

The "Incubus"

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According to Dictionary.com, “incubus” means an imaginary demon or evil spirit supposed to descend upon sleeping persons, especially one fabled to have sexual intercourse with women during their sleep. According to American people of the late 19th century, incubus had a slightly different meaning. Democrats in this time had a hard time accepting the idea of freed blacks and blacks participating in politics. It was this that caused them to fabricate the “incubus.”

After the Civil War and the legislation that followed, blacks were freed people. They were interested in owning land, becoming educated, and mostly being able to be involved in politics. After 1865, blacks slowly became involved in politics. They were mainly in local politics such as city mayors and some state congress. White democrats did not believe that blacks should be treated as full American citizens. They felt as if the blacks were not smart enough to vote or did not deserve to vote. Democrats discussed their issue and decided that they needed to come up with a platform that would turn all whites against the blacks. They came up with the platform of “home protection” (Cecelski et al. 1998).

The basis of the “home protection” platform was that white women were in danger of black men. They came up with roles; white women were the “virginal victim” while the black men were the “black beasts” (Cecelski et al. 1998). It was a “truly massive campaign to rally the masses of white men to defend their ‘manhood’ and white women” (Cecelski et al. 1998). The idea was that black men could not resist white women and therefore they were tempted to rape them. In reality, there was no increase in

actual rape cases. The Democratic campaign was creating a “rape scare, not a rape epidemic” (Cecelski et al. 1998). The rape scare became prominent because white women began to tell stories about them being raped by black men, recently and from years before. The answer to the problem, as promoted by the Democratic campaign, was lynching.

Lynching, defined as “put to death, especially by hanging, by mob action and without legal authority” (“Lynching”), was the go-to punishment for blacks during the late 1800’s to early 1900’s. A lynching became a public event. Whites would gather, usually in the middle of the town, to watch a black person be lynched. It was a very violent death. Whites would beat and abuse the black person and then hang them. Their bodies could sit in the town square for a few days, even a week, before someone took them down as a show. Rape became a common reason for lynching during the Democratic rape scare campaign. While it may be hard to believe, the rich white Democrats had most whites brainwashed into believe that lynching was justified by the “cry of rape,” (Cecelski et al. 1998).

Some whites did not believe that lynching was right in general, but if it solved the problem of rape then it was acceptable. Mrs. Rebecca Latimer Felton was one of these people. She gave a speech at the South Bend Hotel in Tybee, Georgia on August 12, 1897 on the subject of rape and lynching. She advocated for the education of the white women, claiming that if they were educated then they would be less likely to be raped.

They would be high enough up in society to not be around the blacks and they would be able to provide their own protection. However, she said that if lynching is necessary to prevent rapes, then it should happen (Morning Star 1898). A quote from her speech, “if it needs lynching to protect woman’s dearest possession from the ravening human beasts – then I say lynch; a thousand times a week if necessary,” (Morning Star 1898) was brought back to life a year after her speech in *The Morning Star* newspaper. The editor of the Morning Star did an article on the entire speech Mrs. Felton gave. This caused a little bit of an uproar.

Alex Manly was the editor of *The Daily Record*, the only black daily newspaper in New Hanover, North Carolina. He wrote a response to *The Morning Star*’s revival of Mrs. Felton’s speech. Manly agreed with Mrs. Felton in many aspects. He said that women should get educated and should be protected more. He also agreed that rape is a crime. However, he was sure to point out that blacks were not the only ones at fault in the situation. He pointed out that “poor white men are careless in the matter of protecting their women,” (Manly 1898). He goes as far as to point blame on white men by claiming that rape is a crime, no matter if it be a black man raping a white woman or a white man raping a black woman. Manly makes the point that all women, race aside, are at risk of rape and therefore should all be protected. He made the claim that while black men are being blamed for wanting to sleep with white women, white women are not being blamed for lusting after black men. Manly points out that many black men were children of white

men and black women slaves, technically making them half white. He suggests that this causes higher-class white women to be attracted to the black men (Manly 1898).

It was this claim that caused uproar with whites in Wilmington, North Carolina. The Wilmington newspapers reprinted Manly's article from August to November, adding their thoughts and opinions to each reprint. The goal of the Democrats was to gain white unity by saying that blacks were against them. The Democrats used the article to gain the votes of the poor white farmers who were generally on the same level as blacks. They used cartoons to get the whites to "stand by the white race" (Cecelski et al. 1998). It strengthened the idea of "home protection" that the Democrats were working towards. By November, election time, all the whites were fired up against blacks and the Democrats were voted into office.

The newly elected Democrats, led by Alfred Waddell, Charles Aycock, and Furnifold Simmons, came up with a plan to take back control of Wilmington. They ordered the resignation of Alex Manly, as well as required him to close his newspaper office. They also ordered the compliance of various other black leaders. They wanted this done by November 10, 1898, which was the following day. When the black leaders did not respond to the whites, they became furious. It was then that the Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 began. They burnt buildings and killed people. There was a huge uproar throughout the city of Wilmington. Nine blacks were killed and three whites were injured, according to an article in the *New York Times* that ran the following day. The

newspapers that ran anything regarding the riot were mostly white papers blaming the whole thing on the stubbornness of the black leaders. They state, “further trouble of a general or serious nature is not expected” (“Nineteen Negroes Shot to Death: Fatal Race Riots in North and South Carolina” 1898).

The Wilmington Race Riot was a vicious attack against blacks based solely on the idea that blacks are a lesser race than whites. White democrats used a rape ploy to scare whites into believing that blacks were savage, incompetent creatures that could not be trusted around their wives and daughters. They used the “incubus” to destroy the lives and dreams of many blacks in Wilmington and around the country. To this day, the word “incubus” carries a negative stigma that has been carried around since this time.

Works Cited

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