from crime. Church's associates also protested strenuously against the league's successful campaign to convince the city to change the name of Negro Industrial High School to Booker T. Washington High School. While the white press generally praised Griggs and Fuller and spotlighted their views in contrast to Church and his associates, Lt. Lee and others succeeded in publicizing their viewpoints through the coverage of white newspapers. In addition, Bert Roddy, the former Lincoln League member and local NAACP president, wrote a letter to the *News-Scimitar* that criticized Griggs, Fuller, and others who espoused their views, provoking a critical response from *Commercial Appeal* editor C. P. J. Mooney. Roddy accused them of ineffectiveness and duplicity, saying that they pandered to whites in the hope of receiving funds for their pet projects while they condemned white discrimination, prejudice, and violence to black audiences.⁴³⁴ In a time and climate in which black men could face violence

⁴³² Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 59.

⁴³³ Memphis Inter Racial League, *Inter Racial Blue Book*, 39.

⁴³⁴ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 59-64; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 64, 73-4; Tucker, *Black Pastors and Leaders*, 64.

or other ill consequences for speaking publicly against lynching and for civil rights, Church and his associates were bold enough to do so despite the obstacles they faced.

More than any other group in Memphis, Church, Lee, and their associates represented the “New Negro” of the 1920s. Rejecting Booker T. Washington’s philosophy of accommodation, the New Negro spoke out against racial violence and discrimination as well as assertively pressed for civil rights and economic opportunities. After all, Booker T. Washington’s approach had failed to counter racial violence and discriminatory practices. The New Negro also embraced the Harlem Renaissance, the outpouring of black culture in New York City that emphasized black history and pride and influenced blacks around the country. In 1925, black professor Alain Locke gave a picture of these developments and views in his seminal anthology, *The New Negro*. In addition to advocating interracial cooperation, Locke urged blacks to press the country to live up its ideals. To be sure, Fuller and Griggs embodied aspects of the New Negro as well, but they also had characteristics of the “Old Negro,” who Locke said oppressed blacks by stressing their negative characteristics and portraying them as needing uplift.⁴³⁵ Other blacks of the time recognized Church as a New Negro, including labor leader and socialist A. Philip Randolph, who eventually became one of his closest friends and political associates.⁴³⁶ Lt. Lee called Church a “fearless champion of human rights” and a “new leader for a new day, whose ideas are in keeping with a new order.”⁴³⁷

⁴³⁵ Alain Locke, “The New Negro,” in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (1925; reprint with a preface by Robert Hayden, New York: Atheneum, 1968).

⁴³⁶ “Memphis Negroes Win Great Victory!” *Houston Informer*, 19 Nov. 1927, Church Family Papers, Box 5, Folder 10; Randolph to Church, 6 Aug. 1928, Church Family Papers, Box 9, Folder 4.

⁴³⁷ Lee to T. O. Fuller, 7 Jun. 1923, Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 32.

For all their differences, however, Church's group and Fuller, Griggs, and others in the Inter-Racial group had much in common. In addition to supporting better public services and an end to lynching, they sought improved race relations, were dedicated to racial advancement, advocated racial pride, and worked with the city administration. For instance, Fuller used his publications to counteract ideas of black inferiority, and Lt. Lee thought that racial pride would lead blacks to secure equal rights.⁴³⁸ Even Griggs, like other black uplift advocates, believed that changing the behavior of the black poor would lead to improvements in their lives and the end to negative stereotypes that served to oppress the race. While leaders of the militant and cooperationist wings in Memphis clashed, those who supported the work of both groups evidenced the similarities of these approaches.

In 1927, Church and his associates, Inter-Racial League members, and other black Memphians came together to make the most ambitious black electoral effort in more than a decade. They were spurred to political activity after the city built an incinerator two hundred yards away from Booker T. Washington High School, the major black high school in Memphis. Black business leaders had unsuccessfully filed a lawsuit to stop its construction. Considering the city's action a grave insult, blacks were concerned about the facility's negative effect on students.⁴³⁹ Church called a mass meeting in order to take action. At Beale Avenue Baptist Church, leaders of nineteen ward organizations formed the West Tennessee Civic and Political League. Church was its central figure, and Lt. Lee became its president. The league's other major figures included black professionals, ministers, and

⁴³⁸ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 64-73.

⁴³⁹ Memphis Inter Racial League, *Inter Racial Blue Book*, 1-2; George W. Lee, interview by unidentified person, transcript, n.d., Everett Cook Collection, MSC, p. 1-2.

women's club leaders. Some of its leaders and members were previously involved with the Lincoln League effort in 1916.⁴⁴⁰

The West Tennessee Civic and Political League leaders and members had a number of goals, many of which forwarded the agenda of the black Inter-Racial League division. They wanted to encourage blacks to participate in municipal affairs and to resist voter manipulation.⁴⁴¹ Considering Mayor Paine's administration indifferent and hostile, they wanted the municipal government to devote more funds to improving public services for blacks; of the three million dollars that had been spent for improving the city, less than five hundred thousand dollars had gone to black neighborhoods.⁴⁴² Blacks faced poor living conditions, including cramped, dilapidated, and unsanitary housing.⁴⁴³ The political league called for street lighting and paving services, better pay for black schoolteachers, more playgrounds and parks, black admission to white parks, better hospital care for blacks, and black police officers and firefighters.⁴⁴⁴ Except for the brief appointment of three black police officers in 1919, none had served since 1895; no black firefighters had served since 1874. In contrast to the 1916 Lincoln League effort, blacks did not run for public office and they mainly called for improvements within the existing conditions rather than an end to lynching and segregation. The Jim Crow system had become more entrenched by this time,

⁴⁴⁰ Lee, *Beale Street*, 245; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 36.

⁴⁴¹ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 101; Adkins, "Beale Street," 42-3.

⁴⁴² Adkins, "Beale Street," 45; Lee, *Beale Street*, 245-6. Also see: Schuyler, "Aframerica Today."

⁴⁴³ Schuyler, "Aframerica Today."

⁴⁴⁴ "Memphis Mayor Declines to Heed Demands," *CD*, 24 Sept. 1927, p. 4.

so perhaps blacks made a pragmatic decision to seek requests they saw as most likely to be granted.⁴⁴⁵

Hoping to achieve their aims through political action, league members waged an intensive campaign to mobilize black Memphians. The organization held mass fund-raising meetings, and black leaders underwrote the league's expenses.⁴⁴⁶ Once again, Roscoe Conkling Simmons traveled to Memphis to speak at black political rallies.⁴⁴⁷ The famed black orator tied together economics and politics, saying that economic advancement brought independence and political rights brought freedom. "Register, register, register" was the cry at each rally. The *Memphis Triangle* urged registration as well. Church and his associates gave speeches, and the black millionaire caused a stir when he criticized mail carriers and schoolteachers for not registering.⁴⁴⁸ As a result of the league's efforts, black men and women from all walks of life joined the effort. "ALL Memphis entered the campaign, pew and pulpit, the learned and unlettered--the PEOPLE without distinction," the *Memphis Triangle* reported. "[They] joined the fight to re-enter THEIR government, write their names in the books of CITIZENSHIP, and help Memphis, the state of Tennessee, and COUNTRY to a better, a fairer day for all, whether Aryan or Ethiopian."⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁵ Adkins, "Beale Street," 44.

⁴⁴⁶ Lee, *Beale Street*, 245.

⁴⁴⁷ After speaking in support of the Lincoln League's 1916 effort, the famed black orator had returned for black political rallies periodically. Ibid., 145-8; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 93; "Startling Facts about Mr. High-Tax Pain's Extravagant Government," Watkins Overton Papers, Box 2, Folder 11, SC.

⁴⁴⁸ "Sink or Swim: the Ballot Box in Memphis, The People's Only Hope," *MT*, 13 Aug. 1927, p. 1, Church Family Papers, Box 5, Folder 17; Lee, *Beale Street*, 246.

⁴⁴⁹ The capitalized words are formatted as such in the article. "Sink or Swim," *MT*.

That election season, Crump ran a ticket for public office. He enlisted Watkins Overton, a Memphis lawyer and state legislator, to oppose Mayor Paine in his bid for re-election. Though Crump had supported Paine in 1923, the mayor had not always followed Crump's directives. Crump had remained in the country trustee position through 1924 but then decided to focus on his insurance business and exercise political influence without occupying public office himself. He had steadily secured more control of city employees, but he needed a mayor in place who would be his puppet. While Crump had continued to build his machine, he also had become increasingly focused on state politics. Crump realized that state political influence could help him further achieve his local political goals and that a non-supportive state governor could hurt his control. Aside from the two-year term of Republican governor Alf Taylor from 1920 to 1922, Democrats controlled this office in the 1920s, but the party remained divided at the state level. Crump's gubernatorial candidates lost in the 1920s, yet Crump became one of the most influential forces in state politics. He rallied Shelby County for state office seekers and continued to use blacks for his political purposes. The decline of independent black electoral action in the mid-1920s apparently enabled him to control more black votes than the Church faction.⁴⁵⁰ In the 1926 gubernatorial election, for instance, his county machine fraudulently "herded" hundreds of blacks to the polls and told them how to vote. Church mobilized black voters for the same candidate, possibly cooperating with Crump. The candidate lost, but Crump succeeded in increasingly regaining power on the local political scene.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁵⁰ Lee, *Tennessee in Turmoil*.

⁴⁵¹ I do not like the term "herded," but I employ it because it was used at the time. Ibid., 70-3; "News of Bygone Days: 50 Years Ago, Jan. 14, 1927," CA, 14 Jan. 1977, Vertical File: 1926 Election, MSC; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 100; Loyal Tennesseans League, *Edward H. Crump*, 15-6.

Crump ensured that his organization developed a working relationship with Church's group for the 1927 election. Lee, Church's right-hand man, would meet with Frank Rice, Crump's right-hand man, and Lee served as the campaign manager for Overton's Beale Street office.⁴⁵² Feeling very secure about receiving black support, Crump publicly boasted that the Overton ticket would receive 99.1 percent of the black vote.⁴⁵³ He most certainly felt this confident because of his interactions with black supporters like Annie Brown. She told Crump that she "heartily endorse[d] the Overton ticket." President of the City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs and a member of the Inter-Racial League, she also was a leader of the political league and the chair of the black women's division of the Eleventh Ward.⁴⁵⁴ "I know you are a friend to my race, and to me personally," Brown wrote Crump. In response, the political boss thanked her for "endorsing the Overton ticket, for I know you are in a position to do a great deal of good."⁴⁵⁵

Overton courted the black vote in a number of other ways. He implicitly included blacks in his ticket's motto: "For All the People." Most significantly, he wrote the political league's demands into his campaign platform. In a specific plank for blacks, he called for adequate school facilities; better paid teachers; more parks, playgrounds, and swimming pools; and improved health facilities and public services. The platform painted Paine as a

⁴⁵² Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 99-100; Adkins, "Beale Street," 36; Lee, interview, n.d., 1-2.

⁴⁵³ "Mayor's Statement Dealing with Negro Political Issue," *MT*, 13 Aug. 1927, p. 1, copy in Church Family Papers, Box 5, Folder 17.

⁴⁵⁴ The City Federation of Women's Clubs began in 1905 in response to the streetcar segregation law. The organization went on to play a major role in securing state funding for a vocational school for delinquent girls, according to Lieutenant Lee. He does not provide more specific information, however. Lee, *Beale Street*, 211.

⁴⁵⁵ Brown signed her letter "yours for a better Memphis." See this letter exchange in Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 106, Folder: General Correspondence "B" 1927: Brown to Crump, 1 Sept. 1927, mfm, 001043 and Crump to Brown, 2 Sept. 1927, mfm, 001044.

double-crosser for not fulfilling his 1923 campaign promises to improve public services, and it castigated him for building the incinerator.⁴⁵⁶ Overton also courted the black vote with secret promises to appoint black firemen and policemen and grant blacks admission to municipal parks. After a league member leaked the deal to the press, Crump called Lee into the courthouse basement for their first-ever political meeting.⁴⁵⁷ Criticizing Lee for the disclosure, the political boss said that he would have to deny the deal and that black police officers would have to wait. “All I can promise now is a chance to destroy your worst enemy,” he said.⁴⁵⁸ Subsequently, Overton publicly denied the secret promises.

Overton’s inclusion of the league’s demands in his platform further revealed how blacks used their political leverage to press for improvements to their lives. Blacks knew that Crump was willing to give them better public provisions, and they maneuvered to persuade him to take these actions according to their needs, taking advantage of his paternalistic governing style and desire for their ballots. Blacks exerted themselves in a way that demonstrated their rights to actively participate in politics and to ensure that the government served them. Instead of yielding to Crump’s voter manipulation tactics, league leaders and members mobilized black Memphians into a powerful electoral force.

At the same time that Crump and Overton responded to black concerns, they underscored the distinct limits of black political action in denouncing the public deal for black police officers and firefighters and black admission to white parks. Regardless of the leak, it is highly doubtful that Crump would have fully enacted these requests. His machine

⁴⁵⁶ “Overton-Davis Platform--Progressive for a Big City,” 1927, Overton Papers, Box 2, Folder 11.

⁴⁵⁷ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 95; Adkins, “Beale Street,” 42-3.

⁴⁵⁸ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 95-6.

had no record of taking any steps to challenge segregation. He likely would have allowed blacks admission to white parks in a way that stayed within the parameters of the Jim Crow system.⁴⁵⁹ As for black police officers and firefighters, if Crump intended to acquiesce to these demands, he would almost certainly have severely limited their power and jurisdiction so that, for example, they would be prevented from arresting whites and exercising power directly over them. The inability of black activists to effectively protest Crump's public denials of the private promises demonstrated the barriers that they experienced in their political efforts.

The black political activists also were faced with the prevailing atmosphere of racial hostility in Memphis. The *Pittsburgh Courier* published a scathing article on the city during the election season. Observing that "Memphis [was] the gateway to the cotton belt, the center of many railroads, [and] the headquarters of many important business concerns," the paper said that "for all of its modernity . . . [it was] culturally barbarous" and reflect[ed] all of the colorphobia of its next door neighbors . . . barbarous Arkansas and unspeakable Mississippi."⁴⁶⁰ Bordering Mississippi and larger than any metropolis in the Magnolia State, Memphis was, in effect, the capital of perhaps the most racially repressive state in the country. Like Crump, many white Memphians had Mississippi roots and hardened and paternalistic racial attitudes. The police, for instance, mainly hailed from the state and were known for their brutality, a fact that indicated why black Memphians pushed for black police officers in particular.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁵⁹ After all, in 1911, Crump had refused to allow blacks admission to white parks and instead had the city provide a separate municipal park for blacks.

⁴⁶⁰ "Bob Church on Warpath," *PC*, 10 Oct. 1927, excerpts in Adkins, "Beale Street," 21.

⁴⁶¹ Schuyler, "Aframerica Today."

Unwilling to relent to this environment, black Memphians mobilized to the point that they made up some 40 percent of registered voters, causing Mayor Paine to become increasingly alarmed by their effort. As a result, he tried to interest Church in organizing a Republican ticket for the election. Local elections remained nonpartisan, but Overton and Paine clearly were Democratic candidates. Paine recognized that the black vote could hold the balance of power, and he thought a Church-sponsored ticket would take black ballots away from Overton.⁴⁶² After this unsuccessful attempt, Paine resorted to more drastic tactics and appeals to white prejudice. His campaign published full-page newspaper ads opposing the black political movement and spotlighting Church as a “boss” who would rule local politics, pointing to his national political power and his ability to name the local postmaster and district attorney. Joining Paine in opposing black mobilization, local white newspapers warned that the league’s campaign was part of a nationwide conspiracy for black equality.⁴⁶³ Black leaders experienced threats of personal violence, and Paine supporters allegedly bombed both a school where the Overton campaign was instructing black men and women on how to vote as well as a black church on Beale Street where Church was making a speech at a mass meeting. No one was killed or apparently injured in either explosion, but the blast damaged the church considerably.⁴⁶⁴

During the campaign, Paine also issued a statement castigating Crump and Overton’s overtures to blacks and rejecting the West Tennessee Civic and Political League. The mayor

⁴⁶² Lee, *Beale Street*, 246-7.

⁴⁶³ Ibid, 247-8; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 94-5.

⁴⁶⁴ “Negrophobist Ousted from Mayor’s Office at Memphis Election,” *The Light*, 19 Nov. 1927, p. 19; Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 18-9; “Bomb Thrown in Memphis School,” *NYAN*, 16 Nov. 1927, p. 2; “Bob Church Names Overton as Mayor of Memphis, Tenn.,” *CD*, 19 Nov. 1927, p. 1.

said that the politicians who manipulated the black vote in the 1926 election “paved the way for the situation now confronting the people of Memphis and constituting the greatest menace to white supremacy in this city since the reconstruction days.” If he did not protest, Paine said, “I would be false to my own convictions of what is best for both races and disloyal to the ideals and traditions of the [S]outh.” Declaring there was “nothing to fear from votes of [the] class [of] intelligent law-abiding negroes,” he said that office seekers could appeal for “the support of a negro who votes his own convictions.” He opposed the “the recent appeals for racial solidarity and political mass action” and “political activities that [would] give the negro . . . the balance of power in [municipal] political affairs.” He also was against the league’s demands for black firefighters and policemen as well as park admission. Pointing out that he had provided blacks with better public services, he said that he had tried to treat blacks fairly and justly and pledged to continue to do so.⁴⁶⁵ The West Tennessee Civic and Political League members responded that “they were determined to show the city officials with the citizens’ ballots that their demands were not idle jests, but declarations for their rights.”⁴⁶⁶

Paine’s statement revealed the balancing act that Memphis’s white politicians engaged in as they appealed for the black vote, on the one hand, and adhered to the Jim Crow system, on the other hand. Paine gave typical white southern reasons for opposing black political activity--it threatened white control and superiority. Yet, the mayor knew that black voters were an entrenched part of Memphis politics; he felt compelled to accept and even appeal for black votes. As a result of his concerns, Paine released a nuanced campaign

⁴⁶⁵ “Mayor’s Statement Dealing with Negro Political Issue,” *MT*.

⁴⁶⁶ “Memphis Mayor Declines to Heed Demands,” *CD*.

statement that spelled out what he thought was and was not acceptable black political activity. He accepted certain individual blacks supporting white candidates but not blacks mobilizing for political change. Crump and Overton also engaged in this balancing act by making promises to blacks and aligning with them and yet going back on their secret deal to avoid alienating white voters.

The Paine campaign's opposition made black Memphians all the more determined to carry on with their campaign.⁴⁶⁷ The political league initially did not plan to support either Paine or Overton but ended up following Church's recommendation to back Overton and endorsed him shortly before the election.⁴⁶⁸ The organization's official explanation was that Paine had attacked the league's platform whereas Overton had agreed to most of the league's requests. Church also was motivated to support Overton because their families shared a longtime friendship.⁴⁶⁹ Not all blacks supported the league's endorsement or effort, however. Rev. Boyd, one of the league leaders, clearly saw the limits of both candidates when it came to dealing with blacks. He warned that endorsing any office seeker would be the equivalent of giving him "a whip by which to hit us back."⁴⁷⁰ Griggs, a Paine supporter,

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ "Negrophobist Ousted," *The Light*.

⁴⁶⁹ Roberta Church said a reason for Church's support of Overton was because of their friendship. Roberta Church, "Summary by Roberta Church Re: Robert R. Church, Jr. and Edward Hull Crump," 14 Jul. 1992, finding aid folder of Church Family Papers. Despite the difference of their color of skin, the Churches and Overtons were longtime family friends. Church, Sr., and Overton's father, John Overton, Jr., had worked together in the real estate business. In fact, when Church, Sr., took his family to Europe in 1888, he asked John for a loan in case he needed money overseas for emergency purposes. He wrote Church a blank check and said, "I am doing something for you I would not do for my own son." Church and Church, "Robert R. Church, Sr., Memphis[s] First Black Capitalist."

⁴⁷⁰ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 94.

accused the league of “laying the foundation of a race riot,” revealing his continued practice of publicly criticizing blacks instead of protesting white racism.⁴⁷¹

Nonetheless, the 1927 campaign signified the largest black political effort since the late nineteenth century, surpassing the 1916 Lincoln League campaign in the number of blacks mobilized. The West Tennessee Civic and Political League’s membership reached some six thousand blacks, and more than twelve thousand blacks ended up registering to vote and paying their poll tax.⁴⁷² On election day, some one hundred black women worked at the polls from 8 in the morning until 7 at night in an atmosphere that Lt. Lee called “tensely exciting.”⁴⁷³ Eighty percent of blacks voted for the Overton ticket, and Overton won the election by thirteen thousand votes. Blacks celebrated Overton’s election as a personal victory even though they had not technically held the balance of power.⁴⁷⁴ Declaring that the city “underwent the greatest civic and political campaign in its history,” the *Memphis Triangle* said, “The response of the people to the West Tennessee Civic and Political League took us back forty years, back to the days when freedmen cherished freedom. Sons and daughters of freedmen . . . heard, many for the first time, of lost power, and of the ballot, the only bloodless weapon of liberty.” The weekly reported that thousands saw Church as the “gallant and bravest figure of the New Day,” had heard Lee’s eloquent oratory, and had been inspired by Roscoe Conkling Simmons.⁴⁷⁵ After the election, black leaders told the *New*

⁴⁷¹ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 36.

⁴⁷² Adkins, “Beale Street,” 41-2.

⁴⁷³ Lee, *Beale Street*, 246.

⁴⁷⁴ Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 102-3; Lee, *Beale Street*, 247.

⁴⁷⁵ “Sink or Swim,” *MT*.

York Amsterdam News that they and black citizens would “seek more ardently in the future to secure their full citizenship rights, and especially assert themselves at the polls.”⁴⁷⁶

With almost every leading black newspaper carrying the election results, the West Tennessee Civic and Political League’s success won the praise and attention of blacks throughout the nation.⁴⁷⁷ S. D. Redmond, a prominent black lawyer and Republican in Mississippi wrote Church, “When the Negroes vote in other states as they do in Tennessee our plight will not be so bad.”⁴⁷⁸ The *New York Amsterdam News* called the victory significant for “knock[ing] to pieces the argument made by southern advocates of disfranchisement that the [s]outhern Negroes do not really want to vote.”⁴⁷⁹ Noting that a “voteless man is voiceless in a democratic republic,” the *Houston Informer* expressed hope that “the example set by ‘Bob’ Church and the Negroes of Memphis, Tennessee, who organized their forces, put up their own money and waged their own campaign for the successful mayoral candidate . . . will have a salutary effect upon Negro leaders and followers in . . . the South.” The newspaper said that “the race’s political salvation could be worked out right in the heart of the South” if more men existed like Church.⁴⁸⁰

In addition, the *Houston Informer* enumerated barriers to black political mobilization. It observed that some blacks considered it a “dangerous and heretical act” to vote and believed that political activity would disrupt the “amicable” relations between blacks and

⁴⁷⁶ “Bomb Thrown in Memphis School,” *NYAN*.

⁴⁷⁷ Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 102-3.

⁴⁷⁸ Redmond to R. R. Church, 8 Aug. 1928, Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 17. For more on Redmond, see: McMillen, *Dark Journey*.

⁴⁷⁹ “Memphis and Harlem,” *NYAN*, 23 Nov. 1927, p. 20.

⁴⁸⁰ “Memphis Negroes Win Great Victory!” *Houston Informer*.

whites. These blacks recognized that “certain [s]outhern white demagogues labeled as ‘radical’ blacks who want[ed] to enjoy and exercise their elective rights.” Instead, these black commentators encouraged blacks to foreswear political activism in order to maintain peaceful interracial relations.⁴⁸¹ Furthermore, blacks who were complicit in their own subjugation by acquiescing to white social control were part of the problem, according to the paper. To be sure, the vast majority of southern blacks could not make similar campaign efforts because they were disenfranchised. Still, in spotlighting the efforts of Church and black Memphians, the paper revealed its belief that political obstacles could be surmounted through skilled and courageous leadership and grassroots mobilization.

The *Houston Informer* not only commended black Memphians but also the city’s white citizens. The paper observed that Paine’s appeals to white prejudice had not convinced enough whites to back him at the polls for him to win, and it praised Overton for openly seeking black votes. Because of these factors and the successful mobilization of black voters, the paper said that the election signified a “new day” in the South.⁴⁸² Memphis certainly was unique in that Paine’s anti-black stance did not lead to his election and Overton’s appeals to blacks did not significantly hurt him; plus, Paine made sure to state his support for limited black voting rights. Southern politicians successfully engaged in race baiting to win votes elsewhere, and any perceived advocacy for black civil rights was almost always the kiss of death for white candidates.

Despite its victory at the polls, the West Tennessee Civic and Political League immediately faced problems. After the election, the organization was forced to disband

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

because it lacked funds and patronage.⁴⁸³ As was the case elsewhere in the South, most blacks were poor and could not fund ongoing political efforts. Another major reason for the league's decline was the collapse of the black bank. Beset by financial troubles, Solvent Savings Bank and Fraternal Savings Bank, the two black banks in Memphis, had merged to survive as Fraternal and Solvent Savings Bank in 1927. Church had given up his presidency of and professional association with Solvent Savings Bank earlier in the decade. He was not connected with these developments though he tried to rescue the bank by depositing and raising money. His efforts were not enough: by the end of 1927, state bank examiners took over the institution. Black businessmen had led and funded political efforts but could no longer do so to the same extent.⁴⁸⁴

The political league also was limited in its political approach. Though black Memphians displaced Paine, they bolstered Crump's control. Even with his overtures to blacks, Crump still had a record of illegal activity and voter manipulation. Memphis had reportedly provided better public services to blacks than cities elsewhere in the South, but Crump and city officials who granted these provisions exhibited a "plantation mentality" that constructed blacks as dependent and inferior persons and perpetuated the construction of whites as superior beings. By supporting Overton's ticket, blacks also helped elect Cliff Davis as vice mayor, the only successful candidate on the Klan slate in 1923. To be sure, Overton had yielded to black demands, but it remained to be seen whether he would keep his campaign promises and whether black Memphians' political strategy would bear fruit for good or ill.

⁴⁸³ Adkins, "Beale Street," 44.

⁴⁸⁴ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis, 84-9.

Even with the limits of the 1927 effort, it served as a fitting culmination of the victories experienced by Church and black Memphians over the past ten years. In his leadership roles in the NAACP and Lincoln League, Church mobilized thousands of black Memphians for political action and civil rights, and he served as a voice for black concerns in Republican Party politics. Blacks outside Memphis saw the Lincoln League as a model for political activity and inspired Church to form the Lincoln League of America. Black Memphians joined him in participating in the national organization, which opened more doors for black political involvement. Church used his national leverage to secure more black political appointments, appoint fair-minded whites to political posts, and increase the standing of blacks in the party. Serving as a vital force against lily whitism, he and his associates helped keep a racially progressive strain in the party.

Locally, black Memphians sometimes differed in their political philosophies, but they shared a dedication to racial advancement and worked through the Inter-Racial League and electoral organizations for this purpose. They played a key role in the decline of the Ku Klux Klan in defeating its slate in 1923. Through their work in the Inter-Racial League, they successfully pressed the local government for public service improvements and engaged in uplift efforts within their own community. The 1927 campaign demonstrated the commonality and interlocking nature of the various strategies of black Memphians by bringing together members of Church's faction and the Inter-Racial League.

In the end, Church, black Memphians, and other black southerners knew that a house divided against itself could not stand and that disenfranchisement, segregation, and other racial injustices only weakened the United States. They desired to better not only the lives of

blacks but also the country as a whole. Influenced by World War I, they wanted to make their own country safe for democracy and to secure equal treatment for all.

Chapter 3: “Come and See What a Negro Democrat Looks Like”: The Diversity of Black Political Activity from the Hoover Years through the Great Depression, 1928 to 1939

The years from 1928 to 1939 brought new political challenges for black Memphians. Edward H. Crump, now exercising tighter control than ever, cracked down on black and white Memphians who challenged his power. Further solidifying his control was Franklin D. Roosevelt's election to the presidency in 1932. Crump now held national influence in a way that he did not enjoy when Republicans occupied the White House. In light of Crump's power, the question became how would black Memphians continue to maneuver for a place in the political system. Moreover, how would black political activists carry on in the face of the Great Depression? Robert R. Church, Jr., and other black Republicans faced even more political obstacles: the Grand Old Party became less attuned to black concerns with Herbert Hoover's election to the presidency. Despite all these difficulties, black Memphians engaged in a variety of electoral activities. While some found it beneficial to work with the Crump machine, others protested it. The city's black-and-tan faction persisted as the most powerful local Republican group, and Church remained an influential Republican figure in the state and country. Rivaling Church in power, businessman J. E. Walker emerged as the city's most prominent black Democrat. The local NAACP chapter pushed for racial justice, and a powerful, biracial labor movement emerged in Memphis and the region. In all these ways, black Memphians worked to make democracy real in the city, South, and country.

The 1927 election had resulted in the return of Edward H. Crump to power citywide. Until then, the consolidation of the Crump machine was by no means complete. Crump had secured control of county government, but Memphis city politics had remained in flux. Now, his machine encompassed both the county and the city, and no political rivals emerged to challenge his power. Preferring to stay in his insurance and real estate business rather than hold an elected position, he ran Memphis from behind the scenes, installing his followers as mayors, approving all officeholders, and even handpicking the heads of white civic organizations.

Crump apparently maintained his alliance with Bob Church until Roosevelt's ascendancy to the presidency in 1932 and to a limited extent after that. The evidence strongly indicates that they came together to support city, county, and state candidates of the Democratic Party though Church's daughter, Roberta Church, and at least two historians later contended that they just happened to back the same office seekers.⁴⁸⁵ Political observers of the time, both in Memphis and elsewhere, pointed out or charged that Crump and Church worked together during election time.⁴⁸⁶ Moreover, Lt. George W. Lee supported the contention that an alliance existed. After collaborating with Crump's lieutenant Frank Rice during the 1927 campaign, Lee continued to see Rice as Church's political liaison to the Crump organization.⁴⁸⁷ He claimed that Church ensured that a congressional committee

⁴⁸⁵ As pointed out in Chapter 2, Church and his followers often voted for Democratic candidates in local and state elections because they knew that Republican candidates usually did not have a chance. Though local elections were nonpartisan, many candidates clearly were Democrats. See: Adkins, "Beale Street," 26; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 103-4; Church, "Summary by Roberta Church."

⁴⁸⁶ Lewinson, *Race, Class, and Party*, 138-41; Bunche, *Political Status*, 499; Loyal Tennesseans League, *Edward H. Crump*, 17; Adkins, "Beale Street," 89; Moon, *Balance of Power*, 176.

⁴⁸⁷ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 99-100.

investigating fraudulent elections failed to prosecute the Crump machine. As a result, the city did not charge Church property taxes.⁴⁸⁸

Church's partnership with Crump came at a time when black Memphians were struggling to keep up their battle for civil rights. Along with the impact of the Great Depression, the black bank's collapse of 1927 hurt the political efforts of black Memphians. Some twenty-eight thousand depositors saw more than 90 percent of their savings at the bank wiped out, and more than fifty black-owned businesses suffered major losses.⁴⁸⁹ The bank's troubles had resulted not only from bad loans and a shortage of funds but also criminal activity.⁴⁹⁰ Six black officials received jail sentences, including Church's political associate T. H. Hayes, Sr. Wayman Wilkerson, another one of his political lieutenants and a business leader affected by these developments, committed suicide. Though the bank personnel were guilty, an anonymous writer of a pamphlet by a Beale Street publishing company accused white businessmen of encouraging black businessmen in unwise activities and white bank examiners of negligence in carrying out their duties. Some white Memphians, to no avail, tried to connect Church to the scandal.⁴⁹¹ After the bank closed, Mrs. Wayman Wilkerson, the local NAACP president, wrote the national office, "[E]verything possible is being done to intimidate the colored people. For that reason we are being as quiet as possible." With the

⁴⁸⁸ Lee may have been referring to the investigation of Senator Gerald Nye, the Republican chairman of the campaign funds committee, into corruption charges in Shelby County elections in 1930. Nye concluded that he did not have enough proof against the Crump machine to substantiate the allegations of corruption. Lee, interview, 17 Apr. 1966, 32; Dowdy, *Mr. Crump*, 62-3.

⁴⁸⁹ Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee*, 89.

⁴⁹⁰ Bert Roddy's Citizens Cooperative Stores, for instance, had collapsed in 1922 and had never repaid its loan of one hundred thousand dollars. Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 84.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 87-9.

business and professional class no longer able to support the local NAACP, the branch lost funds and ceased activity for two years.⁴⁹²

At a time when they were suffering economically, black Memphians received a number of benefits by aligning themselves with Crump. Though it is unclear how many blacks viewed Crump positively, local black journalist Nat D. Williams later contended, “Mr. Crump had the admiration and respect of most Negroes . . . because he did things for Negroes nobody had done before.”⁴⁹³ Those who backed him considered him a “benevolent dictator,” and Lt. Lee shared this view.⁴⁹⁴ Writing about the Watkins Overton administration, Lee said, “I have seen parks and playgrounds spring up in densely populated [c]olored sections where Negro children lived in two room shanties without playdays [*sic*] or places to jump the rope I have seen muddy and unpassable [*sic*] streets that marked the section in which my people lived, beautified, paved and made passable.”⁴⁹⁵ These public service improvements revealed that Mayor Overton had fulfilled some of his campaign promises to blacks in the 1927 election. After the election, black leaders also detected a “favorable change in the attitude of white administrators towards the Negro population,” according to Walter Adkins, who authored a 1935 master’s thesis on Beale Street politics. “[They] discern[ed] an attitude

⁴⁹² Ibid., 88. For more information on the bank disaster, see: Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 64-5.

⁴⁹³ Walker, “Role of Black Clergy,” 41.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., 33; Lee, interview, n.d., 5-6.

⁴⁹⁵ Lee to Watkins Overton, 2 Nov. 1931, Overton Papers, Box 7, Folder 31. For evidence confirming Lee’s observations, see: “Public Improvements Sponsored by City of Memphis for Colored Citizens: January 1, 1928-June 1, 1937,” n.d., Chandler Papers, Box 14, Folder: 1940 Race Relations.

of cautious solicitation . . . despite their refusal to commit themselves to those larger demands of the colored constituency.”⁴⁹⁶

Crump appeared racially progressive in other ways as well. The police protected black Republicans in their battles with the lily whites. Church, for example, could call the police if lily whites locked them out of official Republican meetings. Crump refrained from race baiting, which was prevalent among southern politicians. Furthermore, black Memphians continued to contact the city administration or Crump directly in order to secure benefits. For example, Rev. Jacob W. Dammons, formerly a leader of the 1916 Lincoln League effort, secured a city tag from Crump. He wrote the political boss that he had come to him on several occasions to secure job opportunities and that Crump had never turned him down or failed to comply with any of his requests.⁴⁹⁷ Other black Memphians went through Church and his lieutenants when they sought benefits from the machine.⁴⁹⁸ Whereas local governmental officials elsewhere in the South might have been repelled by these communications or concerned about the effect on their image, this was not the case in Memphis and Shelby County.⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹⁶ George W. Lee and R. W. Wright, presumably another black political leader, made these comments. Adkins interviewed other black Memphians for his thesis as well. Adkins, “Beale Street,” 45.

⁴⁹⁷ “Directors, Lincoln Republican League,” [Jan. or Feb. 1916?] and these documents in Crump Papers, Series III, Box 84, Folder: Watkins Overton, 1933: Dammons to Crump, 3 Dec. 1933, mfm, 002153 and Charlie Gates to Crump, 3 Feb. 1933, mfm, 002154.

⁴⁹⁸ Bunche, *Political Status*, 499. For example, Lucie E. Campbell, a local schoolteacher and nationally renowned gospel songwriter, asked Church to support her application for a promotion in the Memphis public schools. It is unclear if her request was met, but, a few months later, E. W. Hale, chairman of the Shelby County Commission, wrote Church that he would let him know if a position became open in the schools because Church had contacted him about the matter. Hale said that he would keep “her letter” on file, which Church had a messenger send. Hale, however, does not specify to whom “her” refers. Campbell to Church, 30 Jul. 1934, Church Family Papers, Box 6, Folder 20; Hale to Church, 14 Nov. 1934, Church Family Papers, Box 6, Folder 2.

⁴⁹⁹ G. Wayne Dowdy, interview by author, Memphis, 20 Jun. 2007, typed notes in author’s possession.

While Church benefited from his ties to Crump, Crump benefited from an alliance with Church not only because Church could deliver votes for his candidates but also because it gave him important national connections. As long as Republicans occupied the White House, Crump was limited in his power. In 1930, he was elected to the House of Representatives. As a result, he consolidated his control over West Tennessee and had a direct say in Washington D.C. But, as a Democrat, he remained a member of the minority party. By working with Church, the most powerful Republican in West Tennessee, Crump bolstered his influence in national politics. According to Lt. Lee, Crump and black Republicans collaborated because “he needed us on the national scene; we needed him on the local scene.”⁵⁰⁰ Blacks distributed the patronage that Crump wanted for his officials, and Crump benefited from having local political appointees who did not interfere with his organization.⁵⁰¹ Elsewhere in the South, black Republican leaders occasionally could trade political appointments for a degree of influence with white Democratic politicians who wanted their officials or allies in these positions.⁵⁰²

While Crump worked with Church and other black Memphians, the political boss continued to manipulate the votes of local blacks, especially those of the lower class. Some blacks took advantage of this manipulation for their own purposes, accepting cash for voting or collecting poll tax receipts. “People were only making fourteen to seventeen cents an hour, until [Roosevelt] brought in the minimum wage of thirty-five cents an hour,” remembered George Holloway, a black union activist who grew up in the city during this

⁵⁰⁰ Lee, interview, n.d., 8.

⁵⁰¹ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 100.

⁵⁰² Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, & Lily-whites*, 36-7.

time. “A lot of blacks were paid to get receipts, and since they didn’t have jobs, they’d marked the ballot the way they were told, to earn some money.”⁵⁰³ To maximize the monetary rewards, some blacks cast votes at least four times on election day, showing up at different polling places and disguising themselves in different clothes.⁵⁰⁴

Crump used underworld figures and ministers to manipulate black support, and these groups also used him to serve their ends. By maintaining a partnership with the Crump machine, black bootleggers as well as gambling and brothel proprietors could continue their operations.⁵⁰⁵ On the other side of the moral spectrum, many black ministers used their authority to persuade their parishioners to support Crump. In turn, they received benefits such as the ability to borrow money for church improvements or charitable donations from Crump himself.⁵⁰⁶

While it is impossible to know how many blacks registered and voted as a result of manipulative tactics, it appears that most blacks engaged in independent political activities. Some signaled their opposition to the Democratic machine by only voting in the Republican primary, and others steered clear of manipulative tactics by silently abstaining from voting.⁵⁰⁷ Yet others enthusiastically backed the Crump machine’s candidates. According to Memphis NAACP official Florence McCleave, many blacks registered merely “to keep their vote from

⁵⁰³ Michael K. Honey, *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999), 65.

⁵⁰⁴ Hill, “Self-Defined African American Community,” 14.

⁵⁰⁵ Loyal Tennesseans League, *Edward H. Crump*, 14. For a description of the underworld, see: Lee, *Beale Street*, 62-5.

⁵⁰⁶ Walker, “Role of Black Clergy,” 42; Dammons to Crump, 3 Dec. 1933.

⁵⁰⁷ Walker, “Role of Black Clergy,” 33, 45; Loyal Tennesseans League, *Edward H. Crump*, 14.

being stolen, but [did] not vote.”⁵⁰⁸ In his 1932 study, Paul Lewinson observed that black voting in Memphis occurred more as a result of state political conditions and skilled black leadership than manipulation.⁵⁰⁹ Tennessee never did enact a statewide white primary or disenfranchisement measures that could not be surmounted in the area. A degree of political competition continued to exist statewide that was conducive to black voting, and the Republican Party continued to depend on blacks to maintain its strength. To be sure, black leaders not only accounted for black voting but also ordinary blacks who registered and cast ballots.

Because of the lack of consistent records, estimates differ on how many blacks registered and voted overall.⁵¹⁰ All this is complicated by the fact that no permanent registration existed: blacks and whites had to re-register annually to remain eligible. According to Paul Lewinson, as many as thirty-five hundred blacks voted in municipal campaigns, with locals believing the number was higher.⁵¹¹ Blair Hunt, the principal of Booker T. Washington High School and a black minister and Crump supporter, estimated that eight thousand blacks were registered in Memphis from the 1920s through the 1940s, and Lt. Lee thought that between three thousand and eight thousand blacks usually registered

⁵⁰⁸ Florence McCleave to Robert Bagnall, 5 Aug. 1932, Papers of the NAACP, Group I, Box G199, Folder: Memphis NAACP 1932.

⁵⁰⁹ Lewinson, *Race, Class, and Party*, 138.

⁵¹⁰ Official registration statistics, separated by race, were not kept until 1951.

⁵¹¹ Lewinson, *Race, Class, and Party*, 138.

for elections during this time.⁵¹² One historian estimated that as many as thirty thousand blacks were registered, but no more than 10 percent actually voted in local elections.⁵¹³

For particular elections, the number of blacks who registered and voted was higher than most of these estimates, but contemporary black and white observers differed as to how many blacks independently registered and voted. The *Memphis Triangle* reported the charge that Church lined up twelve thousand blacks in the Shelby County primary election for Crump's gubernatorial endorsee in 1928.⁵¹⁴ In August 1931, around twenty-four thousand blacks were registered of the ninety-seven thousand blacks of Shelby County, and the *Chicago Defender* attributed the number of registered blacks to the Church organization.⁵¹⁵ One contemporary white political observer in Memphis estimated that thirty thousand blacks would register by November and the Crump machine would control the votes of more than two thirds of them. Local lily-white Republican leaders estimated that less than 10 percent of those who registered "had any idea of what [registration] was all about and [did] not know where their registration certificates [were]."⁵¹⁶ But, these statements by whites were meant as a critique of the Crump machine. Dr. R. Q. Venson, a black community leader, said in 1932, "The majority of self-respecting Negroes in Memphis (except those who have become disgusted with the actions of white office seekers) pay their poll tax and vote their own convictions."⁵¹⁷ That same year, the *Chicago Defender* reported that thirty-three thousand

⁵¹² Walker, "Role of Black Clergy," 33; Jalenak, "Beale Street," 27.

⁵¹³ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 137.

⁵¹⁴ Untitled newspaper article, *MT*, 13 Oct. 1928, Church Family Papers, Box 5, Folder 22.

⁵¹⁵ Loyal Tennesseans League, *Edward H. Crump*, 15; "The Week," *CD*, 12 Sept. 1931, p. 1.

⁵¹⁶ Loyal Tennesseans League, *Edward H. Crump*, 21.

⁵¹⁷ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 137.

blacks were registered in Memphis and Shelby County and that thirty thousand voted for Church's candidate for governor, but the black Citizens Publishing Company in Tennessee disputed this number, claiming that only eighteen thousand had cast their ballots for him.⁵¹⁸

Though the number of black votes Crump controlled is disputed, he continued to secure black ballots in order to increase his influence in politics statewide. Luke Lea of Nashville acted as the undisputed boss of Tennessee politics until 1930. After Lea was jailed for corruption in 1930, Crump emerged as the boss of Tennessee politics, a position that he would hold for the next eighteen years. It became impossible to win the governor's race without his support. Memphis's position as the state's chief commercial center also served to increase its power on the state political scene. Tennessee historically had a strong Republican presence in East Tennessee, but Republicans typically only ran nominal candidates for the governorship in light of the Democratic Party's monopoly of this office.⁵¹⁹ Because Crump faced Democratic Party factionalism, he benefited from having black votes. The Memphis returns came in last in state elections, so he and his cronies knew how many votes were needed for their candidates to win. Crump fraudulently held some black votes in suspension and used them to tip the balance if necessary.⁵²⁰

The Crump organization had two main areas of voting strength: the Democratic counties of West Tennessee and the Republican counties of East Tennessee. A rivalry existed between Middle Tennessee and West Tennessee. Nashville politicians resented

⁵¹⁸ T. J. Johnson, "Election in Memphis to Be Spirited," *CD*, 30 Jul. 1932, p. 13; "The Week," *CD*, 10 Sept. 1932, p. 1; "The Week," *CD*, 22 Oct. 1932, p. 1.

⁵¹⁹ Adkins, "Beale Street," 34; V. O. Key, *Southern Politics* (New York: Vintage Books, 1949), 47-8.

⁵²⁰ Adkins, "Beale Street," 28; Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 16-7; Loyal Tennesseans League, *Edward H. Crump*, 15.

Crump's influence, including his ability to determine the governor.⁵²¹ In contrast, a power-sharing situation occurred between West Tennessee and East Tennessee. The Crump Democrats respected the Republicans' control of local offices in East Tennessee, and the East Tennessee Republicans respected the Democrats' domination of statewide offices. It was widely believed that the Crump Democrats, East Tennessee Republicans, and East Tennessee Democrats all worked together: East Tennessee Democrats supported Republican candidates locally, and East Tennessee Republicans voted for Crump's candidates for statewide office in the Democratic primaries. Rumors spread that Crump ensured that East Tennessee Republicans received patronage during Democratic administrations in order to prevent any potential opposition to his control. This gossip made Middle Tennessee politicians all the more resentful of Crump.⁵²²

Because Church headed the state Republican organization along with East Tennessee Republican Congressman J. Will Taylor, the alliance between Crump and Republicans on the state level further indicates that Church worked with Crump.⁵²³ In fact, a July 1930 political cartoon of a Chattanooga newspaper pictured Taylor, Church, Luke Lea, Crump, and Henry Horton, the Democratic governor running for re-election, in bed together, calling them "strange bedfellows." Lea and Crump had politically collaborated before Lea's imprisonment.⁵²⁴

⁵²¹ Key, *Southern Politics*, 72-3.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, 60-1, 65, 67, 72, 75, 78-9.

⁵²³ For more information, see: Chapter 2 and Lee, *Tennessee in Turmoil*.

⁵²⁴ Lee, *Tennessee in Turmoil*, 106-7, 111.

By bolstering Crump's control through their votes, however, Church and other blacks arguably did more for Crump and his endorsees than they did for blacks. Church was savvy enough to know that working with Crump might backfire given the political boss's record of corruption. The black Republican must have thought, however, that the advantages of working with Crump outweighed the disadvantages. Black Memphians were faced with a dilemma: should they support Crump even with his corruption and see benefits firsthand in their lives or fight his machine and most likely not receive these benefits? Church and other black Memphians clearly took the former approach albeit at an unforeseen cost. Raymond Lymon, who joined Church's group in the 1930s, remembered that at that time "there wasn't anything much behind the average Negro but his shirttail and it was a lot of times waving in the breeze."⁵²⁵ Though Lymon exaggerates, he bespeaks of the dismal conditions that most blacks faced; any political gain must have been a source of hope and inspiration. In addition, Church firmly believed that political influence would lead to civil rights.

At the same time, it remains difficult to understand why Church would support Crump in light of the charges against the political boss made by R. E. Johnson. One of few public voices against Crump, Johnson, a white Democrat, was a Mississippi native and Memphis citizen since 1910. An engineer and construction contractor by trade, he held local and state governmental positions at various times, including as a Shelby County Relief Commissioner and as a deputy inspector in the State Department of Finance and Taxation. To protest Crump, whom he called "the Red Headed Monster," he founded the Loyal Tennesseans League and contacted President Herbert Hoover, Tennessee politicians, Washington officials, journalists, and the political boss himself. A whistleblower if there

⁵²⁵ Lymon, interview, 23.

ever was one, Johnson, who was not financially well off, was willing to be a martyr for his anti-Crump crusade. He experienced physical attacks and economic repercussions at the hands of the machine.⁵²⁶

Johnson battled against the Memphis boss by publishing *Edward H. Crump: Public Enemy No. 1* just before the August 1932 election. A take-off of the popular 1931 gangster movie *Public Enemy*, the witty, well researched, and astute booklet described Crump and his cronies as gangsters and used newspaper articles, first-person accounts, court records, and other sources as evidence. Johnson castigated Crump for manipulating the black vote, attacking white opponents, and partnering with vice. He hoped to convince white Tennesseans to elect state officials not beholden to Crump. To show that they could exercise their political muscle at the polls, he revealed that nearly one million voters stayed home for the 1930 state election.⁵²⁷

Johnson described Crump as egotistical, a characteristic that he used to illuminate the boss's political operations. "He was like a cock who thought the sun had risen to hear him crow," Johnson wrote.⁵²⁸ After becoming a congressman, Crump bought eight costly suits and "let it be known . . . that he desired news stories to the effect that he would be the best dressed man in [C]ongress."⁵²⁹ His machine raised a \$250 monthly fund to outfit his congressional office daily with flowers "in spite of the fact of wholesale suffering and want

⁵²⁶ Frank, finding aid to Johnson Papers, 2.

⁵²⁷ Loyal Tennesseans League, *Edward H. Crump*, 30-1.

⁵²⁸ Johnson quoted *Adam Bede*, the 1859 novel by George Eliot, the pen name of Mary Ann Evans. *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

among the unemployed of Memphis.”⁵³⁰ Johnson also quoted a profile of Crump of the *Albany (NY) Evening News* that the boss “proudly showed to his friends” and had re-printed in the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*.⁵³¹ In the article, a white Memphian said, “Why, we have a mayor now--his name is Watkins Overton. Well, he’s a good man. Smart, honest, capable. But nobody is fooled about him . . . [E]verybody knows Crump is really mayor.” The Memphian further observed, “[T]he man’s an organizing fool. He’s the greatest organizer you ever heard of. He’s not so handsome and he’s never made a speech in his life, but just let him stay in the House of Representatives two or three years and you will find those Democrats taking orders from him!”⁵³² Reporting that a portrait of Napoleon hung in Crump’s business office in Memphis, Johnson wrote, “In Crump the Napoleonic complex burns with lambent flame.”⁵³³

Arguing that an honest election had never occurred in the city and county in his twenty years as a legal voter in the area, Johnson accused the Crump machine of burning ballots in the courthouse basement in order to cover up evidence of election fraud. He wrote, “Ribald observers of Memphis politics watch the smoke from the chimney of the court house; when smoke rises Crump has won another ‘victory’--and destroyed the evidence!” The courthouse custodian, Joe Boyle, even admitted to burning ballots though he claimed he did so to make more room in the basement.⁵³⁴ “Stories of ballot-box stuffing, boxes stolen

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁵³¹ Ibid., 5.

⁵³² Ibid., 6.

⁵³³ Ibid., 7.

⁵³⁴ Ibid., 18.

from the court-house cellar, herding, and bribery, fill the air,” reported Walter Adkins a few years later in his 1935 thesis. “[N]o determined or effective effort is ever made to fight these charges in court, or before the Democratic state executive committee.”⁵³⁵

Johnson also called on white citizens to mobilize against Crump because of his use of the black vote, and he quoted prominent white Memphians concerned about the effect of black electoral action. “It is only a matter of time until the negroes, now comprising almost half of the total registration of the county, demand representation in the legislature and county [commission],” Johnson wrote. “Already they are talking [about] such representation at Orange Mound, a Crump controlled suburb.”⁵³⁶ He was referring to the observations of Rembert Moon, an anti-Crump member of the Shelby County Election Commission, who considered black voter manipulation a “menace to the white social system in the South.” Moon reported that blacks in the Twenty-ninth Ward were considering running candidates for the constable position and county commission.⁵³⁷ Johnson also quoted Christopher Harris “Kit” Williams, a Memphis lawyer and the son of a former Mississippi senator. Pointing out that Memphis was the only southern city where a large number of blacks voted, Williams said that the “herd voting” of blacks was “permitted by the indifference of citizens to the destination that such tactics are leading the city.”⁵³⁸ He predicted that eventually a Democratic governor would be elected by “a majority of negro votes--a governor elected by negroes who don’t know for whom they voted. It will result in racial hatred which all good

⁵³⁵ Adkins, “Beale Street,” 29.

⁵³⁶ Loyal Tennesseans League, *Edward H. Crump*, 19-20.

⁵³⁷ I have found no evidence that these or other blacks bid for public office at this time. *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵³⁸ The senator was John Sharp Williams. *Ibid.*, 27.

[s]outherners hope will never be aroused.”⁵³⁹ Williams observed that clubs and organizations were springing up to oppose black voting in the Democratic primary.⁵⁴⁰ Despite Johnson’s battle against the machine, Crump’s candidates won in 1932.

