

# Theodore G. Bilbo and the Decline of Public Racism, 1938-1947

*By Robert L. Fleegler*

“I call on every red-blooded white man to use any means to keep the niggers away from the polls[;] if you don’t understand what that means you are just plain dumb.”<sup>1</sup> These were the words of United States senator Theodore G. “The Man” Bilbo of Mississippi, as he addressed white supporters during his successful re-election campaign in June 1946. His inflammatory language ignited a firestorm, however, that prevented him from taking his Senate seat in January 1947 and ended the career of one of the nation’s most flamboyant politicians.

“The Man” fell because of the growing intolerance among many whites toward public racism and anti-Semitism. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, white elites outside the South—defined here as leading daily newspapers, weekly magazines, organizations, and political leaders—largely ignored Bilbo’s racist incitements.<sup>2</sup> World War II, however, brought about a significant change in elite attitudes. Due to the ideological war against Nazism, America’s emergence as a superpower, and the unifying nature of the conflict, the kind of virulent public racism that was a trademark of Bilbo’s career was no longer tolerated outside of the South. Bilbo’s career, from his return to the governor’s mansion in 1928 through the Senate debate over his seating in 1947, parallels and illustrates the declining tolerance of overt racism and nativism in the United States.

Many southern politicians continued to use extreme language similar to Bilbo’s. Major southern figures such as James Eastland, Richard Russell, Strom Thurmond, and George Wallace played the race card and supported Jim Crow with all their energies well into the 1960s. But they

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<sup>1</sup> *Time*, July 1, 1946, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> These “elites” were by no means monolithic; they disagreed on many—indeed most—issues. However, they came together to oppose Bilbo.

usually avoided the kind of overt racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Italian remarks that Bilbo consistently expressed. Instead they employed code words; these legislators talked of the need to protect the South from “outside agitators” and the necessity of defending “state’s rights,” but rarely used the terms *niggers* or *kikes*.

Three forces associated with World War II brought about changes in white attitudes that precipitated Bilbo’s downfall. First, the war against Nazism and the revelation of the Holocaust heightened white elites’ awareness of racism. The historian Steve Lawson wrote, “Fighting Hitler’s atrocities abroad shifted the focus of racism at home from an economic to a moral issue, prompting liberals to try to prove that their society did not behave like Nazi Germany.”<sup>3</sup>

Second, America’s new role as leader of the “free world” caused elites to see racism as the nation’s Achilles’ heel. Mary Dudziak noted that as “presidents and secretaries of state from 1946 to the mid-1960s worried about the impact of race discrimination on U.S. prestige abroad, civil rights reform came to be seen as crucial to U.S. foreign policy.”<sup>4</sup> Although the Cold War was in its infancy in 1947, Soviet propaganda was already calling attention to American racism, particularly the wave of lynchings in 1945-46.<sup>5</sup> As a result, American policymakers were keenly aware of the obstacles Jim Crow posed to the nation’s foreign policy. Dean Acheson wrote to Malcolm Ross, chairman of the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) in March 1946, “The existence of discrimination against minority groups in this country has an adverse effect on our relations with other countries.”<sup>6</sup>

Finally, scholars have suggested that the unifying experience of the war—aided, of course, by wartime propaganda—substantially weakened the ethnic divisions that had traditionally plagued America. Public and private groups launched educational programs to prevent these divisions

<sup>3</sup> Steve Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America since 1941* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 6. See also Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Donald R. McCoy and Richard Ruetten, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1973), 66.

from hampering the war effort.<sup>7</sup> Wartime propaganda from such diverse sources as the Office of War Information (OWI) to Hollywood stressed a pluralistic definition of citizenship. For instance, typical war “platoon films” showed military units containing an Italian, a Jew, a southerner, and a soldier of native stock.<sup>8</sup> These efforts combined to reduce the power of traditional nativism. “By war’s end,” observed historian David Bennett, “nativism was all but finished.”<sup>9</sup>

But it took more than just a change in white attitudes to bring down Bilbo. A more energized black civil rights movement emerged from World War II as many African Americans, having fought for democracy abroad, demanded changes at home.<sup>10</sup> The NAACP’s membership increased tenfold during the war, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which would become one of the major civil rights groups of the 1960s, was formed.<sup>11</sup> One black soldier from Alabama illustrated this feeling of heightened awareness when he declared, “I spent four years in the Army to free a bunch of Dutchmen and Frenchmen, and I’m hanged if I’m going to let the Alabama version of the Germans kick me around when I get home. No siree-bob! I went into the army a nigger; I’m coming out a man.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Richard W. Steele, “The War on Intolerance: The Reformulation of American Nationalism,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 9 (Fall 1989), 9–35. For analyses of the unifying nature of the conflict, see Richard Polenberg, *One Nation Divisible* (New York: Viking, 1980), 46–69; and John Blum, *V Was for Victory* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 147–72.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Gleason, *Speaking of Diversity: Language and Ethnicity in Twentieth Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 153–87. Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 237–39.

