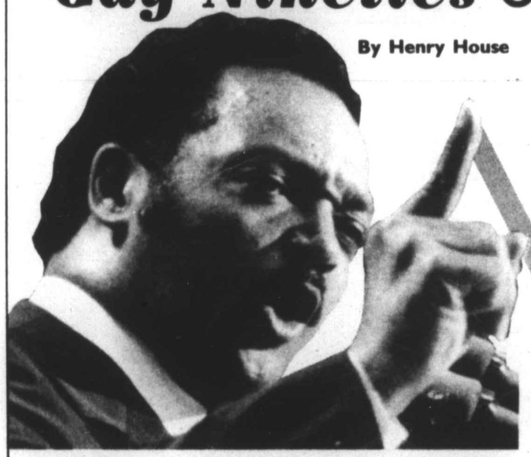
Gay Nineties or Gray Nineties?

By Henry House



On January 29, 1901, Congressman George H. White, of North Carolina rose to address the House of Representatives for the last time. Thirty-six years after the end of the Civil War, White was leaving Congress.

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

If ever an era of African - American history deserved greater study, that period is almost exactly one hundred years ago, when African - Americans all but disappeared from the national consciousness.

The end of the nineteenth century is remembered as the "Gay Nineties." But they were the gray Nineties for African - Americans; dreary years when, as James Weldon Johnson wrote, "all hope had died."

As America moved toward overseas expansion in Asia and South America, White was one of the few who spoke out against imperialism overseas. And as political and violent attempts to intimidate African Americans increased, White introduced the first federal anti - lynching bill, which later died in committee.

But the times were not right for a man like White. The 1890's witnessed his defeat at the polls, and the death of an even greater African - American activist, Frederick Douglass.

White and Douglass were eclipsed as the voices of Afro - America by a man with a completely different plan, Booker T. Washington.

Washington, in his 1895 Atlanta Exposition speech, summed up his goals in language which may seem unpalatable today.

"In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers," he said, "yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."

Washington's acquiescence to what amounted to apartheid may seem repellent today, but his plan was probably the only practical solution to contemporary problems. White's assurance that African-Americans would return to Congress was prophetic, but, few had reason to think so at the turn of the century.

As we enter the 1990's, how far have we come since Congressman White's farewell and Washington's surrender? Have we moved forward or are we standing still?

Compromise and disenfranchisement

For those who believe that history often repeats itself, the Reconstruction period and its aftermath, which ended in Congressman White's farewell, has an unpleasant contemporary ring. Almost ten years ago, as Reagan Republicans and their Democratic cohorts celebrated victory, Rep. Kweisi Mfume, D.-Md. saw ominous comparisons with the past. Mfume, then a Baltimore, Md. City Councilman, noted that the reverses suffered by liberal forces signalled the beginning of days as dark as those of post reconstruction days.

To trace the story of African - American disenfranchisement in the 1890s, one has to go back to the presidential election of 1876. The United States had just suffered the first of a series of post-Civil War financial panics, and was entering a period of bloody labor battles.

Old - line Republicans who had once led the movement for African - American enfranchisement were dead or defeated.

The Southern Democrats promised to allow African - American officeholders and voters to continue to exercise their rights. At first those promises were kept, albeit grudgingly. African - Americans continued to be elected to local, state and federal office through 1900.

But then, at the turn of the century, economics and politics collided in a cataclysmic movement. Rising prices and falling incomes drove poor farmers, White and African - American, together in a new movement called the Farmer's Alliance.

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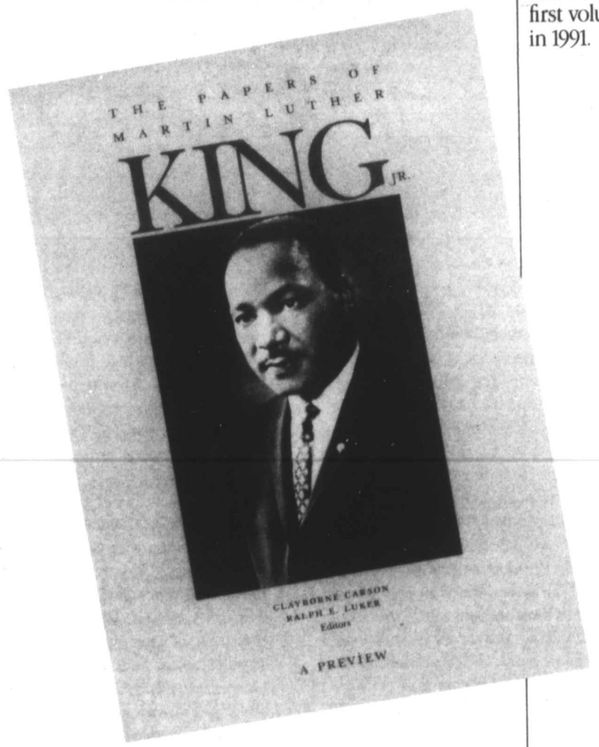
BRIGHT LIGHTS OF THE SECOND RECONSTRUCTION — Jesse Jackson and L. Douglas Wilder are both staking their claims to a share of the political landscape of the 90's and maybe well into the 21st Century.

His dream spoke volumes.



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Publication of the King Papers Project is part of a continuing effort to preserve the history of the civil rights movement.

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