Section II

While Robert R. Church, Jr., aligned with Crump, the black Republican faced increasing challenges to his leadership by the local lily-white group, and he suffered from the Grand Old Party’s turn away from blacks. The year 1928 saw these developments come to a head. That year, lily whites attempted to have Church indicted on trumped-up charges of graft relating to post office appointments.⁵⁴¹ In response to the allegations, Rev. S. A. Owen, one of the most prominent black ministers in Memphis, wrote to Church:

Truly we are proud of you and of the heroic accomplishments to your credit. We believe in you now and the unsullied integrity you have maintained through all of the intricate and delicate experiences of the past. Many of the citizens of Memphis are willing to be directed by your wise counsel and stand ready to champion your cause when unfortunately the fight centers on you. We remember that your defeat means the ultimate annihilation of the rights and privileges of a great host of people.⁵⁴²

Expressing her grief about the lily-white opposition, Cora P. Taylor, principal of the black Manassas High School, wrote Church that she and the entire faculty were holding him “up as a spokesman and martyr” for blacks to their students. “[S]hould the time ever come when you have a message to send or when you should need to rally this [s]ection, for any purposes, I can assure you of a hearty response,” she wrote. Taylor signed off saying, “with best

⁵³⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 27.

⁵⁴¹ Lee, *Beale Street*, 251-2; Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 79-82.

⁵⁴² Owen to Church, 22 Mar. 1928, Church Family Papers, Box 5, Folder 8. For biographical information on Owen, see: Pink Palace Museum, *Historic Black Memphians*, 29.

wishes for you and our common cause.”⁵⁴³ Church was vindicated of the graft charges the next year.

Local lily-whites kept up their attack on Church that election season. For the primary election, two male and two female lily whites formed a ticket to oppose Church and three whites who ran as a slate for the Republican State Executive Committee. Calling Church a “menace” and accusing him of being a Democrat, the lily whites distributed campaign literature saying that he “must be eliminated from domination of the Republican Party in Shelby County” and that the “pernicious influence of the negro” had an “injurious effect on the *whole* community.”⁵⁴⁴ The *Memphis Evening Appeal* jumped on the attack bandwagon and accused Church of having a machine.⁵⁴⁵ Even with all this opposition, Church’s ticket won by a ten-to-one margin, and he received more than seven thousand votes.⁵⁴⁶

The *Commercial Appeal* took a different approach to battling black political mobilization that election season: it launched a crusade to exclude blacks from the Democratic primary. Yet, at the same time, it decried the attempt of local whites to challenge Church’s power.⁵⁴⁷ “It is one of the traditions of the South that the Democratic [P]arty is the white man’s party and the Republican [P]arty is the Negro party,” the paper said in an editorial titled “The Ludicrous Attempt to Create a Jim Crow Republican Party.” It argued, “To exclude the negro from the Republican [P]arty . . . would deprive him of his

⁵⁴³ Taylor to Church, 2 Apr. 1928, Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 17.

⁵⁴⁴ See these documents in Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 24: “Beat Bob Church,” campaign handbill, 1928; “Vote for Henry Horton,” campaign handbill, 1928; “R. R. CHURCH must be eliminated,” campaign flyer, 1928.

⁵⁴⁵ “Bob Church Has a Machine Also,” *Memphis Evening Appeal*, 3 Aug. 1928, p. 4, copy in Church Family Papers, Box 5, Folder 22; Lee, *Beale Street*, 281-2.

⁵⁴⁶ “Bob Church Wins Victory in Tennessee,” *CD*, 11 Aug. 1928, p. 2; Travis, “Bob Church.”

⁵⁴⁷ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 98.

natural party affiliation and of the right of franchise.” Calling Church an undisputed leader of the Republican Party, the paper pointed out, “His work is done in his Beale Street office in Memphis and in the White House in Washington.” It continued that “[n]o federal appointment is made in Memphis or Shelby County under a Republican administration without his endorsement.. Federal office-holders and applicants for federal favor not only admit his authority, but seek his favor His influence in the Republican [P]arty is more extensive in the [S]outh than any other man white or black.”⁵⁴⁸

On the one hand, the editorial provided an important white recognition of Church’s leadership. The newspaper’s acceptance of his leadership, even over whites, revealed that Church and other black Republicans had the potential to counteract prevailing stereotypes of black inferiority and subservience by the mere fact that they occupied positions of power within the party.⁵⁴⁹ On the other hand, the *Chicago Defender*, which reprinted the editorial, warned, “Don’t take the Memphis Commercial Appeal too seriously [It] cares nothing for Bob Church, for Mr. Church is not of the race to which the [paper] caters.” It continued, “Whom is this paper kidding when it starts out to champion you and your rights to vote? . . . ‘Beware the Greeks when they come bearing gifts.’”⁵⁵⁰ Even though black Memphians could exercise the franchise, the editorial revealed that their voting rights were not completely secure given its opposition to black voting in the Democratic primary. Furthermore, the paper promoted a segregated party system with blacks occupying the less powerful party.

⁵⁴⁸ “The Ludicrous Attempt to Create a Jim Crow Republican Party,” *CA*, 6 Oct. 1928, Church Family Papers, Box 5, Folder 23.

⁵⁴⁹ The *Pittsburgh Courier* later reprinted the editorial in a profile of Church. Travis, “Bob Church.”

⁵⁵⁰ “The Week,” *CD*, 20 Oct. 1928, p. A1. The *Chicago Defender*’s remarks led to numerous requests for the editorial, so the paper reprinted it. “Other Papers Say,” *CD*, 27 Oct. 1928, p. A2. Also see: “Memphis Paper Comes Out for Bob Church,” *CD*, 27 Oct. 1928, p. 2.

Black Republicans controlled patronage, secured some political rewards, and held some party leadership positions, but white Democrats remained in charge locally and regionally. So, black Republicans did not constitute much of a threat to the power structure even though some whites saw them as such.

The local lily-white opposition to Church was energized by national developments occurring in the Republican Party. In the 1928 election season, the party's presidential candidate, Herbert Hoover, was determined to make inroads among southern whites in order to build up the party in the region. He supported a reform program that would ensure that southern party organizations consisted of elite, honest leadership. While Hoover generally has been portrayed as a bigot determined to strip the black-and-tans of their power and instead make the party lily-white, his plans were more complicated in reality. Southern party organizations had a reputation for corrupt leadership. Officials, for instance, abused patronage privileges by selling federal jobs. Hoover hoped to attract elite white leaders, in particular, to take over such organizations. Like other Republican politicians, Hoover knew that the party's acceptance of black leaders and members drove many whites away from it. Though he thought that honest black leaders and members should remain part of the party, he did not publicize these intentions. As a result, his reform program took on the cast of lily whitism, compounded by the fact that Hoover's southern campaign officials erroneously declared that he promoted a whites-only party in the region.⁵⁵¹

Church retained his allegiance to the Grand Old Party that election season even though Hoover's reform intentions raised suspicions among blacks. At the party's national convention in June, Church and his fellow black delegates pushed the party for planks in its

⁵⁵¹ Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, & Lily-whites*.

platform supporting the enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, enactment of anti-lynching legislation, prohibition of discriminatory civil service hiring, and disavowing of lily whitism.⁵⁵² But, the party's plank for blacks ended up consisting merely of a statement calling for anti-lynching legislation. Further damaging black political efforts were the convention's credentials committee's actions in seating only delegations that supported Hoover. Church's faction and black-and-tan groups from Mississippi and Georgia were seated, but black-and-tan factions from other southern states were not seated.⁵⁵³ After the convention, a federal grand jury indicted Perry Howard, Mississippi's black-and-tan leader and the former Lincoln League of America official, for patronage abuse despite the fact that he was previously acquitted of this charge. Many blacks saw this action as more proof that the party was turning against blacks in an unprecedented way.

In keeping with Hoover's emphasis on elite and new leadership, his campaign officials appointed black professionals, who had little political experience, to head the Republican Advisory Committee devoted to securing black votes for the party. These blacks represented one of the three wings of black Republicans. They had no political power base and did not run for office or get out the vote but were committed to securing equal rights for blacks and working through the party for this goal. Of an older generation, they generally were associated with Booker T. Washington in advocating racial advancement through educational and economic advancement. Robert Moton, who had headed Tuskegee since

⁵⁵² "Negroes Hitch Dry Idea to Suffrage," *New York World*, 10 Jun. 1928, Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 2.

⁵⁵³ Church was seated as a delegate as well. In fact, a white Tennessee delegate told the credentials committee, "Church must be seated if we are to carry Tennessee for the nominee and elect five Republican members of [C]ongress, as we hope. We need his support." "Bob Church Wins Fights with Whites," *CD*, 16 Jun. 1928, p. 1.

Washington's death in 1915, led the second wing. It worked to uplift Moton as a leader, advance Washington's philosophies, and lobby the government to adopt policies helping rural black southerners in particular.⁵⁵⁴

Church was a member of the third wing, the diverse and unorganized group that actively participated in politics. Perry Howard also belonged to this faction. Some of these leaders faced criticism from other blacks for not attacking disenfranchisement in or politically mobilizing their communities but instead focusing on rounding up southern delegates for presidential nominees and working as dispensers of patronage. Church, however, was respected as a bold, skilled, and militant leader who was committed to racial advancement and had successfully mobilized blacks in Memphis.⁵⁵⁵ Because he disagreed with the selection of the black professionals, Church refused to serve on the advisory committee.⁵⁵⁶ In a public protest to the campaign, Church pointed out that the black professionals lacked political experience, had no political standing in their communities, and thus could not effectively represent blacks or their issues. He felt the campaign had "ignor[ed] men and women who meet issues daily and create votes" by appointing those "who dodge issues, cannot influence a single vote, have no voice to raise when we are assailed, and are Republican only once in four years, and then only by appointment and not

⁵⁵⁴ Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, & Lily-whites*, 99-100.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., 100-1, 106; Kelly Miller, "The Political Desert," *NYAN*, 15 Apr. 1928, p. 16; Kelly Miller, "Behold the 'Lily Whites,'" *NYAN*, 15 Aug. 1928, p. 16; "Church's Letter Stirs G.O.P.," *CD*, 25 Aug. 1928, p. 1; "Lesser of Two Evils," *CD*, 3 Nov. 1928, p. 2; "An Illinois Candidate," *CD*, 30 Jan. 1932, p. 14; Travis, "Bob Church;" Dan Burley, "Declares Southern Race Man Determines Status in North," *CD*, 6 Mar. 1937, p. 4; Jacob Anderson, "Will Hays, Movie Czar, Tells of Negro Politicians, Picture Stars and Future," *NYAN*, 30 Nov. 1935, p. 11; "Leadership of Late Henry 'Linc' Johnson Lauded Here at Service in His Honor," *NYAN*, 1 Oct. 1930, p. 3.

⁵⁵⁶ He refused to serve on the advisory committee even though he had traveled to California to let Hoover know of his selection as the presidential candidate. He had been the first black to ever serve on the party's notification committee.

by choice of the people.” Church asked Hoover to restructure the committee’s leadership, but the candidate refused.⁵⁵⁷

Church considered the 1928 campaign the bitterest one in his memory.⁵⁵⁸ Both the Hoover campaign and that of Democratic candidate, Al Smith, engaged in race baiting in an effort to attract white votes. The factionalism of black Republicans had perhaps never been stronger, and Hoover’s southern reform policy alienated blacks. Church initially did not endorse Hoover and hardly campaigned for him. Though Hoover wanted to remain distant from blacks during the campaign, he could not afford to ignore Church’s influence or to lose his support. He called Church to Washington D.C. for a personal meeting, heard his grievances against lily whites, and spoke a few soothing words.⁵⁵⁹ He told Church that, contrary to perception, his administration would respect black leadership and black concerns and white and black Republican leaders would work together in the South. The candidate assured him that his southern campaign manager, Horace Mann, had misled southerners in thinking that Hoover promoted lily whitism.⁵⁶⁰

As a result of Hoover’s courting, Church supported him more fervently in the last days of the campaign. According to *Time* magazine, all but six of the leading twenty-five black newspapers supported Al Smith, but “most of the rebellious journals, at Church’s command, changed front and Hooverized vociferously” during the last week of the

⁵⁵⁷ “Church’s Letter,” *CD*; Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, & Lily-whites*, 102-7. The quotes are from Church’s letter.

⁵⁵⁸ R. R. Church, “Why I Am for Hoover,” *CD*, 3 Nov. 1928, p. 3.

⁵⁵⁹ “National Affairs,” *Time*, 18 Feb. 1929, 10.

⁵⁶⁰ Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, & Lily-whites*, 111.

campaign.⁵⁶¹ Church also released an open letter to the *Chicago Defender* backing Hoover that was published three days before the election. It was by no means a wholehearted endorsement, however. Church acknowledged that countless blacks had asked him, “Why, if things are as they seem to be, do you support Hoover for president?” He said that they had “every right to halt and question” him and that he had “neither fault to find nor criticism to bestow” in regard to those leaving the Republican Party. Admitting his confusion about the “undeserved indifference of the party of our love and hope,” he made clear that he did not “wish the ascendancy of the Republican [P]arty as we have it now,” and he expressed his belief that Republican black leadership would not be destroyed.⁵⁶²

Church framed the election as a choice between two bad options: “The Republican [P]arty offers us little. The Democratic [P]arty offers us nothing.” He chose the Republican Party “because its history is a better assurance of justice to us, while the history of the Democratic [P]arty is a guaranty of injustice to all of us.” “If I err, I err in thoughts of you,” he said about his decision. “Long have I waged war in your name and for our children I have known deadly and unrelenting fire. I have fled from no battle My contests have been waged with a support from people among whom I was born and as loyal as man ever knew in any cause.”⁵⁶³

When election day arrived, Hoover swept Tennessee and four other southern states in his successful bid for the presidency. Church saw not only Hoover win but also Oscar DePriest of Chicago, a former member of the Lincoln League of America. DePriest was elected as the first black congressman since the turn of the century and became a leading

⁵⁶¹ “National Affairs,” *Time*.

⁵⁶² Church, “Why I Am for Hoover.”

⁵⁶³ *Ibid*.

spokesman for black rights nationally and in the House of Representatives. In Shelby County, Hoover captured the black vote, and Smith received the white vote. Local whites turned to Smith in part because of their dislike of the anti-lynching plank in the Republican Party platform. Although Hoover had sought to distance himself from the black vote, he had been forced to cultivate it; this strategy backfired among whites as he had feared. Many local white Democrats feared any kind of alliance between local blacks and national political figures as in the case of Church and Hoover.⁵⁶⁴ They thought that it would lead to “negro bossism” in West Tennessee, resulting in the everlasting “humiliation of the white man.” In addition, they feared that a Republican administration would place local blacks in positions of political power--primarily postmasterships--over white citizens. It was assumed, for example, that Church would be rewarded for his campaign work by becoming the local postmaster though neither he nor any other black received that appointment.⁵⁶⁵

One day after the election, Church sent Hoover a telegram. Pointing out that most blacks had voted for him, he called on the president-elect to promote peace, freedom, and justice “for a people . . . who are still in bondage.”⁵⁶⁶ Initially, it appeared that black Republicans would remain influential in the Hoover administration. Shortly after meeting with Church in March, Hoover fired Horace Mann, who had promoted lily whitism in the South, as a party official. Black newspapers credited Church for Mann’s dismissal, and it

⁵⁶⁴ G. Michael McCarthy, “Smith vs. Hoover--The Politics of Race in West Tennessee,” *Phylon* 39, no. 2 (2d Qtr., 1978): 157-8.

⁵⁶⁵ Local newspapers used the phrases in quotes. *Ibid.*, 159.

⁵⁶⁶ “‘Bob’ Church Congratulates Hoover,” *CD*, 10 Nov. 1928, p. 1.

appears he had an impact.⁵⁶⁷ Observing that Church controlled the black vote in eight states whose combined vote was strong enough to hold the balance of power in a presidential election, the *New York Amsterdam News* commented that Hoover granted Church's request because "[t]he complete espousal of the 'lily white' policy by the Republican [P]arty might easily alienate this vote without gaining enough [s]outhern white votes to offset its loss."⁵⁶⁸

But, Hoover remained willing to take the risk that bolstering white leadership would lead to a stronger Republican Party in the region. Shortly after Hoover dismissed Mann, the Hoover administration attacked Perry Howard for patronage corruption even though he was eventually acquitted again. In addition, Hoover sanctioned the stripping of black Republican leadership nearly everywhere in the South in the name of reform.⁵⁶⁹ Though the president also worked to replace allegedly corrupt white leadership, Kelly Miller, a political columnist of the *New York Amsterdam News*, astutely observed that his southern policy was "ostensibly based on corruption and political scandal, which in the last analysis is laid at the door of the Negro race and is calculated to damn the Negro to everlasting infamy. Practically every white leader in the South has or does lie under allegation. The Negro is made to bear the chief brunt of the stigma." Pointing out that "every Negro had already been eliminated from

⁵⁶⁷ Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, & Lily-whites*, 120-1; "Bob Church Forces Colonel Horace A. Mann to Resign," *CD*, 16 Mar. 1929, p. 1; "Bird in the Hand," *NYAN*.

⁵⁶⁸ "Bird in the Hand," *NYAN*.

⁵⁶⁹ His aides proceeded to replace black-and-tan leaders with lily whites in Georgia, South Carolina, and Mississippi; the respective black-and-tan factions had been investigated for corruption. In Georgia, his aides secretly experimented with a new faction that included lily whites and blacks who would have influence. Though on occasion Hoover publicly said that he did not favor purging blacks from the party, he continued to refuse to give a public explanation for his southern reform strategy in which he could have clarified that his political vision encompassed black party leadership and membership. Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, & Lily-whites*, 121-7, 131, 134, 178, 180, 276; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 86; Kelly Miller, "Mr. Hoover Speaks Out," *NYAN*, 3 Apr. 1929, p. 20; Sherman, *Republican Party*, 172-6, 238-9; Lee, *Beale Street*, 273; McMillan, *Dark Journey*, 66-8.

independent leadership except Robert R. Church,” Miller said that it appeared that the chief objective of Hoover’s policy “was not to get rid of corruption but to install white leadership, which in turn is demanded by the inexorable law of political necessity.”⁵⁷⁰ He also commented that the “simple fact that Mr. Hoover does not pose for photographers with Negro delegations, as Mr. Coolidge was wont to do, may be suggestive and significant.”⁵⁷¹

In an eloquent four-page letter to Hoover exactly one year after his election, Church reported the “grievous disappointment” of blacks, again reminding Hoover that they had helped elect him. He expressed dismay that Hoover, unlike his Republican and Democratic predecessors, had made no black political appointments. “When a Republican president disregards both our citizenship and our party regularity and joins the cry of ‘Down with the Negro,’ we have a spectacle that calls for tears,” Church wrote. The continuation of the present policy would “leave the Republican [P]arty a wreck upon the shores of the political ocean, but a memory to those who once loved it,” he declared. He concluded that he was willing to talk to Hoover any time.⁵⁷² Though Church’s impassioned plea apparently had little impact on Hoover, the president ensured behind the scenes that Church was not stripped of his party leadership positions in Tennessee. As an honest politician, Church represented the type of leader that Hoover was trying to cultivate, and the president personally liked and

⁵⁷⁰ Miller, “Mr. Hoover Speaks Out.”

⁵⁷¹ Kelly Miller, “End of Co-Racial Politics,” *NYAN*, 18 Sept. 1929, p. 20.

⁵⁷² Church to Hoover, 6 Nov. 1929, Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 7. Earlier in the year, Church had protested the turn of events by sending members of Congress a series of editorials rebuking Hoover for his perceived policy to create all-white leadership in the South. “Congressmen Get Letters from Robert R. Church,” *CD*, 27 Apr. 1929, p. 1; “Verdict Expected Today in Howard’s Job Selling Trial,” *NYAN*, 24 Apr. 1929, p. 1.

respected him. Church did not know of Hoover's work on his behalf, however, and he remained disillusioned.⁵⁷³

In Tennessee, Church also continued to take a stand against lily whitism. In 1930, he supported the Democratic candidate in the gubernatorial race over C. Arthur Bruce, a prominent lily white in Memphis who ran as the Republican candidate. Members of the defunct Ku Klux Klan campaigned for Bruce, and he never appeared before black voters though he unsuccessfully tried to persuade Church to secure campaign money for him from the Republican National Committee. Bruce received some one hundred thousand fewer votes than Hoover had in 1928 and was defeated by nearly seventy thousand votes. High-ranking Democrats attributed Bruce's loss to his failure to follow Church's advice and campaign for black support.⁵⁷⁴

Though Church experienced success in state politics, Hoover continued to appear indifferent and even hostile toward blacks. He met with nearly universal protest from blacks when he nominated John Parker to the Supreme Court. Parker had publicly supported disenfranchisement and belonged to North Carolina's lily-white Republican faction. Mainly because of the NAACP's pressure, Parker's nomination was defeated. Church, who continued to serve as an NAACP board member, worked against him.⁵⁷⁵ In addition, Hoover met with outcry when his administration mandated that black and white Gold Star mothers take separate ships when they went overseas to visit the graves of their sons. Like his Republican predecessors, Hoover took no action against segregation, disenfranchisement, or

⁵⁷³ Sherman, *Republican Party*, 234-5; Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, & Lily-whites*, 175-7.

⁵⁷⁴ Travis, "Bob Church."

⁵⁷⁵ Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, & Lily-whites*, 205-31; Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy*, 19; Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 138-42.

lynching. He made vague statements that blacks interpreted as a desire to carry out a lily-white policy in the South, and he appointed a lily-white proponent as the chairman of the Republican National Committee. Black leaders were further alienated by Hoover's unwillingness to solicit their views and exchange ideas with them.⁵⁷⁶ Moreover, Hoover's weak response to the Great Depression hurt his standing among blacks and whites.

After 1930, Hoover largely abandoned his deeply flawed and ineffective southern reform policy, which had alienated blacks and whites as well as weakened the party. In South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi, black Republicans had succeeded in maintaining influence even though the Hoover administration had tried to weaken their power; they demonstrated the continued importance of black-and-tan organizations to preserving black participation in the party. Lily-white Republicans had hoped that Hoover would go further in stripping blacks of leadership positions and were alienated by his protection of Church and Walter Cohen, the Louisiana politician and former Lincoln League of America official whom he allowed to remain collector of customs of New Orleans. Because southern white Democrats wanted to maintain their dominance, they had opposed Hoover's attempts to strengthen the Republican Party in the region and supported Perry Howard in his trial for patronage abuse. Still, the damage of Hoover's southern policy had been done. The percentage of black delegates in 1932 was smaller than at previous Republican National Conventions. Church remained a delegate, and he vowed to speak out publicly to the black

⁵⁷⁶ Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, & Lily-whites*; Weiss, *Farewell to the Party*, 15-7; Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy*, 9-28; Sherman, *Republican Party*, 224-59.

electorate if black delegates were not seated, a threat that resulted in the credentials committee recognizing some.⁵⁷⁷

The 1932 presidential race between Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt demonstrated the growing political independence of blacks. The number of blacks willing to speak on behalf of Hoover was smaller than normal, and a substantial number defected from the party. The majority of black newspapers and journals endorsed the Republican Party, but a significant number actively supported Roosevelt, attacked Hoover, or did not endorse either candidate.⁵⁷⁸ Criticisms of the Republican Party that the *Chicago Defender* raised during the 1928 campaign rang just as true in 1932: “Today, with segregation, disfranchisement, lynchings . . . and all other forms of humiliations facing us, the Republicans are in control of government. With . . . the government flaunting segregation signs in our faces under the dome of the nation’s capitol, the Republicans are in control.” The paper continued, “[W]e are asked to . . . vote again as we voted 50 years ago, for the party that has disowned us!”⁵⁷⁹

Though blacks were largely not enthusiastic about Hoover, Roosevelt seemed worse to many blacks. Nothing in Roosevelt’s background suggested any sympathy, understanding, or attention toward blacks, and he chose a southern senator, John Nance Garner, as his running mate. Roosevelt’s campaign sought black votes in the North to a limited extent, and Hoover’s campaign continued the Republican tradition of having a black voters division, but neither candidate answered the NAACP questionnaire on racial concerns. Hoover did end up taking more steps on behalf of blacks than Roosevelt during the campaign. The Republican

⁵⁷⁷ Sherman, *Republican Party*, 238-9, 252-3; Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, & Lily-whites*, 135-7, 177, 261, 278.

⁵⁷⁸ Sherman, *Republican Party*, 254-5; Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 65-6.

⁵⁷⁹ “The Party in Power,” *CD*, 20 Oct. 1928, p. A2.

candidate sent a message to the NAACP convention and delivered the commencement address at Howard University. A month before the election, the Republican National Committee invited two hundred blacks to meet with Hoover on the White House lawn. The group included Lt. Lee. In response to their call for Hoover to take a firm stand on racial issues, the president assured them that the Grand Old Party would not abandon its traditional duty to blacks. He cited the Republican platform, which pledged to “maintain equal opportunity and rights for our negro citizens” and which declared, “We do not propose to depart from that tradition.” In contrast, the Democrats had no such language in their platform. Some blacks, particularly the most loyal Republicans, were assured by Hoover’s remarks.⁵⁸⁰ A few weeks later, Church opened an office on Beale Street to support him.⁵⁸¹ Though most black voters chose Hoover, Roosevelt won the election by a large margin.

Section III

In Roosevelt’s first one hundred days of office, the Democratic-controlled Congress passed a flurry of legislation to alleviate the Depression. These actions were just the start of a first term devoted to increasing the economic security of Americans. A slew of agencies were created--called the alphabet agencies because of their acronyms--that provided jobs to ordinary citizens and took other measures for social relief. All in all, the New Deal marked an unprecedented federal intervention in the lives of citizens as the government expanded to embrace a social welfare role. Like most southern members of Congress, Crump supported the New Deal initially. He voted for every piece of New Deal legislation in the first one

⁵⁸⁰ Topping, *Lincoln’s Lost Legacy*, 26; Weiss, *Farewell to the Party*, 18-21; Lewinson, *Race, Class, and Party*, 175-6; Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 30-2; Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, & Lily-whites*, 271-3; Simmons, *Republican Party*, 30; Sherman, *Republican Party*, 252-4; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 88-9. The quotes are from p. 30 of Simmons’s *Republican Party*.

⁵⁸¹ “R. R. Church Opens Offices to Aid Hoover,” *CD*, 22 Oct. 1932, p. 4.

hundred days.⁵⁸² He also ensured that the city administration in Memphis successfully applied for New Deal funding from governmental agencies in order to alleviate economic suffering. During the early years of the Depression, few businesses failed in the city, and unemployment was only 2.8 percent for whites and 3.5 percent for blacks. But, the number of unemployed people rose rapidly as the decade proceeded, and some businesses went bankrupt. The number of families helped by community relief organizations increased as well.⁵⁸³

Black Memphians experienced greater economic distress than whites. In 1932, they made up around 30 percent of the city's unemployed people; by the end of decade, they made up 36 percent. They disproportionately applied for and received governmental assistance compared to whites. Rev. Sutton Griggs was one of many black Memphians severely affected by the Depression. He saw his church, Tabernacle Baptist, face foreclosure because of the inability of both his church members to make mortgage payments and his white friends to financially support him. Unpopular among blacks in Memphis, he moved to Texas and died in 1933. But, other black Memphians benefited from the more than six million dollars in funding that the city secured to provide them with jobs, improved health services, better schools, a library, public housing, and street and park improvements. Across the South and the country, other blacks also saw increased job opportunities and better public services as a result of the New Deal.⁵⁸⁴

⁵⁸² Dowdy, *Mr. Crump*, 71.

⁵⁸³ Roger Biles, *Memphis in the Great Depression* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1986), 52-3.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid., 93; Tucker, *Black Pastors and Leaders*, 85-6; Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee*, 96; "Public Improvements Sponsored by City of Memphis," n.d.; Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 51-8; Harvard Sitkoff, "The Impact of the New Deal on Black Southerners," in *Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table*, eds. Julian Bond and Andrew Lewis (New York: American Heritage, 1995), 113-24.

In addition to securing New Deal funding, the city also provided blacks with an important cultural recognition by naming a new municipal park on Beale Street after W. C. Handy. Following the Ell Person lynching in 1917, Handy had fled Memphis to escape racial violence in the region and had gone to New York City to open a publishing company.⁵⁸⁵ As his fame continued to grow, he did not forget his roots. He returned almost annually to visit, and the city remained an inspiration for his compositions.⁵⁸⁶ The “Memphis Blues,” Handy’s famed song, “has done more to advertise Memphis than all the publicity emanating from the Businessmen’s Association,” a local judge said, and businessmen seemed to agree.⁵⁸⁷ Handy also stayed connected to the Church family. Church and his daughter, for instance, traveled to New York as invitees to his Cotton Club birthday celebration one year.⁵⁸⁸ In 1931, Lt. Lee suggested to Crump that the city name a park for Handy, and Crump agreed to do so in order to secure votes. The city subsequently organized the park’s dedication ceremony before an election.⁵⁸⁹ Handy came to the ceremony, attended by twenty thousand from the city and surrounding states. A “who’s who” of Memphis showed up, including city and county officials, federal judges, Crump, and Church. Among the speakers was Judge Harry Anderson. Church had appointed him, and the judge had returned blacks to federal jury service in the area.⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁸⁵ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 178-85.

⁵⁸⁶ Handy to Annette Church, 19 Dec. 1956; “Beale Street’s Hero,” *Time*, 25 May 1936, 54-5.

⁵⁸⁷ Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 115.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 277-8; Handy to Annette Church, 19 Dec. 1956.

⁵⁸⁹ Lee, interview, n.d., 3-5; Lee, *Beale Street*, 242.

⁵⁹⁰ “Dedicate New Park in Memphis,” *CD*, 28 Mar. 1931, p. 13; T. J. Johnson, “Memphis Names Park for Handy,” *CD*, 4 Apr. 1931, p. 13.

While the Crump machine celebrated Handy, it devoted few of its own funds to social relief. In December 1930, the Mayor's Commission on Employment and Relief was created. It helped hundreds secure temporary jobs and handed out clothing and food to the most poor. But, Memphis, like most other southern cities, kept taxes low, limiting funds available for relief. As a result, black Memphians relied on New Deal programs. The Crump machine's administration of these programs, however, resulted in racial discrimination. Memphis employers, who supported the machine, objected to giving blacks equal pay to whites for the same work.⁵⁹¹ And, relief programs buttressed the existing socio-economic hierarchy in which blacks occupied low-level positions: local black women saw program administrators train them to work as better domestic servants, and local black men faced barriers in obtaining higher skilled positions.⁵⁹²

Even the benefits that the city administration provided for blacks were limited in effect. The new black library's resources did not compare with white library branches. Recreational facilities for blacks were in poor shape.⁵⁹³ At black housing projects, local authorities charged high rents and made all decisions concerning site and tenant selection. By placing the projects in black neighborhoods, they perpetuated the housing segregation in the community. In general, black housing was located in undesirable parts of the city such as in swampy areas or near railroad lines. A 1934 housing survey found that 14 percent of

⁵⁹¹ Biles, *Memphis*, 55, 59, 69, 79, 93; Dowdy, *Mr. Crump*, 59.

⁵⁹² Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 25. Also see: Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee*, 89-93.

⁵⁹³ Adkins, "Beale Street," 30-1; Wilson, interview; W. H. Foote to E. H. Crump, 1 Jan. 1937, Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 138, Folder: Wm Foote, mfm, 002034; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 20.

housing for blacks qualified as dilapidated beyond reasonable repair compared to 2 percent for whites.⁵⁹⁴

Discrimination plagued New Deal programs in other southern communities as well, and some programs had discriminatory effects. For instance, the Social Security Act, enacted in 1935, exempted farm laborers and domestic workers from its provisions. As a result, it did not benefit the majority of black workers, who were concentrated in these sectors. Though some New Deal programs banned discriminatory treatment, these provisions proved difficult to enforce. By funneling control of these programs to local governmental agencies, the Roosevelt administration provided the opportunity for southern officials to engage in racially discriminatory practices. Blacks usually could take advantage of these programs but often did not receive benefits on par with whites, and, in some cases, were excluded altogether. Roosevelt knew that white Democrats from the South, who held the most powerful positions in Congress, might not vote for his legislation if he mandated that federal officials control local programs given the region's emphasis on states' rights. He also was not a forceful advocate for civil rights or anti-lynching legislation in part because he did not want to alienate these southern politicians. In 1938, for instance, he did come out publicly for the abolition of the poll tax, but he did not lead the fight for this cause.⁵⁹⁵

Despite its limits, the Roosevelt presidency enabled many blacks to believe that they had a friend in the White House, more so than previous Republican presidents. The fact that New Deal programs included and economically uplifted blacks, albeit unequally, made

⁵⁹⁴ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 20; Biles, *Memphis*, 95-6; Hill, "Self-Defined African American Community," 20-1; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 159.

⁵⁹⁵ Weiss, *Farewell to the Party*, 50-8, 175-9; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (Mar. 2005): 1240-1; Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 32-43.

Roosevelt a hero to many. Roosevelt made more black political appointments than any previous president, and he involved an unprecedented number of blacks in policymaking circles--steps that Church and others had long advocated. He appointed more than one hundred blacks to administrative positions, and most of these officials dealt directly with problems faced by blacks. Furthermore, the expansion of civil servants under his administration benefited blacks as the number of black federal employees tripled in the 1930s. His administration also began to desegregate federal cafeterias, secretarial pools, and restrooms.⁵⁹⁶

Moreover, Roosevelt surrounded himself with black advisors and racially progressive whites. The "Black Cabinet," a group of Roosevelt's racial advisors for New Deal programs, met informally and conferred with civil rights leaders. Though the administration did not sanction the Black Cabinet meetings, the mere presence of these officials proved, at the very least, a symbolic recognition to blacks of the government's attention to them. Black Cabinet members also made governmental officials more attuned to black concerns, raised the black public's awareness of the New Deal, and helped ensure that blacks became federal employees. In addition, Eleanor Roosevelt was a forceful and genuine advocate for civil rights. Never before had someone so close to the president been such a supporter of black rights. The First Lady had close ties to civil rights organizations and genuine friendships with blacks, including Mary McLeod Bethune. As a member of the Black Cabinet and the most powerful black official in the administration, Bethune influenced the government to

⁵⁹⁶ Weiss, *Farewell to the Party*; Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 57-8, 248.

sponsor conferences and reports that examined problems affecting blacks, criticized the New Deal for its shortcomings, and called for the government to support black rights.⁵⁹⁷

In part because of the hope generated by the Roosevelt presidency, black political action increased throughout the South and the country during the 1930s, and blacks shifted to the Democratic Party. The number of blacks who registered and voted increased nationwide. The Agricultural Adjustment Act allowed black farmers to cast ballots in cotton making quota referenda, resulting in many rural black southerners voting for the first time and signaling an important step in their politicization. Even though none won, southern blacks ran for local, state, and national offices; their bids challenged the prevailing system of disenfranchisement and segregation. More than four hundred thousand blacks migrated North, and they increasingly came to hold the balance of power in elections, forcing politicians of both parties to pay attention to their needs and demands. Blacks, many as Democrats, were elected to political offices in state legislatures in the North and in other governmental bodies across the country. In 1934, Arthur Mitchell beat Oscar DePriest in Chicago to become the first black Democrat ever elected to Congress. That year, the midterm elections signified the first time that Democrats captured the majority of black votes.⁵⁹⁸

Moreover, the number of black voter organizations rose in the 1930s, and these groups appeared in cities in every southern state, paving the way for later civil rights

⁵⁹⁷ Weiss, *Farewell to the Party*; Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, xv, 45-9, 59-62, 248.

⁵⁹⁸ Bunche, *Political Status*, 76-7, 94-100; Scott, *Negro in Tennessee Politics*, 98-9; Weiss, *Farewell to the Party*, 78-95, 234; Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 66-7; Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy*, 2.

mobilizations.⁵⁹⁹ Amelia Boynton Robinson, for instance, registered to vote in Selma, Alabama, and founded a black political organization there, laying the groundwork for her and others' participation in the Selma voting rights movement in the 1960s.⁶⁰⁰ The City-County Civic League of Nashville and Davidson County formed a black political organization based partially on Memphis's Lincoln League of days gone by.⁶⁰¹ In 1936, Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., led a black voting rights march in Atlanta, and he later joined the black Atlanta Voters League.⁶⁰²

In addition to inspiring black political activity, the Roosevelt administration enabled labor activism. The Wagner Act of 1935 spurred unionization by legitimizing the rights of employees to unionize and have union representatives negotiate with management. The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) formed that year and welcomed blacks unlike the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which generally maintained discriminatory policies. Throughout the South, CIO members conducted interracial strikes. Many of these laborites were part of a broad, sprawling movement of unionists, civil rights activists, black voter organization members, black and white radicals, progressive New Dealers, communists, and others committed to a social democratic vision that promoted labor and civil rights for all that developed in the region by 1938.⁶⁰³ For instance, a biracial coalition of labor and civil rights

⁵⁹⁹ Robert J. Norrell, *The House I Live In: Race and the American Century* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 115-7; Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 74-5; Bunche, *Political Status*.

⁶⁰⁰ Amelia Boynton Robinson, *Bridge across Jordan* (Washington D.C.: Schiller Institute, 1991).

⁶⁰¹ Scott, *Negro in Tennessee Politics*, 94-6.

⁶⁰² Julian Bond, interview by author, Birmingham, Alabama, 6 Mar. 2008, typed notes in author's possession.

⁶⁰³ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*; Hall, "Long Civil Rights Movement," 1245-8.

activists engaged in anti-poll tax and voter registration campaigns as part of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, formed in 1938 in Birmingham, Alabama.

Like other black southerners, black Memphians experienced a rise in union membership and activism.⁶⁰⁴ Black men and women participated in interracial CIO strikes, and they also joined non-CIO unions and formed their own unions when excluded from white unions. Founded in Arkansas in 1934, the interracial Southern Tenant Farmers Union attracted members of different political persuasions, including Socialists, New Dealers, and NAACP members. Headquartered in Memphis, it had members in West and East Tennessee.⁶⁰⁵ Though black strikers in Memphis and Shelby County generally received only minor wage increases and did not have all their demands met, riverboat workers carried out a series of successful interracial strikes. A 1937 strike of the AFL's International Longshoremen's Union (ILA) over low wages, poor working conditions, and long hours resulted in fewer hours and a better environment for workers. In 1939, the ILA and CIO's Inland Boatmen's Union's strike resulted in union recognition and better working conditions.⁶⁰⁶

Black Memphians experienced a greater degree of politicization during the 1930s as well. In contrast to the 1916 Lincoln League and 1927 West Tennessee Civic and Political League mobilizations, they were less reliant on figures such as Church and his associates for

⁶⁰⁴ In the late 1920s, Memphis had the most unionized workers of any city in Tennessee, but blacks made up only 1 percent of union members and they generally faced racial friction with the white members. Almost half of the twenty-five thousand workers employed by the 580 businesses in the city were unionized. Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 151; Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1993), 19.

⁶⁰⁵ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis" 153; Adkins, "Beale Street," 103.

⁶⁰⁶ Honey, *Southern Labor*, 93-116.

political guidance and were more likely to develop their own outlooks. They developed more political groups and engaged in more political debates than in the 1920s. Some blacks became Democrats whereas others turned to the Socialist and Communist Parties; these parties also gained strength nationwide during the Depression. Civic clubs formed and took some political action as well.⁶⁰⁷ In addition, local blacks kept up with political developments elsewhere such as the NAACP's legal battle against the white primary in Texas. Rising black literacy and educational levels, along with the growth of black periodicals and the spread of radio, furthered this increased political consciousness in Memphis and throughout the country.⁶⁰⁸ Though the momentum of the 1927 effort had not been sustained, it remained an important example to black Memphians of their political potential.⁶⁰⁹

Section IV

Roosevelt's election had another effect on black Memphians: it further increased Crump's power. Because the federal administration was now Democratic, Crump no longer had to rely on local Republicans for national influence. His service in the House of Representatives from 1930 to 1934 further increased his influence in Washington, and he controlled this seat after he ended his term. Crump also controlled every important office in Memphis and Shelby County as well as the seats of the two U.S. senators and the

⁶⁰⁷ Adkins, "Beale Street," 53, 93-5, 101-12; Honey, *Southern Labor*, 55; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 152-3; Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 177-9; Dowdy, *Mr. Crump*, 61.

⁶⁰⁸ In fact, blacks nationwide increased their literacy levels as a result of New Deal programs, resulting in a 10 percent drop in their illiteracy rate in the 1930s. Adkins, "Beale Street," 92-6; Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 56-7, 67.

⁶⁰⁹ Adkins, "Beale Street," 36.

governor.⁶¹⁰ Moreover, his power became unparalleled: from 1931 to 1943, his candidates received almost 99 percent of the votes in the four mayoral elections; no politician in any major U.S. city has ever matched that record to date.⁶¹¹

Not wanting any black person to hold any position of political influence that potentially threatened his control, Crump began a personal campaign against Church after Roosevelt took office. Though Church had aligned with Crump, Church was a powerful black political leader and well-known civil rights advocate, and the black vote became less necessary for Crump now that he was more in control. Crump harassed Church by finding building-code violations in his properties. As Church's daughter, Roberta Church, later explained:

[I]t took the form of things like this: if you put in a fire escape after the fire inspectors had been to your property, then they'd find some trouble with the electrical wiring; after you got the electrical wiring repaired, there'd be some troubles with the exits It was one constant thing after another, so that you always had to be spending money for repairs. The city wouldn't approve inspection unless you did this, that, or the other.⁶¹²

Crump also apparently pressured Church not to criticize the city administration in political mass meetings.⁶¹³ By 1937, the machine reneged on its promise to exempt Church from local property taxes and ordered him to pay high back taxes. Hurt economically by the

⁶¹⁰ Key, *Southern Politics*, 59; Silliman Evans to V. O. Key, 10 Nov. 1949, V. O. Key Papers, Box 58, Folder: Comments 1 of 2, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts; Paul Coppock, "Crump Ticket Rides into City's Offices on Confidence Vote," *CA*, 10 Nov. 1939, Vertical File: 1939 Election, MSC.

⁶¹¹ Kousser, *Colorblind Injustice*, 143, 146.

⁶¹² Roberta and Annette Church, interview by Charles W. Crawford, transcript, Memphis, no. 2, 10 Jul. 1973, p. 2-3.

⁶¹³ E. H. Crump to Watkins Overton, 6 Feb. 1934, Crump Papers, Series III, Box 85, Folder: Watkins Overton Personal Correspondence, mfm, 000091.

Depression, Church could not pay this money, so city officials began to seize and sell his property.⁶¹⁴

Crump took steps against white political adversaries as well. One target was Ed Meeman. After assuming the editorship of the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* in 1931, he became one of the most vocal critics of the Crump organization. Crump detested him and tried to undermine him.⁶¹⁵ For instance, when Mrs. Hamilton Little told Mayor Overton that Meeman was trying to “get the friendship” of members of the city’s white women’s organizations in 1934, Overton and Crump suspected that he was trying to build up their support in order to generate opposition to the machine.⁶¹⁶ “I would not trust him across the street,” Overton wrote.⁶¹⁷ Revealing his fear of any type of competing social organizations, Crump suggested that Overton recruit at least two women to monitor Meeman’s activities. The boss recommended contacting the wives of Joe Boyle and E. W. Hale, two officials in his machine, to see whom they suggested as informants.⁶¹⁸

Crump not only went after political opponents in Memphis but also ones statewide. When Silliman Evans bought the Nashville *Tennessean* in 1938, he observed that Crump ruled the state with an iron fist. Evans launched an attack on him through its pages. It

⁶¹⁴ Church and Church, interview no. 2, 10 Jul. 1973, 5-12; “Party Out of Power--Taxes,” *NYAN*, 3 Apr. 1937, p. 11; “Ask Sale of Bob Church Property in Memphis to Collect \$55,000 Taxes,” *NYAN*, 5 Mar. 1938, p. 4.

⁶¹⁵ Clark Porteous, “The Two Eds of Memphis--Meeman and Crump,” *WTHSP* 45 (1991): 140-52; Edward J. Meeman, *The Editorial We: A Posthumous Autobiography* (Memphis: Memphis State Univ. Press, 1976).

⁶¹⁶ See these documents in Crump Papers, Series III, Box 85, Folder: Watkins Overton Personal 1934: Overton to Crump, 24 Jan. 1934, mfm, 000052; Overton to Crump, 22 Jan. 1934, mfm, 000056; and Crump to Overton, 24 Jan. 1934, mfm, 000054-5. The quote is from Overton’s letter of January 24.

⁶¹⁷ Overton to Crump, 22 Jan. 1934.

⁶¹⁸ Crump to Overton, 26 Jan. 1934, Crump Papers, Series III, Box 85, Folder: Watkins Overton Personal 1934, mfm, 000051.

became the state's only newspaper to make a sustained fight against Crump though Meeman made some headway in Memphis. Evans later recalled the extent of Crump's control: Governor Prentice Cooper would call the Memphis boss every morning for guidance. Because Evans opposed Crump, politicians ostracized him, leading him to feel like a "leper." Crump destroyed "scores of men financially, [drove] men out of the state, destroyed their homes [and] . . . businesses, and no Hitler was ever more dictatorial than Crump when we started the fight against him," Evans later said.⁶¹⁹

Black Memphians faced not only Crump's opposition to independent political activists but also police brutality, which intensified after 1933 and became increasingly deadly by the decade's end. In 1937, for instance, the police murdered two black men, wounded blacks in seven shooting incidents, and otherwise harmed blacks at least six other times.⁶²⁰ "There was a general fear of the police by blacks in the 1930s," labor activist George Holloway recalled. "If a policeman saw you on a corner, he'd almost always anticipate that you were stealing or up to no good. If you walked through a white neighborhood, they'd drive you out or arrest you, saying you were trying to steal or something."⁶²¹

One of the most significant police brutality cases concerned William Glover, a member of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the large black union headed by A. Philip Randolph. In early 1938, the police arrested Glover. After accusing him of flirting

⁶¹⁹ Evans to Key, 10 Nov. 1949.

⁶²⁰ Bunche, *Political Status*, 493-4; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 32; Honey, *Southern Labor*, 1-5, 61.

⁶²¹ Holloway further remembered that the police would make sure he and other Booker T. Washington High School students kept going when they walked through white neighborhoods on their way home from school. Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 64.

with a young white woman, officers beat him to the point that they left a hole in his forehead. The police chief ordered Glover to resign his job with the Pullman Company and leave town. Glover resigned and then traveled with his family to Cairo, Illinois, to stay with his brother.⁶²²

Bob Church tried to rectify at least two or three cases of police brutality, including the one involving Glover. If the victim was not killed, Church would press the mayor to hear the victim's side and give him a fair trial if he was prosecuted. Church also tried to get guilty police officers dismissed.⁶²³ When Glover made an official statement in Cairo on the incident of police brutality, J. T. Settle, Jr., a lawyer and political associate of Church's, represented him.⁶²⁴ Ten days later, Rev. S. A. Owen, the prominent black minister, and Julian Bell, an employee of Booker T. Washington High School, praised Church for his handling of the case. "I realize that you serve unselfishly and unostentatiously in the interest of your fellow citizens as usual. We appreciate you all the more," Owen wrote.⁶²⁵ Proclaiming himself an "interested observer" of black leaders, Bell said, "I'm sure Memphis would be a much better place in which to live if our [r]eligious, [p]olitical, and [s]ocial leadership were dotted with a few more men like yourself, and those with whom you are connected."⁶²⁶ Later that year, Church advised blacks to protest police brutality by not

⁶²² Ibid., 23-8.

⁶²³ Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 17-8; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 144-5.

⁶²⁴ Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 23.

⁶²⁵ Owen to Church, 3 Feb. 1938, Church Family Papers, Box 6, Folder 2.

⁶²⁶ Bell described Church and his associates as "[m]en with character, intelligence, and grit enough to get things done in an intelligent way and still hold the respect and confidence of the powers that be." If he could ever be of any service to Church or his cause, Bell said that the black Republican should feel free to call on him. Bell to Church, 3 Feb. 1938, Church Family Papers, Box 6, Folder 2.

voting for Walter Chandler, the Crump candidate for governor.⁶²⁷ Chandler ended up withdrawing from the race and more blacks stayed away from the polls than usual, but Crump's candidate still won.⁶²⁸

As Glover's case shows, the Crump machine also targeted laborites. City officials previously had tolerated and even worked with certain labor organizations.⁶²⁹ With the rise of labor activism in the 1930s, Crump continued to work with the conservative AFL, but he and local business leaders opposed the CIO as well as the Southern Tenant Farmers Union and other unions as threats to their control and interests. Local governmental officials consistently publicized the low wages offered in the city as a way of attracting more business to the area, but labor activism threatened to force higher wages.⁶³⁰ Like other southern politicians, Crump became disenchanted with the more liberal components of the New Deal, such as the establishment of the minimum wage and the protections offered to unions.⁶³¹ Militant unions, with their legal strikes, illegal sit down strikes, and other direct-action protests, threatened to interfere with Crump's desire to present Memphis as a peaceful and orderly city. He also opposed labor activism because he knew that unionists potentially could join forces and oppose him at the polls.⁶³²

⁶²⁷ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 32-3.

⁶²⁸ Bunche, *Political Status*, 499.

⁶²⁹ David M. Tucker, *Memphis since Crump: Bossism, Blacks, and Civic Reformers, 1948-1968* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1980), 56; Wayne Dowdy, email to author, 12 Apr. 2005, copy in author's possession; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 154.

⁶³⁰ *Ibid.*, 54, 56; Honey, *Southern Labor*; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 30-1.

⁶³¹ Biles, *Memphis*, 81-7; Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 4, 5, 61, 100; Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 77-104.

⁶³² Virginia Emerson Lewis, "Fifty Years of Politics in Memphis, 1900-1950" (Ph.D. diss., New York Univ., 1955), 138.

Mayor Overton's press statement of March 1938 represented a typical justification of the Crump machine's anti-union stance. Overton said:

Some people's ideas of civil rights is [*sic*] to hide behind American democracy, and to carry on their underhand work until they think they are strong enough to overthrow our democracy. Memphis still does not want or need imported C I O [*sic*] agitators, radicals, or communists to tell us how to conduct our government. We believe in American democracy, and will preserve it in this city from all illegal attacks Merchants, bankers, civic leaders, and Memphis labor will attest that Memphis is a healthy, progressive and efficiently operated city.⁶³³

The statement revealed that the Crump machine tried to paint the unionists as the problem and present the city as a place of "good abode," the very meaning of the name Memphis.

Ironically, the Crump machine was the one engaging in activities that threatened the social harmony of Memphis by violating the civil liberties of its opponents and violently attacking them. As a result of Crump's opposition, black and white unionists suffered beatings, harassment, and even death at the hands of the political machine.⁶³⁴ The Crump machine's police brutality and attacks on unionists attracted national publicity, and national civil rights organizations devoted attention to these matters.⁶³⁵ For instance, though the 1939 riverfront strike of the AFL's International Longshoremen's Union and the CIO's Inland Boatmen's Union was considered successful, its black leader, Thomas Watkins, escaped a murder attempt by city authorities. The local NAACP branch provided for his transportation so that he could flee to East St. Louis, Illinois. At the request of the Memphis police, law

⁶³³ Watkins Overton, "Statement," 14 Mar. 1938, Overton Papers, Box 10, Folder 11.

⁶³⁴ Michael Honey has done the most extensive work on the Crump machine's crackdown on labor activists. See: Honey, *Southern Labor*; Honey, *Black Workers Remember*.

⁶³⁵ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 154-5; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 32.

enforcement officials there arrested Watkins twice, but the charges failed to stick.⁶³⁶ The Memphis NAACP chapter protested the Watkins case to the U.S. Justice Department and the national office of the NAACP.⁶³⁷ The chapter's president, Utiillus R. Phillips, wrote U.S. Attorney General Frank P. Murphy, "This instance is another of numerous violations of basic civil rights and liberties of Memphis [c]itizens, aided and abetted by the city administration and the police force."⁶³⁸

Section V

As Crump and his cronies grew increasingly repressive in the 1930s, they favored relationships with black leaders who did not challenge them politically. One was Dr. J. E. Walker, who emerged as Memphis's most prominent black Democratic figure in the 1930s. He grew up poor in Indianola, Mississippi. Using his earnings from farm work and summer teaching, he self-financed his undergraduate education at Alcorn College in Mississippi. Savings from his teaching days enabled him to attend Meharry Medical College in Nashville, where he received his M.D. Walker moved to Memphis and founded the Universal Life Insurance Company in 1923, which became one of the city's most prominent businesses and one of the country's largest black life insurance companies. He organized the Negro

⁶³⁶ Honey, *Southern Labor*, 1-5, 93-116. I have also drawn from the following documents in the Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Bethesda, Md.: University Publications of America, 1982-1995), Group II, Box C367, Folder: Memphis, Tenn. 1939: "Tom Watkins Flees amid Police Bullets," [PS], 27 May 1939, mfm, 19:001006 and Utiillus R. Phillips to Thurgood Marshall, 20 Jul. 1939, mfm, 19:001011.

⁶³⁷ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 32; Phillips to Marshall, 20 Jul. 1939; and these documents in the Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C367, Folder: Memphis, Tenn. 1939: Grace T. Hamilton to Walter White, 27 May 1939, mfm, 19:001007 and Phillips to Murphy, 27 May 1939, mfm, 19:001005.

⁶³⁸ Phillips to Frank P. Murphy, 27 May 1939.

Chamber of Commerce in 1926.⁶³⁹ Though Walker served as a leader of the West Tennessee Civic and Political League in 1927, tension between him and Church grew out of unpleasant business relations and their similar ambitions. After Church denied his request to be a delegate to the Republican National Convention in 1932, Walker emerged as a political rival and turned to the Democratic Party.⁶⁴⁰

Walker personally experienced the benefits of federal action to alleviate poverty. Hit hard by the black bank's failure in 1927, Universal Life suffered further losses during the first years of the Depression.⁶⁴¹ In 1933, Walker borrowed money from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to save his business from financial disaster. Three years later, Walker observed, "Better conditions were reflected soon after the beginning of the Roosevelt administration, and conditions have continued to improve without a hitch. In 1934, in fact, our business was better than in any year of the existence of our company." As a result of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, which provided subsidies to farmers, black farmers could make payments on properties for which the company held mortgages, allowing Universal Life to pay back its Reconstruction Finance Corporation loan.⁶⁴²

During the 1930s, Walker engaged in numerous endeavors to increase the economic security of blacks and mobilize them politically. He formed the nonpartisan Independent

⁶³⁹ For biographical information on Walker, see: Pink Palace Museum, *Historic Black Memphians*, 18-9; McMillan, *Dark Journey*, 106, 184-6, 275-6, 298; James B. Jalenak, "Beale Street Politics" (honors senior thesis, Yale Univ., 1961), 39-40; "Tennessee's \$6,000,000 Negro Business," *Color* magazine, Mar. 1950, African-American Culture and Life Collection, Box 2, Folder 7.

⁶⁴⁰ Adkins attributes their tension to similar ambitions though he does not specify what he means by this statement. Adkins, "Beale Street," 111-2; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 135, 143; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 121-2.

⁶⁴¹ Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee*, 95.

⁶⁴² In 1932, the Hoover administration set up the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to lend federal funds to businesses. "Negro Business Given Government Help," *NYAN*, 10 Oct. 1936, p. 2.

Business and Civic Association in 1932, which worked with the Crump machine, encouraged civic responsibility, and advocated for black economic advancement.⁶⁴³ With its membership representing a fairly representative cross section of ages, the group held regular monthly meetings in contrast to Church who no longer had any extensive or permanent organization beyond his black-and-tan faction.⁶⁴⁴ Walker also served as president of the Community Welfare League in 1932, an organization affiliated with the local government and created to provide relief for blacks. It distributed flour for needy families and provided other social welfare services.⁶⁴⁵ At a time in which Inter-Racial League and other black welfare activity had waned, this group served an important function.⁶⁴⁶ In addition, Walker was a member of the National Negro Business League, the organization founded by Booker T. Washington. He became its president in 1939, enhancing his national prominence.⁶⁴⁷

Walker also involved himself with the local NAACP branch, a move that further intensified his rivalry with Church because Church and his associates had once controlled the chapter. Following the cessation of its activities after the black bank's failure, the Memphis NAACP branch had reactivated in late 1930. It held mass meetings, protested the local showing of *Birth of a Nation*, and pressed for criminal justice. Church was no longer involved in the branch though Lt. Lee signed on as a charter member of the reactivated chapter. In contrast to the 1920s when its membership drew mainly from the business and

⁶⁴³ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 136, 170-1; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 121-2.

⁶⁴⁴ Adkins, "Beale Street," 111.

⁶⁴⁵ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 132-4; "Tennessee State News," *CD*, 20 Aug. 1932, p. 11; "Tennessee State News," *CD*, 12 Nov. 1932, p. 12.

⁶⁴⁶ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 126.

⁶⁴⁷ "Head of Business League Honored," *CD*, 7 Oct. 1939, p. 6; "Memphis Expresses Pride in Dr. Walker's Election," *CD*, 16 Sept. 1939, p. 19; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 172.

professional class, railroad postal workers predominated among the fifty-six charter members; only a few ministers, teachers, and businessmen joined.⁶⁴⁸ When the branch declined in activity after its young leadership left town in 1932, Walker and his lieutenants took it over. The chapter protested racial discrimination in New Deal programs at the same time that it distributed information to blacks on how to take advantage of these relief initiatives.⁶⁴⁹ Its activities also included supporting the lawsuit of William B. Redmond II of Nashville to integrate the University of Tennessee School of Pharmacy. The NAACP national office, which was working on similar legal challenges elsewhere, supported Redmond as part of its legal campaign against the Jim Crow system.⁶⁵⁰

Even though Church resigned from the national board of the NAACP in 1931, he continued to maintain ties to the organization's national office. National officials sometimes bypassed the Memphis branch's leadership and consulted him about local matters. Church, for instance, assisted the national office in its case against the University of Tennessee.⁶⁵¹ Walker's lieutenant, M. S. Stuart, a Universal Life executive, headed the local NAACP branch until 1935, but national officials saw Church as more committed to racial justice than Stuart. According to Walter Adkins, "The organization did very little under Stuart's leadership, probably due to the popular idea that he was more concerned with the exploitation of the Negroes in favor of his insurance company than with the welfare of the

⁶⁴⁸ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 139-41.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid, 142-50; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 122.

⁶⁵⁰ "Seeks Admission to Tenn. U. Grad School," *CD*, 9 May 1936, p. 3; Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 205-13.

⁶⁵¹ Upon resigning from the board, Church privately indicated the organization had become too partisan. By this time, the NAACP was becoming identified with the Democratic Party. Publicly, Church indicated that his business and political activities had kept him from participating in board meetings and that the organization was now so well established that it no longer needed him on the board. Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 141-3; "Cites N. A. A. C. P. Membership Boost," *NYAN*, 6 Jan. 1932, p. 3; "Robert R. Church Quits N. A. A. C. P." *CD*, 30 Jan. 1932, p. 13; Walter White, Letter to the Editor, *CD*, 13 Feb. 1932, p. 15.

group.⁶⁵² By 1939, Utillus R. Phillips, a railroad postal worker, headed the NAACP chapter, and Walker and Stuart appear to have ended their official involvement.

While Walker and his associates headed the NAACP branch and engaged in political and economic efforts, the first black Democratic club in Memphis formed in 1934; the group called itself the “Roosevelt New Deal Negro Democratic Organization.”⁶⁵³ It is unclear whether Walker was involved. In communications with Crump officials, the group’s leaders asked for their assistance in starting their organization and pledged cooperation with them. These black Democrats backed Roosevelt because of their support for the New Deal, and they wanted to line up with the regular Democratic organizations on the local, state, and national levels. The club had four hundred members, including a number of male college students, and the leaders hoped to reach five thousand members. Black independent professionals led the organization, and working-class blacks primarily made up its membership ranks.⁶⁵⁴ The fact that the younger generation embraced the Democratic Party revealed similar dynamics taking place elsewhere in the South. Unlike their parents’ and grandparents’ generations, which could have vivid memories of the Democratic Party’s history of racial repression and the Republican Party’s steps for racial justice, these youth saw the Democrats as a more viable political alternative. Moreover, they were disenchanted with the older generation of black Republicans that Church and his associates represented;

⁶⁵² Adkins, “Beale Street,” 107.

⁶⁵³ Ibid., 94-5; “DeWitt Alcorn Heads Club as President,” *Memphis Journal*, 30 Nov. 1934, Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 111, Folder: Walter Chandler 1936, mfm, 000724.

⁶⁵⁴ Ralph Picard to E. H. Crump, 12 Feb. 1935, Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 111, Folder: Walter Chandler 1936, mfm, 000722; “DeWitt Alcorn,” *Memphis Journal*; Adkins, “Beale Street,” 94-5.

they saw them as bolstering whites in the party, not serving the broader interests of blacks, and being self-serving politicians interested in patronage.⁶⁵⁵

Walker's political groups and the Negro Democratic organization represented avenues open for black political activists in the face of Crump's crackdown on whites and blacks who threatened his control. Although Church and his associates had certainly worked with Crump, they retained their independence from the machine both in party affiliation and in their larger objectives. In contrast, these black Democratic organizations tied themselves to the machine. While Church could serve as a delegate to Republican National Conventions and control patronage during Republican administrations, Walker could not do either during Democratic administrations because the local, state, and national organizations did not include black southerners in these capacities. As of 1935, Church and his group continued to hold more influence over and enjoy more support from black Memphians than the black Democrats.⁶⁵⁶

Lt. Lee also reflected the changes in black political leadership taking place locally in the 1930s. He shifted from being a leader focused on protest to being one who accommodated to the machine.⁶⁵⁷ He continued to develop a working relationship with the city administration, not only as a political leader but also in social relief efforts.⁶⁵⁸ Like other blacks, he served as an informant for the Crump machine as well.⁶⁵⁹ In turn, Lee could

⁶⁵⁵ Weiss, *Farewell to the Party*, 78-80, 229-32.

⁶⁵⁶ Jalenak, "Beale Street," 40; Adkins, "Beale Street," 112.

⁶⁵⁷ Perre Magness, "Lee Loses Position as Blacks' Spokesman," CA, 15 Feb. 1990, Vertical File: George W. Lee, MSC; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 120.

⁶⁵⁸ Lee, *Beale Street*, 212.

⁶⁵⁹ Picard to Crump, 12 Feb. 1935.

recommend at least a few blacks for city employment, have a say in community projects such as the naming of Handy Park, receive a special police permit to carry a gun, and successfully press the city to build a football stadium and two swimming pools for blacks.⁶⁶⁰

In order to forward his political agenda, Lee developed an acute and perceptive understanding of Crump's personality. Lee observed that Crump was forceful and had a temper but that he could be manipulated. "You could get across explosive cross-cutters that separated you from a strong willed man and keep him from exploding, if you employed the right kind of technique," Lee recalled.⁶⁶¹ "Beyond all that crust and thunder, beyond it was a kindly heart You had to dig for it, but if you didn't rile him, if you could find a way to neutralize him, you could get almost anything out of him."⁶⁶² Prominent black lawyer and Democrat W. H. Foote took a psychological approach when dealing with Crump as well. When complaining to Crump about inadequate recreational facilities, he pointed out that Memphis was "being severely criticized" for these services. "[L]et us hope that something is done before radicals start either by agitation or [c]ourt procedure some movement to give Memphis unfavorable publicity," he wrote.⁶⁶³ By pointing out that a group of potentially aggressive blacks existed and speaking to the machine's concerns about social harmony, Foote pressured Crump to take action.

Undoubtedly aware of the political constraints imposed by the Crump machine, Lt. Lee, J. E. Walker, and J. B. Martin, another political lieutenant of Church, believed foremost in an economic approach for improving race conditions. Lee said, "I believe the Negro

⁶⁶⁰ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 100-1; Bunche, *Political Status*, 499-500.

⁶⁶¹ Lee, interview, n.d., 5.

⁶⁶² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶⁶³ Foote to Crump, 1 Jan. 1937.

problem will be solved by the growth of class consciousness among the [s]outhern white masses. This will remove the necessity of demanding rights on the basis of race or color and will place our struggle on the plane of class interest.” Similarly, Martin believed that progressive labor leaders and not politicians would serve as the most effective black leaders in Memphis. In addition, Walker was supportive of black trade unionists.⁶⁶⁴

Section VI

During the 1930s, Bob Church remained steadfastly loyal to the Republican Party. He had reached the height of his power in the 1920s, the likes of which he would not see again.⁶⁶⁵ The year 1932 marked the last one in which he carried out a program of vigorous political activity statewide; his membership on the Republican State Executive Committee ended that year after fourteen years of continual service.⁶⁶⁶ Blacks in Memphis and Shelby County had engaged in their greatest political mobilization in years to elect Church. They had registered to vote in unprecedented numbers with thirty-three thousand ending up on the rolls, and ward organizations and a general organization headed by Lt. Lee had campaigned for Church. But, a lily-white Republican defeated him for a spot on the committee.⁶⁶⁷

Afterward, Church spent a great deal of time in the East working with leaders, including industrialist Joseph Pew of Pennsylvania, to try to re-build the Grand Old Party so that Republicans would regain the presidency in 1936. Pew largely opposed the New Deal,

⁶⁶⁴ No evidence exists, however, that Lee engaged in labor activism. Bunche, *Political Status*, 500.

⁶⁶⁵ Adkins, “Beale Street,” 67, 80; Thomas N. Boschert, “Church, Robert Reed, Jr.,” *American National Biography Online*, Feb. 2000, <http://www.anb.org/articles/06/06-00102.html> [accessed 23 Aug. 2009].

⁶⁶⁶ Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 93.

⁶⁶⁷ Johnson, “Election in Memphis;” Bessie Thornton, “Tennessee State News,” *CD*, 30 Jul. 1932, p. 11.

and the Eastern wing of the party promoted business interests.⁶⁶⁸ But, despite the work of Church and other leaders, the Republican Party floundered, experiencing factionalism and no strong leader. It offered little to counter Roosevelt's work to alleviate the Depression. A visible strain of racial progressivism persisted in that some white leaders made statements for black rights and blacks remained involved in party operations. However, the damage of the Hoover years and the popularity of Roosevelt hurt efforts to attract blacks back to the party.⁶⁶⁹

Despite his activity outside his hometown and the opposition that he faced from Crump, Church remained involved in Memphis and Tennessee politics and a major figure on Beale Street.⁶⁷⁰ In fact, he saw his local and national activism as intertwined. According to the *Chicago Defender* in 1935, "[H]is slogan always has been to help better the condition, first, of the Race in Memphis, then the members of the Race in the United States." As in the previous decade, Church served as a delegate to Republican National Conventions. His black-and-tan faction held forth as the city's regular Republican organization; it consisted mainly of men but women also joined.⁶⁷¹ It still battled with local lily whites.⁶⁷² In 1934, for instance, four hundred members of Church's faction attended the Shelby County Republican

⁶⁶⁸ Scott, *Negro in Tennessee Politics*, 93; Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy*, 31.

⁶⁶⁹ Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy*, 29-33.

⁶⁷⁰ Jalenak, "Beale Street," 39-40; Adkins, "Beale Street," 112.

⁶⁷¹ I have retained the capitalization style that the newspaper used. James C. Dickerson, "Tennessee State News," *CD*, 2 May 1936, p. 23.

⁶⁷² The *Pittsburgh Courier* reported in April 1932 that the lily-white wing of the Republican Party was very weak in Memphis: no lily whites were a member of the state executive committee or had an official voice at the national convention. Travis, "Bob Church." On the black-and-tan and lily-white battles, see, for instance: "Lily-Whites Continue Open Warfare on Church's Faction," *CD*, 16 Apr. 1932, p. 1; "Foil Effort of Whites to Rule Memphis Confab," *CD*, 7 Apr. 1934, p. 4; "Bob Church Wins Again in Memphis," *CD*, 8 Sept. 1934, p. 4; "Tenn. GOP in Convention at Nashville: Bob Church Defeats the 'Lily-Whites,'" *CD*, 16 May 1936, p. 9; "Bob Church Wins Convention Seat after Contest," *Cleveland Call and Post*, 11 Jun. 1936, p. 1.

Convention whereas only forty to fifty members of the lily-white faction showed up. Still, the lily-white faction tried to turn the meeting in their favor but to no avail.⁶⁷³

Even with the lily-white opposition, Church stood in high regard among people of all classes and in the business world. He enjoyed friendships with members of official circles in the city, county, and state regardless of their partisanship.⁶⁷⁴ Once again, he received praise from the *Commercial Appeal*. In a 1934 editorial, the daily pointed out his status as the most powerful black Republican nationally and as a welcomed visitor to the White House during the last three Republican administrations. It also noted that Republicans eagerly sought his assistance in national campaigns. Calling Church “[r]ich, cultured, quiet, and unassuming,” the paper commented, “He makes no speeches, has never been known to answer a criticism, and seldom appears on the scene of political action. He does not seek publicity and has never by act or word encouraged race prejudice.”⁶⁷⁵ Although Church defended himself from criticism on occasion, the daily’s observations indicated that he had maintained the “soft touch” in his interactions with whites that had characterized his outreach to them when he had served as president of the local Lincoln League. In pressing for civil rights, he and his associates had appealed to American principles of fairness and justice instead of attacking whites as enemies who supported the Jim Crow system.

In his characteristically colorful style, Nat D. Williams heralded the *Commercial Appeal*’s editorial in his column “Down on Beale” for the *Memphis World*, a black newspaper started in 1931. Noting that the paper typically carried negative coverage of

⁶⁷³ “Foil Effort,” *CD*.

⁶⁷⁴ Lee, *Beale Street*, 284; Travis, “Bob Church;” Wilson, interview; “National Affairs,” *Time*, 28 May 1934, Church Family Papers, Box 6, Folder 26; “Robert Church Is on Executive GOP Committee,” *CD*.

⁶⁷⁵ The *Commercial Appeal* editorial, published on May 17, 1934, is quoted in: Nat D. Williams, “Down on Beale,” *Memphis World*, 22 May 1934, Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 18.

blacks, he expressed shock at its words because the daily could make him “do more cussing than any other item in [his] daily existence.” Williams wrote about the praise, “Caesar, himself, could have appreciated a back-pat like that, even if Brutus had said it.”⁶⁷⁶ Similarly, Rev. S. A. Owen wrote Church: “To be able to come through the many upheavals, stresses, and storms of heated political campaigns . . . and then to have such commendable things said of you by . . . the opposite race group . . . in the heart of the country’s prejudice [*sic*], is indeed a noble triumph.”⁶⁷⁷

Church also continued to receive attention from blacks outside Memphis for his political activities and his ability to inspire them. The National League of Republican Colored Women, for instance, invited him to speak at their conference in 1935.⁶⁷⁸ That same year, John Wesley Dobbs of Atlanta invited Church to speak at a mass meeting. Informing Church that he had long kept up with his national and local political activities, he said, “You have attracted the attention of many citizens and have set a concrete example to be patterned after by other men of like temperament, desiring to be of service to an under-privileged minority group of citizens.” Dobbs mentioned that the late Henry Lincoln Johnson, the former Lincoln League of America official, had inspired him to register to vote. Because of his work as a railway mail clerk, Dobbs had not been permitted to become active in politics, but he now was pensioned and determined to “do some real work for my people here in Atlanta.” When in Memphis earlier, he had learned firsthand of Church’s local electoral

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁷ Owen closed his letter by saying that “our hope” was that Church’s “life be prolonged” and his “days of usefulness be many.” Church responded to Owen that the “article did not touch me half as much as your very kind letter . . . I hope by no act of mine, that you will ever have cause to change your opinion of me.” See these letters in Church Family Papers, Box 6, Folder 2: Owen to Church, 21 May 1934, and Church to Owen, 28 May 1934.

⁶⁷⁸ Nannie H. Burroughs to Church, 23 Feb. 1935, Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 47.

activities, which had inspired him to register voters in order to “get rights and privileges right here in Atlanta that we do not now enjoy.”⁶⁷⁹

In a rare interview in 1934 with Walter Adkins, Church explained his political philosophy. His paramount goal was not that blacks become Republican and vote for the party’s candidates but that most be politically active. Realizing that black political influence had thus far been small, Church justified his work to “[keep] an active Negro constituency in the Republican Party” as a means “to arouse the masses of colored Americans to a consciousness of the potency of the ballot, and to use it most effectively.”⁶⁸⁰ He believed that blacks were Republicans out of tradition and circumstances, as incipient capitalists, and because the party was one of “rugged individualism.”⁶⁸¹ Adkins observed, “The Negro Democrat and colored adherents of other parties are not regarded seriously by the ‘Boss of Beale Street’ To him the colored Democrat, Socialist, and Communist are merely back-sliding Republicans beguiled by ephemeral promises, or moved by a childish recalcitrance.”⁶⁸² Church’s remarks indicated an elitist political approach in which he thought he knew what was best for blacks and could speak for their party loyalties even if they differed from his assessment.⁶⁸³

Moreover, Church expressed skepticism about Roosevelt’s “social experimentation.”⁶⁸⁴ As someone who had a career in business, belonged to a family that

⁶⁷⁹ Dobbs to Church, 22 Jun. 1935, Church Family Papers, Box 6, Folder 3.

⁶⁸⁰ Adkins, “Beale Street,” 88.

⁶⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 88, 103.

⁶⁸² This is not a direct quote from Church but rather Adkins’s words. *Ibid.*, 88.

⁶⁸³ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

had grown rich through real estate, and believed black capitalism was a key to racial advancement, Church supported a business-friendly party that did not intervene economically in the way that the New Deal did. He evidently thought this principle outweighed the governmental intervention necessary for mitigating the Depression's impact and helping the black and white masses.

To be sure, Church belonged to an older generation and the black professional class, two groups more likely to support Republicans than younger and poor blacks.⁶⁸⁵ He remembered the hostility of Democrats to blacks and how Republicans had represented a better alternative. He and other black Republicans continued to invoke history to urge blacks to support the party. In 1936, for instance, John Lynch, the prominent Reconstruction-era black politician, said, "The colored voters cannot help but feel that in voting the Democratic ticket in national elections they will be voting to give their [e]ndorsement and their approval to every wrong of which they are victims, every right of which they are deprived and every injustice of which they suffer."⁶⁸⁶

Yet, Church, Lynch, and other black Republicans held on to an increasingly outdated view of their party. Whereas Republicans had dominated national politics since the Civil War, the Democrats now were gaining strength and Republicans no longer had a monopoly on the black vote. To be sure, conservative white Democrats from the South still held a great deal of influence in the party, but their power was on the decline as the party came to encompass a coalition of blacks, laborites, and working-class citizens across regions that put its hope in the party as a vehicle for social change. For instance, two thirds of the Democrats

⁶⁸⁵ Weiss, *Farewell to the Party*, 216-8, 229-32.

⁶⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 231. Also see: Simmons, *Republican Party*.

elected to Congress had come from the South and Border South states from 1896 to 1930, but their numbers decreased to less than half under Roosevelt.⁶⁸⁷

Many white Democrats in the South opposed this new face of the Democratic Party. They also abhorred the New Deal's steps on behalf of blacks, the encroachment of the federal government in their communities, and Eleanor Roosevelt and racially progressive New Deal officials. In 1936, these conservative white Democrats were further dealt a blow when the party did away with its 104-year-old rule that required two-thirds of a convention's delegates to nominate the presidential candidate. Because of their dominance in the party, southern congressmen had always held veto power over the party's candidates and platforms. They no longer wielded this influence.⁶⁸⁸

The 1936 election showed the changes in the party unlike any other election to that point. The Democratic Party, along with the Republican Party, made an unprecedented effort to secure black ballots by running full-page ads in black newspapers, having an active black voters division, and taking other steps.⁶⁸⁹ For blacks, the election, in essence, served as a referendum on the New Deal.⁶⁹⁰ Would they support the president despite the pervasive discrimination that plagued his New Deal programs? Or, would blacks turn to the Republican Party presidential candidate, Alf Landon? He embraced black civil rights to a

⁶⁸⁷ Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 83-4.

⁶⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 77-83.

⁶⁸⁹ Weiss, *Farewell to the Party*, 185-204; Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 69-71.

⁶⁹⁰ Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy*, 40-5.

greater degree than the president and spoke out against discrimination in New Deal programs, but he and his party did not fully support Roosevelt's relief measures.⁶⁹¹

J. E. Walker and local black attorney William H. Foote organized the Shelby County Colored Democratic Club under the guidance of the Crump machine for the election. A U.S. Department of Agriculture official also assisted its formation. At Universal Life Insurance Company in late October, the club held its first public meeting. In publicizing the gathering, J. Ashton Hayes, a local black principal, called on black educators to "come to Universal and see what a Negro Democrat looks like." Sound trucks parked outside the Booker T. Washington High School stadium, where two football teams were playing, also spread the word about the meeting. Walker returned for the gathering from Texas, where he was speaking on behalf of John Nance Garner, the vice presidential candidate. The crowd was small at the meeting, but community interest soon grew.⁶⁹² As many as five hundred attended one of the club's rallies, and more than twenty-five hundred attended its last meeting before the election.⁶⁹³

While Walker and other black Democrats recruited support for their party, Church served as co-director of the black voters division for the Republican Party. In Landon, the governor of Kansas, black Republicans found a candidate who took steps that validated their belief that blacks remained better off in the Republican Party than the Democratic Party.

⁶⁹¹ Weiss, *Farewell to the Party*, 195-205; Simmons, *Republican Party*; "Gov. Alf M. Landon Outspoken on Lynch Question at Conference," *CD*, 17 Oct. 1936, p. 4; Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 69-70.

⁶⁹² Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 171; Walker to E. W. Hale, 1 May 1944, Chandler Papers, Box 66, Folder: Negroes 1944; "Invited to Look at 'a Negro Democrat,'" *CD*, 31 Oct. 1936, p. 22.

⁶⁹³ "Meanderings around Memphis, Tennessee," *CD*, 7 Nov. 1936, p. 19; "Meanderings around Memphis, Tennessee," *CD*, 14 Nov. 1936, p. 19.

“With Landon[,] G.O.P. Begins Its Recovery,” a *Chicago Defender* headline blared.⁶⁹⁴ In contrast to Hoover, Landon openly embraced black activities in the party, and his pictures with Church and other blacks were featured in black newspapers and Republican Party campaign material. In addition, he met with black Republican leaders during the campaign. Following a meeting with Church, Landon publicly condemned lynching and called on Congress to pass an anti-lynching bill. Roosevelt had previously condemned lynching, but he continued to not support anti-lynching legislation.⁶⁹⁵ Though Democrats accredited blacks as delegates for the first time at their convention, the Republican Party pointed out in campaign material directed at black voters that a South Carolina senator had walked out when a black minister gave the invocation. In the Grand Old Party, open black participation was tolerated, and blacks had long served as convention delegates.⁶⁹⁶

In fact, the party afforded Church the honor that election season of becoming the first black in forty years to sit on the executive committee of the Republican National Committee; the executive committee was charged with directing all aspects of the upcoming campaign. Church had sat in on these meetings for years, and he now held the proxy for East Tennessee Congressman J. Will Taylor, his loyal ally on the state and national political scenes. The *Chicago Defender* noted that Church “entered into the deliberations of the committee with his accustomed modesty. He was given a most cordial reception. No members sought to

⁶⁹⁴ “With Landon[,] G.O.P. Begins Its Recovery,” *CD*, 1 Aug. 1936, p. 1. On the enthusiasm of black Republicans for the Landon ticket, see also: “Knox Ceremony Attracts Many,” *NYAN*, 8 Aug. 1936, p. 2; “Landon’s Notification Draws Negro Leaders,” *NYAN*, 1 Aug. 1936, p. 5.

⁶⁹⁵ Simmons, *Republican Party*; “Landon Greets Little and Church,” *CD*, 17 Oct. 1936, p. 1; “Gov. Alf M. Landon,” *CD*; “Gov. Landon Takes Stand on Lynching,” *CD*, 10 Oct. 1936, p. 9; “Landon Backs Law to End Lynching,” *NYAN*, 10 Oct. 1936, p. 1; Roscoe Simmons, “The Week,” *CD*, 17 Oct. 1936, p. 1; “Roosevelt Attacked Lynching as Murder,” *NYAN*, 10 Oct. 1936, p. 1.

⁶⁹⁶ The first time that blacks were accorded status as alternative delegates by the Democratic Party was in 1924. Simmons, *Republican Party*, 19; Weiss, *Farewell to the Party*, 185; Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 70.

flatter his presence His presence was noted as [a member] and not as a ‘leader of the Race.’”⁶⁹⁷

In a Republican Party campaign booklet directed at blacks, Church and more than seventy other prominent black Republicans, including Lt. Lee, signed a statement that focused on the negative aspects of the New Deal. They pointed out that the New Deal discriminated against blacks and gave the Social Security Act as an example because it had excluded black domestic and agricultural workers from its provisions. In addition, the black Republicans spotlighted the Republican plank that stated: “We favor equal opportunity for our colored citizens. We pledge our protection of their economic status and personal safety.” The platform also pledged to “further their employment” and condemned “the present New Deal policies which would regiment and ultimately eliminate the colored citizen from the country’s productive life and make him solely a ward of the [f]ederal [g]overnment.”⁶⁹⁸

For most blacks, however, the benefits of the New Deal outweighed Roosevelt’s inattention to black rights, blacks’ traditional loyalty to the Republican Party, and the racial conservatism of southern congressmen.⁶⁹⁹ The Republican Party had not provided a viable alternative to the New Deal and had a history of empty promises to blacks. In one of the twentieth century’s most stunning partisan shifts, the majority of blacks voted for the Democratic Party for the first time, and Roosevelt swept the election. In contrast to 1932 when some 70 percent of blacks voted for Hoover, now some 70 percent backed Roosevelt.

⁶⁹⁷ “Robert Church Is on Executive GOP Committee,” *CD*, 19 Sept. 1936, p. 5.

⁶⁹⁸ Simmons, *Republican Party*, 14-8. The quote is from p. 14.

⁶⁹⁹ Weiss, *Farewell to the Party*, 211-2.

After the election, Church remained a Republican. In fact, despite their support of Roosevelt in 1936, most blacks remained registered Republicans in the 1930s.⁷⁰⁰ Church argued that the Republican Party should embrace black rights in order to stem the migration of blacks to the Democratic Party.⁷⁰¹ During the Hoover years, he had not become a Democrat because he felt that he could make more of a difference within the Grand Old Party, and he continued to hold this belief.⁷⁰² Indeed, he had a standing and history with the party that enabled him to exert influence albeit to a limited degree. Church would not have been as influential a political figure if he had left the party, and he would have been forced to give up the personal prestige of his recognition within party councils. It remained important that he stay in the party to advocate for black rights and political participation and to keep alive these strains of the party. However, in rigidly adhering to his beliefs in the free market and aligning himself with business interests that opposed the New Deal, Church displayed a disconnection from the plight of working-class and impoverished blacks. He appeared to have a narrow political vision that precluded him from seeing the significance to blacks of the government's ability to improve their economic conditions.

Moreover, the local tension between Church and J. E. Walker suggests that Church --and perhaps Walker as well--was undemocratic when it came to power sharing. It was no wonder that Walker came to enjoy a greater degree of mass political support than Church. While Church was out of town working to rebuild the Republican Party, Walker was the one working in local organizations for social relief and urging blacks to take advantage of the New Deal through his NAACP and political activities. In contrast, Church appears to have

⁷⁰⁰ Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy*, 3.

⁷⁰¹ "Church Calls for Election Control," *CD*, 18 Dec. 1937, p. 5.

⁷⁰² Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 133.

dealt with economic relief on more of an individual basis. For instance, he allowed people who occupied his rental properties to stay for free as a way of alleviating their economic distress.⁷⁰³

Section VII

While Church kept up his battle to make the Republican Party a vehicle for black rights, the year 1938 revealed the different political approaches that black Memphians were employing as the decade came to a close. Inaugurated under the sponsorship of the *Memphis World* that year, the Mayor of Beale Street contest saw blacks elect a mayor and city council in a symbolic campaign modeled after one in Harlem.⁷⁰⁴ The contest was designed to promote citizenship among blacks, educate blacks about the city government, and encourage cooperation with city officials “for the betterment of Memphis as a whole.”⁷⁰⁵ Matthew Thornton, Sr., one of the three police officers who had served in 1919, was elected mayor, and Mayor Overton issued a proclamation giving an official seal of approval to his election.⁷⁰⁶ Active in social, fraternal, and civic circles, Thornton had been a member of the local Lincoln League and a charter member of the city’s NAACP branch. He operated a barbershop and worked for the U.S. Postal Service.⁷⁰⁷ Though black Memphians faced a

⁷⁰³ Church and Church, interview no. 2, 10 Jul. 1973, 3. Also see: Lee, *Beale Street*, 284-5; Bunche, *Political Status*, 499.

⁷⁰⁴ Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 175; “Inauguration for Beale St. Mayor Nov. 6,” *CD*, 5 Nov. 1938, p. 7.

⁷⁰⁵ L. O. Swingler and Norman E. Jones to Walter Chandler, 9 Mar. 1940, Chandler Papers, Box 13, Folder: 1940 Public Improvements Colored Citizens.

⁷⁰⁶ Watkins Overton, “To the ‘Mayor and Commissioners of Beale Street,’” 5 Nov. 1938, Chandler Papers, Box 13, Folder: 1940 Public Improvements Colored Citizens.

⁷⁰⁷ Born in 1873, Thornton worked as a coachman for Church’s white paternal grandfather as a young man. After organizing the K. of P. (Knights of Pythias) band, Thornton persuaded W. C. Handy to lead it in 1905 at the beginning of the blues musician’s career. Church and Walter, *Nineteenth Century Memphis Families*, 95-7.

constricted political environment in which they did not make real bids for office, these symbolic campaigns politicized them by enabling them to elect black men and educating them about the political process. Elsewhere in the South, blacks engaged in similar efforts to elect “bronze mayors.”⁷⁰⁸

For the actual 1938 election, the *Southern Journal*, a black newspaper published on Beale Street, praised the Crump organization and featured news about an upcoming mass meeting supporting the machine. The newspaper’s founder and a rally participant was T. J. Johnson, a local schoolteacher. He had organized the paper and paid all its expenses in order to vindicate Crump as a leader following criticism of the machine by blacks upset about police brutality.⁷⁰⁹ On the front page, the paper extolled the benefits of the city administration for blacks, including better health services, improvements for existing schools, and new public housing projects and schools. It featured a photograph of a gleaming, benevolent looking Edward Crump as well as pictures of Mayor Overton and other local officials. The publication revealed that the mass rally was to feature free watermelons, fireworks, and speeches by black community leaders promoting the Crump candidates and discussing the machine’s benefits.⁷¹⁰

⁷⁰⁸ Bronze mayor was a term used for a symbolic black mayor. Bunche, *Political Status*, 87.

⁷⁰⁹ Johnson to Crump, 20 Jun. 1940.

⁷¹⁰ The image of Crump is featured so prominently that it is above the masthead. Inside the newspaper is a listing of election precincts. The black leaders included J. E. Walker, Lt. Lee, T. O. Fuller, Nat D. Williams, and Lucie Campbell. Blair Hunt, Rev. S. A. Owen, and Rev. J. A. G. Grant were among the six black men who served on a sponsoring committee for the rally, and women’s club leader Mary D. King and five other women served on the auxiliary committee. The Crump machine may have put pressure on some of these leaders to support it. Campbell, for instance, was a teacher in the public schools and could have faced economic repercussions if she did not campaign for Crump. See the July 29, 1938 issue of a *Southern Journal*, a copy of which is in: Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 36.

Before the publication of the *Southern Journal* issue, Taylor C. D. Hayes wrote his pastor, Dr. J. A. G. Grant, to express his disappointment and that of other young black Memphians with his participation in this meeting. A traveling representative for the Elks, Hayes, who was around thirty years old, was the son of T. H. Hayes, Sr., the oldest businessman in Memphis and longtime political associate of Church.⁷¹¹ “News has it that a [c]ommittee of colored men, *working with the city administration*, are to stage a [m]ass [m]eeting in Memphis for the purpose of pointing out to the colored people what the city administration has done (?), is doing (??) and will do (???) for them,” Hayes wrote. Saying that he had heard that Grant, along with J. E. Walker, T. O. Fuller, and Lt. Lee, was a member of this committee, Hayes suggested that his pastor point out to these black leaders the problem of police brutality; the lack of black police officers, firefighters, and city health officials; the low pay for black teachers; and the inadequate recreational facilities and “many other inconvenience[s] . . . for a down-trodden people.” Hayes wrote that he and other young Memphians would be watching the committee “to determine the type of leadership that we desire and the type that we can so well do without.”⁷¹²

Grant admired and sympathized with the young men’s views. Though “not at all satisfied with the treatment that has been awarded to our people” by the city administration, the minister wrote Hayes that he felt that “if we have any hope at all it will be through them.” He further explained, “I believe that if we stick to them [*sic*] at this crucial time it will mean

⁷¹¹ “Chicago Defender’s Ace Reporter Interviews Interesting Memphis Personalities,” *CD*, 6 Mar. 1937, p. 4.

⁷¹² I have retained Hayes’s original emphasis. Hayes to Grant, 17 Jul. 1938, Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 44.

that we will be in a position to get more for our people.”⁷¹³ In response, Hayes called Grant “weak-minded” for believing that Crump and Lee would ever give black people a chance. “The administration of Memphis can never change; it is too deeply rooted in evil,” he declared. “They condone murder, proven by the fact that no officer has ever been fired for the murdering of a Negro, since they were in office. Those that support them, support murder, which is against all the teachings of the Bible.” Hayes also condemned the Crump machine for graft and using money to buy votes. “[I]t is with deep regret that I not only find my faith in the [c]hurch shaken, but my faith in you shattered,” he wrote. “I’m sorry you have taken your stand.”⁷¹⁴ While Hayes and the other young men boldly questioned the authority that their minister represented, Crump and his cronies were still able to recruit black leaders to make the machine look legitimate and manipulate black support.

Despite his overtures to blacks, Crump did not seek black support as vigorously as usual during the 1938 election. Governor Gordon Browning, elected with Crump’s support in 1936, had turned against the Memphis boss by this time. The state crime commission had conducted an investigation of Crump’s tactics for securing the black vote, and it was possible that the Tennessee National Guard would be sent out to monitor elections. In addition, Crump no longer worked with black operators of illegal establishments as much as previously to get votes. His administration had begun to clean up vice in the city partly because of unfavorable national publicity, and Tennessee repealed prohibition the next year.⁷¹⁵

⁷¹³ Grant to Hayes, 12 Jul. 1938, Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 44. This letter was misdated; it was written upon receipt of the July 17 letter.

⁷¹⁴ Hayes to Grant, 19 Jul. 1938, Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 44.

⁷¹⁵ Bunche, *Political Status*, 496-7; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 124-5.

By 1939, the Crump machine was more powerful than ever before as demonstrated by Crump's moves that election season. He ran for mayor to temporarily serve in place of Walter Chandler, a lawyer and World War I veteran who was his choice for the position. Overton and Crump had split over a policy disagreement and the mayor's desire for more power. Chandler, serving in Congress, was needed to cast an important vote. Crump was elected and held office for just fifteen minutes, long enough to rescind the city's invitation to the CIO's American Newspaper Guild to hold its national convention there.⁷¹⁶ Chandler then resigned from Congress to become mayor.

Though blacks increasingly had suffered at the hands of Crump during the 1930s, the decade was not all bleak. Blacks benefited from their political activities in a number of ways. They supported the New Deal, which bettered their standard of living by providing them with improved public services and job opportunities. In response to black political leverage, the city provided blacks with significant improvements, including naming a park for W. C. Handy. Church continued to serve as a voice for black rights in the Republican Party, and his political leadership role mitigated white prejudice as demonstrated by the *Commercial Appeal* editorials. Black Memphians also developed an increased political consciousness, became more politically independent, and formed more political organizations. J. E. Walker emerged as a significant black Democratic leader, providing black Memphians with an alternative to Church and his associates. Under the leadership of Walker and others, the local NAACP engaged in important activism. The labor movement saw some victories and emerged as an important local challenger to the Crump organization in engaging in activism against the interests of the machine.

⁷¹⁶ Dowdy, "E. H. Crump," 87-9; Robert Lasch, "Boss Crump Makes Hague Look Like Mere Amateur," *Chicago Sun*, 6 Aug. 1944, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 36.

Church, Walker, and other blacks, however, paid a major price for supporting Crump given the chronic police brutality, persistent voter manipulation, and other anti-democratic ways of his machine that hurt both blacks and whites. Church himself began to personally suffer the consequences of bolstering Crump's power. If Church had known the effects of backing Crump, it is unlikely that he would have supported him in the first place. After all, he urged blacks to protest police brutality by not voting for Crump's gubernatorial candidate. By serving as a leader of the Colored Democratic Club, J. E. Walker sought to gain bargaining power in the local political machine, but his impact was minimal.⁷¹⁷ It is unclear why Walker continued to back Crump beyond his hope for leverage. Walker may have felt that working with Crump in support of the Democratic Party, especially given the New Deal's benefits to blacks, outweighed the downsides of associating with him.

Though the Crump machine manipulated black voters, the organization, ironically, was planting seeds that challenged the prevailing southern political system of limited power for blacks. Blacks took advantage of their ability to vote to serve their own ends, and blacks who participated in electoral politics, even at the behest of the machine, were building political skills and knowledge. By the end of the 1930s, black Memphians were employing a variety of political strategies for their ultimate goal of racial advancement. Some engaged in party politics, and others sought to secure benefits by working with the Crump machine. Yet other blacks took a decisive stand against the machine or quietly abstained from voting to avoid voter manipulation tactics. While Crump's repressive tactics made the future look ominous for black Memphians, their ongoing activism provided reason for hope.

⁷¹⁷ Bunche, *Political Status*, 500.

Chapter 4: “As Un-American as Any Dictator-Ridden Country in Europe”: Seeking Democracy during the War Years, 1940-1945

At a time of increased political opportunities for blacks across the country during World War II, black Memphians confronted Edward H. Crump, who attempted to further restrict their political power. At the same time, he continued to support their voting rights to a limited degree and provide them with public services that were unequal to those of whites but better than those afforded to blacks in other southern cities. During the war years, the political boss increasingly oppressed not only blacks but also whites who threatened his control. He forced Robert R. Church, Jr., and two other black Republicans to leave the city, and he cracked down on Memphians who even mildly criticized him. Within this environment, black political activists became more accommodating to the machine. While blacks elsewhere in the country agitated for civil rights as they sought the democracy at home that black soldiers were fighting for abroad, black Memphians faced their bleakest decade ever. Nonetheless, the labor movement remained a potent force that challenged Crump, black Republicans represented an oppositional force to the political boss, and black Memphians engaged in civil rights protests. After leaving Memphis, Church remained a nationally powerful Republican and worked from afar to oppose Crump. Crump represented many of the larger problems facing blacks in the South, and black soldiers and national leaders spoke out against him with the larger purpose of making the region more democratic. Their protests were intertwined with the local efforts of black Memphians against Crump and for racial justice.

Crump and his Democratic organization completely dominated the local political scene in the early to mid-1940s. Harry Woodbury, who worked as a reporter at the *Commercial Appeal*, later recalled that elections from 1940 to 1947 “were just an exercise in muscle building.”⁷¹⁸ In 1944, for instance, Crump’s ticket was unopposed except for one candidate for sheriff. Wearing horn-rimmed glasses and with thumb-thick eyebrows and a mop of white hair, Crump directed the operations of his political machine from his downtown office at Main and Adams and named his candidates usually following get-togethers with his lieutenants. About his control, Crump told one reporter, “Work . . . hard work--that’s what does it. I’m always working--a little buttermilk, a little orange juice keeps me going.”⁷¹⁹ Crump not only favored these drinks but also was a vegetarian and abstained from liquor, smoking, and coffee.⁷²⁰

Despite his behind-the-scenes approach, it continued to be well known that the city’s mayors held office nominally while Crump really ran things. He publicly claimed that he placed “honest, competent, high class men in office,” and his organization reached into nearly every area of Memphis life. As a journalist observed, “Many of the politicians are active churchmen, many belong to the best clubs, and many are of prominent families long identified with . . . the town. Some are active in civic organizations while wives of city officials and friends of the administration are active club women.”⁷²¹ His machine continued to work with black leaders and citizens and to manipulate black voters through its

⁷¹⁸ Harry Woodbury to Roberta Church, 15 Apr. 1986, Roberta Church Papers, Box 1, Folder 19, MSC.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid.; Lasch, “Boss Crump.”

⁷²⁰ Arthur Evans, “Bosses Come, Bosses Go, but Not Mr. Crump,” *CT*, 15 Jul. 1947, p. 11, copy in James Pleasants Papers, Box 7, Folder 7, SC.

⁷²¹ Ibid.

longstanding tactics of paying their poll tax, instructing them how to vote, and providing them with enticements.

During the war years, Crump remained the most powerful political figure not only in Memphis but also in Tennessee. Though his faction faced challengers during every state election, he outsmarted any opposition. Crump exercised his statewide power in a number of ways. He continued to form a political partnership with East Tennessee Republicans in order to bolster his control.⁷²² In addition, the Crump organization could expedite or delay local bills, which required passage by the state legislature, through the legislative process or the governor's veto. As a result, it simultaneously wielded influence over local officials and influenced state policies.⁷²³ Moreover, the Crump machine ensured that leaders of poor rural counties received campaign funds of one thousand dollars or more from the state headquarters for key races. This funding effectively bought their support and led to Crump candidates carrying the respective counties.⁷²⁴

The Crump organization also continued to rely on grassroots techniques and governmental employees to marshal votes for its candidates. During election seasons, Crump had an estimated fifteen thousand city, county, and federal officials at his command locally. Each needed to enlist the support of only three voters to bring in the sixty thousand ballots that would ensure the victory of his candidates in state elections; these votes signified the key

⁷²² See the discussion of this point in Chapter 3.

⁷²³ Key, *Southern Politics*, 62, 68.

⁷²⁴ *Ibid.*, 68-9.

to his control statewide.⁷²⁵ A *Chicago Sun* reporter observed that the machine was organized like an industrial enterprise and that it maintained a card index of voters and potential voters.⁷²⁶ At a meeting of campaign workers in the Sixteenth Ward, the journalist found the school board chairman, city library director, tax assessor, two probate judges, and fifty other local governmental employees. “Each had his election day duties laid out before him,” he said. “[T]he workers were busy, as in all other 51 wards. As voters came to the polls they ticked off their names. Those who didn’t come were called. Those who still didn’t come were sent for.” He further observed that the campaign workers did these tasks joyfully and any of them would “talk for hours about what a great man Crump is.”⁷²⁷

Though Crump’s machine could appear benign, it was ruthless when bucked.⁷²⁸ A candidate for public office, for instance, was playing gin rummy when Crump organized a softball game and commanded him to come. A woman begged the attorney to stay with the game, but he declined, making the seemingly innocuous remark: “When the Old Man says you gotta go, you gotta go.” The statement enraged Crump, and the attorney’s name was removed from the ballot. Because of a lack of business, the lawyer eventually had to leave town.⁷²⁹ Seemingly anyone who defied Crump was subject to physical brutality or other repercussions from his machine. Labor leaders were beaten up, journalists suffered at his

⁷²⁵ Estes Kefauver, “How Boss Crump Was Licked,” *Colliers*, 16 Oct. 1948, excerpts reprinted in Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 191-3; Thomas F. Doyle, “Gestapo in Memphis,” *The Crisis*, May 1941, 152, copy in Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 17.

⁷²⁶ Lasch, “Boss Crump.” Also see: Wayne Dowdy, “‘We Engaged in a Hard Campaign,’ Primary Sources Related to the 1940 and 1944 Presidential Elections in Shelby County,” *Tennessee Librarian* 54, no. 1 (2004), <http://www.lib.utk.edu/~tla/TL/v54n1/compiled.htm> [accessed 20 Jul. 2004].

⁷²⁷ Lasch, “Boss Crump.”

⁷²⁸ Evans, “Bosses Come, Bosses Go.”

⁷²⁹ Lasch, “Boss Crump.”

hands, and political opponents faced his wrath. During election time, Crump took out full-page newspaper ads to attack his rivals; he typically used colorful language without profanity.

In a response to famed journalist Lowell Mellett's charge that he maintained a "totalitarian political regime," Crump said:

There is nothing of a totalitarian nature in my make-up nor is there anything suggestive of totalitarianism in the manner in which . . . Memphis is governed [I]t [is] one of the cleanest cities, morally and physically in the entire United States. There is less graft and more efficiency in the governments of both Memphis and Shelby County than may be found in any other city or county in the United States We have none of the organized vice to be found in the average American city Indeed, a person would have a hard time making a bet on a horse race here Memphis is a clean city, a quiet city--the quietest in America--a city of beautiful parks, fine churches, excellent schools, splendid hospitals, with broad, well-paved streets. Ours is one of the few cities in America which owns its light, gas and water utilities. Our city and county tax rates are among the lowest in the United States.⁷³⁰

Indeed, the city received national recognition for being clean, and one Chicago-based reporter observed, "The cleanness of the city strikes the eyes of the visitor at once. It gleams in the sun."⁷³¹ Mellett responded to Crump's defense by writing, "Memphis is a clean city and a quiet city That was true also of Berlin and Tokyo before the war. They were two of the cleanest cities on this earth. You didn't dare drop a match on the sidewalk in either of them."⁷³²

In public statements, Crump steered clear of the key reason why whites allowed his control. A Chicago reporter termed it "something people did not talk about"--the fear that a different political system would allow blacks, who made up some 40 percent of the city's

⁷³⁰ Lowell Mellett, "'On the Other Hand': Finds Memphis Boss Confused Concerning Meaning of a Word," unidentified newspaper article, 1944, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 36.

⁷³¹ Evans, "Bosses Come, Bosses Go."

⁷³² Mellett, "On the Other Hand."

population, to gain too much power; white Memphians knew that Crump would ensure this situation did not occur.⁷³³ Crump permitted blacks to cast ballots, but white citizens remained aware of the potential threat that black voting represented to the social order; they trusted Crump to keep blacks in check. Whites were willing to settle for a political atmosphere of “fear and futility” in order to ensure social control.⁷³⁴ Allowing blacks the vote thus served as a way for Crump to wield power over both blacks and whites. To be sure, white politicians across the South also were trusted to keep blacks in a subordinate position.

The 1940 elections demonstrated both Crump’s ability to rein in independent black political mobilization and his increasing opposition to it. As the presidential election approached, Robert R. Church, Jr., was committed to electing a Republican. Unlike in his previous campaigns for Republican office seekers, however, Church faced resistance from the Crump organization. The Republican presidential candidate, Wendell Willkie, not only had a chance of winning but also made vociferous statements against the Memphis machine, classing Crump with corrupt political bosses such as Frank Hague of New Jersey and Tom Pendergast of Kansas City. The Tennessee State Republican Convention followed suit, saying that “a real Hitler and Mussolini” ruled in Shelby County.⁷³⁵ Crump knew that a Willkie victory would hurt his organization and diminish his national influence.

Because Church had plans to organize black voters in the North and East, he asked

⁷³³ Lasch, “Boss Crump.”

⁷³⁴ Gerald Capers, “Memphis, Satrapy of a Benevolent Despot,” in *Our Fair City*, ed. Robert S. Allen (New York: Vanguard, 1947), 229.

⁷³⁵ The quote is from: Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 127. Indeed, Hague and Pendergast displayed similarities to Crump. See, for instance: Thomas F. X. Smith, *The Powertricians* (Secaucus, N.J.: L. Stuart, 1982); Lawrence H. Larsen and Nancy J. Hulston, *Pendergast!* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1997).

J. B. Martin to head the local Republican campaign organization.⁷³⁶ A long-time political associate of Church, Martin served as a founding director of the Lincoln League in 1916 and a key figure of the West Tennessee Civic and Political League in 1927. He was a prominent, wealthy businessman and a physician with a clinic on Beale.⁷³⁷ Along with his brothers, he owned the Memphis Red Sox, the Negro League team in the city. Its fans earned a reputation for traveling to away games, and the team was the only one in the league owned by blacks.⁷³⁸ In addition, Martin served as president of the American Negro Baseball Association, a national organization that supervised professional black baseball.

Since 1910, Martin had run the South Memphis Drug Store on Florida Street. Like the Memphis Red Sox, the store and its sub-post office represented a source of community pride. At a time when most blacks remained poor and dependent on white employers, the store was a successful black business.⁷³⁹ Perhaps most significantly, the store's post office, which Church had helped establish, was the only one operated by blacks in Tennessee. "Whenever visitors or prominent people come to Memphis, [black] Memphians take them to

⁷³⁶ Scott, *Negro in Tennessee Politics*, 129; Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 2-3.

⁷³⁷ J. B. Martin, "Memorandum regarding Police Persecution of Dr. J. B. Martin of Memphis, Tennessee, Because of Political Activities in 1940 Presidential Election," n.d., Roberta Church Papers, Box 1, Folder 17, p. 1.

⁷³⁸ The stadium, Martin's Stadium, in fact, was named for the Martins. For more on the Memphis Red Sox, see: Hill, "Self-Defined African American Community," 58-74.

⁷³⁹ Dun & Bradstreet rated the drug store as worth \$101,000. Roi Ottley, "Memphis Row Is Boon to Chicago," *CT*, 28 Sept. 1954, sec. 3, p. 15, copy in Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 308, Folder: Newspaper Articles, Magazine Clippings, 1954, mfm, 000307; M. S. Stuart to Walter Chandler, 1 Nov. 1940, Chandler Papers, Box 14, Folder: Race Relations, 1940; U.S. Department of Justice, transcript of deposition of J. B. Martin, Washington D.C., 12 Mar. 1941, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 11, p. 20.

the South Memphis Drug Store to show them the branch post office,” Church said. “I, myself, have taken hundreds of visitors there.”⁷⁴⁰

During the election season, Martin and his fellow black Republicans planned interracial rallies for October and November--as was usual for presidential campaigns--to promote Willkie and the other Republican candidates.⁷⁴¹ At the first two rallies, held in October at two black churches, black and white speakers attacked the city administration and criticized it for police brutality. The white and black press as well as Crump informants covered the meetings.⁷⁴² An official of the Memphis and Shelby County Welfare Commission, Aubrey B. Clapp, reported to Crump that about four hundred blacks, including some twenty-five women, attended one of the October meetings. Three white Republicans spoke, and the talks of black pastors G. A. Long and Harry B. Gibson were “extremely severe and vitrolistic [*sic*],” he said. “In my opinion the speeches they made under certain circumstances and conditions might cause trouble. They both preached race equality without any reservations.” He reported that they urged blacks “to organize and demand their percentage of state jobs, jobs on the Fire Department and on the police force in the city, county, and state” in proportion to the amount of taxes that they paid. In addition, Long and Gibson urged the abolition of the poll tax and criticized J. E. Walker for being a friend of the Crump organization.⁷⁴³

⁷⁴⁰ Church to Kenneth D. McKellar, 25 May 1945, Church Papers, Box 8, Folder 9.

⁷⁴¹ Church and Church, interview no. 1, 10 Jul. 1973, 3.

⁷⁴² These churches were Beale Street Baptist and Centenary Methodist. Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 127; U.S. Department of Justice, transcript, 10-2.

⁷⁴³ Long and Gibson were pastors of Beale Street Baptist and Centenary Methodist respectively. Blacks remained barred from serving as police officers or firefighters and continued to mainly hold menial governmental jobs. Clapp to Guy Joyner, 22 Oct 1940, Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 179, Folder: Negroes Election Data 1940.

Infuriated by these rallies, Crump sent George W. Lee to tell Martin that his drug store would be “policed” unless he resigned as chair of the Republican campaign committee, closed his Republican headquarters, and called off the final political meeting.⁷⁴⁴ The city also made Martin take down a banner displayed in front of the Republican headquarters saying “Our Own Joe Louis is for Willkie,” ostensibly because only candidates could have their names on campaign signs according to the Crump machine’s interpretation of a city sign ordinance.⁷⁴⁵ Refusing to succumb to Crump’s threats, Martin kept up his campaign work and held the rally. In response, Crump stationed two police officers in front of his South Memphis Drug Store during all its operating hours under the pretense that Martin was running a drug operation. The officers searched all blacks and whites entering and leaving the store, including kindergarteners who went there to buy ice cream. In many instances, the policemen frisked purchasers of cigarettes to the point of opening their cigarette boxes, breaking the cigarettes in half, and dumping them in their hats. Black Memphians flooded the store in protest, and one white salesperson was arrested after refusing to be searched. Nonetheless, the surveillance and searching continued.⁷⁴⁶ Police officers also frisked people entering and exiting the successful saloon on Beale Street of Elmer Atkinson, another black Republican who had taken part in the rallies.

Police Commissioner Joe Boyle claimed that the treatment of Martin and Atkinson was a measure to enforce narcotics laws. But, no charges were filed against Martin nor were

⁷⁴⁴ Church and Church, interview no. 1, 10 Jul. 1973, 4-5. In his extensive memorandum, Martin just puts in quotes that he was told that his store would be “policed,” and he does not indicate that more details were provided about what this policing would entail. Martin, “Memorandum,” 1.

⁷⁴⁵ Martin, “Memorandum,” 5.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid., 2-3; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 45.

any warrants put out for him, and apparently the same held true for Atkinson. Boyle claimed that his case against Martin was based on missing files.⁷⁴⁷ Whereas Martin had no drug record, Atkinson had a drug charge some ten years previously. Martin suspected that Crump officials targeted Atkinson to make their repression seem more legitimate. Indeed, in a lawsuit against the city of Memphis a year later, Atkinson insisted that he had not acted illegally and that the harassment had been politically motivated. Martin faced the harassment despite the fact that he had served as a notary public for more than twenty years, an appointment made after the Shelby County Court certified his moral character.⁷⁴⁸ Moreover, he had served on a federal jury, had been named a special officer of the police department, and had been permitted to work as an unlicensed bondsman.⁷⁴⁹

During this time, the Crump machine also increasingly turned against Church. Crump and his cronies knew that a Willkie election would increase Church's power locally.⁷⁵⁰ Church ran for election as a Republican National Convention delegate, and Mingo Scott, who later published a history of black politics in Tennessee, led the effort to secure his victory. Crump lieutenants told Scott that Memphis had "had enough of Church's type of leadership" and to "go easy" in the campaign to elect him. After Scott ignored them, thugs beat him with iron pipes and left him bleeding on Beale Street.⁷⁵¹ Thugs also beat Lt. Lee

⁷⁴⁷ Martin, "Memorandum," 3-4.

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid., 1; U. S. Department of Justice, transcript, 22-3; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 39.

⁷⁴⁹ According to Martin, his appointment allowed him certain rights and required the posting of a bond, but he provides few additional details. To be sure, he was not a full-fledged police officer, because, as mentioned, blacks pressed for black representation in the police force. Martin, "Memorandum," 1; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 127.

⁷⁵⁰ Church and Church, interview no. 1, 10 Jul. 1973, 3-4.

⁷⁵¹ Scott, *Negro in Tennessee Politics*, 129.

after he supported Church's bid despite Shelby County Attorney General Will Gerber's warning not to take this step; Lee was left with a broken hand and cut across his face requiring fifteen stitches.⁷⁵² Despite all this violent opposition, Church was elected.⁷⁵³

But, Church's troubles were not over. While he was campaigning for Willkie outside of Tennessee, city officials seized the rest of his property and eventually sold it off, leaving him in a state of financial ruin. Their actions occurred right after Martin started holding the political rallies.⁷⁵⁴ Church and his sister, Annette, left Memphis for Chicago in November. Church had established a home there in 1938 though it had mainly served as a political headquarters and he had maintained his residence in Memphis. With their property gone and his local political base facing oppression, Bob and Annette knew that they did not face a bright future in Memphis.⁷⁵⁵ Later in the month, the city dealt another blow by changing the name of Church's Park to Beale Avenue Park and Auditorium.⁷⁵⁶ The city eventually sold the Church family home a year later to private bidders who planned to use it as a boarding house.⁷⁵⁷

⁷⁵² Lee, interview, 17 Apr. 1966, 37-9.

⁷⁵³ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 188.

⁷⁵⁴ Scott, *Negro in Tennessee Politics*, 129; Church and Church, interview no. 2, 10 Jul. 1973, 5; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 188; "Bob Church's Property Sold at Auction," *CD*, 17 Feb. 1940, p. 9; James H. Purdy, Jr., "File Another Suit against Bob Church," *CD*, 20 Apr. 1940, p. 1.

⁷⁵⁵ Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 93-7; Church and Church, interview no. 2, 10 Jul. 1973, 5; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 195.

⁷⁵⁶ Beale Street was sometimes called Beale Avenue. The *Memphis World* reported the name change on November 22, 1940. Patricia M. LaPointe, finding aid to Roberta Church Collection, Roberta Church Papers, p. 17.

⁷⁵⁷ The house was replete with crystal chandeliers and mahogany mantels. James H. Purdy, Jr., "Bob Church Home Sold in Memphis," *CD*, 6 Dec. 1941, p. 1.

As the Crump machine cracked down on black Republicans that election season, it worked with black Democrats to bolster its power. It provided the Colored Democratic Club, the black wing of the local Democratic campaign organization, with a headquarters and funding and appointed its officials.⁷⁵⁸ J. E. Walker continued to head the club. Men mainly served in top leadership positions though two women served as chairwomen. Thirty black men and twenty-seven black women acted as vice chairmen and vice chairwomen respectively. Male officials and vice chairmen included businessmen, ministers, and other professionals, including Universal Life executive M. S. Stuart and prominent black ministers T. O. Fuller and Rev. Blair Hunt. J. B. Martin's brother, W. S. Martin, served as a vice chairman, and he wrote Crump that he regretted the "serious mistake" his sibling had made in backing Willkie. Vice chairwomen included J. E. Walker's wife, Lelia Walker, and Mary Murphy, who led the City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs.⁷⁵⁹

The black Democrats engaged in a number of efforts in support of the Crump-backed Democratic ticket of Roosevelt for president, Prentice Cooper for governor, Kenneth McKellar for senator, and Clifford Davis for Congress. They held local rallies. At the behest of the Democratic National Committee, Walker spoke to enthusiastic meetings of blacks and whites in Illinois on behalf of Roosevelt.⁷⁶⁰ Along with the local Roosevelt Democratic Headquarters, the Colored Democratic Club distributed flyers extolling the benefits to blacks

⁷⁵⁸ W. S. Martin to E. H. Crump, 1 Nov. 1940, Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 177, Folder: "Ma" 1940, mfm, 000472; Mack Lofton to John Vesey, 21 Sept. 1940, E. W. Hale Papers, Box 19, Folder: Election 1940-41, MSC; Walker to Hale, 1 May 1944.

⁷⁵⁹ Martin to Crump, 1 Nov. 1940; Lyda Graham-Binns to E. W. Hale, 22 Nov. 1940, Hale Papers, Box 19, Folder: Election 1940-41.

⁷⁶⁰ Walker to E. W. Hale, 21 Oct. 1940, Hale Papers, Box 19, Folder: Election 1940-41.

of the Roosevelt administration, including national black political appointees, National Youth Administration jobs, school improvements, and better public services.⁷⁶¹

Ordinary black Memphians worked with the Democratic club or campaigned for Democrats on their own. "I am with the administration and President [*sic*] Roosevelt one hundred per cent." Rev. J. H. Johnson wrote Walter Chandler, the new mayor installed by Crump. "I have canvassed from here to Knoxville. I have given out buttons and stickers for cars I have stickers on my car front and rear."⁷⁶² Letting Chandler know of his willingness to speak on behalf of Roosevelt anytime, Rev. J. A. G. Grant wrote, "I feel that Mr. Roosevelt has done more for our [c]ountry than any president since Lincoln and feel that Negroes as well as white people who hope for a safe [d]emocracy should support him."⁷⁶³ H. B. King, a funeral home director and teacher, aligned with the Colored Democratic Club in mobilizing his civic club members on behalf of the Democratic ticket.⁷⁶⁴ King headed the Twenty-fifth Ward Civic Club, which earlier in the year had turned away hundreds from its citizenship meetings held on Sunday afternoons in various churches. Informing Chandler that the attendees "greatly appreciated" his work "to improve their general welfare," he had said that they planned to vote for his re-election and that he and his associates had "reminded our listeners about the various advantages and conveniences that have been made available to

⁷⁶¹ Roosevelt Democratic Headquarters, Memphis, Tennessee, "To the Colored Voters of Memphis and Shelby County," Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 179, Folder: Negroes Election Data 1940, mfm, 001817; Colored Democratic Club, "Attention Colored Voters," 1940, Chandler Papers, Box 13, Folder: 1940-Public Improvements for Colored Citizens. See also these Colored Democratic Club flyers from that election season, which all are in Hale Papers, Box 19, Folder: Election 1940-41: "Facts Every Negro Should Know about Roosevelt and the Democratic Administration," "Mass Meeting, Oct. 29," and "Grand Jubilee--Rally and Festival, Oct. 31, 1940."

⁷⁶² Johnson to Chandler, 3 Nov. 1940, Chandler Papers, Box 14, Folder: Race Relations 1940.

⁷⁶³ Grant to Chandler, 7 Sept. 1940, Chandler Papers, Box 9, Folder: Roosevelt Democratic Club.

⁷⁶⁴ King to E. W. Hale, 19 Oct. 1940, Hale Papers, Box 19, Folder: Election 1940-41.

the colored citizens by our city government, including good streets, adequate lighting facilities, wholesome recreation, excellent schools, and better housing conditions.”⁷⁶⁵

Even with the support from black Democrats and civic club members, the Crump machine knew that many black Memphians were dissatisfied with the police harassment of J. B. Martin. Thinking that a “friendly word” would be “reassuring” at this time, Mayor Chandler sent a letter to black ministers the Sunday before election day.⁷⁶⁶ Chandler pointed out the benefits that blacks had received from the city government and Roosevelt administration. He accused a few black leaders of being “only interested in their personal gain and political welfare to the detriment of the masses of the colored people,” and he expressed a desire for interracial peace and harmony.⁷⁶⁷

Many ministers responded by saying that they and their congregations supported the mayor and the Democratic ticket. For instance, Rev. Blair T. Hunt, a particularly loyal supporter of the local machine, replied that Crump was “almost a human idol” to blacks though he protested that the policing of the two businesses was “inopportune.”⁷⁶⁸ The preachers’ response indicated that they were afraid or unwilling to speak out against the city administration as well as that they continued to have a stake in the Crump machine. Like most other black ministers in the South at this time, black pastors in Memphis, most of whom

⁷⁶⁵ King to Chandler, 29 Jul. 1940, Chandler Papers, Box 13, Folder: 1940-Public Improvements for Colored Citizens.

⁷⁶⁶ Chandler to G. A. Long, 5 Nov. 1940, Chandler Papers, Box 14, Folder: Race Relations-1940.

⁷⁶⁷ Walter Chandler, form letter to ministers, n.d., Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 179, Folder: Negroes Election Data 1940, mfm, 001816.

⁷⁶⁸ Hunt to Chandler, 4 Nov 1940, Chandler Papers, Box 14, Folder: Race Relations 1940. Also see these letters to Chandler in the same folder: W. H. Winston, 4 Nov. 1940; Arthur W. Womack, 7 Nov. 1940; W. A. Johnson, 4 Nov 1940; G. H. Howard, 4 Nov. 1940; D. Morrison, 4 Nov. 1940; W. C. Paine, 3 Nov. 1940; J. H. Johnson, 3 Nov. 1940.

lacked formal training, generally focused on otherworldly concerns and not social justice issues.⁷⁶⁹ Through supporting Crump with their votes, black ministers continued to be able to receive benefits, including securing teaching contracts for their parishioners and having blacks released from jail.⁷⁷⁰ They also undoubtedly believed in the Biblical admonition to respect political rulers or at least “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s.” At the same time, as T. C. D. Hayes had pointed out to his pastor in 1938, their work for and support of the Crump machine helped prop up a city administration determined to keep blacks as second-class citizens and that engaged in “sins” such as violence and harassment.

Rev. G. A. Long apparently was the only minister who responded negatively to Chandler in a letter.⁷⁷¹ Physically strong and religiously fundamentalist, Long was from Arkansas and had served as the pastor of churches in Indiana and Illinois before arriving at Beale Street Baptist in 1937.⁷⁷² He wrote the mayor that good city services were no substitute for constitutional rights. As for Chandler’s comment about selfish black leaders, Long wrote, “To whom this has reference I do not know I am the humble pastor of Beale Ave. Bapt. Church. I do not hold any political job I have not at any time sought to misguide my people.” He said that he had white Republican and Democratic friends and that he desired Christian love and not racial hate. “I want to meet you some time and have

⁷⁶⁹ Walker, “Role of Black Clergy,” 35-8; Myrdal, *American Dilemma*, 872-8.

⁷⁷⁰ Walker, “Role of Black Clergy,” 42.

⁷⁷¹ I found no other record of such a letter in the Chandler Papers.

⁷⁷² Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 135.

you see me and know me,” Long said. “I am sure you will like me. I just want to be a man and enjoy my rights as an American citizen.”⁷⁷³

When election day came, the majority of Memphis voters cast ballots for the Democratic ticket. The number of votes for Republican candidates showed a noticeable increase from the previous presidential and state elections, revealing that Crump’s tactics had not scared these voters away. Some fifty-eight hundred Shelby County voters chose the Republican gubernatorial candidate compared to nearly twelve hundred in 1938, and around seventy-three hundred picked Willkie compared to some twenty-one hundred for Alf Landon in 1936. Statistics do not exist on how black Memphians voted, but indications are that they continued to shift to the Democratic Party even though more voted for Republicans than in these previous elections.⁷⁷⁴

Like other past Republican presidential candidates, Willkie had made statements during the campaign supporting black rights. These words were not merely a ploy for the votes of blacks; he seemed to genuinely believe that securing civil rights was the right thing to do.⁷⁷⁵ He called for anti-lynching legislation and the abolition of segregation in Washington D.C. and discrimination in the armed forces. In fact, the Republican Party had the strongest civil rights plank in its party platform in history in an attempt to win back black votes. The platform included calls for the passage of anti-lynching legislation, the protection

⁷⁷³ Long to Chandler, 4 Nov. 1940, Chandler Papers, Box 14, Folder: Race Relations-1940. The mayor responded to Long with the same general letter that he sent to other ministers who replied to his November 2 letter. In short, Chandler wrote that he had felt that a “friendly word at this time might be reassuring to you all” and thanked him for the letter, saying he appreciated its “sentiment . . . and your loyalty and fine cooperation.” Chandler to Long, 5 Nov. 1940.

⁷⁷⁴ Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 191-2, 233 n. 12.

⁷⁷⁵ Topping, *Lincoln’s Lost Legacy*, 202.

of black voting rights, and the ceasing of discrimination in the civil service and armed forces.⁷⁷⁶

The Democratic Party also had signaled its support for racial advancement that election season and had taken some tangible measures. For the first time in its history, the party mentioned blacks by name in its platform in reiterating the benefits they derived from the New Deal even though the platform did not have a civil rights plank. Responding to calls by the Black Cabinet and black Democratic leaders to counter Republican statements for civil rights, Roosevelt announced nondiscriminatory policies for certain military programs and expanded the opportunities for blacks in the armed forces.⁷⁷⁷ Perhaps partly as a result of these steps, the black vote nationally remained largely in Roosevelt's corner. The Republican Party had continually failed to live up to its campaign promises for blacks, and the Democratic Party offered the most promise for economic relief and made some civil rights efforts.

Section II

Victory at the polls for Crump did not end his crackdown. The machine's efforts against Martin, Atkinson, and Church were part of a larger campaign that lasted through at least December, which national civil rights and civil liberties organizations called the "reign of terror." Martin's harassment attracted the most media attention, but the Crump organization also attacked working-class blacks, black saloon patrons, and black labor activists. In mid-November, Police Commissioner Joe Boyle announced a desire to rid the city of "undesirables." Police officers carried out raids on Beale and in black neighborhoods,

⁷⁷⁶ Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 228.

⁷⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 228-9.

and they arrested sixty-five black men one evening, calling them “suspicious persons.” Boyle charged that these men were idle, insolent, and vagrant, failing to state that the raids were partly motivated by the fact that those arrested could help make up the shortage of agricultural laborers needed for the cotton harvest. To be sure, the machine’s efforts to crack down on vice and get rid of “undesirables” served as a guise for attacking the city administration’s political opponents, exerting socio-economic control, and ensuring blacks remained subordinate. According to Collins George, the advisor to the NAACP Youth Council at LeMoyne College, any black man or woman on the street or at cafes or poolrooms was liable to arrest, bodily search, verbal abuse, and physical injury.⁷⁷⁸

After the election, blacks and whites increasingly spoke out against the police surveillance of Martin’s store. Local white newspapers and Tennessee’s black newspapers condemned the police action. Organized earlier in 1940 by the Memphis Ministerial Association and affiliated with the Atlanta-based Commission on Interracial Cooperation, the Memphis Commission on Interracial Cooperation, made up equally of black and white clergy of all faiths, petitioned Mayor Chandler to withdraw the police from the store.⁷⁷⁹ The group said that a “state of tension and fear unprecedented in the recent history of our city” existed in the black community.⁷⁸⁰ While the adult members of the NAACP branch were too frightened to protest, the Memphis NAACP Youth Council wrote Chandler to condemn the

⁷⁷⁸ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 26, 39-41; Honey, *Southern Labor*, 165-7.

⁷⁷⁹ It is unclear what the connection is between this branch and the city’s Inter-Racial chapter that was prominent in the 1920s. The old branch might have reactivated but in a different form. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 41; Martin, “Memorandum,” 6-7; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 129; Doyle, “Gestapo in Memphis,” 152.

⁷⁸⁰ Martin, “Memorandum,” 7.

harassment of Martin.⁷⁸¹ National civil rights and civil liberties organizations that protested the reign of terror included the Southern Conference of Human Welfare, the Southern Negro Youth Congress, the national office of the NAACP, and the American Civil Liberties Union, all of which called on federal authorities to intervene.

The reign of terror not only revealed the Crump machine's willingness to violate civil liberties but also further exposed the racial views of the city fathers. Refusing to meet with the interracial committee, Police Commissioner Joe Boyle rebuked it for criticizing the police. He attacked Martin as "a minister of evil" and "fence for thieves." Accusing Martin of gloating over "social equality," Boyle charged that the black Republican and his wife, who were light-skinned, sat in seats reserved for whites at the Barnum and Bailey Circus.⁷⁸²

Crump made similar remarks when J. E. Walker, Blair Hunt, and T. O. Fuller, representing the black Democrats, asked him to end the police harassment of Martin's store. "He would not let them talk," reported the *Nashville Globe*, the state capital's black newspaper. "Tall, gaunt, and shaggy, he . . . fumed at the mouth He declared that Bob Church had been spending most of his time . . . up North, that he had been staying in white hotels there and had come back to Memphis 'spreading ideas of social equality' and that Martin had abetted him in it." Crump told them that blacks should "learn their places."⁷⁸³

⁷⁸¹ Daniel D. Carter to Walter Chandler, 26 Nov. 1940, Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 179, Folder: Negroes Election Data 1940.

⁷⁸² Martin, "Memorandum," 7.

⁷⁸³ According to the *Nashville Globe* in its December 20 issue, black Democrats were just as indignant as the black Republicans over the treatment of Martin. The *Globe* is quoted in Martin, "Memorandum," 8 and Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 13. Black businessman M. S. Stuart, also a Democrat, urged the city administration to stop the harassment of Martin as well. Stuart to Chandler, 1 Nov. 1940.

Boyle further blasted the idea of social equality by attacking the black newspapers that protested the machine's treatment of Martin. Like Crump, he made a comparison to the North to express what was not allowed in the South. "They are not going to carry on and conduct themselves in Memphis as if they lived in Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia," he said. "We have never had it before and we will never have it. For after all this is white man's country."⁷⁸⁴ After the *Memphis World* editorialized that blacks deserved more city revenues for schools, parks, hospitals, and streets, Boyle called the editors ungrateful, pointing out that black Memphians paid less than 5 percent of the city's taxes and the city spent more money than that in providing services for them.⁷⁸⁵ "Not a single Memphis newspaper had the temerity to reply that the low contribution to the city treasury . . . was due to the very excellent reason that they are the lowest paid and most poverty-stricken section of the people," the NAACP's *Crisis* reported. It further pointed out that no local paper had pointed out "that an adequate concentration on Negro health needs would reduce the numbers who were forced to seek hospitalization."⁷⁸⁶

The local and national outcry led to the removal of the police officers from the store on December 5 after six weeks of surveillance. During this time, the police had found no evidence of illegal activity, and Boyle had not prosecuted Martin or anyone connected with the establishment. Still, on December 6, Boyle publicly commented that the store would be policed in a different way. Police officers subsequently made short stops there daily.⁷⁸⁷ In

⁷⁸⁴ Martin, "Memorandum," 7.

⁷⁸⁵ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 130; Doyle, "Gestapo in Memphis," 153.

⁷⁸⁶ Doyle, "Gestapo in Memphis," 153.

⁷⁸⁷ Martin, "Memorandum," 3-4.

addition, Boyle continued to slander Martin publicly and keep up his campaign against proponents of racial equality. In mid-December, he declared that the Crump organization had its eyes on five black pastors, four black doctors, five black newspaper writers, one black drugstore operator, two black postmen, and one black undertaker who had been “fanning race hatred.” Four were members of the interracial committee. Claiming again that Memphis was “white man’s country,” Boyle said that race relations were excellent and that these leaders threatened this environment.⁷⁸⁸ Crump, Mayor Chandler, and the city commission publicly backed Boyle.⁷⁸⁹

Finally, in January, the U.S. Department of Justice sent an investigator, Colonel Amos Woodcock, to examine the police harassment of Martin for political purposes. National organizations, Robert Church, J. B. Martin, and apparently others had called on the Justice Department to intervene. However, Woodcock only talked to Boyle and city officials. Blacks did not know about his visit until after he left, and he did not contact Martin. Woodcock concluded that the police posting had been legitimate and the case could not be tried in federal courts. After his investigation, some blacks called for another one, but none apparently occurred. The Justice Department backed Woodcock’s assessment.⁷⁹⁰

By this time, Martin had left Memphis for Chicago. The Crump machine had begun building a criminal case against him for serving as an unlicensed bondsman though it had turned a blind eye previously to this activity. Lt. Lee found out and told Martin, who knew he was being framed. “They’re trying to put me in the workhouse, and I couldn’t stand that,”

⁷⁸⁸ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 130-1; Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 196-7. The quotes are from p. 130.

⁷⁸⁹ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 39.

⁷⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41; Martin, “Memorandum,” 9-10.

said Martin, who had suffered mental and financial distress during the ordeal. The next day, Lee relayed to him Crump's message to Blair Hunt that Martin must leave town.⁷⁹¹ Martin moved away the next evening and did not return to live in Memphis. His brother took over management of the drug store. Atkinson also left the city and sold his business.⁷⁹²

Martin won the respect of whites and blacks alike in Chicago. In fact, the *Chicago Tribune* later said in a profile that the city "was gifted with a sterling citizen" as a result of the 1940 ordeal. "For all the rough and tumble experiences, Dr. Martin, a distinguished looking man, remains every inch the gentleman--perhaps because he is instinctively a gentlemen," it reported.⁷⁹³ Martin remained president of the American Negro Baseball Association, and he bought the Chicago American Giants, a black baseball club that was nearly bankrupt. Under his leadership, the team recovered financially. He became a Republican committeeman and was elected a county commissioner in Chicago in 1942. Four years later, he became the first black ever elected as trustee of the Sanitary District of Cook County, a very powerful position.⁷⁹⁴ Martin's political success revealed that he took the political skills he developed in Memphis and used them to make strides for blacks in the North.

⁷⁹¹ I have not been able to find specific dates when Martin, Atkinson, and Robert and Annette Church left Memphis. Martin to George M. Klepper, 18 Apr. 1942, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 19; Lee, interview, 17 Apr. 1966, 34-7. The quote is from p. 35 of the Lee interview.

⁷⁹² Lee, interview, 17 Apr. 1966, 37; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 41; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 195, 235 n. 30; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 182.

⁷⁹³ Ottley, "Memphis Row."

⁷⁹⁴ Apparently, Church helped Martin with his 1942 race. Ibid.; Benjamin L. Hooks with Jerry Guess, *The March for Civil Rights: The Benjamin Hooks Story* (Chicago: American Bar Association Publishing, 2003), 46; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 182.

Both Church and Martin unsuccessfully sought justice against the Crump machine for the 1940 developments. Church persuaded Martin to come with him to Washington D.C. to confer with Republican and Democratic officials about the matter, and Church was present when Martin gave a deposition at the Department of Justice on March 12, 1941. They also prepared an extensive memorandum, substantiated by quotes from black and white Memphians, which attested to Martin's impeccable reputation and recounted his troubles with the Crump machine. In fact, so respected was Martin that many white police officers had reported sick when assigned to his store.⁷⁹⁵ Church and Martin presented the memo to officials of both parties and the Department of Justice to no avail.⁷⁹⁶ Afterward, Church continued to monitor the case and publicize it.⁷⁹⁷ Though Congress was investigating the matter as late as 1948, no action was ultimately taken.⁷⁹⁸

The Crump machine kept up its intimidation of Martin after his move from Memphis. Eight days after his deposition, Martin wrote Church, in Washington D.C. at the time, that Lt. Lee had visited him in Chicago and told him that Will Gerber, the Shelby County Attorney General, wanted him back in Memphis. "I was careful what I said to him. I think they sent him here. He did not get a thing out of me," Martin said.⁷⁹⁹ Lee called Martin four days later

⁷⁹⁵ Ottley, "Memphis Row."

⁷⁹⁶ Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 184; Martin, "Memorandum;" Church and Church, interview no. 1, 10 Jul. 1973, 11-2.

⁷⁹⁷ Church and Church, interview no. 1, 10 Jul. 1973, 12; Church to George W. Lee, 9 Feb. 1948, Church Family Papers, Box 6, Folder 41; Church to Carroll Reece, 29 Feb. 1944, Church Family Papers, Box 8, Folder 4; Marie Wathen to Church, 31 Oct. 1943, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1; Marie Wathen to Church, 12 Mar. 1944, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1; Matthew Thornton to Church, 10 Jun. 1943, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1; Church to James R. Wright, 26 Oct. 1943, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 27.

⁷⁹⁸ Church to Lee, 9 Feb. 1948; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 184.

⁷⁹⁹ Martin to Church, 20 Mar. 1941, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 12. For a brief portrait of Gerber, see: Evans to Key, 10 Nov. 1949.

to pass on Gerber's message that he did not have anything against him and did not understand why Martin did not return. The next day, three men rode by Martin's house four times, and they parked across the street and talked. "I said nothing to no one but it look [*sic*] bad to me," Martin wrote Church. "I don't go any place at night and a very few in the day [*sic*]. I think I may need some protection."⁸⁰⁰

Martin's suspicions of ill intent by the Crump machine were verified when he returned to Memphis in 1943. In May, he attended a party for Matthew Thornton, the Mayor of Beale Street. Some blacks left the celebration out of fear because of his presence. When Thornton showed up at his post office job the next day, the postmaster fired him.⁸⁰¹ Martin came back in October to watch a Negro League game in his capacity as president of the American Negro Baseball Association. Three detectives went to his box, arrested him, and took him to the police station. The police chief told him that neither he nor any of his kind was wanted in Memphis. Martin left the next morning with his wife. The night of the next game, police officers came by to make sure he was not there.⁸⁰²

The atmosphere of fear and tension pervaded Memphis for years after the Martin incident. In fact, in some ways, the reign of terror continued and even worsened as Crump maintained an iron grip on the city and no Martin or Church-like political figure rose to challenge his regime. When Lee visited Martin in Chicago in March 1941, he reported that things were tough in Memphis, that people were afraid to ride out in the city.⁸⁰³ Church

⁸⁰⁰ Martin to Church, 25 Mar. 1941, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 12.

⁸⁰¹ Thornton to Church, 10 Jun. 1943.

⁸⁰² Church to Wright, 26 Oct. 1943.

⁸⁰³ Martin to Church, 20 Mar. 1941.

wrote his uncle in New Jersey two years later, “You asked me how people . . . feel towards the [c]ity [a]dministration, they are scared to death, but there is nothing they can do about it.”⁸⁰⁴ Raymond Lynom, who owned a flower business in the city, served as vice president of the local NAACP chapter in the early 1940s. He remembered that the organization was not popular; some who had previously “stood tall” as members were now afraid to admit involvement.⁸⁰⁵ According to Blair Hunt, blacks could not express themselves “without being martyrs,” and the black community’s consensus was that “it was better to be a living soldier than a dead martyr.”⁸⁰⁶

The Crump machine’s exile of Church and Martin from Memphis signified a turning point for black political leadership in Memphis. With the most aggressive leaders gone, Lt. Lee, T. O. Fuller, J. E. Walker, and Blair Hunt, who all worked closely with the Crump machine, remained. Lt. Lee, for instance, had been afraid to come to the Republican campaign headquarters, had not attended any of Martin’s political meetings, and had served as a messenger for Crump during the election season. Lee apparently had not stood up for Church either when the Crump machine harassed him and ran him out of Memphis.⁸⁰⁷ Church considered Lee a “creature of circumstances” who would say only what Crump officials would let him say if he was subpoenaed about the Martin matter.⁸⁰⁸ Yet, Lee’s position likely stemmed from fear given his beating. His stance most certainly derived from

⁸⁰⁴ Church to Wright, 26 Oct. 1943.

⁸⁰⁵ Lymon, interview, 23-4. Also see: Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 77, 138.

⁸⁰⁶ Walker, “Role of Black Clergy,” 31.

⁸⁰⁷ Martin to Klepper, 18 Apr. 1942; U.S. Department of Justice, Transcript, 1-10, 26-7. Also see: Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 1-5; Lee, interview, 17 Apr. 1966, 32-9.

⁸⁰⁸ U.S. Department of Justice, Transcript, 26-7.

his desire to remain in Memphis. When Blair Hunt had told him that Crump wanted Martin to leave town, the minister had said that Crump wanted Lee to leave town as well. “I don’t want to offend Mr. Crump but I’m not going anywhere,” Lee had told Hunt. “I haven’t done anything for Mr. Crump to run me out of town and my business is here, my grave lot is here, and I’ve got to go sometime, so if I am to go, I prefer going in a town where my ‘roots’ are, near the grave that I have prepared for my body.”⁸⁰⁹

Despite all the ways in which Lee had worked for the machine, Crump accused him after the election of not letting all he had done for him “seep down to the masses.”⁸¹⁰ In response, Lee suggested to the political boss a large parade of black city employees as a way of showcasing the city’s benevolence toward black Memphians. The lieutenant subsequently put on this event at the Blues Bowl, a football game of the top two black high schools teams in the Mid-South. Conceived by Lt. Lee, the football game, which had segregated seating, served as a fundraiser for the black poor. Lee invited Crump and Chandler as the honored guest and keynote speaker respectively.⁸¹¹ Above all else, Lee wanted to survive during this time, according to his biographer. He did, but his actions damaged what was left of his reputation as a protest leader and his relationship with the Crump machine became increasingly unpopular with black Memphians.⁸¹²

⁸⁰⁹ Lee later remembered that the machine “didn’t spare white or colored [people] who didn’t go along with [its] program.” Lee, interview, 17 Apr. 1966, 37, 39.

⁸¹⁰ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 131.

⁸¹¹ Ibid., 131-3; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 43; Lee to Crump, 19 Nov. 1940, Chandler Papers, Box 13, Folder: 1940-Public Improvements for Colored Citizens.

⁸¹² Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 123, 131, 133.

Lee took the place of Church as the most prominent local black Republican in the 1940s. He attended the Republican National Convention as a delegate and served as the only black member of the Republican State Executive Committee from Memphis and Shelby County.⁸¹³ In a letter to a white Republican lawyer in Memphis, Martin had protested the selection of Lee to run for the committee. Even though Lee had informed Martin of the Crump machine's plans to prosecute him for making bond without a license, Martin said that the lieutenant had not supported him during his ordeal. In addition, Martin feared that Crump would control the Republican Party.⁸¹⁴ His suspicions were not far from the mark: white Republicans had not protested the harassment of Martin or Church, revealing their weakness as an oppositional force to Crump.⁸¹⁵ Some sort of collaborative relationship existed between white Republicans and the Crump organization, and many black-and-tan Republicans helped elect Crump candidates in the Democratic primaries.⁸¹⁶

Even so, black Republicans remained primarily responsible for keeping the party organization alive and made up most of the small Republican primary vote. They worked with a few white Republicans, including attorney George Klepper, who chaired the local Republican executive committee.⁸¹⁷ The machine monitored the Republicans, as it did with

⁸¹³ Ibid., 155; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 225, 265, 320.

⁸¹⁴ Martin to Klepper, 18 Apr. 1942.

⁸¹⁵ Church and Church, interview no. 1, 10 Jul. 1973, 10.

⁸¹⁶ Woodbury to Church, 15 Apr. 1986; "Lt. Lee Responsible for Packed GOP Meeting," *PS*, 6 Feb. 1952, Vertical File: George W. Lee, MSC.

⁸¹⁷ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 155; Lymon, interview, 25; "Lt. Lee Responsible," *PS*; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 320.

virtually any group that presented a potential threat, but they were not much of one.⁸¹⁸ With Church and Martin gone and its leadership in accommodating hands, the organization declined in power to the point that no Republican primary was held in Memphis or Shelby County in 1942.⁸¹⁹ The black-and-tan faction functioned as a mere shell of what had once been a vital local party organization that pressed for civil rights, economic advancement, criminal justice, and political power. At a 1944 meeting of local Republicans, only twenty-seven whites and forty blacks attended, and they sat segregated from one another, an arrangement that Church never would have allowed.⁸²⁰

Despite their small numbers, Lt. Lee and the black Republicans served as a counterforce to Crump by the mere fact that they belonged to a different political party, and they battled fear in carrying out their activities. Black unionist George Holloway remembered that Lee was accepted as “token opposition” to Crump.⁸²¹ After Church and Martin left, Raymond Lymon, the longstanding black Republican, took charge of the Republican ward and precinct work in the city and county.⁸²² Black Republicans were responsible for working at the polls on election day, and they used storefronts for Republican primaries. Lymon recalled, “You had many Negroes, I am sorry to say at that time [who] were afraid to have a ballot box out in the front yard of their business. Absolutely afraid!”⁸²³

⁸¹⁸ Dowdy, ““We Engaged in a Hard Campaign;” “At a Meeting Held . . . April 22, 1944,” 1944, Hale Papers, Box 19, Folder 11: Election Misc. 1944; Key, *Southern Politics*, 73.

⁸¹⁹ Lymon, interview, 26; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 227-8.

⁸²⁰ “At a Meeting Held,” 1944.

⁸²¹ Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 65.

⁸²² Lymon, interview, 25-6.

⁸²³ *Ibid.*, 24. Also see: Robert R. Church to James R. Wright, 18 Nov. 1943, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 27, p. 3.

Still, black Republicans continued with their electoral efforts. In 1944, for example, they sent four thousand letters to blacks to urge them to back Thomas Dewey for president, and Lt. Lee won 1,109 votes in his successful bid for the Republican State Executive Committee.⁸²⁴

Despite Crump's ruthlessness, black Memphians remained politically active in other ways as well. They campaigned and held rallies during election time, participated in political and civic clubs, and pressed public officials for city jobs and about other matters. Ministers, businessmen, civic and women's club members, and ordinary citizens were among those who politically mobilized.⁸²⁵ The City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, for instance, wrote Mayor Chandler that they supported him and the war effort. Composed of more than 750 members, the group reported that they were selling war bonds and helping with city beautification efforts.⁸²⁶

Black businessmen maintained their involvement in politics though they were not as aggressive as Church and his associates had been in pursuing racial equality. Instead, they sought improvements within the segregated society. For instance, M. S. Stuart, on behalf of the Memphis Negro Chamber of Commerce, informed Crump that black people objected to the name "Shinertown" for a housing project. Stuart instead proposed the name "T. J. Searcy Homes" after the late black minister. Crump said that he would not allow any name objectionable to blacks.⁸²⁷ In addition, the Negro Chamber of Commerce and its female

⁸²⁴ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 225.

⁸²⁵ Walker, "Role of Black Clergy," 33.

⁸²⁶ Mary E. Murphy and Jennie S. Broadnax to Chandler, 1 Aug 1942, Chandler Papers, Box 39, Folder: Negroes 1942. Also see: Marie L. Adams et al. to Chandler, 3 Feb. 1945, Chandler Papers, Box 79, Folder: Negroes 1945.

⁸²⁷ Stuart to Crump, 1 Apr. 1940, Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 183, Folder: St-1940. A note is written on the letter that Crump called on April 2, 1940, to say that "any name objectionable to the colored people would not be selected."

counterpart, the Housewives League, protested the White Rose Laundry's sign picturing a black female laundry worker washing a pair of underpants. In a letter to the storeowners, these groups demanded its removal, noting that hundreds of black Memphians objected to "its subtle although effective ridicule of the race." The letter continued, "[M]ost colored people have to work hard for a living [W]e do not believe the many servile tasks that they have to perform should be held up in ridicule and be made a public laughing stock" through the "immoral exhibition of underwear etc."⁸²⁸ The organizations sent Mayor Chandler a copy of the letter, and he suggested to the storeowners that their sign did more harm than good. They subsequently removed the sign.⁸²⁹

Like Church and his group, these black businessmen saw economics as a channel for black advancement. As head of the National Negro Business League, J. E. Walker, for instance, decided to work with other national black organizations in a campaign to teach blacks to save money with the ultimate goal of raising their economic level. So, he resigned from the Colored Democratic Club in May 1944.⁸³⁰ Lt. Lee remained a chief official of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company. Along with Church's former political associate Dr. A. N. Kittrelle, he convinced Walker to found Tri-State Bank in 1946, one of thirteen black banks in the country and the first one in Memphis since the failure of the black bank in 1927.⁸³¹ Lee

⁸²⁸ Memphis Negro Chamber of Commerce and Housewives League to White Rose Laundry-Cleaners, 5 Oct. 1942, Chandler Papers, Box 39, Folder: Negroes 1942.

⁸²⁹ See these letters in Chandler Papers, Box 39, Folder: Negroes 1942: L. J. Searcy to Chandler, 13 Oct. 1942; Walter Chandler to Walter Klyce and Arnold Klyce, 6 Oct. 1942. For more on this matter, see: Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 63-4.

⁸³⁰ Walker to E. W. Hale, 1 May 1944; Walker to Walter Chandler, 20 Apr. 1944, Chandler Papers, Box 66, Folder: Negroes 1944.

⁸³¹ George W. Lee, interview by Aaron Boom, transcript, Memphis, 19 May 1966, UMOH, p. 1-2; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 251.

believed that it was imperative that blacks advance economically. The black man “can’t always be in front of the counter and not behind the counter. He can’t always be buying and never selling,” Lee said. “He can’t always be begging charity with no charity to bestow.”⁸³²

While the Crump machine accepted a limited degree of black protest activity, Rev. T. O. Fuller represented the type of black leader that it continued to tolerate and encourage, one who generally supported city officials and did not challenge them. After his election as mayor in 1939, for instance, Chandler had asked Fuller to provide him with suggestions and advice.⁸³³ Fuller continued to cultivate his ties to the Crump organization as a way to improve the conditions of blacks within the segregated system, such as by seeking city jobs for them, but his statements and actions in support of the Crump machine ultimately served to legitimate it and undermine those who protested it.⁸³⁴ For example, despite ongoing police brutality, Fuller brought business to the city by ensuring that the National Baptist Convention, of which he was the assistant secretary, met in Memphis even though--as he wrote Crump--an “effort was made to give us the ‘black-eye’ on the account of some things that have happened here.”⁸³⁵ The black minister also supported Will Gerber in his bid for re-election as Attorney General of Shelby County in 1942. Despite Gerber’s actions during the “reign on terror,” Fuller wrote Crump that Gerber was “recognized as a painstaking, hardworking, courteous and efficient [a]ttorney [g]eneral” with a good record and was “held

⁸³² George W. Lee, interview by Aaron Boom, transcript, Memphis, 17 May 1966, UMOH, p. 18.

⁸³³ Chandler to Fuller, 19 Jan. 1940, Chandler Papers, Box 12, Folder: Negroes 1940.

⁸³⁴ For example, see these letters in Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 192, Folder: “Fu” 1942: Fuller to Crump, 8 Jan. 1942, mfm, 002378 and Fuller to Crump, 23 Mar. 1942, mfm, 002372.

⁸³⁵ Fuller to Crump, 16 Apr. 1942, Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 192, Folder: “Fu” 1942, mfm, 002368.

in high esteem by all who are brought in touch with him.”⁸³⁶ Shortly before his death in 1942, Fuller even criticized Church in a letter to Crump, accusing him of “never ma[king] any effort to organize an intelligent following. [Church] . . . held the spotlight and prestige for what it meant to him in other quarters.”⁸³⁷ After Fuller died, Crump called the *Commercial Appeal* to say, “He thoroughly understood his own race as well as the white people and his work was always helpful and constructive He was held in high esteem by all white people who knew him [His] whole life [was] spent not only for the good of his own race, but for this entire community as well.”⁸³⁸

Rev. Blair Hunt carried on Fuller’s torch in serving as one of Crump’s closest black political associates in the 1940s. In fact, Hunt had begun his church service as an assistant minister to Fuller. Born in Memphis in 1888 to former slaves, Hunt came from an elite black family with a history of political involvement. A relative, Fred Hunt, acted as Recorder of Deeds in Memphis in the 1880s. Hunt did his undergraduate work at Morehouse and graduate work at Harvard, financing his education by his own efforts. His father, who had a substantial carpenter trade, also helped fund his schooling. After a stint as a chaplain during World War I, Hunt served as the long-time minister of Mississippi Boulevard Church, of which J. E. Walker and other prominent black Memphians were members. Hunt moved up

⁸³⁶ Fuller to Crump, 9 Mar. 1942, Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 192, Folder: “Fu” 1942, mfm, 002375.

⁸³⁷ Fuller to Crump, 23 Apr. 1942, Vertical File: T O. Fuller, MSC.

⁸³⁸ “Dr. T. O. Fuller, Negro Leader, Son of Slave Parents, Dies,” CA, 22 Jun. 1942, Vertical File: T O. Fuller, MSC.

the ranks of the school system and became the principal of Booker T. Washington High School in 1932, a position that he held for decades.⁸³⁹

Hunt's political approach was to campaign for and make friends with white politicians in order to secure benefits for his high school and otherwise improve the social and economic conditions of blacks. He sent holiday greetings and gifts to Crump and elected officials in order to establish relationships with them, and they often thanked him for these gestures.⁸⁴⁰ He also sent congratulatory notes to local officials when they won office.⁸⁴¹ Calling himself "a little brown nut" in the Crump machine, Hunt campaigned for Crump-backed candidates and supplied the organization with names of campaign workers.⁸⁴² In 1944, he worked, once again, with the Colored Democratic Club and compiled a fact sheet on why blacks should vote for Roosevelt.⁸⁴³ Going so far as to suggest that Senator Kenneth McKellar of Tennessee nominate Crump to be vice president, Hunt wrote, "Thousands of Memphis Negroes will be happy."⁸⁴⁴

⁸³⁹ Pink Palace Museum, *Historic Black Memphians*, 13; and see this information in Vertical File: Blair Hunt, MSC: Ada Gilkey, "\$650 Investment Inspired by 33-Year-Old Failure," *PS*, 26 Mar. 1947; Perre Magness, "Hunt Gave Blacks a Political 'Ear,'" *CA*, 14 Feb. 1991; Mantri Sivanada, "Blair T. Hunt: A Resourceful and an Illustrious Black Memphian 1887-1976," Jan. 2000, SouthernHistory.net.

⁸⁴⁰ For example, see: E. W. Hale to Hunt, 27 Dec. 1944, Hale Papers, Box 32, Folder 13 and these letters in Crump Papers, Series II, Box 59, Folder: Greetings 1934: Hunt and Earl Allen to Crump, 21 Dec. 1933, mfm, 001509 and Crump to Hunt, 5 Jan. 1934, mfm, 001508.

⁸⁴¹ For example, see: Hunt to E. W. Hale, 8 Nov. 1944, Hale Papers, Box 32, Folder 13; Hunt to E. W. Hale, 2 Aug. 1946, Hale Papers, Box 32, Folder 13.

⁸⁴² Hunt to Walter Chandler, 22 May 1942, Chandler Papers, Box 39, Folder: Negroes 1942.

⁸⁴³ Hunt to E. W. Hale, 30 Oct. 1944, Hale Papers, Box 19, Folder 12; and see this information in Chandler Papers, Box 66, Folder: 1944 Presidential Campaign: Hunt to Walter Chandler, 30 Oct. 1944; Hunt, "Cold Facts and Figures on Why Negroes Should Vote for President Roosevelt," 1944.

⁸⁴⁴ Magness, "Hunt Gave Blacks a Political 'Ear.'"

Even though the Crump machine manipulated black voters, Hunt contended that black political participation in this system laid the foundation for future black political development. “I’m a desegregationist, but with it a gradualist. I’m not a revolutionist but an evolutionist,” he explained in 1959.⁸⁴⁵ Yet, was Hunt right that manipulated black voting was better than no voting at all? Did participation in this system provide a solid foundation for independent political activity later? Hunt took an optimistic stance, but others perhaps argued that Crump’s manipulation of the black vote threatened to inhibit independent black political mobilization in the future because black Memphians had experienced a system in which they were told how to vote and were not encouraged to think for themselves.

To be sure, at the same time that the Crump machine manipulated black and white votes and cracked down on white and black activists, it continued to provide benefits for blacks, a reason that Hunt, Fuller, and others supported it. Mayor Chandler summarized the machine’s approach to blacks in 1943: “More than forty percent of the residents of Memphis are colored, and we try to maintain friendly relationships with the colored groups by giving them excellent schools, sufficient parks, playgrounds, housing and hospital facilities,” he wrote. “We endeavor to take care of streets on which they live, and to encourage the proper understanding of their responsibilities as citizens.”⁸⁴⁶ Indeed, the Crump machine continued to improve black schools, streets, and health services.⁸⁴⁷ Maintaining a degree of civility with blacks, Chandler made speeches at black institutions and participated in black-oriented

⁸⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁶ Chandler to Kemper G. McComb, 28 Jul. 1943, Chandler Papers, Box 52, Folder: Negroes 1943.

⁸⁴⁷ “Memphis-Resident,” [1952?], Overton Papers, Box 9, Folder 46.

events.⁸⁴⁸ Per the requests of black groups, he sent letters of support for national meetings held in Memphis, including the Colored Methodist Youth Conference.⁸⁴⁹ Like past mayors, Chandler provided municipal assistance for the Tri-State Fair, the black counterpart to the white Mid-South fair. He also ensured that the city provided an office to Mayor of Beale Street Matthew Thornton after his re-election to this ceremonial position in 1940, and he addressed Thornton as “mayor” in his correspondence with him.⁸⁵⁰ Adhering to the longstanding Crump machine policy, Chandler, in general, responded to letters from blacks in a civil and cordial manner.⁸⁵¹

The NAACP’s *Crisis* magazine observed that Crump had improved housing and public services for blacks and that Memphis ranked as one of the best places in the South for its material provisions to blacks. Yet, it reported, “In the congested colored sections . . . complaints persist of unlighted and unpaved streets, of underpaid Negro school teachers, of [the] lack of playgrounds and parks and of vast numbers of Negroes whose housing and hospitalization needs continue to be neglected.”⁸⁵² To be sure, the Crump machine’s public services to blacks remained inadequate. Public housing, for instance, did not have enough slots to fulfill demand.⁸⁵³ And, in general, black Memphians were discontented: in a 1942

⁸⁴⁸ See, for example, these documents in Chandler Papers, Box 13, Folder: 1940-Public Improvements for Colored Citizens: George W. Lee to Chandler, 11 Dec. 1940; Chandler to T. O. Fuller, Jr., 10 Jun. 1940; T. O. Fuller, Jr., to Chandler, 8 Jun. 1940; J. L. Campbell to Chandler, 11 Sept. 1940.

⁸⁴⁹ Chandler to W. H. Amos, Chandler Papers, Box 13, Folder: 1940-Public Improvements for Colored Citizens.

⁸⁵⁰ Chandler to Thornton, 10 Jun. 1940, Chandler Papers, Box 13, Folder: 1940-Public Improvements for Colored Citizens; Lewis O. Swingler to Chandler, 31 Jul. 1940, Chandler Papers, Box 13, Folder: 1940-Public Improvements for Colored Citizens.

⁸⁵¹ This assessment is based on my review of numerous documents in the Chandler Papers.

⁸⁵² Doyle, “Gestapo in Memphis,” 152.

⁸⁵³ Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 270.

poll, 75 percent said that they thought they would receive better treatment than they faced currently if Japan defeated the United States.⁸⁵⁴

Even with the limits of the Crump machine's treatment toward blacks, not all whites appreciated the city administration's steps for them, particularly as racial tensions heightened during wartime. For instance, white Cotton Exchange workers, who considered themselves "friends" of Chandler, questioned his decision to allow a black Baptist convention in the city auditorium. "[W]e all agree that it is certainly the wrong time to encourage a bunch of [n]orthern Negroes to come down here, where there is certainly a most distinct feeling of animosity growing daily between the whites and the negroes," one wrote him.⁸⁵⁵ With fewer white men around because of the war, numerous white women wrote the draft board to express their fears about black men; they noticed them around more, such on the bus during Christmas shopping season. Expressing anxiety about the absence of white men to protect them, these women feared that the black men carried venereal disease; they worried about miscegenation and black rule. The women urged that the black men should be drafted.⁸⁵⁶ Their anxieties indicated that white Memphians desired Crump to keep black voting in check in part because of their fears of black-white sex. The white women's pleas also may have been a rhetorical strategy to support their argument that blacks rather than just whites should be drafted.

⁸⁵⁴ Honey, *Southern Labor*, 204.

⁸⁵⁵ B. E. Booth to Chandler, 11 Sept. 1942, Chandler Papers, Box 39, Folder: Negroes 1942.

⁸⁵⁶ See these documents in Chandler Papers, Box 39, Folder: Negroes 1942: Mrs. E. C. Felts to Chandler, 24 Sept. 1942, S. Toof Brown to Chandler, 22 Sept. 1942; anonymous to Draft Board, 17 Sept. 1942; "From several weman [sic] of city" to Chandler, 20 Sept. 1942. Also see: Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 92.

Section III

The war years saw not only increased racial friction but also the explosive growth of the labor movement in Memphis and across the country. Federal legislation and grassroots activism had spurred unionization in the 1930s, and labor activism accelerated in the 1940s. Because President Roosevelt aided the Europeans in their war effort, federal military spending rose even before the United States entered World War II. As a result, the demand for labor increased, providing a favorable environment for hundreds of successful strikes for union recognition and higher wages. Union membership jumped to more than 8 million by 1941, from a low point of 3 million in 1933. Black workers joined unions in large numbers in Memphis and elsewhere.⁸⁵⁷

In June 1941, black labor and civil rights activists won a major victory when President Roosevelt issued an executive order banning employment discrimination in the defense industries based on race, national origin, color, or creed, and creating the Committee on Fair Employment Practices (FEPC) for enforcement. A. Philip Randolph, the head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, had successfully pressured Roosevelt to take this action by threatening to hold a mass-based march to press for this demand. After Roosevelt issued the executive order, the most significant executive action for black rights since the Emancipation Proclamation, the labor leader abandoned march plans.⁸⁵⁸ The FEPC

⁸⁵⁷ Honey, *Southern Labor*, 145-7.

⁸⁵⁸ Benjamin Quarles, "A. Philip Randolph: Labor Leader at Large," in *Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table*, eds. Julian Bond and Andrew Lewis (New York: American Heritage, 1995), 126.

succeeded in alleviating employment discrimination, and Randolph created the March on Washington Movement organization to monitor it.⁸⁵⁹

During the war, the number of factory workers doubled in Memphis because of the economic growth generated by private investment, new industrial plants, and military facilities constructed by the federal government. The city gained about nineteen thousand manufacturing jobs, providing an environment ripe for industrial unionism. The CIO grew at a rapid pace, becoming the most prominent union association in Memphis. More than twenty thousand Memphis workers joined it, and the CIO reached thirty-two thousand members by the end of the war. Black workers were the heart of its support, and biracial organization became the key to its success.⁸⁶⁰ The CIO gained bargaining rights in more than sixty workplaces--most with mainly black laborers--in Memphis and nearby areas as soon as September 1941. Black Memphians joined the AFL as well and participated in strikes in that capacity.⁸⁶¹ They sought to better their employment situation and combat job discrimination not only by engaging in union activities but also by making appeals to the FEPC and asking for help from black community leaders.⁸⁶²

While the labor movement grew and experienced success, it faced racial tensions in Memphis. Many whites saw the CIO as a “communist, nigger-loving union” federation.⁸⁶³

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid., 136; Louis Kesselman, *The Social Politics of FEPC: A Study in Reform Pressure Movements* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1948), 93-4.

⁸⁶⁰ Honey, *Southern Labor*, 177-9; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 50-1.

⁸⁶¹ Honey, *Southern Labor*, 180-2; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 49, 61-2.

⁸⁶² Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 56.

⁸⁶³ Honey, *Southern Labor*, 171.

Crump himself used that phrase to describe it.⁸⁶⁴ In the fall of 1940, the most important target for CIO organizers was the Firestone plant, which employed nearly three thousand workers of which one third were black.⁸⁶⁵ But, Crump's "reign of terror" drove away many probable supporters of the CIO.⁸⁶⁶ CIO union organizers experienced violence and intimidation from the police and anti-union Firestone employees, and local authorities were largely complicit. Some workers believed Crump paid those who instigated the violence because of the money being passed around the plant.⁸⁶⁷ White workers voted for a racially exclusive AFL union, which the city of Memphis endorsed. Their ballots outnumbered those of blacks, who voted for a CIO union. As a result, an AFL union took hold with whites joining one unit, and blacks joining another.⁸⁶⁸ Fanning these flames was the fear mongering of Congressman Martin Dies, who headed the House Special Committee on Un-American Activities. Shortly before the vote was taken, he accused subversives, including CIO organizers, of generating racial hatred through trying to gain black support. His charges inspired city officials and the *Commercial Appeal* to justify the reign on terror as an effort against communism and race warfare.⁸⁶⁹

As the CIO grew in Memphis, the city became more receptive to its presence. The Roosevelt administration sent down a Justice Department investigator after the beating of a

⁸⁶⁴ Ibid., 209.

⁸⁶⁵ Ibid., 155-65.

⁸⁶⁶ Ibid., 170.

⁸⁶⁷ Ibid., 155-63, 170-1; Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 55.

⁸⁶⁸ Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 49; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 40.

⁸⁶⁹ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 40. For a broader look at Dies, see: Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 89-91.

union organizer, perhaps putting pressure on the municipal administration to change its ways.⁸⁷⁰ City officials became aware that totally opposing the CIO was counter-productive because of its size and influence. Wartime workers were needed, and Memphis was experiencing unprecedented prosperity. Still, Crump continued to dislike the organization, and police harassed union organizers. Many businesses remained anti-union and resisted union demands, and labor organizing continued to suffer from racial tensions. In 1942, after the AFL union was ineffective, Firestone workers switched to a CIO union. But, racial divisions continued to hamper union activities within the plant.⁸⁷¹ Like elsewhere in the South, most white workers were not fully committed to interracialism. They wanted to hold better jobs than blacks and to maintain segregation in the workforce and society.⁸⁷²

Despite the limits they faced, black laborites represented the most vital force against the Jim Crow system in the absence of any strong civil rights or black political organization in Memphis. Black workers first fought for the right to unionize, sometimes risking their lives in the process. Then, they used unions to battle workplace discrimination. By aligning with whites, they challenged the social code of racial separatism. Ultimately, black unionists wanted the Jim Crow system to end.⁸⁷³ Most apparently did not engage in formal political mobilization, but they helped create an environment that provided the seeds for challenging the Crump regime at the polls in the future.

⁸⁷⁰ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 56.

⁸⁷¹ Ibid., 54-6; Honey, *Southern Labor*, 187-91, 208-9; Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 49.

⁸⁷² Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 132, 134.

⁸⁷³ Ibid., 132; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 79.

During the war years, these laborites and other black Memphians became more overt in challenging the Jim Crow system than in previous decades; they tried to make wartime rhetoric about democracy a reality in their lives. Individual protests increased, especially on buses where blacks risked arrest for not complying with segregation policies. Working-class ministers increasingly hosted union and civil rights meetings at their churches.⁸⁷⁴ As occurred elsewhere in the South and the country, NAACP membership in Memphis grew at a dramatic pace, rising ten times in size to a high of some four thousand members.⁸⁷⁵ In 1944, branch members helped organize the Tennessee State Conference of Branches in order to better coordinate NAACP activities in the state.⁸⁷⁶ Local blacks were further spurred to activism after hearing about the poor treatment of black soldiers stationed in the South, who experienced violent attacks from whites and saw prisoners of war receiving better treatment than them. Black unionist Clarence Coe protested by signing up hundreds of NAACP members at his plant.⁸⁷⁷

Crump could not stop the rising tide of protest activity, but he did manipulate the fear of race riots to clamp down on efforts for black equality. During the war, at least 240 racial incidents occurred in forty-seven cities, most extensively in Detroit in 1943 where thirty-three people died. Rumors spread of race riots in Memphis, and city officials remained vigilant,

⁸⁷⁴ Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 63 n. 13, 127; Honey, *Southern Labor*, 203; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 46, 92.

⁸⁷⁵ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 54; Honey, *Southern Labor*, 203.

⁸⁷⁶ Ullius R. Phillips to Ella J. Baker, 25 Oct. 1944, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1944-47, mfm, 19:00785; E. B. Cowan, forward to "Souvenir Booklet and Program: Third Annual Conference N. A. A. C. P. Branches of Tennessee," 14 Jul. 1949, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1948-50, mfm, 19:00061.

⁸⁷⁷ Honey, *Southern Labor*, 204.

but none broke out.⁸⁷⁸ Still, race riots were not far from Crump's mind, and his political use of this potential disorder was epitomized in the A. Philip Randolph controversy.

The local branch of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters invited Randolph to speak in Memphis on November 7, 1943, at Rev. Roy Love's Mt. Nebo Baptist Church. The day before the speech, the sheriff called a group of black leaders to meet with him at his office, including J. E. Walker, Matthew Thornton, Blair Hunt, Lt. Lee, and H. L. Patton, the president of the Memphis chapter of the Brotherhood. The sheriff subsequently took them to the Shelby County jail, where other Crump lieutenants met them. Serving as the spokesman, Attorney General Will Gerber reminded the black leaders of what the city had done for blacks and said that the upcoming meeting must be stopped; each would be held accountable if Randolph spoke and a race riot occurred. He said that Crump was so interested in maintaining peace that he would walk back from Little Rock (if he was there) to stop a race riot and incarcerate anyone who participated in one.⁸⁷⁹

After the meeting, Patton and a delegation of porters met Randolph at the train station and urged him to leave. Refusing to be intimidated, the labor leader came anyway. Though forbidden by Crump to speak at Love's church, he denounced the Crump machine for its refusal to permit freedom of speech and compared him to Hitler in an address at the national convention of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union taking place in Memphis. He said that the city officials' actions challenged black and white Memphians and the labor movement to

⁸⁷⁸ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 152-4; A. B. Clapp to Walter Chandler, 3 Oct. 1942, Chandler Papers, Box 39, Folder: Negroes 1942; Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 373.

⁸⁷⁹ In addition to Sheriff Oliver Perry and Attorney General Gerber, the Crump lieutenants were Shelby County Commission Chairman E. W. Hale, City Commissioner Joe Boyle, and County Attorney Charles Cabtree. Anonymous, Report of Meeting of Black Leaders with Crump Lieutenants, n.d., 1-2, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 140-1; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 74.

invite him back to speak at a public meeting. Randolph's union was part of the AFL, and he subsequently suggested that its president, William Green, arrange a labor meeting for him to address in Memphis. Green agreed and organized a mass meeting, which Randolph returned to speak at on March 31, 1944.⁸⁸⁰

After Crump forbade Randolph to speak in November, local blacks were quite worked up about the black leaders' role in pressuring the labor leader to follow the political boss's orders.⁸⁸¹ It probably was not publicly known that Crump officials had apparently pressured the black leaders to sign affidavits to prevent any legal activity against the machine.⁸⁸² They also may have forced them to defend the machine. J. E. Walker, for instance, denounced Randolph as a demagogue.⁸⁸³ In the *Memphis World*, Blair Hunt said that he had intended to "promote the larger good for all concerned" in discouraging Randolph from speaking.⁸⁸⁴ He told the press, "The white officials didn't ask us to call it off. They just talked with us."⁸⁸⁵

Crump's treatment of Randolph generated national attention, in large part because of the efforts of Robert R. Church. Long a close friend and political ally of Randolph's, Church

⁸⁸⁰ "Notes on Telephone Call from A. Philip Randolph, Monday, November 29, 1943," 1943, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box A507, Folder: Randolph, A. Philip, 1942-55, mfm, 23:00846; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 141; "Randolph Denounces Crump Machine in Memphis," press release, n.p., 10 Nov. 1943, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 74-5; A. Philip Randolph, "Speech at Memphis, Tennessee, First Baptist Church," 31 Mar. 1944, Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 44, p. 1-2; Green to Randolph, 17 Jan. 1944, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1; Randolph to R. R. Church, 24 Jan. 1944, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1.

⁸⁸¹ Randolph to R. R. Church, 3 Dec. 1943, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1.

⁸⁸² R. R. Church to A. Philip Randolph, 19 Feb. 1944, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1.

⁸⁸³ R. R. Church to Roy Wilkins, 22 Mar. 1944, Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 28.

⁸⁸⁴ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 74.

⁸⁸⁵ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 141.

monitored and publicized the incident from afar, calling it “the hottest thing in the South today.” National publications that covered the affair included the *New Republic*, the *Nation*, and the *Chicago Defender*.⁸⁸⁶ Church also pressed the national office of the NAACP to protest the machine’s action, pointing out that Randolph was a board member of the organization and a winner of its prestigious Spingarn Medal. Acting Secretary Roy Wilkins replied that the organization had protested the incident to federal authorities because the consensus of its officials was that contacting Memphis politicians would have little effect.⁸⁸⁷ In addition, Church persuaded a Republican senator to place a *Chicago Sun* editorial against Crump in the *Congressional Record*.⁸⁸⁸ Not all black Memphians appreciated the publicity, however. Lt. Lee wrote Church that he wanted to be left out of the coverage of the *Chicago Defender*, which supported Randolph against Crump and opposed those blacks who tried to stay within the good graces of the machine. Referring to the Crump machine, Lee wrote, “There is a job here I am trying to do and its [sic] hard enough. To be involved [sic] in something else will be an exceeding handicap in carrying out a political program where the opposition would try to stop me on the slightest pretense.”⁸⁸⁹

⁸⁸⁶ The quote is from: Church to Roy Wilkins, 15 Mar. 1944, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1. Also see: Church to Wright, 18 Nov. 1943; Randolph to Church, 10 Mar. 1944, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1; Randolph to Church, 24 Nov. 1943, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1; Church to Marshall Field, 24 Nov. 1943, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1; Church to Randolph, 20 Dec. 1943, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1.

⁸⁸⁷ Church to Wilkins, 15 Mar. 1944; Church to Wilkins, 22 Mar. 1944; Wilkins to Francis Biddle, 23 Mar. 1944, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1; Wilkins to Church, 23 Mar. 1944, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1; Walter White to Cordell Hull, 3 Dec. 1943, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box A507, Folder: Randolph, A. Philip, 1942-55, mfm, 23:00850.

⁸⁸⁸ The senator was William Langer (R-ND). See: *Congressional Record*, Friday, November 26, 1943, p. 10093; Church to Field, 24 Nov. 1943; Church to Marshall Field, 18 Dec. 1943, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1.

⁸⁸⁹ Lee to Church, 23 Mar. 1944, Church Family Papers, Box 6, Folder 41; Fay Young, “Randolph Speaks; Defies ‘Boss’ Crump,” *CD*, 8 Apr. 1944, p. 1.

In New York City at his Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters headquarters, Randolph thanked Church for publicizing the controversy and reported that he was “busy building fires under Boss Crump and his reprehensible [G]estapo.”⁸⁹⁰ Randolph protested to the Department of Justice about the Crump machine’s denial of his right to free speech and its pressure on black leaders to sign affidavits.⁸⁹¹ He also urged the national office of the NAACP to protest the incident.⁸⁹² The labor leader’s March on Washington Movement organization came to his aid. Representing one thousand members, the New York City branch wrote Mayor Chandler to protest the situation.⁸⁹³ Another protest letter came from Layle Lane, a North Atlantic division official. Using March on Washington Movement letterhead that featured the organization’s slogan, “Winning Democracy for the Negro is Winning the War for Democracy,” he wrote, “If such things can happen in America of what avail is all the terrible slaughter in this war supposedly fought to preserve the rights of free men.” Urging Chandler to invite Randolph to Memphis to assure him of his constitutional rights, Lane wrote, “Only in this way will Memphis redeem itself from the justifiable charge it has already become a part of Hitler’s empire.”⁸⁹⁴

Randolph returned to Memphis to speak at the AFL meeting in late March. He did so even though the Crump machine likely funded the trip of two black Memphians,

⁸⁹⁰ Randolph to Church, 24 Nov. 1943.

⁸⁹¹ See these letters in Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1: Tom C. Clark to Randolph, 27 Nov. 1943; Randolph to Francis Biddle, 10 Mar. 1944.

⁸⁹² “Notes on Telephone Call,” 1943.

⁸⁹³ L. J. Sullivan to Chandler, 23 Nov. 1943, Chandler Papers, Box 52, Folder: Negroes 1943.

⁸⁹⁴ Lane was based in New York City. Lane to Chandler, undated letter but received 22 Nov. 1943, Chandler Papers, Box 52, Folder: Negroes 1943. For an analysis of the international dimension of the Randolph controversy, see: Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 74-6.

businessman G. L. Young and drugstore operator T. J. Johnson, to Washington D.C., where they tried to convince AFL President Green to forbid Randolph from speaking in the city in March or at any time.⁸⁹⁵ When Randolph came back to Memphis, G. A. Long was the only minister who allowed him to use his church for the occasion. After Long opened the meeting with prayer, Randolph spoke to a crowd of two thousand, made up primarily of black and white unionists, both male and female.⁸⁹⁶ Doctors, schoolteachers, principals, and ministers largely stayed away.⁸⁹⁷ Physicians and businessmen said they were either “too busy” to attend or “home with a cold.” The one black lawyer in town, A. A. Latting, did not come. When a *Chicago Defender* reporter asked the wife of one black principal why she did not attend, she replied, “Now you know right well, honey, that we couldn’t dare to go. It would jeopardize my husband’s job.”⁸⁹⁸

Saying that blacks did not want to be “well-kept slaves,” Randolph declared in his speech that Crump “out-Hitlered Hitler.”⁸⁹⁹ Engaging in a battle of words and ideas, he spent a great deal of time pulling apart a recent statement from Crump, published in the *Commercial Appeal*, that defended his actions against Randolph. “Free speech does not mean that anyone has the right to holler fire in a packed theatre,” Crump wrote. “[N]or does it mean that anyone, white or black, has the right to incite race trouble.” Randolph called his

⁸⁹⁵ T. J. Johnson was the former schoolteacher who had published the *Southern Journal* in 1938 in support of the Crump machine. Young, “Randolph Speaks;” Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 75.

⁸⁹⁶ Beale Avenue Baptist Church was also known as First Baptist Church and Beale Street Baptist Church. Honey, *Southern Labor*, 206; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 187; “Randolph Speaks,” *CD*.

⁸⁹⁷ Young, “Randolph Speaks;” Untitled news story, n.p., 6 Apr. [1944 or 1945], Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1.

⁸⁹⁸ Young, “Randolph Speaks.”

⁸⁹⁹ Randolph, “Speech at Memphis,” 7-8.

comparison of a public meeting to a disruption in a packed theater “an insult to the intelligence of decent citizens, black and white.”⁹⁰⁰ He pointed out that no race riots had broken out in any place, including cities in the South, where he had spoken.⁹⁰¹ If the city had friendly race relations, as Crump had stated, Randolph said that there “ought not be any fear that one speech by one man could upset or disturb” them.⁹⁰² He further rebutted Crump’s claim of good race relations by castigating the machine for “waves of police brutality and terrorism,” trampling on the rights of J. B. Martin, manipulating the black vote, and providing few city jobs for blacks. He pointed out that no blacks sat on the city commission in Memphis despite their large percentage of the population.⁹⁰³

In an attempt to discourage black activism, Crump also pointed out that his machine provided benefits to blacks. “About 99 percent of the negroes in Memphis appreciate what has been done for them--housing . . . medical centers, schools, playgrounds, parks . . . and innumerable other helpful things,” Crump wrote.⁹⁰⁴ Randolph replied that these public services were “no proper justification or compensation for denying . . . freedom of speech.”⁹⁰⁵ Moreover, Randolph blasted the quality of these public services. For instance, he denounced the black schools for being typical Jim Crow schools--inadequate, poorly equipped, and with teachers who were both underpaid and unequally paid compared to

⁹⁰⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁹⁰¹ Ibid., 6-7.

⁹⁰² Ibid., 8.

⁹⁰³ Ibid., 9-11. The quote is from p. 10.

⁹⁰⁴ Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 186.

⁹⁰⁵ Randolph, “Speech at Memphis,” 7.

whites. Instead of “crowing” about these schools, Randolph said that Crump should make a constructive effort to deal with educational discrimination.⁹⁰⁶

Randolph also had harsh words for the black leaders who followed Crump’s orders to prevent him from speaking, saying that they had failed the black people of the country as well as unborn generations of black children. “They failed when they refused to stand up and support the right of free speech,” he said. “They went back on the noble and valiant traditions of Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth . . . Frederick Douglass . . . and a great galaxy of heroic Negro crusaders for freedom and justice in the dark days of slavery, reconstruction, and our own time.” Randolph reasoned that some of these blacks sought to defend their stake in the Jim Crow system and others wanted to win the favor and good will of whites. “But this is not typical of the Negro today,” he declared. “Negroes want no part of the me-too-boss, hat-in-hand, Uncle Tom Negro leader.”⁹⁰⁷

Randolph tied the situation in Memphis to larger problems across the South. Quoting Booker T. Washington in saying that “a white man cannot keep a Negro in the ditch without remaining in the ditch with him,” Randolph observed that the region did not flourish economically, socially, or culturally because it was held down by segregation, disenfranchisement, violence, economic exploitation, and civil liberties infractions.⁹⁰⁸ The labor leader called on black and white workers to unite to “save the South from destruction by [J]im-[C]rowism, fascism, and Crumpism,” pointing out that the “same forces that attack

⁹⁰⁶ Ibid., 10-1.

⁹⁰⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁹⁰⁸ Ibid., 18-9. The quote is from p. 18.

the Negro's struggles for their rights, attack the struggles of labor for its rights."⁹⁰⁹ Randolph said that it was common knowledge that the same groups that opposed abolishing the poll tax were against the FEPC.⁹¹⁰ Pointing out that Crump was both a lucrative insurance executive and machine government boss, he said that businessmen and politicians aligned to racially divide black and white workers as a way of economically exploiting both.⁹¹¹ Randolph predicted that the day would "come when the black and white workers . . . stop this misrule and unholy alliance" for they would recognize that their shared interests trump racial divisiveness.⁹¹² "Like other powerful political dictators, [Crump] will . . . disappear in a blaze of political disgrace," he said.⁹¹³

Randolph was correct in making the connection between Memphis and the South; both the city and region hurt blacks and whites through undemocratic practices. With blacks held down by the restrictions of southern law and society, the South limited their potentialities as well as whites affected negatively by the Jim Crow system. The poll tax disenfranchised not only blacks but also poor whites and women in particular, and the Crump machine consistently opposed its repeal because it remained part of its arsenal for maintaining control.⁹¹⁴ Most Tennesseans did not vote, which made it easier for Crump to exert political influence statewide. In fact, voter turnout numbers were low in states across

⁹⁰⁹ Ibid., 15, 18.

⁹¹⁰ Ibid., 14.

⁹¹¹ Ibid., 18, 21.

⁹¹² Ibid., 18.

⁹¹³ Ibid., 21.

⁹¹⁴ Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman, "The Second Battle for Woman Suffrage: Alabama White Women, the Poll Tax, and V. O. Key's Master Narrative of Southern Politics," *Journal of Southern History* 68, no. 2 (May 2002): 333-74; Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 336-41.

the region, sometimes not reaching above 15 percent of those eligible. Moreover, the South was the poorest region in the country, as spotlighted in the federal government's 1938 "Report on Economic Conditions of the South," a document that Randolph referred to in his speech.⁹¹⁵ Segregation served as a powerful barrier to poor blacks and whites joining together to uplift their economic status, and a southern oligarchy with influence particularly wielded by black belt planters controlled politics. It was no coincidence that the white business community supported and made campaign contributions to the Crump machine.⁹¹⁶

Randolph was part of a powerful social movement struggling for a more democratic South during the war years. The labor leader considered the Memphis meeting where he spoke "epoch making" and wrote Church that the "crusade that is being waged to make Memphis civilized and also make the South democratic is bound to have far reaching consequences for the good of democracy in America and the Negro in particular."⁹¹⁷ During this time, black and white laborites, New Dealers, Socialists, and others continued to push for a more democratic South and racial and economic justice in the region. For instance, the biracial Southern Conference for Human Welfare advocated for federal legislation abolishing the poll tax and met with success when the Soldiers Vote Bill was passed in 1942. The new law exempted soldiers serving in the armed forces from the poll tax during the war as well as ensured that they received absentee ballots for primary elections. A 1944 *New York Times* ad, released as a message for the Republican and Democratic Conventions, spoke of the rising activism during wartime as well. Sponsored by leading black organizations of the day

⁹¹⁵ Randolph, "Speech at Memphis," 18.

⁹¹⁶ G. Wayne Dowdy, "General Correspondence 1925-1954," finding aid to Crump Papers, xv.

⁹¹⁷ Randolph to Church, 12 Apr. 1944, Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 44.

--including fraternal, religious, labor, and political ones--and representing 6.5 million blacks, the message called for the abolition of disenfranchisement measures, the extension of the FEPC, the enactment of anti-lynching legislation, an end to discrimination in the armed services, and a stop to colonial exploitation and imperialism.⁹¹⁸

After Randolph's speech, Crump railed against him in another *Commercial Appeal* statement, pointing again to public services. Crump may have felt validated by several black ministers who publicly affirmed their support for him and said that Randolph did not represent the attitude of blacks in his speech.⁹¹⁹ The boss said that he "hate[d] to think that [Randolph] voices the sentiment of the colored citizens of this community in his belittling the many things that have been done for them."⁹²⁰ In an open letter to Crump published in the *Chicago Defender* and other black newspapers, Randolph replied by reiterating points that he had made in his talk. Church provided him with suggestions for crafting his letter, and he used all of them.⁹²¹ Challenging Crump to a public debate, Randolph expressed confidence that he could prove "positively, definitely and without the shadow of a doubt . . . that the colored citizens of Memphis are not satisfied with your jim crow [*sic*] charity and that they resent your tyrannical and Hitler-like policies." Repeating his criticism of black leaders who ingratiated themselves to Crump, he pledged to show the political boss that these "'little black nuts in the . . . machine' have taken you for a ride and [have been] feeding you with a

⁹¹⁸ The measures of the Soldiers Voting Act did not lead to widespread voting among members of the armed services but nonetheless were a significant step for racial justice. "Message to the Republican and Democratic Conventions. From the Negroes of America!" *New York Times* (hereafter *NYT*), 24 Jun. 1944, Hale Papers, Box 19, Folder 11; Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 116; Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 66.

⁹¹⁹ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 75.

⁹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁹²¹ Randolph to Church, 12 Apr. 1944.

lot of baloney in order to get your good will and a little jim crow hand out [*sic*] from time to time.” Blacks had not challenged Crump because they were afraid that he would use his “[G]estapo ruthlessly to beat them up and run them out of town,” he said. Again predicting the demise of Crump’s regime, Randolph declared, “Because of your political feudalism, Memphis is backward and benighted but the people will wake up.”⁹²² Crump did not accept Randolph’s invitation to a debate.

Although Randolph apparently did not face repercussions from Crump beyond these verbal attacks, other black Memphians faced a violent crackdown in the months following Randolph’s speech. The Crump machine undoubtedly took these actions to reassert its power in the wake of the rebellion of the thousands of Memphians who attended Randolph’s talk. The city banned the planned birthday celebration for Randolph by the ladies auxiliary of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters at the recreation room of the Foote Homes, a public housing project, ostensibly because outside groups were not allowed to use the facility. In addition, local governmental officials pressured families of Brotherhood members to move out the public housing project.⁹²³ A number of black Memphians experienced physical attacks, including George W. Lee and labor organizer Benjamin Bell. Two black assailants, who the *Press-Scimitar* reported were “known to have done work at times for the police,” beat them with an iron pipe. Others received threats of violence, even steadfast Crump supporter Blair Hunt. Anonymous callers warned journalist Nat D. Williams not to publicize

⁹²² Randolph to Crump, 6 Apr. 1944, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1.

⁹²³ News release, n.p., 24 Apr. 1944, Church Family Papers, Box 9, Folder 1.

the violence.⁹²⁴ Appealing to the Justice Department for an investigation of these matters, the Workers Defense League, a national socialist organization committed to protecting the legal rights of poor workers and trade unionists, charged that the police, abetted by the Crump machine, was violating the civil rights of black leaders.⁹²⁵

For allowing Randolph to speak in his church, Rev. G. A. Long faced the most serious repercussions. Crump publicly accused Long of “spreading race hatred” and said Memphis was “better off” without him.⁹²⁶ In a public letter titled “Christ, not Crump, is my Boss,” Long replied that he was not beholden to Crump as to whether he could live in Memphis, that he took orders only from God.⁹²⁷ Chandler sent Long a threatening letter, and Boyle verbally abused him in comments publicized by the local white papers. Two black assailants attacked Long at night at his garage door, but he survived and stayed in Memphis. On Sundays, police harassed his congregation.⁹²⁸ The city condemned his church, forcing him to pay more than \$5,000 in improvements. Long only made \$25 per week, and his parishioners were working class and few in number. To meet the city’s fees, Randolph ensured that his union paid Long \$1,000. Other organizations raised money, including a group of black sailors who were students at the nearby Naval Air Base at Millington. They

⁹²⁴ Honey, *Southern Labor*, 206; “Negro-Baiting in Memphis Laid to Police,” unidentified newspaper article, 16 Jun. 1944, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box A507, Folder: Randolph, A. Philip, 1942-55, mfm, 23:00872. The quote is from the newspaper article.

⁹²⁵ “Negro-Baiting,” 16 Jun. 1944; Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 315.

⁹²⁶ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 76-7.

⁹²⁷ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 142.

⁹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 143; Honey, *Southern Labor*, 206; Walker, “Role of Black Clergy,” 47; and these documents in Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1: Long to Church, 18 May 1945; Long, “Defense of Dr. G. A. Long,” Waco, Texas, Feb. 19-20, 1947, 4.

visited Long's church and contributed \$136.50. Church monitored the repression against Long, and the pastor's congregation supported him through these trials.⁹²⁹

Section IV

As seen through the Martin and Randolph cases, Church stayed connected with Memphis people and politics from afar. Church and Randolph communicated about the labor leader's experiences there for years afterward, and Church remained interested in the conditions of the city. During the Randolph ordeal, Church wrote an uncle in New Jersey that Lt. Lee had visited him in Chicago and had said that he "did not see how in three short years Memphis could be changed around like it is today." Church had told him "he was partly to blame for it, that Memphis had not changed, that it was the leadership of which he was part."⁹³⁰ In addition, Church bemoaned the decline of the Republican Party in Memphis; it was undoubtedly hard for him to see considering his work to establish the black-and-tan faction as the regular party organization and the trials he went through with the local lily whites to keep his group dominant. Church urged black-and-tan members in Memphis not to be intimidated by city officials, who he feared were taking over the rival lily-white faction.⁹³¹

Church seldom went back to Memphis, instead spending his time in Washington D.C. and Chicago. His ownership of a small piece of property in Memphis, however, made him eligible for political activity there. In 1942, he sought to run for the Republican state committee in Tennessee, but Crump ordered the County Court not to pay the bills for the

⁹²⁹ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 143; Long, "Defense of Dr. G. A. Long," 4; "Negro-Baiting," 16 Jun. 1944; and these documents in Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1: Randolph to Church, 26 May 1944; Church to Long, 10 May 1945.

⁹³⁰ Church to Wright, 18 Nov. 1943.

⁹³¹ Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 227-8.

Republican primary unless he withdrew from consideration. Church did so, but no Republican primary was held anyway.⁹³² Two years later, Church tried to be elected as a Republican National Committee delegate from Memphis, but apparently Senator McKellar, one of Crump's key officials, conferred with East Tennessee Republican Congressman B. Carroll Reece to help prevent Church from making this move.⁹³³ J. Will Taylor, Church's loyal white ally in state politics, had died in 1939, and Reece was now one of the state's most powerful politicians.

Church met with more success in national politics after leaving his hometown. He remained devoted to using politics as leverage for first-class citizenship for blacks and to making the Republican Party a stronghold for civil rights. In addition to wanting blacks to return to the party, Church wanted more blacks in policymaking positions. To help achieve all these goals, Church formed the Republican American Committee, apparently the only national black Republican organization, and was elected its first president in early 1944. As with the Lincoln League of America, it consisted of black Republicans, both male and female, from more than thirty states. In fact, some were former members of the organization or their descendents. The Republican American Committee met at least annually, and its members included J. B. Martin, George W. Lee, and Perry Howard, the prominent Mississippi Republican who had worked as a top official of the Lincoln League of America.⁹³⁴

⁹³² Ibid., 228.

⁹³³ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 240; Reece to George W. Lee, 8 Mar. 1944, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 23.

⁹³⁴ Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 23-4; Church and Church, interview no. 2, 10 Jul. 1973, 20; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 79-86.

The Republican American Committee achieved one of its greatest successes in 1944, when it influenced the party to include the strongest civil rights language in its platform in its history. Church and an organizational delegation met with the Republican National Convention's platform committee, and they helped persuade its members to include statements calling for a constitutional amendment to abolish the poll tax, legislation against lynching, the establishment of a permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee, and a congressional investigation into discrimination and segregation in the armed forces. They argued that the black vote held the balance of power in close elections in seventeen states and that Republicans could win this bloc by embracing a strong civil rights position.⁹³⁵ The Republican platform ended up containing stronger civil rights statements than that of the Democrats despite the increasing black support for their party.⁹³⁶

When it came to civil rights in the 1944 election season, however, little difference existed between the two parties beyond the platforms. Civil rights remained a minor concern for both parties, and both candidates engaged in mere generalities in expressing their support for civil rights. As a concession to the South, Roosevelt replaced the racially liberal Henry Wallace with Harry S. Truman as his vice presidential candidate of whom blacks had little hope when it came to civil rights. Despite Roosevelt's choice of Truman, most blacks continued to vote for the president. The Republican Party continued to not provide an alternative to his economic programs or take a strong civil rights position that would

⁹³⁵ Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 83-4; Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy*, 98.

⁹³⁶ Republican Party Platform of 1944, 26 Jun. 1944, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, The American Presidency Project [online], Santa Barbara, CA: Univ. of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25835> [accessed 26 May 2009]; Democratic Party Platform of 1944, 19 Jul. 1944, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, The American Presidency Project [online], Santa Barbara, CA: Univ. of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29598> [accessed 26 May 2009].

distinguish itself from the Democratic Party. Its platform was part of the party's pattern of platitudes for civil rights backed up by no real action.⁹³⁷ After Roosevelt won the election, Church and his Republican American Committee pushed the Republican Party to fulfill its platform promises, once again pointing out that the black voters had held the balance of power in key states and that a strong civil rights position was necessary for capturing black votes.⁹³⁸

The Republican American Committee represented one of Church's two major political projects after he left Memphis. The second was his work to make the Fair Employment Practices Commission permanent.⁹³⁹ Church called the issue of fair employment "a human one which involves economic, social and moral justice for more than twenty million members of minority groups."⁹⁴⁰ Long interested in this issue, he had observed as a young man in Memphis that black teachers and principals were paid less than whites even though they did equal work. Federal employment was an exception to the widespread practice of unequal pay. Like his father, he had encouraged young blacks to consider a career with the U.S. Postal Service, where white and black employees received the same salary, when he lived in Memphis.⁹⁴¹

Church served as a member of the board of directors for the National Council for a Permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission, an organization that A. Philip Randolph

⁹³⁷ Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy*, 97-105.

⁹³⁸ Ibid., 109-11; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 84-6.

⁹³⁹ Church and Church, interview no. 2, 5 Jan. 1973, 2-3.

⁹⁴⁰ Church, telegram to Robert A. Taft, 14 Jan. 1942, Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 1.

⁹⁴¹ Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 74.

formed in 1943. Randolph appointed him as its chief lobbyist on Capitol Hill. “I knew there was no other person of color in the country who could reach as many outstanding Republican spokesmen of power . . . [or] whose political wisdom was more highly cherished and sought after, by both black and white Republican leaders, than his,” Randolph later said. “The basic reason for this was that he not only possessed a mind for careful evaluation of political personalities and forces but he [also] was impeccably honest and could not be influenced by money or political power.”⁹⁴² During this time, Church continued his longstanding practice of never accepting payment for political work. And, he was willing to share his political skills: he taught Clarence Mitchell how to lobby. Mitchell became the long-time lobbyist for the NAACP.⁹⁴³

Church involved himself in other national political activities as well. After Virginia Durr, an official of the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax, enlisted him to persuade Republicans to support an anti-poll tax bill, he worked with this committee.⁹⁴⁴ Prominent black and white figures, such as Eleanor Roosevelt and A. Philip Randolph, supported the organization as well. In 1946, Church was instrumental in the election of Tennessee Congressman Carroll Reece as Republican National Committee chairman even though Reece may have prevented him from serving as a convention delegate two years earlier.⁹⁴⁵

⁹⁴² A. Philip Randolph, forward to Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, v.

⁹⁴³ Church and Church, interview no. 2, 10 Jul. 1973, 19.

⁹⁴⁴ The National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax formerly was the anti-poll tax committee of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare; it became its own organization in 1941. See these documents in Church Family Papers, Box 8, Folder 8: Durr to Church, 21 Mar. 1944; Church to Katherine Shryver, 14 May 1945; and Church to Katherine Shryver, 16 May 1945. Durr’s grandfather, Josiah Patterson, had been a friend of Church’s white grandfather, Colonel Church. When the colonel died, Patterson had become the executor of Church’s grandfather’s estate and the legal guardian of Church’s father. Hollinger F. Barnard, ed., *Outside the Magic Circle: The Autobiography of Virginia Foster Durr* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 159-60.

⁹⁴⁵ Church and Church, interview no. 2, 10 Jul. 1973, 21-2.

Church's move undoubtedly served as a strategy to increase his own influence in the halls of Washington.

Section V

As Church battled for political influence, civil rights, and fair employment, the Crump machine kept up its campaign to portray race relations as harmonious in Memphis. By September 1944, the city released a forty-page booklet, *Benefits and Opportunities for Colored Citizens of Memphis: Civic Progress 1940-44*, on its provisions for blacks. Printed on heavy-coated paper, the publication was signed by Mayor Chandler and the rest of the city commission. It spotlighted health, educational, recreational, housing, and other municipal services specifically for blacks and included a map of the respective locations. The publication pointed out that black citizens also benefited from citywide services such as street paving and neighborhood improvements. In addition, the booklet featured city jobs for blacks, including as doctors, nurses, and public housing managers. Attractive photographs showcased the city's offerings and portrayed blacks in a dignified light.⁹⁴⁶

Mayor Chandler took a personal interest in the project, and the city publicized the booklet to citizens, governmental agencies, and other organizations in Memphis and across the country. Often in response to requests, city officials, along with the local Chamber of Commerce, distributed more than fifteen hundred copies free of charge from late 1944 through 1946. They sent the booklet to a variety of recipients, including university and public libraries, Chambers of Commerce, municipal and federal officials, and ordinary citizens.⁹⁴⁷

⁹⁴⁶ *Benefits and Opportunities for Colored Citizens of Memphis: Civic Progress 1940-44* (Memphis: City of Memphis, 1944).

⁹⁴⁷ My analysis is based on the numerous documents pertaining to this booklet in: Chandler Papers, Box 66, Folder: Negroes 1944 and Chandler Papers, Box 79, Folder: Negroes 1945.

Saying that the booklet was a proper part of their education, Chandler ensured that all local black school children received copies to take home for their families. He made sure that Memphis's black library distributed the booklet, even suggesting that it have a "little sign" near the stack of copies "asking everyone to take [one] home."⁹⁴⁸

The booklet served many purposes for the city. In his foreword, Chandler said that the publication was "presented to challenge and arouse the colored people of Memphis to the exceptional opportunities offered to them for the promotion of their health, education, and general welfare, and to impress upon them their duty to take the fullest advantage of those opportunities, benefits and privileges."⁹⁴⁹ Undoubtedly, the booklet was also a way to win black votes and court their support for the administration as well as an effort to tame the civil rights and labor activism of black Memphians. With the 1944 election approaching, the Crump organization wanted black voters to support its candidates. Because Memphis experienced a labor shortage due to World War II, the publication also represented an effort to discourage black migration away from the city.⁹⁵⁰ And, by giving the impression of good race relations, it certainly was written to attract business to Memphis.⁹⁵¹ Following the Martin and Randolph incidents, city officials wanted to rehabilitate the image of Memphis nationally, an effort that resulted in some success. In early 1945, Chandler said that the calls for copies "have been nothing short of remarkable. People are writing to us every day for

⁹⁴⁸ Chandler to Jesse Cunningham, 17 Oct. 1944, Chandler Papers, Box 66, Folder: Negroes 1944. Also see: Chandler to E. H. Crump, 21 Apr. 1944, Chandler Papers, Box 66, Folder: Negroes 1944.

⁹⁴⁹ Walter Chandler, forward to *Benefits and Opportunities*.

⁹⁵⁰ George S. Schuyler, "Views and Reviews," *PC*, 27 Jan. 1945, Chandler Papers, Box 79, Folder: Negroes 1945.

⁹⁵¹ G. Wayne Dowdy, interview by author, Memphis, 7 Jul. 2007, typed notes in author's possession.

them, and the effect has been most favorable.”⁹⁵² Rev. A. J. Garvy of Chicago wrote the mayor, “It was a remarkably telling booklet. As you well know, Memphis has not always been presented in this light. It deserves fairer recognition than it has often obtained.”⁹⁵³

Many local blacks praised *Benefits and Opportunities* and requested copies. According to Mayor Chandler, the booklet was “quite useful in acquainting [black citizens] with the opportunities available to them.”⁹⁵⁴ E. L. Washburn, president of both the Memphis Youth Service Council and Twenty-Sixth Ward Civic Club, wrote Chandler that members of both organizations were asking for copies; they found that the publication was helpful for informing them about city services. In addition, Washburn remarked that he had visited black schools in more than eleven other southern cities, including Raleigh, Atlanta, and New Orleans. “[N]one that I have visited [surpassed] the buildings and set up we have in Memphis,” he said. “I am with you and your administration 100%.”⁹⁵⁵ Those black Memphians who had long supported the machine also commended the booklet. M. S. Stuart reported that he and other Memphis Negro Chamber of Commerce officials planned to send copies to southerners in other cities as an “expression of pride . . . for what has been done and is being done for us.”⁹⁵⁶ Blair Hunt and J. E. Walker added their voices to the chorus of praise for the publication.⁹⁵⁷ Although the local government’s benefits were significant, the words of all these black Memphians represented the “baloney” that A. Philip Randolph had

⁹⁵² Chandler to O. F. Soderatrom, 21 Feb. 1945, Chandler Papers, Box 79, Folder: Negroes 1945.

⁹⁵³ A. J. Garvy to Chandler, 16 Feb. 1945, Chandler Papers, Box 79, Folder: Negroes 1945.

⁹⁵⁴ Chandler to O. E. McKaine, 5 Feb. 1945, Chandler Papers, Box 79, Folder: Negroes 1945.

⁹⁵⁵ Washburn to Chandler, 18 Sept. 1944, Chandler Papers, Box 66, Folder: Negroes 1944.

⁹⁵⁶ Stuart to Chandler, 14 Feb. 1945, Chandler Papers, Box 79, Folder: Negroes 1945.

⁹⁵⁷ Hunt to Chandler, 18 Sept. 1944, Chandler Papers, Box 66, Folder: Negroes 1944; Walker to Chandler, 4 Oct. 1944, Chandler Papers, Box 66, Folder: Negroes 1944.

spotlighted when he had said that some blacks tell Crump that race relations are good in order to win his favor at the same time that they ignore the injustices of his machine. Even so, their comments also signaled to Crump that the city better continue to provide benefits for blacks in order to keep their votes, and the extent of the benefits revealed the degree to which black voters were successful in having the government serve their needs.

In a letter to Chandler, businessman M. S. Stuart expressed pride in *Benefits and Opportunities*, for it revealed that Memphis authorities “have a keen interest in, and fine attitude toward, the welfare of Negro citizens.” He continued, “This is . . . in contrast to several large cities in the South where authorities almost entirely ignore the existence of Negro people except in regard to criminality.” He passed along to the mayor a column commending the booklet by George Schuyler of the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Noting that Schuyler had “a reputation usually for being critical of everything,” Stuart said that his article was “particularly good in view of his background, where he lives, and all of the unfortunate publicity given our city during the past four years.”⁹⁵⁸ Noting that no other southern cities had printed similar booklets, Schuyler wrote that the publication “signified a new departure in race relations.” He said, “It is not unusual for cities to boast of their assets and opportunities But it is certainly unusual for a [s]outhern city to boast in print of what it is doing for its colored citizens.” The journalist admitted that “many gaps [exist] in this flowery account” but said that the “City Fathers of Memphis deserve a hand” for printing the booklet.⁹⁵⁹

⁹⁵⁸ Stuart to Chandler, 31 Jan. 1945, Chandler Papers, Box 79, Folder: Negroes 1945.

⁹⁵⁹ Schuyler, “Views and Reviews.”

Other southerners confirmed Schuyler's remarks that Memphis was unique in showcasing its provisions for blacks. Mayor William Hartsfield of Atlanta requested copies for city officials because they were "under great pressure" to do more for blacks, who made up 36 percent of the population. "[W]hile I retain certain views handed down from time immemorial in the South, still I am one of those that think the [economic] opportunities and privileges of blacks should be enlarged," Hartsfield wrote. "However, we meet with a lot of opposition and indifference from some of our officials."⁹⁶⁰ Chandler complied with his request.⁹⁶¹ Osceola E. McKaine, an editor of South Carolina's *Lighthouse and Informer*, a black weekly published in the state's capitol, distributed *Benefits and Opportunities* to the mayor and city council, newspaper editors, and the chair of the South Carolina Interracial Committee.⁹⁶² Calling it a "splendid booklet" that "registers a high mark [for its] constructive approach to better race relations," McKaine wrote, "I think that its general dissemination throughout our Southland would indeed be a public service Perhaps Memphis is pointing the way."⁹⁶³

To be sure, the booklet demonstrated the variety of city offerings for blacks and revealed that Memphis was unique in publicizing these provisions. At the same time, however, it spread negative ideas about blacks. The publication used the lower-case "n" for the word "Negro." Spinning segregation as legitimate and even beneficial, the pamphlet boasted that blacks had an exclusive day each week at the zoo instead of emphasizing that it

⁹⁶⁰ Hartsfield to Chandler, 15 Dec. 1944, Chandler Papers, Box 66, Folder: Negroes 1944.

⁹⁶¹ Chandler to Hartsfield, 18 Dec. 1944, Chandler Papers, Box 66, Folder: Negroes 1944.

⁹⁶² McKaine to Chandler, 12 Feb. 1945, Chandler Papers, Box 79, Folder: Negroes 1945.

⁹⁶³ McKaine to Chandler, 31 Jan. 1945, Chandler Papers, Box 79, Folder: Negroes 1945.

was the only day they were allowed there. It also characterized the city's one black library branch as a privilege for blacks while ignoring the fact that they could not utilize the other library branches. In publicizing the city's black schools, the booklet failed to discuss their inferior status compared to white schools.⁹⁶⁴ Although the city government employed blacks, *Benefits and Opportunities* did not mention that they mainly occupied the lowliest jobs and that black doctors and nurses only treated black patients. The publication did not address the city's lack of black policemen, firefighters, and public officials either. By framing essential human services to blacks as "opportunities, benefits, and privileges," the booklet made these rights out as something for which to be indebted. In saying that the city government should be commended because the costs of its services to blacks exceeded the amount of taxes that they paid, it ignored the fact that the prevailing legal, social, and economic discrimination remained at the root of their low contribution to the city treasury.

Though most responses to *Benefits and Opportunities* were positive, Lt. Dunbar S. McLaurin and his group of black soldiers differed. Stationed overseas, many were from the South, and several were from Memphis. "It was . . . with a great deal of pride that we read of the publication put out by your city," McLaurin wrote Chandler when requesting copies. "It represents to us fighting men, a recognition of the fact by white southerners that the Negro citizen is definitely an integral part of the southern economic, political, and yes, even social structure This is an example of what we are fighting for."⁹⁶⁵ Initially excited when they received the booklets, McLaurin wrote Chandler that they felt "that Memphis had charted the

⁹⁶⁴ Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., a student at the time, remembered that his textbooks were "throwaways" from white high schools. Shirley Downing, "Desegregation Ruling's Impact Called Monumental," *CA*, 15 May 1994, p. B1.

⁹⁶⁵ McLaurin to Chandler, 14 Feb. 1945, Chandler Papers, Box 79, Folder: Negroes 1945.

way for a new era in southern race relations.” But, when they turned to the first page and saw the non-capitalization of the word “Negro,” he said, “Our hopes, our visions, our excitement were blasted. For there was embodied in one incident the still vigorous antebellum spirit of the South--the deliberate, studied, and intentional degradation of a race by the refusal to allow it the dignity of a proper noun.”⁹⁶⁶

McLaurin and his men then engaged in a heated discussion. They talked about how even the word “Nazi” was capitalized and that no other race or ethnicity was referred to with the lower-case. McLaurin moved the conversation forward to determine *why* the lower-case “n” was used for “Negro.” “We agreed that it is because the South is determined that the Negro shall not be recognized as a man,” he wrote. They reasoned that this recognition would entail treating blacks with human rights. Echoing A. Philip Randolph’s observations, he reported that they thought that the southern ruling classes used race to divide working-class blacks and whites, to keep whites from recognizing that they too were held down by disenfranchisement and segregation, and to prevent blacks and whites from joining together to vote for reform. They concluded that the basis of all the degradation faced by blacks--the lower-case “n,” economic exploitation, segregation, and disenfranchisement--was “to keep the races from knowing each other,” McLaurin wrote. “And, moreover, to keep the whites from realizing that in practice ‘white supremacy’ means only ‘rich white supremacy.’”⁹⁶⁷

Because the lower-case ‘n’ “screamed at the men from each page so that all the text was drowned out,” McLaurin said that they could read the booklet only after they had gone through it and capitalized “Negro.” “Mr. Mayor, I went to bat for you,” he wrote. “I told the

⁹⁶⁶ McLaurin to Chandler, 23 May 1945, Chandler Papers, Box 79, Folder: Negroes 1945.

⁹⁶⁷ Ibid.

men that your mistake in making the error was unintentional.” But, he changed his view after they examined the publication more closely. “[T]he booklet seemed to smack of smug completeness,” he said. “Omitted was police brutality, the lack of Negro civil servants, of Negro firemen, police and others.” He also criticized the city’s policy of banning or censoring movies with any semblance of racial equality and called the chairman of the City Board of Censors a “Memphis Goebbels.”⁹⁶⁸ “Mr. Mayor, I’m quite sure you won’t reply to this letter. That is unfortunate. For we would like to have the South’s side, briefly,” McLaurin concluded. “We would like to know why you deliberately lower-cased the ‘n’ We would like to know what your city’s real attitude is toward Negro policemen, firemen, doctors[,] etc. In short, we would like to know: *Is Memphis afraid of its Negro and white citizens getting to know each other?*”⁹⁶⁹

The positive and negative responses to *Benefits and Opportunities* revealed the dichotomies of the Crump machine. On the one hand, it reportedly provided better public services to blacks than elsewhere in the South and stood out for promoting its provisions to blacks. It appeared racially progressive because blacks could vote. On the other hand, it earned a reputation for its repression against blacks and whites through violence and civil liberties violations. For all his concern about maintaining peace and harmony, Crump, ironically, was building up resentment among Memphis citizens that threatened to damage his control. Again and again, the machine pointed to its benefits to blacks as a way to divert attention from and provide a justification for not giving them civil rights or otherwise

⁹⁶⁸ Ibid. On the Crump machine’s censorship policy, see: Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 145-63; Whitney Strub, “Black and White and Banned All Over: Race, Censorship and Obscenity in Postwar Memphis,” *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 3 (2007): 685-715.

⁹⁶⁹ I did not find any record of a response from Chandler. I have retained the original emphasis. McLaurin to Chandler, 23 May 1945.

meeting their demands. Moreover, black political rights could mean little because of Crump. Pointing to the World War II context, the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine observed, "Politically, Memphis is as un-American as any dictator-ridden country in Europe."⁹⁷⁰

McLaurin wrote Crump at a time that blacks were becoming increasingly politically active across the South. In April 1944, the Supreme Court handed down the *Smith v. Allwright* decision, which abolished the white primary. Though southern states continued to find ways to disenfranchise blacks, these methods were not as effective. Black southerners took advantage of the *Smith* decision to engage in voter registration drives, resulting in a dramatic increase in the number of black voters.⁹⁷¹ Determined to make democracy work within their own country, black veterans, in particular, involved themselves in political activism.⁹⁷²

Immediately after the ruling, black Democrats seized this new opportunity to further their standing in the Democratic Party. South Carolina blacks formed the Progressive Democratic Party to challenge the state's all-white Democratic Party, and Osceola McKaine made an unsuccessful bid for the Senate on its ticket. The party also sought recognition for its delegates at the Democratic National Convention though it was unsuccessful.⁹⁷³ In Memphis, J. E. Walker sent Mayor Chandler a copy of his speech at a local church in which he praised the *Smith* ruling, advocated the permanent establishment of the Fair Employment

⁹⁷⁰ Doyle, "Gestapo in Memphis," 152.

⁹⁷¹ Klarman, "White Primary Rulings," 55-107. Also see: Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*; Hine, *Black Victory*.

⁹⁷² See, for instance: Jennifer Brooks, *Defining the Peace: World War II Veterans, Race, and the Remaking of Southern Political Tradition* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁹⁷³ Moon, *Balance of Power*, 194.

Practices Committee, and called for other civil rights and labor measures. He said these steps were essential to future gains and were necessary for advancing the masses, not the classes, of blacks.⁹⁷⁴ By making this speech, Walker revealed his continued connection with ordinary black Memphians. By sending it to Chandler, he continued to work to carve out a space for himself in the local Democratic Party.

During the war years, black Memphians had worked through the political system to improve their conditions in the face of the Crump machine. Leaders such as Blair Hunt, T. O. Fuller, George W. Lee, and J. E. Walker could secure some employment opportunities, public service improvements, and other benefits for black Memphians. They campaigned for Crump's candidates and cultivated ties with him and his officials as a strategy for achieving their goals, even to the point of being obsequious and pandering. At a time when most southern blacks suffered from a poor economic status, a better job or neighborhood improvement could have a positive effect on their standard of living. In these days when most southern whites constructed blacks as subhuman and inferior, the recognition of their citizenship by white local officials, albeit limited, was significant. These black leaders ultimately decided that it was best to work with and support the Crump machine rather than risk reprisal or even death by going against it.

At the same time that these leaders sought to improve conditions for blacks by working with Crump, they also perpetuated the Jim Crow system and the local political machine. By effusively praising Crump for his public services to blacks, not speaking out against machine injustices, and claiming to speak for all black Memphians, these leaders

⁹⁷⁴ Chandler to Walker, 22 Feb. 1945, Chandler Papers, Box 79, Folder: Negroes 1945; "'New Spirit of Leadership' Dr. Walker Tells Men's Day Audience, Salem Gilfield," unidentified newspaper clipping, n.d., Chandler Papers, Box 79, Folder: Negroes 1945.

bolstered Crump's ideas that those opposing him or the Jim Crow system were troublemakers even as they challenged him to live up to his promises to provide benefits to blacks. In assuming this strategy, they hurt their own aims despite their good intentions. Hunt, for example, perhaps would have better improved the lot of his students by joining forces with A. Philip Randolph and speaking out against Jim Crow schools instead of pushing for benefits for his school within the segregated system. After all, when black businessmen, women, and others came together to protest the derogatory laundry sign, Crump made sure the sign was removed. It would be unwise to think that black leaders could convince Crump to change his position on segregation. If more black Memphians had challenged him, however, he may have become less repressive, especially considering that blacks had some leverage because he needed their votes.

These leaders who stayed in the good graces of the Crump machine paid a price, and those who opposed Crump did so as well. After rebelling against Crump, Bob Church, J. B. Martin, G. A. Long, and others found themselves stripped of their financial and personal security. Even so, these figures, along with McLaurin and Randolph, provided an important challenge to Crump and the larger southern system. They recognized that Crump's control was tenuous, and the extent to which the political boss felt that he had to manipulate black and white votes and crack down on those who threatened his control revealed his own insecurity. Whites and blacks at the grassroots level had been crucial to Crump's rise to power, and he knew both could bring him down. Through speeches and public statements, Randolph worked from afar and locally against Crump, and Long demonstrated that Crump could not run anyone who opposed him out of town. Church successfully sought publicity against Crump and otherwise aided Randolph in his battle. Seeing Crump as indicative of

larger problems across the South, McLaurin and Randolph pointed out that the Jim Crow benefits of the Crump machine were no substitute for civil rights and liberties. Locally, black unionists supported Randolph in his ordeal and worked to break down Jim Crow practices in the workplace. Other blacks increasingly made public their opposition to segregation. With all this activism occurring, it looked like Randolph's prediction that the Crump regime would fall just might come true.

Chapter 5: “A New Day Breaking” in the City and the South: The Decline of the Crump Machine and the Rise of New Leadership, 1946-1954

In the post-war years, Memphis saw the growing political independence of its black and white citizens. Black Memphians increasingly opposed the Crump machine, and they joined forces with white laborites and reformers to hand Edward H. Crump his first electoral defeat in decades in 1948. Their effort resulted in a more open political environment, the Crump machine's decline, and local governmental reforms. But, Crump continued to serve as the most powerful local politician and to work against these activists. Moreover, the labor and social democratic movements suffered in the South because of the anti-communist environment generated by the Cold War. Nonetheless, J. E. Walker, no longer aligned with Crump, made the first black bid for local office since the early twentieth century in 1951. The co-manager of his campaign, Benjamin L. Hooks, represented the new generation of black activists that bolstered civil rights efforts in Memphis and the South. While the Democratic Party continued to attract the support of most black and white southerners, Robert R. Church, Jr., carried on his battle to make the Republican Party embrace civil rights. The year 1954 would see the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, a victory for the black Memphians and southerners who had long pushed for an end to the Jim Crow system.

By ruling the white primary unconstitutional in its 1944 *Smith* decision, the Supreme Court spurred “a political revolution in the urban South.”⁹⁷⁵ Because of the efforts of black

⁹⁷⁵ Klarman, “White Primary Rulings,” 107.

veterans, NAACP branches, labor unions, and other groups and individuals, southern black voter registration shot up from less than 5 percent of those eligible before the ruling to 20 percent by 1952. Blacks in the urban areas of the upper South and the larger cities of the Deep South made up the largest proportion of the black vote. Even in Mississippi, the state with arguably the most intransigent system of white supremacy, black voter registration numbers increased from twenty-five hundred in 1946 to twenty thousand in 1950. Black voter clubs rose in number and appeared in perhaps every southern state. To a greater extent than at any time since Reconstruction, blacks ran for public office, making bids in more than forty municipalities and winning positions as significant as school board or city council posts in at least fifteen communities. Blacks also held important appointive offices in many cities. They increasingly held the balance of power in elections, making the difference as to whether white candidates less vocally anti-black than their opponents won.⁹⁷⁶ Though southern blacks held less than 5 percent of elective and appointive offices and most remained disenfranchised, the post-war environment signified more hope and potential for politics than at any time since Reconstruction.⁹⁷⁷ The Supreme Court's *Brown* decision remains the most remembered and recognized civil rights decision, but the impact of *Smith* on black political activism cannot be overestimated.

⁹⁷⁶ Matthews and Prothro, *Negroes and the New Southern Politics*, 18; Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 129; Margaret Price, *The Negro Voter in the South* (Atlanta: Southern Regional Council, 1957); Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1995), 171-5; Robert E. Martin, "The Relative Political Status of the Negro in the United States," in Harry A. Bailey, ed., *Negro Politics in America* (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1967), 29-30; Moon, *Balance of Power*, 188; Nasstrom, "Down to Now;" John N. Popham, "The Southern Negro: Change and Paradox," *New York Times Magazine*, 1 Dec. 1957, 27, 132-3; Holloway, *Politics of the Southern Negro*; Keech, *Impact of Negro Voting*; Klarman, "White Primary Rulings."

⁹⁷⁷ Matthews and Prothro, *Negroes and the New Southern Politics*, 176.

The post-war environment was ripe not only for political change but also economic change. Southern industrial workers had risen in number from 1.6 to 2.4 million during the war, and the federal government had forced many employers to provide higher wages and other union concessions.⁹⁷⁸ With labor union membership at an all-time high, the largest number of strikes ever took place in 1945 and 1946.⁹⁷⁹ The CIO embarked on an effort called Operation Dixie to organize more unions in the South in 1946 and met with some success in workplaces with large numbers of black workers.⁹⁸⁰

But, these post-war years also saw the development of the Cold War, and progressive organizations suffered. Anti-communist hysteria swept the country and killed the social democratic movement of the late 1930s and war years. By 1946, Operation Dixie declined as a result of the impact of white racism, police and company violence, anti-communist propaganda, and related developments.⁹⁸¹ Truman ordered the armed forces to break up strikes, and Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Bill in 1947. By requiring that union officials swear that they were not communists, the law effectively cracked down on left-wingers who had been key to successes of the labor movement. It also contained other anti-union provisions such as prohibiting strikes by federal employees. Facing all these pressures, the CIO shifted away from the left and banned suspected communists from its ranks; other progressive organizations followed suit.⁹⁸² Victims of red baiting, the Southern Conference

⁹⁷⁸ Honey, *Southern Labor*, 214.

⁹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 225-6.

⁹⁸⁰ Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 133.

⁹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 134-5; Honey, *Southern Labor*, 235.

⁹⁸² Honey, *Southern Labor*, 237-40; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 185-6; Michael K. Honey, "Labour Leadership and Civil Rights in the South: A Case Study of the CIO in Memphis, 1935-1955," *Studies in History and Politics* 5 (1986): 97, 110-7.

for Human Welfare and the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax ended their operations in 1948.⁹⁸³

In Memphis, the immediate years after World War II saw continued labor activism despite the hostile environment nationally and Crump's opposition to the CIO. With about 20 percent of workers belonging to a union, Memphis represented the most organized city in the Deep South.⁹⁸⁴ Even though most white workers remained uncommitted to interracial organizing, a small group of white communists and leftists opposed segregation and engaged in biracial CIO work.⁹⁸⁵ Local 19 of the Food Tobacco and Agricultural Workers Union (FTA) represented one such interracial union; blacks made up around 60 percent of its twenty-five hundred to three thousand members. These unionists organized electoral activity in the black community and worked together daily to agitate for better conditions and to challenge discriminatory practices in the workplace.⁹⁸⁶ Black unionists not only organized in their places of employment but also increasingly engaged in voter registration drives and other civil rights activities.⁹⁸⁷ They were among eighteen thousand laborites--of the AFL, CIO, and railroad unions--who marched in a Labor Day parade in 1947 in which they carried signs that urged everyone to vote, expressed support for the FEPC and opposition to the Taft-Hartley Bill, and called for equal justice and job opportunities. The march began a number

⁹⁸³ Barnard, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 186.

⁹⁸⁴ Michael K. Honey, review of *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle*, by Laurie B. Green, *Journal of Southern History* 74, no. 4 (Nov. 2008): 1023.

⁹⁸⁵ Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 134; Honey, *Southern Labor*, 227.

⁹⁸⁶ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 179-81; Honey, *Southern Labor*, 233-4.

⁹⁸⁷ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 139.

of efforts of these unions to join together to lobby state legislators and support progressive candidates for office.⁹⁸⁸

Local blacks also became increasingly disenchanted with the Crump machine. They remembered the harassment of A. Philip Randolph and J. B. Martin, and they opposed the police brutality that continued with impunity. They disliked Crump's unwillingness to hire black police officers and the machine's exile of its opponents from Memphis.⁹⁸⁹ The city's refusal to allow the Freedom Train in late 1947 angered them even more. Making stops in more than three hundred communities, the train reached three-and-a-half million people across the country from 1947 to 1949. Supported by the federal government, businesses, foundations, and unions, it carried documents related to American heritage such as the Bill of Rights.⁹⁹⁰ Because local officials opposed the train's policy mandating integrated viewing of its exhibits, Memphis was the first city in the country to have its stop cancelled.⁹⁹¹

Black Memphians further opposed Crump's manipulation of their votes, and they were against the black leaders who worked with the machine.⁹⁹² The machine pressured

⁹⁸⁸ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 278; Honey, *Southern Labor*, 238.

⁹⁸⁹ John Jasper, "Minority Vote Helped Ruin 'Crump Machine,'" *Washington Afro-American*, 10 Aug. 1948, Church Family Papers, Box 5, Folder 33; Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 13; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 81-141.

⁹⁹⁰ Green, "Battling the Plantation Mentality," 228.

⁹⁹¹ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 255; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 121.

⁹⁹² Jasper, "Minority Vote;" Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 143. During the 1943 election, for instance, Blair Hunt had written Mayor Walter Chandler that it would be a "splendid thing" to get out the vote. With plans to distribute more than ten thousand handbills in churches, Hunt offered to try to convince his fellow black principals to defray the cost. His flyers said that a committee of black leaders wanted black voters to support the Crump ticket because of the public services provided by the machine. The committee included J. E. Walker, black ministers Roy Love and W. Herbert Brewster, school principals J. Ashton Hayes and Harry Cash, and women's club leader Mary Murphy. Though Hunt elected to work with Crump, it is unclear whether some other committee members were pressured to back him. See these documents in Chandler Papers, Box 53, Folder: Political Correspondence, 1943: Hunt to Walter Chandler, 27 Feb. 1943; Committee of Citizens, "An Appeal to the Colored Voters of Memphis," 2 Mar. 1943.

black citizens in a number of ways to gain their backing at the polls. Crump, in effect, paid some black ministers for their support through his financial contributions to their churches.⁹⁹³ Two high school principals would tell teachers, “You better vote as Mr. Crump says; your job is at stake.” If residents of public housing projects did not vote for Crump’s candidates, they would be informed that they would have to move out.⁹⁹⁴ It was precisely these actions--Crump pressure on blacks and black complicity with Crump--that increasingly upset many black Memphians.

Fueled by their anger at Crump and inspired by their wartime activism, black Memphians saw a rising tide of protest in the post-war years that encompassed not only labor efforts but also civil rights activities. Along with whites, they spoke out against their exclusion from the Freedom Train.⁹⁹⁵ The LeMoyne College NAACP branch, which had experienced the wartime draft of most of its male members, gained new strength. The adult NAACP chapter, which increasingly attracted veterans and working-class men and women, saw its membership rise to 4,120 in 1946 and experienced overflowing crowds at its meetings.⁹⁹⁶ In addition, local leaders and groups, including the NAACP, conducted a campaign for the hiring of black police officers. None had served in Memphis since 1919, and other southern cities had begun to appoint them. Black Memphians argued that the

⁹⁹³ Jasper, “Minority Vote;” James Hunter Lane, Jr., interview by author, tape recording, Memphis, 14 Jul. 2004, SOHP.

⁹⁹⁴ Jasper, “Minority Vote.”

⁹⁹⁵ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 122-31.

⁹⁹⁶ Ibid., 98, 102-5, 113, 129-37, 190. The statistic is from: “Nation-wide Membership Campaign: Membership Status of Tennessee Branches as of November 6, 1947,” n.d., Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1944-47, mfm, 19:00849.

hiring of black police officers would reduce racial police violence, effectively suppress black crime, and give blacks recognition for their wartime service.⁹⁹⁷

When A. Philip Randolph returned to Memphis in 1947, he saw “a new day breaking” in the city. He spoke at the Memphis Labor Conference, which was sponsored by the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. G. A. Long hosted this public meeting at his Beale Street Baptist Church.⁹⁹⁸ The “Crump machine is conspicuous by its silence,” Randolph wrote Bob Church, reporting that they had no trouble with the meeting and that “Memphis appears to be much more civilized now than . . . when I was here last.”⁹⁹⁹ Even so, he noted that most black ministers, professionals, and businesspeople were too afraid to attend. Rather, working-class men and women predominated.¹⁰⁰⁰ One was the young Rev. Dwight Kyle, whom Randolph called “a live wire.” He said that Kyle was leading a movement to set up a local FEPC council.¹⁰⁰¹ Since forming the National Council for a Permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission in 1943, Randolph had been founding local councils around the country. By the end of the conference, a local FEPC council was set up with Kyle as chair; Randolph called the organization’s founding “miraculous.” Predicting that Memphis “may yet become one of most liberal cities in the South because Crumpism is crumbling,” Randolph remarked, “I think the sun of decency, freedom and justice will shine

⁹⁹⁷ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 105-11.

⁹⁹⁸ “Memphis Labor Conference, Sept. 14-19, 1947,” n.d., Church Family Papers, Box 9, Folder 4; “Welcome Program and Reception Honoring A. Philip Randolph,” 15 Sept. 1947, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1.

⁹⁹⁹ See these letters in Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 1: Randolph to Church, 19 Sept. 1947; Randolph to Church, 16 Sept. 1947.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Randolph to Church, 19 Sept. 1947; Randolph to Church, 16 Sept. 1947; “Memphis Labor Conference,” n.d.; “Welcome Program,” 15 Sept. 1947.

¹⁰⁰¹ Randolph to Church, 16 Sept. 1947.

in Memphis in the not distant future. An awakened Negro and white citizen [sic] will bring it about.”¹⁰⁰²

Just as Randolph had forecast, blacks joined with white laborites and reformers in 1948 to back the first candidates to seriously challenge Crump since 1932. Men and women of all economic levels participated in the rebellion.¹⁰⁰³ The anti-Crump office seekers were Estes Kefauver and Gordon Browning, who ran in the Democratic primaries for the junior senatorial and gubernatorial seats respectively. Crump supported the incumbent, Jim McCord, for governor and John A. Mitchell for the Senate. A little-known circuit court judge, Mitchell advocated states rights and opposed the FEPC. The incumbent senator, Tom Stewart, had fallen out of favor with Crump but refused to leave the race. If voters split their ballots between Mitchell and Stewart, Kefauver could win.¹⁰⁰⁴

Both Kefauver and Browning conducted spirited campaigns that attacked Crump. A Democratic congressman from East Tennessee since 1939, Kefauver held liberal views that put him to the left of Crump and most of his southern counterparts. Though against a permanent FEPC and anti-lynching legislation, he supported abolishing the poll tax. He had opposed the Taft Hartley bill and making the House Un-American Committee permanent, which investigated so-called anti-American activities.¹⁰⁰⁵ When Crump compared Kefauver to a pet coon in 1948, the office seeker began wearing a coonskin cap when campaigning; it

¹⁰⁰² Randolph to Church, 19 Sept. 1947.

¹⁰⁰³ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 40-60; Honey, *Southern Labor*, 248-52; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 136-41; Sally Palmer Thomason, “The Three Eds: Memphis 1948,” *WTHSP* 52 (1998): 150-7; Samuel B. Hollis, interview by author, tape recording, Memphis, 14 Jun. 2004, SOHP; Jimmie W. Farris, interview by author, tape recording, Memphis, 16 Jun. 2004, SOHP.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 263; Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 45.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Honey, *Southern Labor*, 248; Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 264.

became his signature. Browning, a World War II veteran, announced his candidacy by saying that he had concluded fighting a war against a dictator and now wanted to rid his native state of Crump's dictatorship.¹⁰⁰⁶ Elected governor with Crump's support in 1936, Browning had been defeated two years later after displeasing him. Crump "had a mania for making people treat him like he was a king. I treated him just like I thought he was another man," he later said.¹⁰⁰⁷ In 1948, Browning made some three hundred speeches across Tennessee, focusing on Crump's negative influence on the state.¹⁰⁰⁸

In Memphis, a group of seven white business and professional men publicly announced their support for Kefauver. They united around the book *Union Now* (1940) by Clarence Streit; it advocated the creation of a federal union of Western democracies in order to promote world peace and personal freedom as well as to serve as a safeguard against communism.¹⁰⁰⁹ Kefauver offered to sponsor a congressional resolution in support of the idea.¹⁰¹⁰ In working against Crump, the group members also promoted a more democratic political system in their own community.

Frances Coe, who served as the group's office manager, was the first woman involved with their effort, and two other women eventually joined the committee.¹⁰¹¹

¹⁰⁰⁶ Key, *Southern Politics*, 58; Evans to Key, 10 Nov. 1949, p. 14.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Joseph H. Riggs, "Gordon Browning: An Oral Memoir" (Memphis: Memphis Public Library, 1966), Everett Cook Collection, Box 16, MSC, p. 84-6. The quote is from p. 84.

¹⁰⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 40-2, 44, 49; James H. White, "Estes, Crump, Coonskin Caps, Etc.--The Colorful '48 Race in Retrospect," *PS*, 20 Mar. 1962, Vertical File: 1962 Election, MSC; Hollis, interview.

¹⁰¹⁰ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 46-7, 52.

¹⁰¹¹ Apparently, Coe served as the most influential female in the group and her involvement was not publicly known at the time. All the women had graduated from Vassar College, and Coe believed that their educational experience outside Memphis contributed to their willingness to oppose Crump. *Ibid.*, 51; White, "Estes,

Previously involved in interracial work, Coe had participated in a local Public Affairs Forum and earned the respect of *Memphis Press-Scimitar* editor Ed Meeman. He invited her to join the 1948 group though she had not previously involved herself in political campaigns.¹⁰¹²

Coe worked ten- to sixteen-hour days for the campaign even though she sacrificed time that she might have devoted to her husband and children, leading to tension in her marriage.¹⁰¹³

Meeman, who spearheaded the small group's campaign along with lawyer Lucius Burch, had been a lonely public voice against Crump over the last decade and a half. His opposition had been limited because of Crump's retaliation. The political boss, for instance, verbally attacked him, and the city charged Meeman with property violations.¹⁰¹⁴ Meeman and the committee met every day in his suite at the Peabody Hotel, the fanciest accommodation in the area. "This small Kefauver group attracted very few . . . people of any stature in the community," Coe recalled. "In fact, we knew only 200 people who would sign an advertisement that they were supporting Kefauver." At one point, Meeman looked around the room and said, "Surely, surely there are more people in Memphis who believe in freedom and honesty in elections than this."¹⁰¹⁵

The AFL and CIO worked with the white reformers because of their opposition to Crump and support for Kefauver, who was friendly to unions.¹⁰¹⁶ Coe remembered that labor

Crump;" Frances Coe, interview by Aaron Boom, transcript, Memphis, 16, 20, 23 Dec. 1965, UMOH, p. 22. (Because the transcript does not specify what parts were recorded what dates, the subsequent references will just be "Coe, interview.")

¹⁰¹² Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 52.

¹⁰¹³ Coe, interview, 21.

¹⁰¹⁴ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 40-50; Evans to Key, 10 Nov. 1949, p. 14-5.

¹⁰¹⁵ Coe, interview, 23-4; Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 56.

¹⁰¹⁶ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 54; Key, *Southern Politics*, 73-4.

“was one of the chief bulwarks of our campaign here, two or three worked practically full time” at the small group’s headquarters.¹⁰¹⁷ Previously, Memphis labor groups had made a strong showing in the 1944 presidential election. Union officials estimated that members of the AFL, CIO, and four independent railroad brotherhoods cast about thirty-five thousand of the sixty thousand votes. Not wanting to acknowledge the strength of any potential opposition movement, Crump had called these estimates high.¹⁰¹⁸ In 1946, the CIO had made the first open challenge of labor unions against the Crump machine at the polls by supporting non-Crump-supported candidates for the gubernatorial and senatorial seats. Laborites registered to vote, became informed voters, and worked as poll watchers in more than half the voting precincts. However, the laborites’ candidates lost by large margins, and many unionists did not vote because of their disgust with the Democratic Party’s lack of support for their rights. Still, this effort had made the laborites more determined to defeat Crump at the polls as they saw voting irregularities and gained political experience.¹⁰¹⁹

In 1948, Local 19 of the FTA, one of the labor unions conducting voter registration drives, canvassed door-to-door in the black community.¹⁰²⁰ LeRoy Boyd, a black member of the union, remembered, “Our union was really playing an active role in telling the people what they had to do if they wanted to change the conditions of the city--that you must . . . get out and vote. You can go up to the courthouse and register to vote.” But, Boyd personally

¹⁰¹⁷ Coe, interview, 25.

¹⁰¹⁸ Locally, Franklin Roosevelt had swept the election with nearly fifty thousand votes while Republican candidate Thomas Dewey had received ten thousand votes. “Labor Vote Estimate High, Crump Asserts,” *CA*, 9 Nov. 1944, Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 192, Folder: Election Data 1943, mfm, 002090.

¹⁰¹⁹ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 56; Honey, *Southern Labor*, 231.

¹⁰²⁰ Honey, *Southern Labor*, 249-51.

found the task difficult; he waited in line four hours to register. “I remember that line was a long line,” he recalled. “You know, they can use psychology on you. They can register you real slow and make the people in line get tired . . . and leave . . . but I got registered. And a lot of people were wanting to . . . register, and they wanted to exercise their right to do it.”¹⁰²¹

Other black Memphians, some of whom had long been politically active, also championed the Kefauver-Browning ticket, and their work intersected with the laborites and reformers. They raised campaign funds, held rallies, registered and organized voters, and encouraged poll-tax payment.¹⁰²² Rev. James McDaniel, head of the local Urban League, spoke to blacks from a CIO sound truck, and Minerva Johnican, who later became an elected official in the city, helped him pass out handbills. At a voters school at the black Vance Avenue YWCA sponsored by the local League of Women Voters, white reformer Lucius Burch spoke; the league was a nonpartisan organization but with members supportive of Kefauver. Black businessmen who supported the anti-Crump candidates included T. C. D. Hayes, who had railed against the machine in a letter to his pastor ten years earlier.¹⁰²³ J. E. Walker, who had broken with Crump by this time, again headed the black Democratic club, now independent from the machine. Though the group had a separate headquarters, it worked with the white liberals. Neither the black Democrats nor the white reformers received any campaign funds from the Democratic state headquarters, so they raised funds on their own.¹⁰²⁴ Not all black Democrats supported the Kefauver-Browning ticket, however.

¹⁰²¹ Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 129.

¹⁰²² Jasper, “Minority Vote;” Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 265.

¹⁰²³ Honey, *Southern Labor*, 249; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 137-8.

¹⁰²⁴ The white reformers and Walker’s group raised funds separately. Coe, interview, 24; George W. Lee to R. R. Church, 25 Jul. 1951, Church Family Papers, Box 6, Folder 41.

Blair Hunt, for instance, offered to campaign for Crump.¹⁰²⁵ Nonetheless, the election season revealed the growing political independence of black Memphians.

Blacks opposed Crump all the more because of his support for the Dixiecrats instead of President Harry S. Truman that election season. Truman had begun a new course in the Democratic Party by calling for civil rights measures following the surge of black activism in the post-war years and his recognition that he needed the black vote to win re-election. During the war, the black population had grown by 40 percent in the North, and blacks held the balance of power in key states. Truman created the President's Committee on Civil Rights by executive order and endorsed its 1947 report, *To Secure These Rights*. The document represented the most far-reaching statement for civil rights of any U.S. president or governmental agency since Reconstruction. Its proposals included eliminating the poll tax, making lynching a federal offense, and establishing a permanent FEPC. When the Democratic National Convention adopted the first-ever civil rights plank in the party platform, the Dixiecrats, a splinter group dedicated to the maintenance of segregation, walked out.¹⁰²⁶ The platform commended Truman for his civil rights stand but stopped short of endorsing any specific proposals; instead, it contained general statements against racial discrimination.¹⁰²⁷ In a resolution against Truman's candidacy and his civil rights program, the Shelby County Democratic Executive Committee contended that his proposals intended

¹⁰²⁵ Hunt to E. W. Hale, 14 May 1948, Hale Papers, Box 32, Folder 13.

¹⁰²⁶ On the 1948 election and Truman's civil rights program, see: Kari Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2001); Bartley, *New South*, 74-104; Key, *Southern Politics*, 58-9, 70-5; Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 40-60; Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy*, 118-39; Steven F. Lawson, ed., *To Secure These Rights: the Report of Harry S Truman's Committee on Civil Rights* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004).

¹⁰²⁷ Democratic Party Platform of 1948, 12 Jul. 1948, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, The American Presidency Project [online], Santa Barbara, CA, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29599> [accessed 25 Jan. 2010].

“to force upon people of Tennessee and the South a deplorable social condition repugnant to our ideals, principles and tradition,” leading to “bitter strife resulting in hate and prejudice.”¹⁰²⁸

The local committee’s statement represented just one part of an election season filled with “extreme bitterness.”¹⁰²⁹ Through full-page newspaper advertisements, Crump vilified Kefauver and Browning, and he smeared Kefauver as a communist sympathizer despite his denials of this charge.¹⁰³⁰ Kefauver suggested debating Crump’s senatorial candidate, John Mitchell, on whether he was a communist or communist sympathizer, but Crump was not interested in taking this step.¹⁰³¹ Browning suspected that Crump considered killing him while some Kefauver supporters feared for Kefauver’s life.¹⁰³² Every member of the small group of white reformers faced pressure to stop their campaign, and Coe feared for her own safety though she was not harmed. Crump called her father, a former elected official who had previously broken with him, to try to persuade him to stop her campaign activity, but he refused, saying that he had no control over his children’s political actions.¹⁰³³

Coe remembered that the small group’s “hardest thing was convincing people that they could vote freely and their vote would be known.” To combat these fears, the reformers

¹⁰²⁸ Shelby County Democratic Executive Committee, Resolution against Truman and His Civil Rights Program, [1948], Overton Papers, Box 9, Folder 27.

¹⁰²⁹ Coe, interview, 23.

¹⁰³⁰ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 50, 53, and these articles in Vertical File: 1948 Election, MSC: “News of Bygone Days: 25 Years Ago, Jul. 12, 1948,” CA, 12 Jul. 1973, and “News of Bygone Days: 25 Years Ago, Jul. 13, 1948,” CA, 13 Jul. 1973.

¹⁰³¹ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 53.

¹⁰³² Key, *Southern Politics*, 68; Riggs, “Gordon Browning,” 87.

¹⁰³³ Coe, interview, 5-6, 26-7, 32-3.

conducted word-of-mouth and advertising campaigns to assure people that their votes would count. She recalled, “The League of Women Voters chapter had just been reactivated in Memphis; it conducted quite a campaign of the same nature and to get over to people what the voting laws were and what was prohibited.”¹⁰³⁴ The chapter also organized a “School for Watchers,” and they met with success. When the August primaries arrived, one thousand poll watchers were on duty to prevent election fraud.¹⁰³⁵ The anti-Crump contingent was smart enough to arm itself with that many because of past experience. Two years earlier, the two hundred CIO-trained watchers had dissipated to two by the end of primary day. Some failed to show up while others were chased away or put in jail.¹⁰³⁶ In 1948, middle-class women worked as poll watchers along with businessmen, unionists, and, apparently, FBI officials.¹⁰³⁷ The Crump machine could not easily intimidate them because of their strength in numbers and the presence of women.

The hard work of the laborites, black political activists, and white liberal reformers paid off that August primary day: Crump’s power was broken as black voters joined with liberal whites to lift the “iron curtain of fear.”¹⁰³⁸ Organized twenty thousand strong, laborites came out in full force. Fifty-five percent of the residents of the heavily white labor precinct of the Frayser neighborhood, for instance, cast ballots for Kefauver. Many black voters, especially those associated with the labor movement, opposed Crump, and the

¹⁰³⁴ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰³⁵ Kefauver, “How Boss Crump Was Licked.”

¹⁰³⁶ Key, *Southern Politics*, 64.

¹⁰³⁷ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 58; Honey, *Southern Labor*, 249; Jasper, “Minority Vote.”

¹⁰³⁸ Jasper, “Minority Vote.”

majority of three predominantly black precincts went for Kefauver.¹⁰³⁹ Both Kefauver and Browning won the Democratic nomination, ensuring their victory in November. Browning received 56 percent of the vote, and Kefauver garnered 42 percent, winning by a plurality. Though neither candidate won Memphis or Shelby County, they received enough ballots there to hand them a victory, thus cracking the Crump machine's control of the state.¹⁰⁴⁰ Crump mainly blamed the CIO for his loss, but the combination of white reformers, unionists, and blacks--with their organization and determination--defeated the political boss in the end.

Memphians rejoiced as they immediately recognized the new political atmosphere. "Everywhere are seen smiling faces of people who have broken the spell of fear--it's like Joe Louis winning a prize [fi]ght," the *Washington Afro American* reported.¹⁰⁴¹ Congratulating Kefauver on his victory, Bob Church, a friend of his, said, "Your courage . . . has done more to put hope into the heart of the 'Man on Street,' than anything that has been done during my generation."¹⁰⁴² "When we beat Crump in '48, he lost face," Browning later said. "He lost the mystery of being invulnerable He got stomped into the ground and it hurt him."¹⁰⁴³ Black Memphian Emogene Wilson recalled that Crump's power began to decline because he could no longer "call the shots," and Lt. Lee later called the defeat "the beginning of the

¹⁰³⁹ A reason for the strong showing of laborites was that they could afford to pay the poll tax. Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 58; Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 130; Kefauver, "How Boss Crump Was Licked;" Honey, *Southern Labor*, 249.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 58-9; Key, *Southern Politics*, 62; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 264.

¹⁰⁴¹ Jasper, "Minority Vote."

¹⁰⁴² Church to Kefauver, 6 Nov. 1948, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 11. Also see: Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 191.

¹⁰⁴³ Riggs, "Gordon Browning," 87.

gradual deterioration of the great Crump organization.”¹⁰⁴⁴ Black unionist George Holloway remembered, “Things changed completely when Senator Kefauver beat the Crump machine [I]t was like a new Memphis. People began to see that they could protest what was happening, and they weren’t afraid.”¹⁰⁴⁵

In September, Crump acceded to black demands to employ black police officers. The news prompted celebration on Beale Street even though Commissioner Joe Boyle, who announced the appointments, declared that he did not intend to support “social equality.”¹⁰⁴⁶ The Memphis Police Department accepted more than 150 applications from blacks, and thirteen began training as officers in October. Though they were not allowed to arrest whites, their appointment was a victory, and the city employed more black police officers by the early 1950s.¹⁰⁴⁷ Crump also responded to the election outcome by retiring Attorney General Will Gerber, who had previously engaged in the machine’s campaigns against J. B. Martin and A. Philip Randolph. In addition, Crump replaced Mayor James E. Pleasants, who had come under fire during the Freedom Train incident, with Watkins Overton, the former mayor of Memphis who had a better record of working with blacks.¹⁰⁴⁸ All these tangible effects so soon after the primaries revealed the increased leverage that blacks had won as a result of their political activity.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Wilson, interview; Lee, interview, n.d., 7.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 155-6.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 109.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Walk, *History of African-Americans*, 29-33; Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 261-2, 300.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 59; Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 269. For praise from black Memphians concerning Overton’s return to office, see, for example: Mimmie Smith to Overton, 17 Jan. 1949, Overton Papers, Box 6, Folder 21; S. A. Owen to Overton, 14 Jan. 1949, Overton Papers, Box 6, Folder 23.

During the primary and general election season, black Memphians also demonstrated their independence from the Crump machine by supporting Republican candidates.¹⁰⁴⁹ Lt. Lee, black ministers, and other black activists encouraged blacks to register to vote, pay the poll tax, and go to the polls. As head of the local Republican finance committee, Dr. A. N. Kittrelle, one of Church's former political associates, apparently raised one third of the party's total campaign funds for the city and county. Lee served as vice president of the Shelby County Republican Campaign Committee, and he recruited Roscoe Conkling Simmons to speak.¹⁰⁵⁰ The journalist, orator, and nephew of Booker T. Washington had repeatedly mobilized black voters at political rallies in the city since 1916.

Even with these campaign activities, the area's Republican Party remained weak. Locally, the Republican primary yielded few votes compared to the Democratic one. Lt. Lee received only 975 votes in his successful bid for the Republican State Executive Committee; the tally represented the largest vote in the primary.¹⁰⁵¹ Because Republicans lacked strength, some black Memphians considered the Democratic Party to be more fruitful for engagement in municipal politics. These blacks, as with others in the South, also turned to the party because of its local, regional, and national dominance and its support at the national level for some black civil rights advances as well as social welfare measures.¹⁰⁵²

Moreover, many blacks disapproved of the Republican Party's growing conservatism on major racial issues. The Memphis black press, for instance, condemned Republican senatorial candidate Carroll Reece for endorsing states rights and opposing the FEPC and

¹⁰⁴⁹ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 140.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 265-6.

¹⁰⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 265.

¹⁰⁵² *Ibid.*, 262-3.

Truman's civil rights proposals.¹⁰⁵³ As industrialists had come to hold more influence in the party and white Republicans had concentrated on battling anti-communism, the Grand Old Party had become less supportive of black rights and fair employment than in years past. After the party lost the black vote in 1944, one party official admitted that its platform plank in favor of a permanent FEPC had chiefly represented an effort to win black support, but blacks had voted for Roosevelt. He said that the party could not afford to support an FEPC law because New England and Midwestern industrialists would stop their campaign contributions. Republicans regained congressional control in the 1946 election for the first time in sixteen years but did not make any civil rights or fair employment efforts, leading to rebukes from the NAACP and Church's Republican American Committee.¹⁰⁵⁴ In 1948, Republican presidential candidate Thomas Dewey, the New York governor, had the strongest civil rights record of any governor in the country, but he hardly campaigned for the black vote and did not stress his civil rights achievements.¹⁰⁵⁵

Still, the Republican Party retained a degree of racial liberalism in 1948 that demonstrated that Democrats had not completely gained the upper hand when it came to civil rights. In its platform, the Republican Party continued to call for the abolition of the poll tax and enactment of anti-lynching legislation though it abandoned its stance in favor of the FEPC. The document also declared the party's opposition to racial segregation in the armed

¹⁰⁵³ Ibid., 266.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy*, 110-1, 126.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Ibid., 106, 113-5, 125, 132, 138, 203.

services.¹⁰⁵⁶ Church had been instrumental, once again, in helping persuade the party to include these statements.¹⁰⁵⁷ He and other blacks knew the platform was no guarantee of action, but the Republican Party continued to afford blacks an element of recognition in including these demands if only to say that the party valued their citizenship rights and wanted their votes.

In Memphis, while some blacks still supported the Republican Party, other blacks took a different political track by backing the Progressive Party in 1948. They attended the interracial gatherings of some two thousand to twenty-five hundred attendees that occurred when the party's presidential candidate, Henry Wallace, made a campaign stop in Memphis in September and when famed black singer and activist Paul Robeson sang folk songs in the city a month later. Wallace unequivocally favored civil rights.¹⁰⁵⁸ Making the first black bid for public office in decades, Rev. Dwight Kyle ran for the state legislature on the Progressive Party ticket with a white woman. The pastor of Avery AME Chapel, a native of West Virginia, and educated in the North, he had moved to Memphis in 1946 and had become the local NAACP Executive Committee chairman. In addition to heading the Memphis FEPC Council, he also had joined Local 19 and participated in its voter registration efforts.¹⁰⁵⁹ On the campaign trail, Kyle declared that he was for "total equality for the Negro" and

¹⁰⁵⁶ Republican Party Platform of 1948, 21 Jun. 1948, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, The American Presidency Project [online], Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25836> [accessed 26 May 2009].

¹⁰⁵⁷ Church, "Material Requested by Mr. Clarence Kelly," 2.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy*, 132; Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 235; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 267-8; Honey, *Southern Labor*, 249-51. For more on Henry Wallace's campaign, see: Patricia Sullivan, "Henry Wallace's Campaign Foreshadowed the Movement as well as the Rainbow," *Southern Changes* 10, no. 5 (1988): 11, 16-7.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 100, 107-8, 127, 139; Honey, *Southern Labor*, 203, 249-51; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 268.

“complete integration.”¹⁰⁶⁰ He joined the ranks of blacks bidding for public office elsewhere in the South. And, he had reason for hope: in Winston Salem, North Carolina, white and black laborites and NAACP branch members had come together to support the successful candidacy of Rev. Kenneth Williams for a seat on the board of alderman in 1947. Williams was the first black to win public office against a white candidate in the twentieth-century South.¹⁰⁶¹

After the primary election, black Democrats urged support for Truman, pointing to Crump’s endorsement of Dixiecrat presidential candidate Strom Thurmond. The black Democratic club sponsored rallies in black wards and at black schools, and it successfully recruited white reformers to speak at a large meeting at the Labor Temple on Beale. Some blacks who had voted in the Republican primary threw their support behind Democratic candidates, and black labor groups made a strong show of support for the Browning-Kefauver ticket. Rev. James McDaniel estimated that 100 percent of black Democrats backed Browning and Kefauver though some preferred Dewey over Truman.¹⁰⁶²

Crump made some concessions after the primary, but he also reasserted his power by harassing black activists. Police officers ordered three black ministers to leave a white-sponsored rally for the Republican ticket. The ministers refused, and the police left them alone.¹⁰⁶³ But, the police successfully forced blacks to leave other rallies for the Republican candidates and the Kefauver-Browning ticket. Black unionist Lonnie Jones reported that

¹⁰⁶⁰ Honey, *Southern Labor*, 251.

¹⁰⁶¹ Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism*, 306-10; Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of American History* 75, no. 3 (Dec. 1988): 786-811.

¹⁰⁶² Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 266-7.

¹⁰⁶³ *Ibid.*, 266.

policemen with clubs had chased him and sixty to seventy other black Memphians from a Kefauver-Browning meeting. Not yielding to fear, Jones publicly declared that he still planned to vote for the Democratic candidates.¹⁰⁶⁴

Despite Crump's violent tactics, Browning and Kefauver won, and the Dixiecrats met with defeat, dealing Crump with another blow to his credibility. Kyle lost but received 3,760 votes, many of which were from predominantly white precincts.¹⁰⁶⁵ The white Democratic vote split between Truman and Thurmond, with each capturing around 40 percent. More than half of black ballots went to Truman. Thirty percent of black voters and 18 percent of white voters supported Dewey.¹⁰⁶⁶ The fact that so many white Memphians supported Thurmond revealed Crump's continuing influence and their continued opposition to civil rights reform.

The year 1948 shook the foundation of the political system not only in Memphis but also in the South. Similar to how Crump's one-man rule had been broken, the one-party system in the region cracked as the Democratic Party splintered and four Deep South states went for the Dixiecrats. Truman desegregated the military and issued an executive order establishing a nondiscriminatory fair employment policy for the federal government.¹⁰⁶⁷ Moreover, black political activists and white laborites formed coalitions not only in Memphis

¹⁰⁶⁴ Jones made this statement in the *Memphis World*. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 140.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Shortly after the election, Kyle moved from Memphis because he was transferred to another congregation. Honey, *Southern Labor*, 251.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Jalenak, "Beale Street," 142-3.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Harry S. Truman, "Executive Order 9980--Regulations Governing Fair Employment Practices within the Federal Establishment," 26 Jul. 1948, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, The American Presidency Project [online], Santa Barbara, CA: Univ. of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=78208> [accessed 23 Jun. 2009].

but also in Richmond, where a black lawyer, Oliver Hill, won a seat on the city council.¹⁰⁶⁸

These campaigns represented the heightened effort for public office by blacks nationwide: the *Chicago Defender* reported that more blacks won elected office “than at any time in our memory.”¹⁰⁶⁹ In addition, blacks increasingly engaged in direct-action protests that further challenged the southern way of life.¹⁰⁷⁰

Section II

Though his machine was damaged, Crump remained the most dominant political figure in Memphis and Shelby County after the 1948 elections. As the *Memphis World* observed, “his iron hand wrapped in velvet” continued to operate in local and state politics.¹⁰⁷¹ Crump selected and appointed local officials, and his candidates won elections. In addition, his ward and precinct organization remained active. Local governmental employees carried on with their campaign work, and Crump continued to manipulate the black vote through such tactics as providing watermelons during election time despite the growing black political independence.¹⁰⁷²

Following the 1948 electoral triumph, the white reformers kept up their battle against Crump. The next year, they formed the nonpartisan Civic Research Committee (CRC), a

¹⁰⁶⁸ Moon, *Balance of Power*, 156-65; Christopher Silver and John V. Moeser, *The Separate City: Black Communities in the Urban South, 1940-1960* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1995), 59-60; Shockley, *We, Too, Are Americans*, 126.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Quoted in Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy*, 158. Also see: p. 265 n. 158.

¹⁰⁷⁰ A. Philip Randolph, for instance, conducted protests at the Democratic National Convention for the desegregation of the armed forces. The previous year, the Congress of Racial Equality sponsored interracial bus rides throughout the South to protest transportation segregation. For a statement on Randolph's philosophy of direct action, see: Randolph to Robert R. Church, 12 Apr. 1949, Church Family Papers, Box 9, Folder 4.

¹⁰⁷¹ Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 330.

¹⁰⁷² Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 61. For a personal perspective on black voter manipulation, see: Blondale Clady Cross, interview by Paul Ortiz, transcript, Memphis, 23 June 1995, BTV, p. 3-4, 28.

research and education organization, to promote greater citizen involvement in politics as well as local governmental and election reforms. The fifty charter members included labor leaders but mostly consisted of housewives, attorneys, businessmen, physicians, and others who had campaigned for Kefauver. Within a year, 250 people joined the group. Wanting to stay away from controversial issues, the CRC, which had a largely middle- and upper-class membership, avoided taking a position on segregation. It did not accept its first black members until two years after its formation despite the fact that black opposition to the Crump candidates in 1948 had led to the independent group's rise to power. Nonetheless, J. E. Walker and other black Memphians backed the CRC's initiatives.¹⁰⁷³

The CRC's goals included providing information on alternative forms of local government and pushing for voting machines and permanent registration. Memphis and Shelby County used paper ballots for elections, and citizens had to re-register annually to remain eligible for voting. The reformers claimed that the CRC was not "anti-administration" and pointed out that it did not support candidates, but Crump and Mayor Overton saw the organization for what it was--an obvious effort to challenge the machine and work against voter fraud and manipulation. Even though CRC officials invited Overton to serve on a subcommittee, he refused and denounced the organization as "a strictly political move to discredit the city government." He and Crump opposed the group's ideas and considered the reformers enemies.¹⁰⁷⁴

¹⁰⁷³ Ibid., 63-4; John Terreo and James E. Montague, "Historical Sketch," finding aid to Civic Research Committee Records, May 2004, SC; Information Sheet on Civic Research Committee, n.d., Ed Meeman Papers, Box 4, Folder 36, SC, p. 1, 4; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 315.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 63, 70; Terreo and Montague, "Historical Sketch." The material in quotations is from p. 63 of *Memphis since Crump*.

Yet, Crump was pressured to accept some of the CRC's ideas. Even before the group formed, the political boss had continued to make concessions to local people. Police officers had demanded higher wages, an end to the arbitrary dismissal policy, and continued political appointment based on merit rather than political service to the machine after the 1948 general election. Some five hundred citizens--including the white reformers--had supported them, and Crump had raised the officers' wages and provided a fairer dismissal policy though he had refused to outlaw political work by city employees.¹⁰⁷⁵ After the CRC's founding, the group involved civic clubs, the Chamber of Commerce, and the media in a community-wide campaign to urge the city to purchase voting machines, which it did in 1952 and used in 1954 for the first time. The CRC also succeeded in having polling places changed from unstable locations such as tents to secure venues such as schoolhouses. In addition, the organization spearheaded voter registration drives that helped increase the number of local voters from 50,000 in 1949 to 160,000 by 1954.¹⁰⁷⁶

The CRC pressed Memphis to develop a comprehensive city plan as well, which connected directly with the recurring demand of black Memphians for better public services. Under Crump, the city had no plan for keeping its public improvements in pace with its growth. The political boss wanted to keep city taxes low and expenditures down, so he had not permitted the construction necessary to meet the needs of the population, which had been expanding since World War II. As a result, the city experienced overcrowding. When Mayor Overton resigned in 1953 after a conflict with Crump, Frank Tobey, an engineer and lifetime city employee, became mayor. He, along with the CRC, convinced Crump to

¹⁰⁷⁵ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 61-2.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Ibid., 65-6; Civic Research Committee, "Why Every Citizen Should Be a Member of CRC" brochure, n.d., Meeman Papers, Box 4, Folder 38.

support a comprehensive plan. The city commission adopted one by the middle of the decade.¹⁰⁷⁷

Governor Browning's administration oversaw legislation that further changed the local political landscape as well as rewarded blacks for helping elect him. In 1949, the Tennessee legislature exempted women and veterans from the poll tax and abolished the requirement for primary elections.¹⁰⁷⁸ Other legal reforms included establishing permanent registration, effectively outlawing the poll tax in 1951, and prohibiting public employees from service as election officers. Browning appointed three CRC members to the Shelby County Election Commission to enforce these election changes. By making examinations for civil service positions open to all and requiring test scores to determine job placement, the state legislature further opened doors for blacks.¹⁰⁷⁹ Browning provided other improvements for them as well. He improved state parks--including the local Fuller Park--and granted university status to Tennessee State Agriculture and Industrial College.¹⁰⁸⁰

Though the CRC did not endorse candidates, it supported citizen involvement in political campaigns, and its members played key roles in backing non-Crump-supported candidates. The first local ticket independent of Crump in twenty years occurred in 1950. Overton was not challenged as mayor, but eleven candidates ran for state, congressional, and

¹⁰⁷⁷ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 69-71; Civic Research Committee, "Why Every Citizen Should Be a Member of CRC."

¹⁰⁷⁸ Valien, "Expansion of Negro Suffrage," 364.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 65; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 279. For more on the elimination of the poll tax, see: Valien, "Expansion of Negro Suffrage," 365; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 314-5.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 324.

local offices.¹⁰⁸¹ At least one hailed from the labor movement, and Crump included a labor representative on his ticket as a concession to the 1948 developments.¹⁰⁸² Black industrial workers, in particular, supported the anti-Crump slate.¹⁰⁸³ Though no independent candidates beat Crump-backed office seekers during the political boss's lifetime, they provided a challenge to his control, contributed to a more democratic Memphis, and could be assured of a fair voting count because of election reforms.¹⁰⁸⁴

In this new political environment, the Crump machine was forced to modify its longstanding practice of ward and precinct work during campaigns. In the 1950 election, white campaign worker Boyd Harte reported to the Crump organization on the poll-tax payment and voter registration effort for the Forty-ninth Ward by white city and county employees. He and others were careful about telling the employees that their work was “voluntary” and avoiding “the oldtime [*sic*] business of ‘insisting that they work or else,’” he said. Warning the workers that they would “find some enemies of the [a]dministration, and some who might be biased by the *Press-Scimitar*,” Harte cautioned them “not to be overconfident” and instructed them to “WORK, WORK, WORK and sell Mr. Crump’s leadership.”¹⁰⁸⁵ In the predominantly black Fiftieth Ward, Harte collaborated with J. Ashton Hayes, the principal of Manassas High School and the president of the local civic club. Harte reported that Hayes was helping them secure additional workers to supplement the black city

¹⁰⁸¹ Because participation in the state legislature could lead to political reforms in Memphis, the reformers ran people for this body. Coe, interview, 29; Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 314.

¹⁰⁸² Coe, interview, 29; Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 59.

¹⁰⁸³ Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 314.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 65.

¹⁰⁸⁵ I have retained Harte’s original emphasis. Harte, “Memo to Commissioner Andrews,” 30 May 1950, Overton Papers, Box 2, Folder 39.

and county workers urging poll-tax payment and voter registration. They found that some blacks, however, refused to support all of the Crump-backed candidates.¹⁰⁸⁶

Section III

While Memphis became more politically free after 1948, its labor movement suffered from the wave of anti-communism spreading across the country. Anti-racist actions of unions made laborites susceptible to charges of communism, so interracial organizing in Memphis experienced a decline.¹⁰⁸⁷ White leaders of the local CIO council considered Local 19 communist as well as Local 282 of the United Furniture Workers Union, another low-wage, black majority union. In 1951, Senator James Eastland of Mississippi, a staunch segregationist and member of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, the Senate's equivalent of the House Un-American Committee, conducted hearings in Memphis that targeted black unions, including Local 19. Even Rev. James McDaniel, executive secretary of the city's Urban League, accused Local 19 of being red. The purge of leftist leaders further stifled local union activity, and white unionists became increasingly resistant to working with blacks. Moreover, union organizers continued to face harassment and brutality at the hands of the police and management. By 1954, the city's CIO and AFL unions had eliminated all their black organizers except for one.¹⁰⁸⁸ Despite this hostile environment, black Memphians continued to engage in labor activism. Groups of black workers filed

¹⁰⁸⁶ Ibid., Harte to Hayes, 2 Aug. 1950, Overton Papers, Box 6, Folder 18. Also see: "Anti Activity 26/2," 1954, Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 308, Folder: Newspaper Clippings, Magazine Articles, 1954, mfm, 000920.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Honey, "Labour Leadership," 97-120.

¹⁰⁸⁸ Honey, *Southern Labor*, 263-77; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 185-9; Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 177-212; Honey, "Labour Leadership," 113-7. For more on the Eastland hearings, see: Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 213-36; Barnard, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 254-73.

complaints with national labor organizations and the Urban League.¹⁰⁸⁹ In 1951, a complaint by the Memphis branch of the National Alliance of Postal Employees, the black union for postal employees, led to better employment opportunities for blacks in the post office.¹⁰⁹⁰ Black laborites also participated in voter registration efforts both within and outside their plants.¹⁰⁹¹ But, all in all, black labor efforts faced severe limits during these years.

The local NAACP saw a waning of its activism during this time as well. Influenced by the Cold War context, the branch took a less aggressive approach to racial matters.¹⁰⁹² In an attempt to prevent communist accusations that threatened to interfere with its program, the national NAACP was one of the many liberal organizations that distanced itself from suspected communist groups and individuals; the local branch took this action as well.¹⁰⁹³ After surpassing more than 3,500 members per year from 1946 to 1948, the chapter declined to 880 members in 1949 and usually did not exceed 1,000 members over the next five years. Collectively, the state's branches lost almost two thirds of their membership from 1947 to 1950.¹⁰⁹⁴ In 1949, Utiillus Phillips, president of the Memphis NAACP branch and the

¹⁰⁸⁹ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 298.

¹⁰⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 279, 300.

¹⁰⁹¹ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 213; Honey, *Southern Labor*, 288.

¹⁰⁹² Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 189-91; Honey, *Southern Labor*, 271-2.

¹⁰⁹³ Honey, *Southern Labor*, 271; Manfred Berg, "Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War," *Journal of American History* 94, no. 1 (Jun. 2007): 75-96.

¹⁰⁹⁴ The 880 figure is from: "Record of Memberships Sent In and 40th Anniversary Quotas Paid, January 1 to August 15, 1949: Tennessee Branches," n.d., Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1948-50, mfm, 19:00057. The information on the membership decline of the state branch is from: Lucille Black, memorandum to Officers and Delegates-Tennessee State Conference NAACP, 24 Aug. 1950, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1948-50, mfm, 19:00037. From 1949 to 1954, the branch did not exceed 1,000 members except for in 1953 when it reached 1,068 members and 1950 when it reached 1,053 members. The 1946 to 1950 membership statistics are in: "Comparative Study of Tennessee Branches: Memberships," n.d., Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1948-50, mfm, 19:00172; Lucille Black to Ruby Hurley, 13 Aug. 1951,

Tennessee State Conference of Branches, wrote a national NAACP official for advice. He said, "Our local membership campaign has hit the rocks. We are so bewildered at the results achieved thus far, that we have not been able to solve the cause."¹⁰⁹⁵

A major problem that the Memphis branch faced was financial difficulties, which hurt its ability to recruit new members and conduct programming.¹⁰⁹⁶ Phillips repeatedly wrote national NAACP officials requesting funding and, to no avail, recommended that the national office reduce the annual membership fee from two dollars to one dollar, thinking the step was a possible solution.¹⁰⁹⁷ Part of the problem stemmed from the financial troubles of the national office, which could not always provide the funding that it usually gave to branches.¹⁰⁹⁸ The Memphis branch's financial difficulties were also partially self-inflicted.

Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1951-55, mfm, 19:00215. The 1951 membership statistics are in: "Membership Status of Tennessee Branches, May 15, 1952," n.d., Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1951-55, mfm, 19:00232. The 1952 through 1954 membership statistics are in: Gloster B. Current to H. T. Lockard, 10 Feb. 1955, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C186, Folder: Memphis NAACP, 1951-55, Manuscript Division (hereafter MD), Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Ulysses Oliver to Phillips, 24 Feb. 1949; Phillips to Roy Wilkins, 7 Dec. 1949, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1948-50, mfm, 19:00103. The quote is from: Phillips to Lucille Black, 26 May 1949, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1948-50, mfm, 19:00046.

¹⁰⁹⁶ The Tennessee State Conference of Branches also experienced financial distress, resulting in the cancellation of its quarterly meeting and the virtual stop to its programming for a brief period in late 1949. Phillips to Wilkins, 7 Dec. 1949.

¹⁰⁹⁷ National officials did not accept the argument that the expense of the two-dollar membership fee was responsible for the decline in membership, and the annual convention voted against changing the fee to one dollar. Phillips to Current, 25 Oct. 1950; Black, memorandum; Current to Phillips, 2 Nov. 1950, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1948-50, mfm, 19:00166. For correspondence of Phillips pressing for funds, see, for example: Phillips to Wilkins, 25 Jul. 1950, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1948-50, mfm, 19:00134; Phillips to Gloster B. Current, 22 May 1952, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1951-55, mfm, 19:00259.

¹⁰⁹⁸ One reason for the financial troubles of the national office was that branches nationwide had failed to meet membership quotas. As a result, the national office experienced a decline in the amount of money that it had available for branches. Roy Wilkins to Ullius R. Phillips, 16 Dec. 1949, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1948-50, mfm, 19:00102.

In 1948, when the branch was experiencing high membership levels, members “opened and outfitted a downtown office as a preparatory step toward securing an executive secretary,” Phillips explained two years later. “This increased overhead expense came at a time our intake of memberships began to decline. It has put us in a very embarrassing financial position It has been two years since we were able to send a delegate to our national convention.”¹⁰⁹⁹ Some Memphis NAACP members spent their own money to keep branch activities going.¹¹⁰⁰

In a memo to the Tennessee State Conference in 1950, Lucille Black, membership secretary of the national organization, said the “primary weakness” of the NAACP structure was not due to financial troubles but “our failure to inject new blood into the life-stream of the Association. We have depended too long on the *same officers*, the *same workers*, the *same members*.” She pointed out, “There are thousands of people in the [s]tate who have never been members and who have never been drawn into our program. These people offer an untapped reservoir which must be capitalized upon.”¹¹⁰¹ Tennessee NAACP branch members subsequently discussed the problems of conducting membership campaigns at the 1951 annual meeting of the Tennessee State Conference, which was held in Memphis and hosted by Blair T. Hunt at his Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church. J. E. Walker, Rev. James McDaniel, and young attorney Benjamin Hooks welcomed the attendees to Memphis.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Phillips to Gloster B. Current, 25 Oct. 1950, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1948-50, mfm, 19:00167.

¹¹⁰⁰ Phillips to Wilkins, 7 Dec. 1949.

¹¹⁰¹ I have kept her original emphasis in the quote. Black, memorandum.

In her advice on how to recruit new members, national official Ruby Hurley emphasized that the organization “must reach all classes of people.”¹¹⁰²

Yet, a year later, Hurley bemoaned the Memphis branch’s continuing decline, which she attributed to its “conservative influence” and “little action” despite its efforts to recruit members.¹¹⁰³ The branch may have been hampered by the illness of Utillus R. Phillips, which forced him to resign from the presidency of the Tennessee State Conference in 1952.¹¹⁰⁴ He stepped down as president of the local chapter the next year. Most certainly, the branch was limited by the continuing power of Crump. In 1950, Phillips wrote a national NAACP official that the branch had had difficulty for “quite a number of years” in “getting substantial citizens to take an active part in the affairs of the branch. Without any apparent sound reason, the City Board of Education frowns upon the [o]rganization, which is a definite handicap.” He continued, “This linked with those who have an unfounded fear of ‘Boss’ Crump, cripples our efforts for the type of organization we should have.”¹¹⁰⁵ The

¹¹⁰² Walker and Hunt were not NAACP officers at this time. Only Hooks was involved as an officer of the organization then. E. B. Cowan, “Memorandum to Branch Officers regarding Fifth Annual Conference of NAACP Branches in Tennessee” and “Summary of Minutes-Fifth Annual Conference NAACP Branches in Tennessee,” 31 Aug. 1951, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1951-55, mfm, 19:00217-9.

¹¹⁰³ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 189. Utillus R. Phillips wrote Gloster B. Current, NAACP Director of Branches, “Our branch has a serious handicap inasmuch as substantial citizens do not take an active part in the operation. We have done everything in our power to enlist their active support to no avail. I do not have the wisdom [or] the understanding to give the answers.” Phillips to Current, 25 Oct. 1950.

¹¹⁰⁴ Upon the resignation of Phillips, NAACP Director of Branches Gloster Current commended him in saying, “Your sacrificial interests in the Association and its work, the years that you have devoted to our movement will always be treasured in our movement. You have always given full measure of devotion to any task assigned you and to you rightfully belongs the major share of credit for the splendid work of achievement in Tennessee since the reorganization of the State Conference in 1947.” Current to Philips, 30 Sept. 1952, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1951-55, mfm, 19:01272. Also see: Phillips to Officers of the Tennessee State Conference NAACP, 22 Sept. 1952, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1951-55, mfm, 19:00274-5.

¹¹⁰⁵ Utillus R. Phillips to Leah I. Brook, 7 Feb. 1950, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C185, Folder: Memphis NAACP 1947-1950.

chapter supported the machine's plans for a new black public hospital despite the national organization's policy against segregation. In the post-war period, blacks had pushed for a new facility because they lacked adequate health services. A 1949 study, for instance, reported that whites had four times more hospital beds available to them than blacks even though blacks made up around 40 percent of the city's population.¹¹⁰⁶ At a 1952 meeting of the local NAACP branch, its leaders said that they felt that the black community so badly needed a new hospital that they could not go against Crump's plan.¹¹⁰⁷ The hospital project came to fruition in 1956 when the E. H. Crump Memorial Hospital opened its doors.¹¹⁰⁸

Yet, the local branch did not let the Crump machine impede all of its civil rights activities, and it worked to tap into the "reservoir" of people who could potentially join its efforts.¹¹⁰⁹ While the chapter conducted membership and fundraising campaigns, it engaged in voter registration efforts. Its lawyers provided legal protection for black tenant farmers from unscrupulous employment practices throughout the tri-state area.¹¹¹⁰ In 1953, the chapter voted to cooperate in all efforts to implement recent Supreme Court decisions ruling restrictive covenants and racial zoning in housing illegal.¹¹¹¹ In addition, the branch, along with other ones in Tennessee, raised funds for a lawsuit to integrate the University of

¹¹⁰⁶ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 272-7.

¹¹⁰⁷ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 189-90.

¹¹⁰⁸ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 308-12.

¹¹⁰⁹ Young attorney H. T. Lockard became a member of the chapter in 1951. At branch meetings, he "found very, very few people but a solid core of mostly men who seemed to be interested and determined to addressing some of the existing problems and in fact doing something about it." H. T. Lockard, interview by author, transcript, Memphis, 10 Oct. 2000, SOHP, p. 4.

¹¹¹⁰ Hooks, *March for Civil Rights*, 49; Lockard, interview, 13 Jul. 2004; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 335-6.

¹¹¹¹ "Press Release: Local Branch Protests Bombing," 3 Jul. 1953, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C186, Folder: Memphis NAACP, 1951-55, MD.

Tennessee.¹¹¹² Under Utillus R. Phillip's leadership, the Tennessee State Conference passed numerous civil rights resolutions, including ones urging its members to register blacks to vote and calling on the state's governor and attorney general to investigate and take corrective action regarding the denial to vote of blacks in some Tennessee counties, especially Fayette and Haywood, which were majority black counties in rural West Tennessee.¹¹¹³

Section IV

The NAACP's political activism during these years was part of the growth of black electoral action following the 1948 elections. While anti-communists redbaited many labor and civil rights efforts, they could not easily oppose political mobilization because of the country's democratic system. Black Memphians cultivated ties with local elected officials, formed and joined political clubs, conducted voter registration drives, worked with the white reformers, and supported white candidates who they thought would best meet their needs. In order to increase voter registration, politicize black Memphians, and ultimately break the Jim Crow system, more blacks began running for public office than at any time since the 1910s.¹¹¹⁴ Whereas black men generally held more visible roles, such as by bidding for

¹¹¹² Utillus R. Phillips, memorandum to Branch Officers, Members and Fellow Citizens re: Annual Membership Campaign and Defense Fund, 27 Mar. 1951, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1951-55, mfm, 19:00181; E. B. Cowan, memorandum to Presidents and Secretaries of Tennessee Branches, N A A C P, n.d. but received at NAACP national office 18 Apr. 1951, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1951-55, mfm, 19:00183.

¹¹¹³ "Resolutions Adopted at the Third Annual Conference of the Tennessee State Conference of Branches, NAACP, Jackson, Tennessee, August 25-6, 1949," n.d., Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Box C187, Folder: Tennessee State Conference, 1951-55, mfm, 19:00088.

¹¹¹⁴ Benjamin L. Hooks, interview by author, Memphis, 29 Jun. 2004, typed notes in author's possession; H. T. Lockard, interview by author, Memphis, 13 and 19 Jul. 2004, typed notes in author's possession; Kousser, *Colorblind Injustice*, 146; Hooks, *March for Civil Rights*, 49.

office and doing public speaking, women mainly engaged in crucial behind-the-scenes work.¹¹¹⁵

But, black Memphians were far from unified. Despite their mobilization against Crump in 1948, many still backed the machine. Mayor Overton maintained its policy of civility, paternalism, and civic recognition toward blacks. At a time when many southern politicians continued to ignore blacks and engage in race baiting, he cordially communicated with them and delivered speeches to black audiences.¹¹¹⁶ The Crump machine even erected a monument and dedicated a park to Tom Lee at the foot of Beale Street near the Mississippi River in 1954. In 1925, even though he could not swim, this black man single-handedly rescued thirty-two whites from a shipwreck. The monument described Lee as a “very worthy negro.”¹¹¹⁷ To be sure, Overton also ensured better public services for blacks, and these gestures attested to the political leverage that black Memphians continued to possess. Blondale Clady Cross, who started voting in 1950, remembered that she supported Crump’s candidates because she could see improvements from one election to the next.¹¹¹⁸ At a 1950 campaign rally, some three hundred black Memphians applauded the mayor for meeting the

¹¹¹⁵ Lockard, interview, 19 Jul. 2004. For a sampling of the work on the political and civil rights work of women during the post-war era, see: Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1994); Pamela Tyler, *Silk Stockings and Ballot Boxes: Women and Politics in New Orleans, 1920-1963* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1996); Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith, eds., *Gender in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999); Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods, eds., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1990).

¹¹¹⁶ For instance, see: A. B. McEwen to Overton, 12 Dec. 1949, Overton Papers, Box 5, Folder 19; L. H. Ford to Overton, 13 Dec. 1952, Overton Papers, Box 5, Folder 9; “Excerpts from address of Watkins Overton, Mayor of Memphis, for the dedication of the Universal Life Insurance Company’s new home on July 7, 1949,” n.d., Overton Papers, Box 9, Folder 46; “Programme, Ground Breaking [*sic*] Ceremonies Lauderdale Branch Y. M. C. A.,” 12 Mar. 1950, Overton Papers, Box 9, Folder 46.

¹¹¹⁷ Crump chaired the committee to erect the monument. Other local officials involved included Overton, E. W. Hale, Walter Chandler, and Joe Boyle.

¹¹¹⁸ Cross, interview, 28.

requests of black delegations for street improvements. “Your curbs and gutters and street lights [*sic*] really, really helped,” white campaign worker Boyd Harte told Overton.¹¹¹⁹ In keeping with the movement across the South to equalize black schools with white schools during this time, the city also bettered its educational services for blacks and equalized black and white teacher pay.¹¹²⁰

Despite Overton’s work for blacks, the mayor was limited in his efforts and by his ties to Crump. After all, blacks had faced higher rates of police brutality under Overton’s tenure as mayor in the 1930s. The 1950 U.S. Housing Census, for instance, found that black Memphians lived in 65 percent of the city housing units considered substandard.¹¹²¹ By inaccurately labeling some black-owned homes substandard, local governmental officials engaged in housing discrimination. They forced owners to sell their houses to the city to make way for slum clearance projects.¹¹²² Moreover, most majority-black neighborhoods lacked provisions such as curbs, gutters, and paved streets.¹¹²³

While some blacks politically maneuvered within the confines of the Crump machine, others directly challenged it through electoral efforts. In the spring of 1951, George W. Lee, J. E. Walker, and four other independent black professionals issued a call to one hundred black leaders of all political shades to join forces to engage in voter registration. Taking advantage of the legal end of the poll tax that year, these six men wanted to extend to the

¹¹¹⁹ Harte to Hayes, 2 Aug. 1950. Also see: Overton to O. P. Williams, 31 Mar. 1950, Overton Papers, Box 2, Folder 39; “Improvements Asked by Negro Civic Club,” CA, 12 Aug. 1949, Overton Papers, Box 2, Folder 42.

¹¹²⁰ Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 280-1, 340.

¹¹²¹ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 201-2. Also see: Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 304.

¹¹²² Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 336-7.

¹¹²³ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 202.

black community the registration efforts of the Civic Research Committee. Lee recognized that a major goal of the white reformers was to qualify “enough independent voters to overcome [sic] the Crump [o]rganization[’s] grip in the town and county.” At a meeting in late May, the group of one hundred leaders, who were mainly men, formed the Citizens Nonpartisan Registration Committee.¹¹²⁴ In a show of partisan unity, Lee and Walker, who remained the area’s leading black Republican and Democrat respectively, co-chaired the committee, which included representatives of the NAACP, black Republican and Democratic organizations, and civic clubs.¹¹²⁵

Lee was well suited to start this grassroots organization. He maintained a Republican ward and precinct organization called the Lincoln League, though it was not officially connected with Bob Church’s former group of that same name. Whereas Church was nationally focused in his political work, Lee was locally focused. “When I succeeded Bob Church as political leader here, I found out that I had to develop a different approach. Church had developed his strength from the top through personal acquaintance with men on the echelon of the Republican Party,” Lee recalled in the mid-1960s. “He was able to neutralize a great deal of his [local] opposition [by] commands down from the top but I had developed no such contact, and if I was to survive, I knew that I had to find my strength in the ‘grassroots.’”¹¹²⁶ So, under Lee’s leadership, local black Republicans had proceeded to

¹¹²⁴ These four men were: Hollis Price, president of LeMoyne College; Roy Love, pastor of Mt. Nebo Baptist Church; A. A. Latting, the lawyer; and A. N. Kittrelle, the doctor and Republican associate of Church. “Negro Leaders Plan Registration Drive,” CA, 23 May 1951, p. 21; Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 315; Lee to R. R. Church, 12 Jul. 1951, Church Family Papers, Box 6, Folder 41; “Lt. Lee Responsible,” PS. The quote is from the Lee letter.

¹¹²⁵ “Organizational Plans for Citizens Non-Partisan Voter Registration Campaign for 1962 in Memphis and Shelby County,” Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, SC; “Negro Leaders Plan Registration Drive,” CA.

¹¹²⁶ George W. Lee, interview by Aaron Boom, transcript, Memphis, 17 May 1966, UMOH, p. 1.

build a ward and precinct organization that served to bolster his own strength as a leader as well as act as a venue for political education and mobilization. From a low of thirteen precinct clubs after Church and Martin left Memphis in 1940, the black Republicans had succeeded in organizing groups in twenty wards and at least sixty precincts.¹¹²⁷

In 1951, Lee used his organizational skills to ensure that the nonpartisan committee hit the ground running. “We are turning the town over to register Negroes,” Lee wrote on June 4 to Church, who remained in Chicago.¹¹²⁸ Lee, Walker, and undoubtedly others recruited about 125 ministers to help with voter registration, signaling a change from the earlier days of the Crump era in which most preachers had shied away from politics and a number had supported the machine. The nonpartisan committee arranged “citizenship Sundays,” when ministers urged voter registration and educated their parishioners about civic responsibility. While civic clubs and churches competed for prizes in trying to register the most voters, nonpartisan committee members held rallies, raised and contributed funds, and canvassed door-to-door. The committee rented buses to transport people--congregated at the doorsteps of churches around town--to and from the courthouse to register.¹¹²⁹

While these registration efforts achieved success, Lee wrote Church on June 28, “[P]eople are beginning to get a little afraid since Rev. [Dewitt] Alcorn was so brutally assaulted This situation should have stimulated registration but . . . it has had the opposite effect.”¹¹³⁰ It is unclear whether the violence related to Alcorn’s membership on the

¹¹²⁷ Ibid.; “Lt. Lee Responsible,” *PS*; Lymon, interview, 21-2, 25-6.

¹¹²⁸ Lee to Church, 4 Jun. 1951, Church Family Papers, Box 6, Folder 41.

¹¹²⁹ Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 315-6; Lee, interview, 17 May 1966, 2; Lee to Church, 28 Jun. 1951, Church Family Papers, Box 6, Folder 41; “Lt. Lee Responsible,” *PS*.

¹¹³⁰ Lee to Church, 28 Jun. 1951.

nonpartisan committee. After accusing him of being a communist, two white police officers kicked and beat him when he was at the segregated Greyhound bus station. They then transported Alcorn, charged with loitering and resisting arrest, to a hospital for treatment. The Inter-Denominational Ministers' Alliance and the NAACP branch protested the police brutality to local authorities, and Lucius Burch, the white reformer, defended Alcorn. But, a city judge dismissed the charges against the police officers, and Mayor Overton supported this decision.¹¹³¹

Despite this violent incident, Lee worked to recruit a black candidate for the school board and consulted Church about the matter.¹¹³² Lee explained to Church that he did not want to offer himself as a candidate because he feared that lily whites would use the opportunity to seize control of the local Republican organization and he wanted to become collector of customs in Memphis in the event of a Republican president. J. E. Walker was willing to run if he had Lee's support. Knowing that Walker had the money to fund his own bid, Lee agreed to back him.¹¹³³ In late July, Walker, who was around seventy years old, announced his candidacy for the school board. He became the first black to seek local office since the early twentieth century. The only candidate to run against the Crump ticket,

¹¹³¹ "Negro Leaders Plan Registration Drive," CA; G. Wayne Dowdy, "'Friends of the Organization': The Political Role of African Americans in Segregated Memphis," 1 Jul. 2003, SouthernHistory.net [accessed 25 Jan. 2010].

¹¹³² Other black Memphians also wrote Church about the political developments that summer. See these 1951 letters in Church Family Papers, Box 6, Folder 41: Lee to Church, Jun. 4, 28; Jul. 12, 25; Aug. 7, 10; Church to Lee, Jun. 22; Jul. 6, 17, 24, 30; Aug. 9, 13. Lee also wrote Church on July 19 and 21, but I have not found copies of these letters.

¹¹³³ Walker continued to head both Tri-State Bank and Universal Life Insurance Company, one of the country's largest black insurance firms. Lee to Church, 25 Jul. 1951; Lee to Church, 10 Aug. 1951. Robert R. Church, Jr., did not support the choice of Walker because he thought a black Republican should be selected to run. Church feared and suspected that black Democrats were dominating the local black political scene and believed that Lee's credibility as a Republican leader would be hurt if he did not ensure that a Republican bid for office. See Church's letters to Lee on Jul. 17, 24, 30, and Aug. 9 and 13, 1951.

Walker made his bid partly to spur blacks to register to vote and met with success. Many black community groups, including the NAACP branch and Negro Junior Chamber of Commerce, increased their voter registration efforts.¹¹³⁴ Benjamin Hooks remembered that Walker's very act of running for office struck "a major blow for racial equality To the black community, this was an act of defiance of an old order. It was a clarion call for blacks to rise up politically. To the white community, Walker's candidacy was a testament to the reality that things were forever changed."¹¹³⁵

In addition to putting his own money forward, Walker may have received funds from the local white reformers and Governor Browning.¹¹³⁶ In fact, the white liberals had urged him to run because of their opposition to Crump, and Walker apparently had not entered the race without their approval. Though the Civic Research Committee did not endorse candidates, two prominent whites in the group, Edmund Orgill and O. D. Bratton, publicly supported him to the point of making radio appeals for him, and several CRC members backed him. But, Orgill, a successful businessman, demonstrated the limits to his support by saying that Walker's election might lessen blacks' demands that their children attend the same schools as whites.¹¹³⁷

The campaign brought together new and longstanding black leaders and generated community-wide interest and activity. In addition to serving as secretary of the nonpartisan

¹¹³⁴ Clark Porteous, "Negro Civic Leader Running for Board of Education," *PS*, 27 Jul. 1951, Overton Papers, Box 7, Folder 30; Kousser, *Colorblind Injustice*, 146; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 317.

¹¹³⁵ Hooks, *March for Civil Rights*, 50.

¹¹³⁶ Lee to Church, 10 Aug. 1951.

¹¹³⁷ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 317; Silver and Moeser, *Separate City*, 86-7; Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 64-5.

registration organization, Benjamin Hooks, at age twenty-six, was chosen by Walker to co-manage his campaign, and T. C. D. Hayes worked as the other co-manager.¹¹³⁸ Ms. Tweze Twyman served as the director of voter registration for the effort, and H. T. Lockard, a young black lawyer, NAACP branch member, and World War II veteran, campaigned for Walker.¹¹³⁹ Saying “a voteless people is a hopeless people,” the campaign employed fundraisers, rallies, and voter registration and education efforts.¹¹⁴⁰ “Interest in the campaign was high. There was a new pride in the black community in the city,” Hooks recalled. “Everywhere, people were talking about the Walker candidacy. In beauty parlors, barbershops, offices, at church and social club meetings, on street corners, and around dinner tables, the talk was about the election.”¹¹⁴¹

Hooks was honored that Walker chose him as his campaign co-manager. A Memphis native and World War II veteran, Hooks had personally experienced the indignity of guarding prisoners of war who could eat in restaurants where black soldiers could not have a meal.¹¹⁴² Having attended LeMoyne College and Howard University as an undergraduate, he went to DePaul University Law School in Chicago after the war. While there, Hooks

¹¹³⁸ Hayes had followed in the footsteps of his father, T. H. Hayes, Sr., to become one of the city’s most prominent black undertakers by this time. Hooks, *March for Civil Rights*, 50.

¹¹³⁹ Ibid., 51; H. T. Lockard, interview by author, tape recording, Memphis, 29 Jul. 2004, SOHP. For more on Lockard, see: Elizabeth Gritter, “Memories of H. T. Lockard,” *Southern Cultures* 14, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 106-16.

¹¹⁴⁰ Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 317. The quote is from: Ad for J. E. Walker, “Souvenir Program: The Second Annual Omega Showboat,” Omega Psi Psi Fraternity, Inc., 24 Sept. 1951, African-American Culture and Life Collection, Box 4, Folder 1.

¹¹⁴¹ Hooks, *March for Civil Rights*, 50-1.

¹¹⁴² Ibid., 48-9.

observed the freedoms enjoyed by blacks and the presence of black public officials. He became convinced that “one of the keys to social change was the exercise of the ballot.”¹¹⁴³ J. B. Martin offered to open doors for him professionally in Chicago after he graduated from law school, and Hooks decided to accept his offer. But, “almost immediately, something told me this was not the thing to do,” he recalled more than fifty years later. “[S]ome inextricable force urged me to return to Memphis. I cannot explain this somewhat mystical experience. All I know is that I saw, in my mind’s eyes, black police officers and detectives, black lawyers and judges.” Hooks also envisioned black city and county commissioners and an integrated society. “With this vision in mind, of black exercising political power, I packed my bags and headed to Memphis.”¹¹⁴⁴ Hooks returned to Memphis shortly after receiving his law license in late 1948, and he moved back in with his parents, who lived in the Foote Homes public housing project. He became one of only three black lawyers practicing in the city and as active as possible in civic affairs, joining the Memphis Negro Chamber of Commerce, the NAACP branch, and the Lincoln League.¹¹⁴⁵

More than any other political effort up to that point, the Walker campaign allowed Hooks the opportunity to make his political vision a reality.¹¹⁴⁶ He and others believed that

¹¹⁴³ Ibid., 49.

¹¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 46-7.

¹¹⁴⁵ The other lawyers were James F. Estes and Aurelius A. Latting. Hooks was head of the Memphis NAACP branch’s legal committee at the time of Walker’s campaign. Ibid., 47; Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 279-80.

¹¹⁴⁶ For a broader look at the new generation of activists across the South that Hooks represented, see: Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1999); Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1991); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1995). For a take on generational differences in the North, see: Jack Dougherty, *More than One Struggle: The Evaluation of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004).

Walker could win if blacks engaged in “single shot” voting. Walker ran against four other candidates; the four who received the most votes would win spots on the school board. If blacks only voted for him and not the other candidates, Walker had a greater chance of winning. Hooks and other campaign workers urged black Memphians to “bullet vote.”¹¹⁴⁷

Walker sought support not only from blacks but also whites, and he explained his motivations for running through newspaper articles, radio addresses, speaking engagements, and campaign flyers.¹¹⁴⁸ Pledging honesty and fairness to all, he said, “I am not running just for my race, but I am running to serve the city and people of the great [c]ity of Memphis.”¹¹⁴⁹ Pointing out that other southern cities had black school board members and elected officials, Walker argued that blacks deserved representation because they represented 40 percent of the population; a black member would be sensitive to the concerns of black students and teachers.¹¹⁵⁰ In this time of the Korean War, the candidate said that it would be a “righteous act” to permit a capable black school board member to serve in a system that trained young black men who enlisted in the military. His campaign also pointed to the Cold War context by saying that his election would be “an example to the North and Russia that democracy works in the South.”¹¹⁵¹ The *Memphis World* added that black political representation would eventually cause the “walls of discrimination” to crumble and lead to “brotherhood, equality,

¹¹⁴⁷ Hooks, *March for Civil Rights*, 50; Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 319.

¹¹⁴⁸ See, for example: “Dr. Walker Appeals for White Support,” CA, 5 Nov. 1951, p. 22. Also see the flyer for the mass rally sponsored by the Twenty-fifth Ward Civic Club in which Walker was to speak at Bethel A. M. E. Church on October 11, 1951. “Mass Rally,” campaign flyer for J. E. Walker, Overton Papers, Box 7, Folder 30.

¹¹⁴⁹ “Walker to Take Plea to White Memphians,” CA, 7 Oct. 1951, p. 7. The quote is from: Porteous, “Negro Civic Leader.”

¹¹⁵⁰ Ibid., “Dr. Walker Appeals for White Support,” CA.

¹¹⁵¹ “Walker to Take Plea to White Memphians,” CA.

and true democracy,” indicating that the country needed to fulfill its promise of democracy and equality to all--an argument all the more salient in this Cold War era.¹¹⁵²

While black Memphians carried on with their campaign, the Crump machine opposed Walker's bid not only because he ran as an anti-machine candidate but also because of his connection to the white reformers and his challenge to the social order.¹¹⁵³ Hooks recalled, “It must be remembered that although Memphis was relatively progressive for a southern city, it was still, after all, a southern city. It was still an integral part of the ‘Old South.’”¹¹⁵⁴ In radio ads, Mayor Overton warned that “a racial issue” had entered the election. The administration distributed voter instruction sheets that featured photographs of the five school board candidates --with Walker's picture unusually dark--to predominantly white neighborhoods whereas it gave sheets with no photographs to predominantly black neighborhoods. Because of the difficulty in recognizing Walker, his campaign workers jokingly called his picture “an ink spot.” In addition, Crump used Blair Hunt to tell Walker that he would be forced to leave the area if he did not withdraw his candidacy, but the candidate remained.¹¹⁵⁵ Though these tactics were hostile, the opposition to Walker's bid, all in all, was less intense than the violence and intimidation of 1940 in which black activists were beaten or run out of town.

¹¹⁵² Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 316.

¹¹⁵³ See this press statement of Watkins Overton that was not issued: Watkins Overton, Statement, 27 Jul. 1951, Overton Papers, Box 6, Folder 8.

¹¹⁵⁴ Hooks also noted, “It is hard for those who have no feeling for the temperament of the times to appreciate the temerity, the audacity, and the courage that it took for a black man to run for office in Memphis in the early 1950s.” Hooks, *March for Civil Rights*, 49.

¹¹⁵⁵ Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 318-9; Silver and Moeser, *Separate City*, 86; Hooks, *March for Civil Rights*, 51.

Walker lost the election in November, and the outcome revealed that black Memphians still had a ways to go politically despite their flurry of campaign activity. Less than one third of the city's registered voters participated in the election, and less than half the ballots of the twenty-three majority-black precincts went for Walker. Not all blacks voted for him: some had already committed to another candidate, the campaign came about too suddenly for others, and yet others did not know him. Attesting to Crump's continuing dominance, some black teachers feared reprisals if he was elected.¹¹⁵⁶ Initially, Lt. Lee had tried to find someone else to run in part because he considered Walker not "generally popular among the average run," but Hooks later characterized the candidate as having "universal respect among the black community."¹¹⁵⁷

Nonetheless, Walker's campaign politicized the black community to a large extent, and it demonstrated the more open political environment created as a consequence of the 1948 elections. Walker had said, "Whether I'm elected or not, I still can't lose."¹¹⁵⁸ The number of black voters rose from 7,000 at the campaign's start to 19,608 by the election.¹¹⁵⁹ As opposed to 1940 when Lt. Lee had not dared show his face at Republican meetings taking place in opposition to Crump's orders, he now felt free to openly challenge the political boss. The *Chicago Defender* named Lee to its "Honor Roll of Democracy" for rallying black

¹¹⁵⁶ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 319.

¹¹⁵⁷ Lt. Lee had initially tried to persuade Dr. A. N. Kittrelle to make the race. Lee's quote is from the August 7 letter. Lee to Church, 25 Jul. 1951; Lee to Church, 7 Aug. 1951; Lee to Church, 10 Aug. 1951; Hooks, *March for Civil Rights*, 50.

¹¹⁵⁸ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 317.

¹¹⁵⁹ Kousser, *Colorblind Injustice*, 146.

Memphians to register and vote.¹¹⁶⁰ Hooks recalled that his own campaign role gave him citywide recognition and propelled him into a leadership position in Memphis.¹¹⁶¹ Most importantly, Walker's bid laid the groundwork for more black political efforts throughout the decade.

Elsewhere in the South, black political efforts provided a foundation for future electoral advances. In Atlanta, for instance, John Wesley Dobbs, the city's leading black Republican and a member of Church's Republican American Committee, wrote Church to report on the impact of the *Smith* ruling and the abolition of the poll tax in Georgia in 1946. "Negroes are registering to vote in large numbers all over the state," Dobbs said. "There is a new day breaking for us in this state."¹¹⁶² Along with black Democratic leaders, local NAACP and Urban League officials, and other prominent blacks, he formed the All Citizens Registration Committee. It launched a voter registration drive in 1946 that succeeded largely because of the grassroots work of women. The effort paved the way for the formation of the black Atlanta Voters League in 1949 and the election of three blacks to public office in the 1950s.¹¹⁶³

In Memphis, civic clubs, which had supported Walker in his 1951 campaign, became one of the major groups involved with political efforts during the 1950s. Inspired by the nonpartisan committee's registration campaign, hundreds of representatives of the twenty existing black civic clubs had formed the Bluff City and Shelby County Council of Civic

¹¹⁶⁰ Nine other individuals nationwide received this honor. "Honor Roll of Democracy Includes Lt. George W. Lee," *PS*, 31 Dec. 1951, Vertical File: George W. Lee, MSC.

¹¹⁶¹ Hooks also observed that the election "remained a source of pride for the pioneers of the political revolution of the second half of the century." Hooks, *March for Civil Rights*, 51.

¹¹⁶² Dobbs to Church, 12 Apr. 1946, Church Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 10.

¹¹⁶³ Nasstrom, "Down to Now."

Clubs in July 1951.¹¹⁶⁴ Raymond Lymon, a member of the nonpartisan committee and Lincoln League, remembered that the civic club federation “sprang right out of the Lincoln League” because the attendees had made plans at a league meeting to found the organization.¹¹⁶⁵ The council’s initial goals were to form more civic clubs and register blacks to vote.¹¹⁶⁶ As one of its first acts, the organization sent a letter of commendation to Walker for running for the school board. Praising Walker for his “courage to run for office with the odds against” him, the federation said, “[T]he Negroes of Memphis are appreciative of the . . . sacrifices made by you and . . . the intelligent manner in which your campaign was conducted [Y]ou are to be congratulated upon your contribution to the history of the South and America.”¹¹⁶⁷

The civic club council became an important and influential organization in community life. Professional and working-class black men and women, including labor activists, educators, and businessmen, served as its officers and members. Hooks acted as its founding legal advisor, and Walker became its president by 1954. In addition to conducting voter registration drives, civic clubs pushed for public service improvements and called for integration.¹¹⁶⁸ The group, along with the NAACP and other black community organizations, also protested the bombing of a home purchased by a black person in a white

¹¹⁶⁴ “Council Is Formed by 20 Negro Clubs,” CA, 9 Jul. 1951, p. 22.

¹¹⁶⁵ Lymon, interview, 22.

¹¹⁶⁶ “Council Is Formed,” CA.

¹¹⁶⁷ A. A. Branch et al. to Walker, 8 Dec. 1951, Overton Papers, Box 7, Folder 29.

¹¹⁶⁸ For an analysis of the black civic clubs in Memphis, see: Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 200-7. For examples of black civic clubs pushing for public service improvements, see these letters in the Watkins Overton Papers, Series II, Box 32, Folder: Civic Clubs, 1952, MSC: Henry F. Picher to O. P. Williams, 21 Mar. 1952 and Henry F. Picher to Overton, 21 Mar. 1952.

neighborhood in 1953. In a joint statement, the groups argued that combating racism was crucial as a safeguard against communism taking hold in the country.¹¹⁶⁹ Along with endorsing the CRC's voting machines initiative, the civic club council pressed for black firefighters as well. In 1955, the city hired the first ones since the late nineteenth century.¹¹⁷⁰

In 1952, the council, which had grown to represent thirty-one civic clubs, spotlighted the lack of recreational facilities and the poor state of existing services for blacks in a report to municipal officials. Broken swings, a pool filled with sticks, and no bathrooms existed at some locations. Pointing out that blacks paid tax dollars for public services, the council protested their exclusion from some recreational and cultural facilities and the restrictions in their usage for others. For example, blacks still were allowed only one day a week at the zoo. The council presented a nine-point program for remedying the situation. It mainly called for improvements to existing recreational facilities for blacks but also called for the admittance of blacks to white facilities. In addition, the committee came up with a four-point plan of action for black Memphians, including registering and voting.¹¹⁷¹

The committee that authored the report was composed of A. A. Branch, a professor at LeMoyne College; James T. Walker, a labor activist; and Willa McWilliams, the council's assistant secretary. They said that black youth, through student citizenship programs, junior civic club organizations, and a radio forum, had urged them to press for better recreational

¹¹⁶⁹ "Press Release: Local Branch Protests Bombing," 3 Jul. 1953; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 203-4; Dowdy, "Something for the Colored People."

¹¹⁷⁰ A. A. Branch et al., letter regarding the Bluff City and Shelby County Council of Civic Club's projects and objectives for 1952, n.d., African-American Culture and Life Collection, Box 4, Folder 14.

¹¹⁷¹ Ibid., 204, and these articles in the African-American Culture and Life Collection, Box 4, Folder 14: Ellis Moore, "Negroes, Worried about Youth, Present a Nine-Point Program," CA, 19 Jun. 1952; "Need Responsibility, Too," CA, 22 Jun. 1952; Ellis Moore, "Some of Negro Parks Are Like Vacant Lots," CA, 20 Jun. 1952.

facilities because “their only recourse for leisure hours is in inadequate movies and beer joints.” Perhaps in an attempt to appease the administration, the committee said that adults previously had bought local officials’ statements that the city provided good schools for blacks, that funds were unavailable for lights for black parks, and that the time was not right for the integration of recreational facilities. But, in light of the “deplorable” state of park services and the city’s failure to meet their past requests for improvements, they said, “[W]e cannot in all fairness to our children teach them the democratic principles of our government and ask them to go along with us. We can’t even sell them on the [s]outhern philosophy of separate but equal facilities because they may be separate, but there is no equality.” So, they submitted the report “not only to fight juvenile delinquency but [also] the foe of democracy, communism.” Thus, like other civil rights activists, they used anti-communist rhetoric to further their ends by pointing out the contradiction of the United States battling communism worldwide while engaging in undemocratic practices at home.¹¹⁷²

In response to the report, the city promised to spend an extra sixty-eight thousand dollars for black recreational facilities in addition to the funds already appropriated for that purpose.¹¹⁷³ But, Mayor Overton also decried the report, saying that the city had continually provided blacks with better recreational facilities since the time that he first became mayor in 1928. “Nowhere in the entire South do our colored citizens have better facilities for their children, both schools and parks, than in the [c]ity of Memphis,” he claimed.¹¹⁷⁴ While the local government certainly had poured millions of dollars into recreational improvements for

¹¹⁷² Moore, “Negroes, Worried about Youth.”

¹¹⁷³ Ellis Moore, “City to Spend Extra \$68,000 for Negroes’ Play Facilities,” *CA*, 21 Jun. 1952, African-American Culture and Life Collection, Box 4, Folder 14.

¹¹⁷⁴ “Negro Parks Works Lauded by Overton,” *CA*, 20 Jun. 1952, African-American Culture and Life Collection, Box 4, Folder 14.

blacks, it had not prevented the shoddy conditions of these facilities or done anything to end the inherent inequality of separate facilities for blacks.

Another important part of black community and political life was local radio station WDIA, the first in the South with all-black programming. At a time when many blacks were illiterate, it held more influence than the local black newspapers. The radio station began broadcasting in October 1948 and included political, educational, religious, and cultural programming.¹¹⁷⁵ Nat D. Williams, the black newspaper columnist and Booker T. Washington High School history teacher, became a radio personality and hosted “Brown America Speaks,” one of the first programs in the country where blacks discussed local, national, and international issues of interest to the black community.¹¹⁷⁶ In addition, WDIA promoted black political action. During the 1952 election season, deejays registered voters and campaigned on air for candidates. The station conducted a contest in which it offered an award to the radio personality who had the most listeners attend a political rally sponsored by the nonpartisan registration committee, which had continued its operations after Walker’s campaign.¹¹⁷⁷

Section V

The early 1950s proved to be a momentous time for the Republican Party in Memphis. Since Martin and Church left the city in 1940, Lee and his black group had worked with whites as the regular Republican Party organization in the area. Black

¹¹⁷⁵ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 163-82; Louis Cantor, *Wheelin’ on Beale: How WDIA-Memphis Became the Nation’s First All-Black Radio Station and Created the Sound That Changed America* (New York: Pharos Books, 1992). For a broad study on black radio, see: Brian Ward, *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South* (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 2004).

¹¹⁷⁶ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 176-7.

¹¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 206.

Republicans continued to exert the most influence as leaders and members and to maintain the group. Along with Lee, the other major black Republican figures were Church's former political associates Drs. W. O. Speight and A. N. Kittrelle, who both served as secretaries of the Shelby County Republican Executive Committee and Republican Congressional Committee for the Tenth District.¹¹⁷⁸ The lily-white faction--the all-white organization that had rivaled the black-and-tan group--had not been consistently active in decades. In fact, throughout the South, the lily-white movement had never regained the strength it possessed during the Hoover years. According to Raymond Lymon, the local black Republican activist, "[T]here were[n't] many so-called white Republicans They didn't think it was respectable at that time to work in the Republican [P]arty because it was actually dominated by Negroes [I]t was dominated by Negroes because we participated and we worked." He recalled that some whites only worked for the party during national election time.¹¹⁷⁹ Other black Republicans believed that many white Republican leaders had decided to wait to become active in the party until a Republican administration came into place so they could personally profit from patronage.¹¹⁸⁰ In fact, some white Republicans had previously involved themselves in the local party in order to receive post office jobs.¹¹⁸¹

¹¹⁷⁸ R. R. Church to Guy G. Gabrielson, 7 Nov. 1951, Church Family Papers, Box 9, Folder 44; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 155; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 320; Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 143-4; "Lt. Lee Responsible," *PS*.

¹¹⁷⁹ Lymon, interview, 9.

¹¹⁸⁰ "Lt. Lee Responsible," *PS*.

¹¹⁸¹ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 143; Lewis R. Donelson III, interview by author, tape recording, Memphis, 25 June 2004, SOHP. A copy of the transcript is in my possession, and I will cite page numbers from it. This information is from p. 2.

Most of the Republican primary vote remained black until the late 1950s, but Lee's black-and-tan faction faced a serious challenge in early 1952.¹¹⁸² White housewives and businessmen, in particular, began building up a "New Guard" Republican movement. Though some were wealthier, the New Guard Republicans were largely upper middle-class.¹¹⁸³ A key leader, white attorney Millsaps Fitzhugh, had been one of the three Civic Research Committee members that Gordon Browning had appointed as local election officers after his victory in 1948.¹¹⁸⁴ The New Guard Republicans attracted disgruntled white Democrats as well as whites who were economic conservatives and anti-union.¹¹⁸⁵ In fact, throughout the South, wealthy white businessmen had come to make up a large number of the white Republican leaders. Alienated by Roosevelt's New Deal, they had turned to the Republican Party.¹¹⁸⁶ The year 1952 was an opportune time for the emergence of more white Republicans, locally and elsewhere in the South, because of the possibility of the victory of Dwight Eisenhower. The former general was popular nationwide and respected for his military service.

White housewives handled most of the grassroots, organizational work in building the New Guard Republican movement. They arranged meetings, called "Republican workshops," in precincts. At these gatherings, local Republicans explained the importance of

¹¹⁸² Donelson, interview, 38-9; William B. Street, "Lieutenant Lee, the Rise and Fall," *CA*, 3 Oct. 1971, Vertical File: George W. Lee, MSC.

¹¹⁸³ Donelson, interview, 26.

¹¹⁸⁴ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 65.

¹¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 144; Donelson, interview, 7-8.

¹¹⁸⁶ Key, *Southern Politics*, 293-4. For a discussion of the types of white Republicans in the South, see: Jack Bass and Walter DeVries, *Transformation of Southern Politics: Social Change and Political Consequence since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 25.

achieving a two-party South, the primary reason they gave in attracting members. After undertaking this groundwork, the Republicans then formed a precinct organization, which they used for educating citizens about issues and mobilizing voters during election time.¹¹⁸⁷ “My wife and fifteen other Republican women built that precinct organization just themselves, with personal visits and phone calls and meetings, that sort of thing,” recalled Lewis Donelson III, a white attorney involved in these efforts. “They’d call up . . . somebody in the precinct and say, ‘How’d you like to have a Republican workshop?’ They’d find somebody and they’d say, ‘Now you get as many of your friends as you can to come and we’ll come and give you a lecture and all,’ and we’d sign up Republicans.”¹¹⁸⁸

The New Guard Republicans vied with Lt. Lee’s “Old Guard” Republicans for control of the local party throughout the 1950s, and they did not collaborate much with each other.¹¹⁸⁹ Black Republicans were alienated from the start because the New Guard Republicans had excluded them from their organizational meetings.¹¹⁹⁰ Though Donelson claimed in a 2004 oral history that no one in the New Guard group was racist, it did seem as if lily-white Republicanism was taking on a new, more sophisticated form. The New Guard Republicans remained largely white throughout the 1950s, and many, though not all, went on to oppose civil rights measures.¹¹⁹¹

¹¹⁸⁷ Donelson, interview, 2-12, 38.

¹¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 47.

¹¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 2-4, 9-11; Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 143-4; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 155-7.

¹¹⁹⁰ “Lt. Lee Responsible,” *PS*.

¹¹⁹¹ Donelson, interview, 26; Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 143-51.

The Republican Party nationally had continued to shy away from civil rights stances, and a wing of its party had aligned with conservative southern Democrats. These Republicans and southern Democrats shared a concern about the growth of the government and accused the New Deal and Truman's Fair Deal--which advocated for further social welfare measures--of veering toward socialism. The Republican Party, after all, was the one of anti-communist crusader Joseph McCarthy, and the Democratic Party continued to have a strong southern wing that hampered Truman's civil rights and social welfare proposals. The anti-communist environment nationally also hurt the president's agenda. In addition, many Republicans continued to oppose the establishment of a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission because of its threat to the party's business interests. Conservative southern Democrats were against the FEPC because of its threat to the Jim Crow system.¹¹⁹² During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Bob Church had continued to head his Republican American Committee and to press the Grand Old Party to support civil rights and a permanent FEPC. Similar to how he had previously spoken out against the lily-white movement, Church railed against the Dixiecrat-Republican alliance.¹¹⁹³

In January 1952, the New Guard Republicans made their first major push to become the regular Republican organization locally. Some 150 whites showed up for a New Guard gathering, the most whites to attend a Republican meeting in recent memory. They decided to try to unseat Lee's faction at the next Shelby County Republican convention by coming

¹¹⁹² Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy*, 86-7, 106-8, 110-11, 144, 147, 157, 160.

¹¹⁹³ Ibid., 86, 170; Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 221-6, 270-92; Kesselman, *Social Politics of FEPC*, 215-6; Francis P. Douglas, "Empty Room in Senate Building Turned Over to FEPC Lobbyist," *Washington Star*, 31 Mar. 1948, p. A22, Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 247, Folder: Bob Church, 1948; "Church Gives GOP Vote Formula," *CD*, 13 Aug. 1949, p. 3; "GOP Leaders Threaten to Bolt Party in Fight over Dixiecrats," *CD*, 26 May 1951, p. 1.

early in hopes of outnumbering them. The meeting always came to order at 2:00 p.m. in the Shelby County Criminal Court Room. Receiving word of their plans, Lee invited hundreds of black Republicans to a free breakfast at the Elks lodge on Beale Street and then transported them in chartered buses to the meeting four hours ahead of time. Ironically, he attracted a large crowd in part because some black Republicans told recruits that Church might return to Memphis to take over the local party's leadership from Lee. Some four hundred members of Lee's group packed the room with some two hundred remaining outside. Just a few New Guard Republicans squeezed in, and one called for the meeting to be moved to a larger room. George Klepper, the white attorney belonging to Lee's group and the longstanding chairman of these meetings, denied the request. The black Republicans dominated the meeting--in part by shouting down the white Republicans--and maintained their control of the local party.¹¹⁹⁴

Calling the Old Guard actions "disgraceful," the New Guard Republicans urged state Republican leaders to expel Lee's group from the state party and recognize them as the regular Republicans. But, Carroll Reece, a longtime ally of Lee and the party boss, refused their request. Lt. Lee, high in the councils of the state party by then, remembered that Reece and his associates saw him as a dependable ally who could "hold the district in line" in the face of opposition.¹¹⁹⁵ Lee's loyalty to Reece stemmed in part because Lee had formed a working relationship with him after Church and Martin left Memphis. At that time, Lee had felt like he was in the middle of "a political ocean without a life preserver."¹¹⁹⁶ Reece also

¹¹⁹⁴ Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 156-7; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 320-1; "Lt. Lee Responsible," *PS*.

¹¹⁹⁵ George W. Lee, interview by Aaron Boom, transcript, Memphis, 26 Apr. 1966, UMOH, p. 5-6.

¹¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

likely denied the request of the New Guard Republicans because he knew that they probably would back Eisenhower. He and Lee supported Senator Robert Taft, the other candidate vying for the presidential nomination, and Reece served as Taft's southern campaign manager.¹¹⁹⁷ Indeed, the New Guard Republicans went on to endorse Eisenhower.

The New Guard Republicans were not the only ones opposing Lee. Church disapproved of Lee's leadership of the local black Republicans and decided to take matters into his own hands in 1952 by returning to Memphis and offering himself as a candidate for Lee's position on the state Republican committee. Planning to run on the New Guard ticket, Church wanted to force Lee out of his leadership position and to regain control of the area's Republican Party.¹¹⁹⁸ Since leaving Memphis in 1940, Church had maintained ties to the local political scene to the point that a Shelby County Democratic official had accused two white Republican leaders of receiving orders by telephone from him.¹¹⁹⁹ Local black Republicans asked him for political advice, and Church claimed that he knew more about the local party than anyone else.¹²⁰⁰

Church also wanted to head the local Republican Party because of his desire for local Republicans to support Eisenhower for the presidency. He believed that the general was the strongest Republican candidate for civil rights, and he disagreed with Lee's endorsement of

¹¹⁹⁷ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 155-7.

¹¹⁹⁸ Though Church returned to Memphis on occasion, he had continued to operate out of Chicago and Washington D.C. He remained eligible to run because he continued to own a small piece of property in Memphis and considered the city his official residence. Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 321; John Spence, "Miss Church off to Washington for Talks about Ike's Drive in South," *PS*, 8 Aug. 1952, Roberta Church Papers, Box 4, Folder 3.

¹¹⁹⁹ "News of Bygone Days: 25 Years Ago, Oct. 9, 1948," *CA*, 9 Oct. 1973, Vertical File: 1948 Election, MSC.

¹²⁰⁰ Lymon, interview, 14.

Taft.¹²⁰¹ Taft, aligned with the party's conservative wing, was for states' rights and opposed the FEPC, New Deal, and some civil rights policies though he favored legislation against lynching and the abolition of the poll tax.¹²⁰² Though Eisenhower only made mild statements for civil rights during the campaign, displayed little knowledge of racial matters, and opposed the FEPC, he received the backing of liberal members of the party and appeared more racially progressive than Taft. He favored the desegregation of Washington D.C. and the elimination of segregation in areas under the authority of the federal government. He also supported the enactment of anti-lynching legislation and the abolition of the poll tax. In addition, he repudiated South Carolina newspaper statements characterizing him as for states rights and opposed to desegregation.¹²⁰³

Church wanted to lead the party for a number of other reasons as well. Following Walker's candidacy, Church had returned to Memphis in October 1951 and had expressed a desire to recruit more members, including young people, to the local Republican Party. Church believed that the black-and-tan faction had declined in strength under Lee's leadership; Raymond Lymon, who was active in the group under both Church and Lee, later verified Church's comment.¹²⁰⁴ George W. Lee, W. O. Speight, and A. N. Kittrelle, who all had worked with Church when he lived in Memphis, had been the only "big-name" Republicans since Church and J. B. Martin left in 1940.¹²⁰⁵ Always a steadfast Republican,

¹²⁰¹ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 321-2; Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 25-7; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 157.

¹²⁰² Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy*, 124-5, 132, 164-6.

¹²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 166-70, 180, 182-4; Robert F. Burk, *The Eisenhower Administration and Black Civil Rights* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 16.

¹²⁰⁴ Lymon, interview, 26-7; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 321, 355-6 n. 69.

¹²⁰⁵ Lee to Church, 10 Aug. 1951.

Church feared that black Democrats were dominating the local black political scene.¹²⁰⁶

Moreover, Church knew that some black Republicans, whom he had previously influenced to become active in the party, did not support his goal to formally re-join the local political scene. He thought that they were afraid of antagonizing Crump. Church felt that he could help end this atmosphere of fear by becoming the local party's leader.¹²⁰⁷

Church apparently ran into Crump only once after leaving Memphis. He spotted Crump at the Kentucky Derby in the late 1940s. When Church approached him, Crump's hands began to tremble. Invoking family honor, Church expressed his disapproval of the city changing the name of Church's Park to Beale Avenue Park because it was named for his father. "My father was a wonderful man, and he did a great deal for Memphis," he said. "And I certainly don't think it was proper and I don't appreciate the city changing the name of that park in view of . . . his contributions to the city." His father, after all, had helped financially rescue the city after a Yellow Fever epidemic had caused it to temporarily change to a district run by the state. Crump said he was unaware of the name change and would look into it, but no action was taken. When in Memphis in 1951, Church tried to schedule a meeting with Crump, but the boss refused to see him.¹²⁰⁸ Crump did not forget about Church, however. He kept a file on his national activities.¹²⁰⁹

Despite his exile from Memphis, Church always saw it as his home, and blacks there were never far from his mind. He remarked in 1951 that he had spent "many, many years . . .

¹²⁰⁶ See the sources in note 156.

¹²⁰⁷ Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 228-9.

¹²⁰⁸ Church and Church, interview no. 2, 10 Jul. 1973, 22-3.

¹²⁰⁹ See: Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 247, Folder: Bob Church, 1948, mfm.

unceasingly fighting in order that colored citizens of Memphis should share equally in participation and representation on both the local and national political scenes [T]his political activity for the benefit of others was sustained by enormous sums of money spent from my personal funds.”¹²¹⁰ He also wrote Charles Browning of the *Tri-State Defender*, a local black newspaper founded that year, “There are no finer Colored people anywhere in America, than are in Memphis. I know them. If you[,] and those associated with you, intend to publish a newspaper of character . . . fighting the many injustices against them, those Memphis Colored people will support your paper, but if you do not, they will let your paper drop like a hot brick.”¹²¹¹

In April 1952, Church traveled to Tennessee to recruit support for Eisenhower after meeting with his southern campaign manager in Washington. He attended the state Republican convention in Nashville and flaunted a gold lapel pin that simply said “Ike.”¹²¹² “Just his presence there seemed to change the convention when he walked in,” remembered Lymon, who observed that delegates, including white elected officials, deferred to him.¹²¹³ Despite this show of respect, Church was unsuccessful in a number of ways at the convention. He failed to convince the state convention to support Eisenhower. Largely out of loyalty to party boss Carroll Reece, Lt. Lee ensured that his delegation unanimously backed Taft even though Lee personally supported the FEPC and was skeptical of Taft’s conservative political philosophy. While Lee succeeded in becoming a delegate to the

¹²¹⁰ Church to Lee, 22 Jun. 1951.

¹²¹¹ Church subscribed to the *Tri-State Defender*. I have retained Church’s capitalization style for this quote. Church to Browning, 25 Oct. 1951, Church Family Papers, Box 9, Folder 44.

¹²¹² Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 147; Spence, “Miss Church off to Washington.”

¹²¹³ Lymon, interview, 7.

Republican National Convention, Church failed in his attempt. In addition, Church was dismayed when the state convention went on record against the FEPC despite the fact that one third of its participants were black.¹²¹⁴ All these matters made Church even more determined to regain local party control in Memphis. Lt. Lee remembered that Church “never forgave” him for standing by Reece and not endorsing Eisenhower.¹²¹⁵ In fact, another reason that Church wanted to regain leadership of the local Republican Party in Memphis was to make it more independent from Reece.¹²¹⁶

Lee dreaded the face off with Church, who had given him his political start and mentored him. The situation weighed on him psychologically. “I spent long hours in sorrow to think that I would have to come face-to-face against a man I had admired so many years and I had followed so long,” he recalled. “It was a tremendous problem, an emotion[al] problem.”¹²¹⁷ But, the battle between these two political lions never occurred. Shortly after attending the state convention, Church died unexpectedly in Memphis on April 17, 1952. At the time of his death, his allies were circulating a petition to qualify him as a candidate for the Republican state committee.¹²¹⁸ Perhaps the stress of facing off with Lee also had weighed on Church, or it was simply too much for him to witness the state of the black-and-tan organization that he had battled to form and maintain as a vehicle for civil rights. Church had a heart attack while talking on the phone with longtime Mayor of Beale Street Matthew

¹²¹⁴ Lee, interview, 26 Apr. 1966, 6-7; Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 321-2; Lee to Church, 12 Nov. 1951, Church Family Papers, Box 6, Folder 41.

¹²¹⁵ Lee, interview, 26 Apr. 1966, 7.

¹²¹⁶ Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 53.

¹²¹⁷ Lee, interview, 26 Apr. 1966, 7-8.

¹²¹⁸ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 157.

Thornton. He was telling Thornton that he thought Eisenhower could win and that Congress had a chance of passing civil rights legislation because some of Eisenhower's supporters were for civil rights.¹²¹⁹ In actuality, however, these supporters appeared more concerned about policy issues other than civil rights.¹²²⁰

Yet, Church was prescient: under Eisenhower's administration, the first civil rights legislation since Reconstruction became law. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 created the civil rights division of the Department of Justice and authorized the attorney general to seek court orders to enforce voting rights. It also created the Civil Rights Commission, an investigative body that conducted hearings on voting rights violations. Though limited in effect, the act led to stronger legislation by creating a legal framework for combating voting rights discrimination.¹²²¹ Within a decade, Congress would pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which enabled more than a majority of eligible southern blacks to register to vote and led to a dramatic increase in the number of black elected officials in the region. Church's hopes for greater black political participation would become a reality.

Roberta Church suspected that the strain of leaving Memphis in 1940 led to her father's death. Like other men of that time, Church kept his emotions to himself. Roberta recalled that he "never discussed" or complained "about difficult things like that" even though he suffered financially, professionally, and personally. Roberta thought his departure from Memphis "was a quite devastating experience for him" but observed that "he always

¹²¹⁹ Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 229.

¹²²⁰ Burk, *Eisenhower Administration*, 16.

¹²²¹ For a history and analysis of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, see: Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 140-249.

[had] presented a calm outward appearance, and he [had thrown] himself into activities . . . that kept him before the public.”¹²²²

Right after Church died, J. B. Martin came by to see Roberta and her aunt, Annette, in Chicago. Martin “was a big man, about six feet two, weight about 200 pounds . . . broad shoulders and so forth, very masculine,” Roberta recalled. “[H]e lost his composure and he wept.” Martin escorted Roberta and Annette to the funeral in Memphis and stood by them during it.¹²²³ The women did not ask Lee to serve as a pallbearer because they did not think Church would have wanted that.¹²²⁴ Instead, they chose Martin as both an active and honorary pallbearer. Church’s local political associates W. O. Speight, O. D. Braithwaite, and Bert Roddy were among the other active pallbearers, and A. Philip Randolph, Blair T. Hunt, Rev. S. A. Owen, and Matthew Thornton were among the honorary pallbearers.¹²²⁵ Like Martin, A. Philip Randolph was apparently very upset by Church’s sudden death.¹²²⁶ Shortly after Church died, the labor leader said that he had been one of his best friends and “a relentless fighter for the Brotherhood . . . [who] never failed to champion [its] cause . . . among his powerful and influential political and business friends.”¹²²⁷

After his death, Church received local and national tributes. The *Journal of Negro History* ran a lengthy obituary, national officials of the NAACP praised Church, and the *New*

¹²²² “I think he internalized a lot of his feelings,” Roberta said. She characterized him as “a very strong person with a very forceful personality and a very disciplined man.” Church and Church, interview no. 2, 10 Jul. 1973, 15-6.

¹²²³ Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 25.

¹²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹²²⁵ L. Alex Wilson, “Bob Church, GOP Head, Dead at 67,” *CD*, 26 Apr. 1951, p. 1.

¹²²⁶ Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 25.

¹²²⁷ Randolph to H. F. Patton, 27 May 1952, Church Family Papers, Box 9, Folder 4.

York Times called him one of the country's most influential black Republicans.¹²²⁸ The *Pittsburgh Courier* called him "the gentleman from Memphis" and asked, "[W]ho is there in the party to take his place?" In addition, local white and black newspapers ran flattering obituaries. "White people knew him and his family as a contradiction to the backward pictures of the Negro they had been conditioned to accept," the *Tri-State Defender* editorialized. "The Church family could rank with the best any group could offer in America. They were ambitious, energetic, aggressive and successful. They combined all the ingredients which Americans regard as great in folks."¹²²⁹

Calling Church "perhaps the most widely known Negro Republican in the country," the black *Memphis Review* observed, "Church had the philosophy that the Negro's best opportunity lay with the Republican [P]arty, and he was a Republican during good years and bad." Church "fought an unceasing battle with the [w]hite Republicans of Memphis to keep Negroes in the party machinery and to control the local offices," the paper further commented. "His strategy, wisdom and acumen were widely conceded to have kept him in control and to have made it possible for Negroes to obtain many of the benefits bestowed on them during Republican administrations."¹²³⁰ In the same vein, the *Chicago Defender*

¹²²⁸ Church had been a life member of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and a friend of its founder, the late Carter G. Woodson. Reprint from *Journal of Negro History* 38, no. 2 (Apr. 1953), Church Family Papers, Box 9, Folder 41; Church and Church, interview no. 2, 5 Jan. 1973, 16-8; Clarence Mitchell to family of Robert R. Church, 21 Apr. 1952, Church Family Papers, Box 14, Folder 20; "Robert R. Church," *NYT*, 10 Apr. 1952, p. 15.

¹²²⁹ *Tri-State Defender* (hereafter *TSD*), 26 Apr. 1952, reprinted in Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 295. Also see: p. 293-96 and Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 35-6.

¹²³⁰ The *Memphis Review* also said, "Church was on intimate terms with the white elite of New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. He perhaps was more widely known among white men than among Negroes." "Robert R. Church: The Great Republican Died In Memphis Where He Gained Fame, *Memphis Review*, 19 Apr. 1952, p. 1, copy in Church Family Papers, Box 10, Folder 9.

remarked that Church had seen the shortcomings of the Republican Party and had courageously and astutely pressed it to embrace civil rights.¹²³¹

After Church died, Theodore E. Brown of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, who served as an honorary pallbearer, wrote Roberta that “the task of hastening the obtaining of full civil rights for the American Negro . . . happily brought me together with your father” and that he had worked closely with him in the fight for a permanent FEPC. They both had agreed that “nothing was more important to the welfare of the country or the democratic process than obtaining for the American colored people the status of first class citizenship.” He called Church a “tireless worker” who “did much to hasten the day when a strong FEPC statute will be the law of our land.”¹²³² Indeed, if Church had lived a dozen more years, he would have seen his objectives realized with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which banned discrimination concerning “race, color, religion, sex, or national origin” by labor unions, employers, and employment agencies and established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission for enforcement purposes.¹²³³

Church’s funeral procession went by his former Memphis residence on the way to his burial at Elmwood Cemetery. Within a few years, however, the house would be no more. The city selected the house ostensibly to test firefighting equipment and burned it to the ground.¹²³⁴ The *Tri-State Defender* called the action an “act of infamy.”¹²³⁵ “To me it was

¹²³¹ Topping, *Lincoln’s Lost Legacy*, 170.

¹²³² Brown to Church, 15 May 1952, Church Family Papers, Box 14, Folder 3.

¹²³³ Quoted in Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 263.

¹²³⁴ Church and Church, interview no. 2, 10 Jul. 1973, 13-4; Lymon, interview, 16-9.

¹²³⁵ Church and Church, interview no. 2, 10 Jul. 1973, 13.

almost a lynching of the Negroes of Memphis,” said Raymond Lynom, when interviewed some thirty years later.¹²³⁶ The act “sticks in the craws [of] a lot of Negroes today,” he said.¹²³⁷ Roberta Church called the burning a “psychological attempt to . . . intimidate the black population.”¹²³⁸

To carry on her father’s torch, Roberta made a bid for the Republican State Executive Committee after his friends asked her to do so in his place.¹²³⁹ She ran as a New Guard Republican with three white candidates. She and Lt. Lee were the only two black candidates running for the committee, and she implied that he had turned against blacks in backing Taft.¹²⁴⁰ In making their appeal, the four New Guard Republicans billed their slate as the “Eisenhower Ticket.” They called on Memphians to vote for them in order to forward a two-party system in the South and protest “the corrupt and socialistic taints of the present Democratic Party.” Further invoking their anti-communist appeal, they invited citizens to “Join the New American Crusade” in supporting them.¹²⁴¹ Roberta appeared in the first-ever integrated television broadcast in Memphis as well as in rallies and photograph sessions with members of her party faction.¹²⁴² While the New Guard Republicans certainly had elements of lily whitism, they also displayed a degree of racial progressiveness in allowing Roberta to

¹²³⁶ Lymon, interview, 16.

¹²³⁷ Ibid., 17.

¹²³⁸ Ibid., 18. (Roberta Church was present at the interview of Lymon.)

¹²³⁹ Church to Chauncey McCormick, 5 Oct. 1953, Roberta Church Papers, Box 2, Folder 7.

¹²⁴⁰ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 158.

¹²⁴¹ Fitzhugh-Wellford Coalition, “Vote the Eisenhower Ticket” flyer for the August 7, 1952, Republican primary election, Roberta Church Papers, Box 2, Folder 2.

¹²⁴² Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 28; Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 323.

join their faction and carrying out integrated campaign activities. At the time, the local white Democrats continued to exclude blacks from their party operations.

During the campaign, Roberta, who was thirty-seven, discussed her family's past contributions to the city and expressed a desire to continue her father's work for civil rights. At rallies, black lawyers from out of town spoke on her behalf and praised her father for his courage and his efforts to liberalize the party. The local branch of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters campaigned for her in accordance with the wishes of A. Philip Randolph.¹²⁴³ When the election came, Roberta won one of the two spots for state committeewoman, and Lee was reelected to one of two spots as state committeeman. The only successful New Guard Republican candidate in the primary, Roberta became the first black woman elected to the committee.¹²⁴⁴ She believed that blacks and whites voted for her as a tribute to her father but recognized that not everyone supported her. During the campaign, for instance, she received an anonymous letter saying that her father would have been greatly distressed by her association with the New Guard faction.¹²⁴⁵

During the presidential election season, Roberta Church supported Eisenhower, undoubtedly a major reason she aligned with the New Guard wing.¹²⁴⁶ Roberta flew to Denver and Washington D.C. to confer with his campaign officials, and the *Memphis Press-*

¹²⁴³ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 158; "A Tribute and Salute to Miss Church," *TSD*, n.d., Roberta Church Papers, Box 4, Folder 3; Randolph to Patton, 27 May 1952; Randolph to Church, 19 Aug. 1952, Church Family Papers, Box 14, Folder 2; H. F. Patton to Church, 2 Jul. 1952, Church Family Papers, Box 14, Folder 2.

¹²⁴⁴ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 324.

¹²⁴⁵ It must not have been widely or publicly known that Robert Church, Jr., had planned to run on the New Guard ticket. Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 29.

¹²⁴⁶ Her aunt, Annette Church, also carried on the family's Republican tradition in serving as a volunteer at the general's headquarters in Chicago. Church to Miller, 4 Sept. 1961.

Scimitar published a photo of Eisenhower conversing with her.¹²⁴⁷ After Eisenhower won, he appointed Roberta as the Minority Groups Consultant for the Department of Labor, so she resigned her state committee position. She did not seek the post but was selected as a tribute to her father. “[T]he people at the White House told me I had enough endorsements to carry me to heaven,” she remembered.¹²⁴⁸ One of a select group of women appointed by Eisenhower, she was responsible for promoting equal employment in the public and private sectors as well as enforcing the federal government’s fair employment policy.¹²⁴⁹ Because of her prominence as a black, female political appointee and as the daughter of Bob Church, she made speeches around the country and became nationally recognized.¹²⁵⁰ Roberta’s fans included W. C. Handy. The famed blues musician kept up with her through the newspapers even though he was blind.¹²⁵¹

Along with Roberta Church, Lt. Lee fell into the good graces of Eisenhower. Because of his association with Carroll Reece, the nationally prominent Tennessee Republican, Lee assumed a prestigious role at the Republican National Convention. He led the delegates in the reciting of the Pledge of Allegiance and gave the speech seconding the

¹²⁴⁷ Spence, “Miss Church off to Washington;” Church and Church, *Robert R. Churches*, 232.

¹²⁴⁸ Church and Church, interview no. 3, 10 Jul. 1973, 31.

¹²⁴⁹ Church to McCormick, 5 Oct. 1953; Pamela Palmer, ed., *The Robert R. Church Family of Memphis: Guide to the Papers with Selected Facsimiles of Documents and Photographs* (Memphis: Memphis State Univ. Press, 1978), 12.

¹²⁵⁰ For instance, Roberta Church was one of fifty black women named to *Who’s Who of American Women*. Toko Schalk Johnson, “Partial List of Who’s Who of American Women,” *PC*, 3 Jan. 1959, Roberta Church Papers, Box 4, Folder 2. For examples of other news coverage, see: Stanley Roberts, “Roberta Church Follows in Footsteps of Father,” *PC*, 25 Jul. 1953; William Gordon, “Miss Church, Minority Consultant Studies Employment,” *Atlanta Daily World*, 4 May 1954; “People’s Similarities More Important than Differences, NCC [North Carolina College] Audience Told,” *Durham Morning Herald*, 19 Feb. 1956. Copies of these and related articles are in: Roberta Church Papers, Box 4, Folder 3.

¹²⁵¹ Handy to Church, 19 Dec. 1956, p. 2.

nomination of Taft for the presidency, receiving much acclaim for the latter.¹²⁵² After Eisenhower became the Republican nominee, Lee conferred with him and promised his utmost support. “Lee returned triumphant to Beale Street,” as his biographer said.¹²⁵³ Six hundred blacks gathered at Booker T. Washington Stadium to give him a watch and pronounce a George W. Lee Day in the city.¹²⁵⁴

Billing Eisenhower as the best candidate for civil rights, Lee developed campaign literature and mobilized his Lincoln League, placing 150 paid workers in precincts. He invoked history by condemning the Democratic Party for “fathering Jim Crow,” and he pointed out that the Democratic vice presidential candidate, John Sparkman of Alabama, had voted against civil rights legislation twenty-three times.¹²⁵⁵ Presidential candidate Thomas Dewey and a Republican National Committee official also condemned Sparkman for his opposition to civil rights though their statements might have been largely a strategic move for black votes.¹²⁵⁶ Lee accused Truman of insincerity in his civil rights efforts, pointing out the president’s words to an Alabama Democrat that he only pursued his civil rights agenda to win votes.¹²⁵⁷ When Eisenhower made a campaign stop in Memphis, he rode down Beale and spotted Lee in front of his Atlanta Life Insurance office. The candidate stopped his limousine, and they shook hands and talked. Passersby looked on in awe.¹²⁵⁸

¹²⁵² Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 158-61; Lee, interview, 17 Apr. 1966, 43-5.

¹²⁵³ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 161.

¹²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵⁶ Topping, *Lincoln’s Lost Legacy*, 178, 180-2, 186.

¹²⁵⁷ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 162; Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 325-6.

¹²⁵⁸ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 163.

The New Guard and Old Guard Republicans joined together in the local campaign organization for Eisenhower but only displayed a façade of unity. When Eisenhower visited Memphis, white Republicans did not put a single black on the reception committee. As a result, Lee successfully persuaded the State Republican Chairman to place two blacks, including Ben Hooks, on the committee. Black Democrats also faced tensions with white Democrats during the election season. Black Democrats H. T. Lockard, J. E. Walker, and James T. Walker--the labor activist and vice president of the black civic club council--refused to sit on the platform with white Democrats at a campaign event because of the segregated seating.¹²⁵⁹

When election day arrived, 54 percent of white Memphians supported Eisenhower, and 80 percent of blacks backed the Democratic presidential candidate, Adlai Stevenson, even though he did not champion civil rights.¹²⁶⁰ In fact, neither candidate came close to Truman in promoting civil rights. With many white southerners voting Republican for the first time, enough supported Eisenhower to lead to his victory in Tennessee and three other southern states in his successful campaign. Tennessee had not gone for a Republican presidential candidate since 1928, the last time a Republican won the presidency. Blacks were the only major group nationally that did not shift toward the Republican column.¹²⁶¹ They supported the Democrats largely because of their civil rights and social welfare actions.

¹²⁵⁹ Ibid., 162-3; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 325-6. Lockard, who was chairman of the black Democratic club in 1952, called it a "vest-pocket organization" in the early 1950s. The group was now called the Shelby County Democratic Club. Lockard, interview, 19 Jul. 2004.

¹²⁶⁰ Jalenak, "Beale Street," 143.

¹²⁶¹ Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy*, 191.

Republicans, with their turn away from civil rights, opposition to New Deal programs, and emphasis on big business, held little appeal for most black voters.¹²⁶²

Because white Memphians gave more votes than blacks to Eisenhower, the New Guard Republicans assumed control of patronage. But, at the insistence of Lee, Reece ensured that black Republicans, who had traditionally dispensed it, regained control of patronage the next year. Their political power continued to result in improved opportunities for blacks. Raymond Lymon, the active member of the Lincoln League, became the first black deputy marshal in Tennessee since the nineteenth century, and Evelyn C. Stuart, president of the Lincoln League of Republican Women, became the first black ever to serve on the Shelby County Primary Board.¹²⁶³

Two years after Eisenhower was elected, three black candidates, including Benjamin Hooks, ran on the Republican ticket for state legislature. They qualified in the primary for the general election. Lt. Lee and J. E. Walker co-chaired another nonpartisan registration effort then. The candidates each polled between seventy-six hundred and eight thousand votes, but they all lost.¹²⁶⁴ Though black Memphians did not win public office in the 1950s, they gained local political appointments, which was common in southern communities where blacks exerted political influence.¹²⁶⁵ Mayor Overton appointed Dr. B. F. McCleave to chair the Negro Hospital Advisory Committee in 1952, and Mayor Tobey appointed black real

¹²⁶² Ibid., 206.

¹²⁶³ Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 328; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 163-4.

¹²⁶⁴ One black candidate, T. L. Spencer, received only nine hundred fewer votes than the white Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate. Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 328-9.

¹²⁶⁵ Bartley, *New South*, 175; Martin, "Relative Political Status of the Negro," 29-30.

estate agent Edward R. Kirk to the Mayor's Urban Rehabilitation Study Committee in 1953.¹²⁶⁶

Section VI

With the election of Eisenhower, Crump further declined in power. He no longer had control over patronage or as much influence on the national scene. Furthermore, his business associates had supported Eisenhower whereas he had endorsed Stevenson. Crump experienced a double blow to his credibility in that he exercised less influence over others and backed a losing candidate.¹²⁶⁷ He told the press that he felt like a “golf ball in tall grass.”¹²⁶⁸ In 1952, he did meet with success in endorsing Frank Clement for governor, who defeated Gordon Browning. Still, Clement’s campaign showed that Crump’s power had dissipated. At black rallies, Clement often did not call attention to Crump’s endorsement and instead emphasized that he would be a candidate for all citizens.¹²⁶⁹ When Kefauver ran for re-election two years later, white reformers, along with blacks, supported him through running an integrated campaign. Crump largely ignored the effort.¹²⁷⁰ By then, his heart was failing, and he died at age eighty in October 1954.

Thousands of Memphians, young and old, black and white, famous and ordinary, friend and foe, mourned Crump’s passing. About ten thousand passed by his bronze casket,

¹²⁶⁶ On the Kirk appointment, see: Wayne Dowdy, “‘Something for the Colored People’: Memphis Mayor Frank Tobey and the East Olive Bombing,” *WTHSP* 51 (1997): 108-15.

¹²⁶⁷ Coe, interview, 37-8; Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 144.

¹²⁶⁸ Coe, interview, 37.

¹²⁶⁹ Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 324.

¹²⁷⁰ Coe, interview, 38-9. I did not see any evidence in the Crump papers to refute Coe’s assertion.

and the Shelby County Courthouse lowered its flag to half-mast.¹²⁷¹ Past and present Tennessee governors and local politicians were among those who attended Crump's funeral, the largest in the memory of Memphians. Seven black Cadillacs transported his white friends and three black Cadillacs transported his black friends and servants in the 145-car procession from the funeral to Elmwood Cemetery, the same place where Church was buried.¹²⁷² In the days that followed, thousands more passed by Crump's grave.¹²⁷³ "It is almost impossible for residents of Memphis and Shelby County to believe E. H. Crump is dead," editorialized the *Collierville Herald*. "[C]itizens came to see that while Mr. Crump definitely was 'the boss' he loved Memphis and Shelby County and instigated many progressive projects that aided the standing of both the city and the county." With no political heir to take Crump's place, the paper said, "The death of Mr. Crump ends a colorful era of politics that possibly will never be duplicated."¹²⁷⁴ But, not everyone was glowing in praise. "Crump bribed Memphis with good government at low cost and Memphis has not functioned as a real democracy for half a century," one observer said.¹²⁷⁵

Crump died seeing not only his political power severely weakened but also his views of race relations increasingly challenged. In Baton Rouge, Louisiana, blacks conducted the

¹²⁷¹ His casket lay in state in the Crump family home. "Thousands Pass Bier of Crump," 18 Oct. 1954, *Nashville Tennessean*, copy in Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 308, Folder: Obituaries, mfm, 000463; Clark Porteous, "Throngs Pay Their Last Respects to the Memory of E. H. Crump," *PS*, 19 Oct. 1954, copy in Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 308, Folder: Obituaries, mfm, 000481.

¹²⁷² Porteous, "Throngs Pay Their Last Respects."

¹²⁷³ James Gunter, "Throng Flows All Day Long around Grave of E. H. Crump, CA, 20 Oct. 1954, copy in Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 308, Folder: Obituaries, mfm, 000397.

¹²⁷⁴ "Mr. E. H. Crump," *Collierville Herald*, 21 Oct. 1954, Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 308, Folder: Obituaries, mfm, 000387.

¹²⁷⁵ "'Boss' Crump, Who Cleaned Up Memphis But Became 'Benevolent' Dictator, Dies," unidentified newspaper clipping, Oct. 1954, copy in Crump Papers, Series IV, Box 309, Folder: Statements, mfm, 000608.

first successful bus boycott of the decade in 1953, foreshadowing the Montgomery Bus Boycott a few years later, which catapulted Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to national leadership and sparked a mass civil rights movement across the South. In May 1954, the Supreme Court issued its *Brown versus Board of Education* ruling, declaring segregated schools unconstitutional. Southern black voter registration numbers rose to 26 percent by 1956, and black political efforts increasingly intersected with direct and legal action.¹²⁷⁶ Rosa Parks, for instance, had pressed for voting rights and served as secretary of Montgomery's NAACP chapter as well as the city's branch of the Progressive Democratic Association, the organization of Alabama black Democrats. Her history of activism served to prepare her for her challenge to the bus system in 1955.¹²⁷⁷

Though Robert Church, Jr., did not live to see *Brown*, his half-sister Mary Church Terrell did. Despite her old age, she engaged in civil rights activism in the 1950s, continuing her lifelong quest against the Jim Crow system. She became a plaintiff in a successful lawsuit to integrate eating facilities in Washington D.C. in 1950, and she participated in pickets, boycotts, and sit-ins protesting segregation. On at least one occasion, she stood at the head of a picket line with her cane in hand.¹²⁷⁸ Terrell died at age ninety in 1954, two months after the *Brown* decision.

The years from 1946 to 1954 had been a momentous and democratizing time in Memphis and in the South. As more and more blacks across the South secured the right to vote after the *Smith* decision, they ran for office and otherwise used politics as a vessel for

¹²⁷⁶ Matthews and Prothro, *Negroes and the New Southern Politics*, 18.

¹²⁷⁷ Douglas Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* (New York: Viking, 2000), 54, 70.

¹²⁷⁸ The Supreme Court upheld the ruling on the unconstitutionality of restaurant segregation on June 8, 1953, in *District of Columbia v. John R. Thompson Co., Inc.* Roberta Church and Ronald Walter, "Mary Church Terrell (1963-1954)," n.d., <http://www.tnstate.edu/library/digital/terrell.htm> [accessed 23 Jun. 2008].

civil rights. They succeeded in winning offices, receiving political appointments, and holding the balance of power in elections. These developments not only helped break the stranglehold of conservative white Democrats in the region but also contributed to the later mass-based civil rights movement started in Montgomery. In Memphis, blacks joined forces with liberal whites to create a more democratic system of their own as they broke the one-man rule of Edward H. Crump. The years of sustained black political mobilization, combined with the activism of unionists and the dedication of white reformers, resulted in Crump's defeat.

Though Crump's candidates continued to win elections until his death, the 1948 election led to the appointment of black police officers, the outlawing of the poll tax, and election reforms to combat voter fraud and manipulation. White politicians were elected and appointed who were less segregationist than their predecessors, and an independent white leadership group took hold. Moreover, the election resulted in an atmosphere conducive to Walker's bid for public office and Church's return to Memphis. Though the New Guard Republicans had a mixed record when it came to supporting black political involvement, they and the Old Guard Republicans made a two-party system more viable in the region. All in all, these reforms and changes made the city and the South more democratic and created an environment riper for civil rights gains.

When Walker ran in 1951, his campaign served as a bridge between long-time black political leaders in Memphis and new ones. Robert R. Church's political associates of his Memphis days--Lt. Lee, Dr. Speight, and Dr. Kittrelle--all supported Walker. The campaign also involved young lawyers Benjamin Hooks and H. T. Lockard. All along, Church and his political allies had ultimately sought the dismantling of the Jim Crow system. Hooks,

Lockard, and others would take advantage of the decision to further press for freedom and equality. Hooks and Lockard would go on to make the local NAACP branch a more powerful force and stand in the forefront of the legal, political, and civil rights changes to come. They would win public office themselves. These young activists and their counterparts would be the heirs to Church and his associates as well as all the other black Memphians who had challenged Crump and the Jim Crow system, sought a better life for themselves and their children, and battled to make American democracy a reality.

Conclusion

For black Memphians, the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling was a call to action. Local civil rights activist Maxine Smith later said about *Brown*, “It was like the Emancipation Proclamation to us. It was just that important.”¹²⁷⁹ She was part of a new generation of leaders, including her husband Vasco Smith, Jesse Turner, Sr., A. W. Willis, Jr., and Russell and Laurie Sugarmon, who joined Benjamin Hooks and H. T. Lockard in giving new life to the black freedom struggle in Memphis. With no appointed successor to Crump, a leadership vacuum existed in the city, and they took advantage of this environment to pursue political power and civil rights.¹²⁸⁰ They joined the Bluff City and Shelby County Council of Civic Clubs and the local NAACP branch, which rose in membership from a low of 818 in 1954 to 2,418 in May 1959.¹²⁸¹ These leaders filed lawsuits for the desegregation of Memphis State College, the public library system, the city bus service, and other accommodations, and they engaged in sustained political mobilization. Black voter registration increased to 57,109 blacks in 1959--more than eight times the number in 1951.¹²⁸²

¹²⁷⁹ Shirley Downing, “Desegregation Ruling’s Impact Called Monumental,” *CA*, May 15, 1994, p. B1.

¹²⁸⁰ Laurie Sugarmon was later known as Miriam DeCosta-Willis. On this group of leaders, see: Sherry L. Hoppe and Bruce W. Speck, *Maxine Smith’s Unwilling Pupils: Lessons Learned in Memphis’s Civil Rights Classroom* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2007); Elizabeth Gritter, “Local Leaders and Community Soldiers: The Memphis Desegregation Movement, 1955-1961” (honors senior thesis, American Univ., 2001).

¹²⁸¹ Current to Lockard, 10 Feb. 1955; “Meeting [Minutes] of the Executive Board, Memphis Branch NAACP,” Memphis NAACP Branch, 5 May 1959, Maxine Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 2, MSC.

¹²⁸² “Heavy Voting May Set Record,” *PS*, 20 Aug. 1959, p. 1. For a more detailed look at the developments in this paragraph, see: Elizabeth Gritter, “‘Women Did Everything Except Run’: Black Women’s Participation in the 1959 Volunteer Ticket Campaign in Memphis, Tennessee,” in *Entering the Fray: Gender, Politics, and*

In the 1959 election, four black men, including Sugarmon and Hooks, made bids for public office as a unity slate called the “Volunteer Ticket.” Their effort galvanized the black freedom struggle in Memphis in a way reminiscent of the 1916 Lincoln League campaign. Blacks represented one-third of the vote. Because each Volunteer Ticket candidate faced three or more white opponents, a unified black vote and split white vote could result in victory. The Volunteer organization formed as the campaign structure, and it included a ward and precinct network that included members of the Shelby County Democratic Club and the Lincoln League. Maxine Smith and other women made up the majority of the grassroots workers supporting the candidates. More than a political campaign, the endeavor was a milestone in the freedom struggle of black Memphians and generated widespread interest. Martin Luther King, Jr., made an appearance on behalf of the Volunteer Ticket as did Little Rock civil rights leader Daisy Bates. In addition to extensive local press coverage, the campaign received national media attention, including from the *New York Times*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, and *Washington Post*. When election day arrived, a record number of blacks and whites cast ballots.¹²⁸³

Though the Volunteer Ticket candidates lost, Russell Sugarmon said, “We won everything but the election.”¹²⁸⁴ “It was a democratic activity. There were more people expressing themselves than ever. What we won was a politicized group who didn’t want to

Culture in the New South, eds. Jonathan D. Wells and Sheila R. Phipps (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2010), 140-1.

¹²⁸³ Gritter, ““Women Did Everything Except Run;” Elizabeth Gritter, ““This Is a Crusade for Freedom’: The Volunteer Ticket Campaign in the 1959 City Election in Memphis, Tennessee” (master’s thesis, Univ. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2005); Kousser, *Colorblind Injustice*, 138-69; Jalenak, “Beale Street;” Silver and Moeser, *Separate City*, 92-7; William E. Wright, *Memphis Politics: A Study in Racial Bloc Voting*, Eagleton Institute Cases in Practical Politics, no. 27 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962).

¹²⁸⁴ L. F. Palmer, Jr., “We Won Everything But the Election,” *TSD*, 29 Aug. 1959, p. 9.

stop,” he later said.¹²⁸⁵ After the election, Sugarmon and other leaders made the Volunteer organization permanent by restructuring the Shelby County Democratic Club into a solid, precinct-based organization.¹²⁸⁶ Along with the NAACP branch, it became one of the two most powerful civil rights organizations in Memphis. Like Church’s Lincoln League, the Democratic club increased political opportunities for blacks as well as mobilized black support for black candidates and white office seekers willing to meet the organization’s demands. As a result, blacks received more political appointments and whites were elected who took civil rights actions.¹²⁸⁷ In 1960, Jesse Turner, Sr., won a spot on the Shelby County Democratic Executive Committee, cracking white control of the party organization and meriting *New York Times* coverage.¹²⁸⁸ Like Church and his group, Sugarmon and his associates expanded their organization beyond Memphis, and their efforts served as a model for blacks elsewhere. They formed the Tennessee Voters Council in 1962, which mobilized blacks statewide in senatorial, gubernatorial, and presidential races.

College students conducted the first sit-ins in March 1960, just seven months after the 1959 election and eight months after Greensboro, North Carolina, students started the wave of sit-ins across the South. “It was like somebody threw a light on material that had been soaked with some kind of inflammable matter,” Russell Sugarmon remembered about the Memphis sit-ins. “It really spread like mad.”¹²⁸⁹ The students’ actions sparked a twenty-month direct-action campaign. Black Memphians from all walks of life conducted marches, boycotts, sit-ins, and

¹²⁸⁵ Sugarmon, interview by author, transcript, Memphis, 13 Oct. 2000, SOHP, p. 13-4.

¹²⁸⁶ Ibid., 14; Sugarmon, interview by author, Memphis, 25 Jun. 2004, typed notes in author’s possession.

¹²⁸⁷ Gritter, ““Women Did Everything Except Run,”” 150-1.

¹²⁸⁸ “Memphis Democrats Elect Negro,” *NYT*, 6 Aug. 1960, p. 8.

¹²⁸⁹ Sugarmon, interview, 2000, 7.

pickets in order to end segregation and employment discrimination. The ward and precinct political organization provided the structure for communication and mobilization of the freedom movement, and political and direct-action leaders and activists overlapped. Smith coordinated the protests through the office of the NAACP chapter, which became the largest in the South with fifty-two hundred members in May 1960. The protests led to the desegregation of public and private facilities and better employment opportunities for blacks. Elementary schools underwent token integration in 1961. By 1965, all legal barriers to integration were removed in the city.¹²⁹⁰

Black electoral mobilization in Memphis peaked in influence in 1964, leading to a sea change in local and state politics and having an impact on the national political scene. That year, the Democratic Party spearheaded the successful passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 while the Republican Party became more conservative. By this time, George W. Lee's Lincoln League had declined in power and had come to represent an older generation of black Memphians. At the Republican National Convention that year, he was not even seated as the New Guard Republicans had become the most influential Republican group in Memphis. As the Grand Old Party further turned toward the states rights' stance of its presidential candidate, Barry Goldwater, in 1964, more than 99 percent of black Memphians voted for Democrats in state and national elections while white Memphians voted more than two-to-one for Goldwater and the Republican candidate for Congress. The votes of black Memphians provided the balance of power to force out the incumbent congressman in favor of the Democratic candidate supportive of integration and to elect an all-Democratic delegation to the state legislature,

¹²⁹⁰ Gritter, "'Women Did Everything Except Run,'" 151; Gritter, "'This Is a Crusade,'" 63; Gritter, "Local Leaders," 41-2, 47-74; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 226, 232-50; Lucille Black to Maxine Smith, 19 May 1960, Papers of the NAACP, Group III, Box C186, Folder: Memphis NAACP 1960; Hoppe and Speck, *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils*; Benjamin Muse, *Memphis* (Atlanta: Southern Regional Council, 1964), 7-8, 12.

including A. W. Willis, Jr., the first black elected to the body in the twentieth century. H. T. Lockard won a seat on the Shelby County Court, the forerunner of the County Commission, in the first successful black bid for local office in more than fifty years.¹²⁹¹ “Shelby County political traditions, which once seemed as indestructible as the pyramids, are beginning to teeter in the shockwave of [the] awesome Negro vote,” reported the *Commercial Appeal*.¹²⁹² In addition, the Tennessee Voters Council provided the structure for the black vote statewide to be the decisive factor in the election of Democrats in the presidential and senatorial races.¹²⁹³ President Lyndon B. Johnson and his Democratic Congress would go on to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965. That same year, Tennessee Governor Frank Clement appointed Benjamin Hooks as a Shelby County Criminal Court judge, the highest judicial post ever achieved by a black in the state.¹²⁹⁴ In 1966, Hooks kept his seat in a countywide election.

Yet, the civil rights, political, and economic gains for black Memphians could not erase the limits of these victories and the persistence of employment discrimination. The *New York Times* reported in April 1964 that Memphis had “made more progress toward desegregation with less strife than any other major city in the Deep South,” a remarkable achievement especially given that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was not passed until that summer.¹²⁹⁵ The NAACP chapter president, Jesse Turner, remarked that same year, however, that most of the

¹²⁹¹ Gritter, ““Women Did Everything Except Run,”” 151; Gritter, ““This Is a Crusade,”” 66-7; Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 149; Jennie M. Betts, interview by author, tape recording, Memphis, 28 Jun. 2004, SOHP.

¹²⁹² William Thomas, “Moment of History Lies Buried Beneath Ballots,” *CA*, 8 Nov. 1964, Vertical File: Memphis-Elections, 1964, MSC.

¹²⁹³ “Analysis of the Negro Votes in Shelby County Received by Democratic Nominees, November 3, 1964,” [1964], Sugarmon Papers, Box 1, Folder 7.

¹²⁹⁴ “Clement Names Negro Attorney to New Court,” *CA*, 12 May 1965, Vertical File: Benjamin L. Hooks, MSC.

¹²⁹⁵ John Herbers, “Integration Gains in Memphis; Biracial Leadership Takes Hold,” *NYT*, 5 Apr. 1964, Schomburg Clipping Files, University of the District of Columbia, Washington D.C.

civil rights gains in the city had been token and halfhearted. The branch worked through a combination of litigation, political and direct action, negotiation, and letter writing to eradicate remaining discriminatory practices and press for more economic opportunities for blacks. Taking advantage of the Civil Rights Act's Title VII provision, which banned racial discrimination by employers and unions, the chapter, along with black unionists, filed complaints to the federal government. The mid-1960s also saw increased black labor activism as well as anti-poverty organizing.¹²⁹⁶ Blacks achieved some economic gains. For instance, more entered customary white jobs and supervisory positions than ever before.¹²⁹⁷ But, Maxine Smith observed, "[C]overt resistance in the form of tokenism and appeasement has in many instances thwarted our [employment] efforts."¹²⁹⁸

Black political achievements continued to occur in the mid-1960s, but a new run-off law proved to be restrictive. Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., and other black Memphians won public office. In 1967, A. W. Willis, Jr., became the first black in the South to run for mayor in a major city though he was unsuccessful. That year, the NAACP chapter and Shelby County Democratic Club supported the change of city government to a mayor-council system in which seven of the council seats were district positions and six were at-large seats. Two blacks were elected to the city council from majority black districts, and one was elected from a nearly majority black district. Despite black opposition, however, Memphis voters passed a run-off

¹²⁹⁶ Gritter, "This Is a Crusade," 67-8; Maxine A. Smith, "Memphis Branch NAACP Annual Report 1964," 23 Dec. 1964, Papers of the NAACP, Group III, Box C146, Folder: Memphis, TN, branch 1936-65, MD, p. 8-9. On the NAACP's employment efforts, see, for instance: Maxine A. Smith, "Annual Report Memphis Branch NAACP 1965," 23 Dec. 1965, p. 11-3 and Maxine A. Smith, "Memphis Branch NAACP Annual Report 1967," [1967], p. 4-8; both documents are located in: Papers of the NAACP, Group IV, Box C30, Folder: Memphis Branch 1966-69, MD. On the efforts of black laborites and anti-poverty activists, see Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 258-75. For a broader study, see: Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: the Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2006).

¹²⁹⁷ Muse, *Memphis*, 36-42.

¹²⁹⁸ Smith, "Memphis Branch NAACP Annual Report 1967," 1.

law in 1967 that required that candidates for city offices receive the majority of the vote. It precluded blacks from holding many of these positions because not enough whites, who continued to make up most of the population, were willing to vote for blacks.¹²⁹⁹

The limits to the civil rights victories of black Memphians were epitomized by the sanitation strike of 1968. Martin Luther King, Jr., came to the city to support sanitation workers protesting poor working conditions, low pay, and racist supervisors. Their strike mobilized black Memphians who saw in them “a reflection of their own rage about ongoing racial injustice and their own quest for liberation.”¹³⁰⁰ When King was shot to death on April 4, 1968, Memphis burst into riots that spread throughout the country. Mayor Henry Loeb, who had been elected with hardly any black support, reached a settlement with the strikers only after King’s murder. Russell Sugarmon later said that the murder was like a “heart attack” for the black community and Democratic club efforts suffered as a result.¹³⁰¹

Yet, the next year, the Memphis NAACP achieved a major victory in the battle for equality in the classroom. To protest the slow pace of school integration, Maxine Smith and Laurie Sugarmon led the Black Monday movement in 1969. In a controversial move, black students stayed home from school on Mondays. Because school funding was based on average daily attendance, these actions proved quite effective, resulting in the seating of black school board representatives, black administrators, and eventually the first black superintendent. After her supporters persuaded her to run, Smith became the first black female elected to a city

¹²⁹⁹ Jonathan I. Wax, “Program of Progress: The Recent Change in the Form of Government in Memphis, Part 1,” *WTHSP* 23 (1969): 81-109; Jonathan I. Wax, “Program of Progress: The Recent Change in the Form of Government in Memphis Part 2,” *WTHSP* 24 (1970): 74-96; Kousser, *Colorblind Injustice*, 173-80; Marcus D. Pohlmann and Michael P. Kirby, *Racial Politics at the Crossroads* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1996), 111-5.

¹³⁰⁰ Green, “Battling the Plantation Mentality,” 395.

¹³⁰¹ Sugarmon, interview, 25 Jun. 2004.

position when she won a school board seat in 1971. She served in that position until retiring in 1995 and chaired the board for a period.¹³⁰²

Despite civil rights gains, black and white Memphians saw the continuation of economic and social divisions over the next few decades. Though the Black Monday movement was successful, many white Memphians responded to the advent of busing in the 1970s by fleeing to the suburbs and forming segregated academies. In 2010, Memphis public schools remained overwhelmingly black, and county schools continued to be predominately white. Blacks made up a majority of the city population, and whites made up a majority of the county population. Blacks entered white-collar professions and graduated from high school and college in increasing numbers, but they remained both in poverty and affected by crime in numbers disproportionate to their population in the early twenty-first century. In 2006, the FBI reported that the city was the metropolitan area with the highest violent crime rate in the United States.¹³⁰³

Since the 1970s, black Memphians have continued to mobilize politically, but they also have continued to face obstacles. The Harold Ford family became a dominant force in local black politics as its members won public office. Only two blacks, however, had won positions citywide by 1991 because of the run-off measure and ongoing racial tensions. It took the repeal of the run-off law that year for the city's first black mayor, Willie Herenton, to be elected. Receiving few white votes, he won with the help of Maxine Smith and other longtime activists. Herenton was reelected to a record fifth term in 2007, but the race was compared to that of 1991

¹³⁰² Gritter, "Local Leaders," 92-3; Kira V. Duke, "To Disturb the People as Little as Possible: The Desegregation of Memphis City Schools" (master's thesis, Univ. of Tennessee at Knoxville, 2005), 26-32; Smith, interview, 2000, 25-6.

¹³⁰³ Gritter, "'Women Did Everything Except Run,'" 153; Chris Peck, "Why a Candidate's Past Matters," *CA*, 30 Sept. 2007, p. V4.

because of its racial polarization. He did not receive a majority of votes, and he received scant white support even though a substantial number of whites had come to back him previously in elections.¹³⁰⁴ Those who did not back Herenton were critical of the lack of economic development, the high rate of crime, and the corruption of local officials plaguing the city.¹³⁰⁵ At least sixty-six Memphis lawmakers, judges, council members, and public employees faced corruption charges from 2000 to 2007, casting a negative light on black and white city officials.¹³⁰⁶

Yet, black Memphians also continued to see political gains, and some developments revealed that the city and county were becoming less racially polarized. In the 2000s, it was common for black men and women to hold the majority of the seats on the city council and school board. In contrast to 1916 and 1959, when whites ensured that no blacks became public officials, they now often had to choose which one to elect. The run-off repeal, a majority black population, and ongoing black electoral mobilization were three key factors that accounted for these black political achievements.¹³⁰⁷ In contrast to the city, whites held the most seats on the county council and county school board. Nevertheless, county voters elected a black mayor, A C Wharton, for the first time in 2002, which indicated that racial divisions were diminishing. In addition, young citizens of Shelby County were more likely to vote for someone of the other race. In 2008, the majority of Memphis and Shelby County voters threw their support behind

¹³⁰⁴ Gritter, ““Women Did Everything Except Run,”” 153.

¹³⁰⁵ The vote split between Herenton’s two competitors, Herman Morris, a black candidate, and Carol Chumney, a white candidate, so Herenton won by a plurality. Blake Fontenay, “Coming Apart at the Polls--Election Results Seen as Crucial--Whoever Wins the Hotly Contested City Races, There Will Be Healing to Do,” *CA*, 30 Sept. 2007, p. V1; “A Crossroads for Mayor Herenton,” *CA*, 6 Oct. 2007, p. A10.

¹³⁰⁶ Peck, “Why a Candidate’s Past Matters.”

¹³⁰⁷ Gritter, ““Women Did Everything Except Run,”” 153.

Barack Obama, the Democratic candidate for president.¹³⁰⁸ Maxine and Vasco Smith, H. T. Lockard, Russell Sugarmon, and other heirs to Church, Jr., and his supporters had lived to see his election. While the media spotlighted the 1960s voting rights campaigns and other civil rights activism in relation to Obama's victory, the deep roots of his election--the work of Church and the black generations previously--cannot be ignored.

Indeed, the story of black political activists in Memphis shines a spotlight on the significance of southern black political mobilization in the age of Jim Crow. To be sure, Church and other black political actors were flawed. By supporting Edward Crump and his endorsees, black Memphians shored up a machine government that provided them with some benefits but ultimately served as a barrier to their quest for civil rights. By cleaving to the Republican Party, Church became increasingly out of step with the masses of blacks who had turned to the Democratic Party. He and other blacks who continued to support the party missed the opportunity to jump on the Democratic Party bandwagon and to use their political skills to bolster a party that improved the lives of blacks in an unprecedented way through its passage of social welfare legislation.¹³⁰⁹ By choosing differently, they might have hastened the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Yet, the political efforts of black southerners in the Jim Crow era held more advantages for blacks than disadvantages. By forming and participating in black political clubs and mobilizations as well as directly contacting governmental officials on an individual basis, black southerners carved out a political space for themselves, exerting their rights to

¹³⁰⁸ Gritter, "'This Is a Crusade,'" 71-2; Thomas Jordan, "Voting along Racial Lines a Habit That's Hard to Break," *CA*, 30 Jun. 2002, p. A1; Zack McMillan, "Official Tally Is in: Obama Took 63.4 Percent of Shelby County Vote," *CA*, 17 Nov. 2008, www.commercialappeal.com [accessed 12 Dec. 2008].

¹³⁰⁹ For a critical view of Church, see: Roger Biles, "Robert R. Church, Jr. of Memphis: Black Republican Leader in the Age of Democratic Ascendancy, 1928-1940," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 42 (1983): 362-82.

participate in the political system and sometimes succeeding in pressuring the government to serve their needs. They secured better public services and employment opportunities for blacks, all of which made a significant difference at a time when most blacks were poor and held menial positions. They also used politics as a public venue to make clear their opposition to the Jim Crow system. In aligning with the NAACP, labor groups, and other organizations in pressing for civil rights and economic opportunities, black political activists made the black freedom struggle a stronger force and the United States a more democratic country. In all these ways, they forwarded the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

In participating in the Republican Party, Church and other black southerners took advantage of the one party in the two-party system that allowed them a significant presence. They inspired local black Memphians to become politically active. Church and other black Republicans served as voices for civil rights and greater black political participation in party councils and succeeded in opening up jobs and political opportunities for blacks. In so doing, they served as a vital force against lily whiteness and prevented the party from excluding blacks to the extent that the conservative southern wing of the Democratic Party did. It would have been tragic for both major parties to have denied blacks participation. In achieving political leadership positions and working on an equal footing with whites, Church and other black southerners challenged stereotypes of blacks as subservient and inferior. Many black Republicans switched to the Democratic Party in the 1930s, and they used their political skills to push the party to become more racially inclusive and to take civil rights and social welfare steps. All these efforts laid the foundation for the more democratic South that emerged in the 1960s.

The political efforts of black southerners in the Jim Crow era were part of the long civil rights movement that continues to this day. Most of these politically active black southerners probably would be amazed at the changes in society today: the election of the first black president and the continued rise of black public officials, the abolition of *de jure* segregation and intolerance for overt racism, and the integration that is common in the South and nation as a whole. Yet, most also would likely continue to battle for racial justice. After Obama was elected, Congressman John Lewis and other civil rights activists of the 1960s commented that his election represented a victory but not the end of the black freedom struggle. Just as Church and his Lincoln League members looked to the past history of black political achievement during the Reconstruction era as an inspiration for their struggle for freedom and democracy, current civil rights and political activists can look at their story and that of other politically active black southerners for inspiration in today's continuing battle for racial justice.

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