<sup>9</sup> John Higham, one of the leading historians of immigration, defined *nativism* as “intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (i.e., “un-American”) connections . . . . While drawing on much broader cultural antipathies and ethnocentric judgments, nativism translates them into a zeal to destroy the enemies of a distinctively American way of life.” Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 4; David H. Bennett, *Party of Fear: The American Far Right From Nativism to the Militia Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 285; see also Gleason, *Speaking of Diversity*, 153–87.

<sup>10</sup> See Richard Polenberg, *War and Society* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1972), 99–130; Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954–1980* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 11. John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 1–18.

<sup>11</sup> Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> James Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 23.

Even before Bilbo delivered his incendiary campaign statements, opponents were maneuvering to expel him from the U.S. Senate. Surprisingly, however, efforts to remove one of the Senate's greatest champions of Anglo-Saxon supremacy have received little attention from historians. The major books analyzing the period barely discuss the episode.<sup>13</sup> This omission is probably attributable to a series of events after World War II that overshadowed the campaign against "The Man" in the minds of historians. Although the conflict had ended, the nation was enduring the pain of postwar inflation as well as the difficult transition back to a civilian economy. One of the greatest strike waves in the nation's history took place in 1945-46, including a railroad labor stoppage that ended only when President Truman threatened to draft the strikers in May 1946. Finally, and most important, the Cold War began during this period. Bilbo's removal occurred only three months before the president enunciated the Truman Doctrine. These events eclipsed Bilbo's downfall.

John Dittmer's *Local People* and Lawson's *Black Ballots*, the two books that discuss the Bilbo case most thoroughly, cite the anti-Bilbo movement as evidence of increasing African-American assertiveness, particularly among black veterans, following World War II.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the remarkable courage of southern blacks who tried to vote during the 1946 election despite the threat of violence—along with pressure from the NAACP and black newspapers—was key to Bilbo's removal. The changing attitudes of white elites, however, also helped to seal "The Man's" fate.

<sup>13</sup> Neither David McCullough's popular biography *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992) nor Alonzo Hamby's more scholarly *Man of the People: a Life of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) discusses the episode. Indeed, even William Berman's *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press 1970), 54, mentions Bilbo's removal only in passing. Robert Garson, *The Democratic Party and the Politics of Sectionalism: 1941-1948*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 206-10, describes the last stages of the battle to remove Bilbo but offers little analysis. Gary Donaldson's *Truman Defeats Dewey* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 104, has an interesting paragraph on Bilbo's removal, noting that "Bilbo's ejection was the official repudiation of the rotten southern political system based on racial hatred, the system that had kept southern congressmen in Washington for decades. Bilbo was a symbol of the past." Most recently, Kari Frederickson's *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) does not discuss the battle over "The Man."

<sup>14</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 1-9; Steve Lawson, *Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South, 1944-1969* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 98-115.

## II

In 1949 political scientist V. O. Key observed that “Mississippi politics may be regarded, if one keeps alert to the risks of over-simplification, as a battle between the delta planters and the rednecks . . . . The hills are radical; the delta is conservative.”<sup>15</sup> In this conflict, Theodore Bilbo consistently sided with the “rednecks” and the “hills.” He was born in 1877 in Poplarville in southern Mississippi, and, while details on his early life are scant, Bilbo probably was influenced by the Populist movement at an early age.<sup>16</sup> Throughout his career, he appealed to the poor farmers of the hill country—attacking Wall Street, large corporations, and other forces that disrupted the isolated regions where his faithful lived. He called for more progressive taxation and increased state aid to education. Indeed, Bilbo’s program of economic populism and white supremacy earned him the loyal support of the poor whites of rural Mississippi, which sustained him through a political life marked by a series of scandals and comebacks.

But it was his style as much as his legislative program that earned him devout followers and staunch enemies. Alan Brinkley described Bilbo’s manner:

Stripped to his shirtsleeves, wearing a flaming red necktie with a diamond stickpin, he campaigned with a contagious passion, whipping crowds into frenzied excitement with his denunciations of ‘Wall Streeters,’ entrenched political interest groups, corporate monopolies and the establishment press.<sup>17</sup>

His populism earned him the eternal enmity of the Bourbons of the Mississippi Delta. The aristocracy of the Delta, while sharing Bilbo’s unswerving commitment to white supremacy, feared “The Man’s” economic policies and his political strength among Mississippi’s poor whites. Bilbo carried twenty-four of the state’s twenty-eight poorest counties in a majority of his seven statewide races.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> V. O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 230, 238.

<sup>16</sup> Chester Morgan, *Redneck Liberal: Theodore G. Bilbo and the New Deal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 26–27.

<sup>17</sup> Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 219.

<sup>18</sup> Morgan, *Redneck Liberal*, 57. The wealth of these counties was measured by average land value.

Scholars have debated whether or not Bilbo's commitment to white supremacy was genuine or merely a cynical attempt to earn votes.<sup>19</sup> Chester Morgan, whose book *Redneck Liberal* details Bilbo's progressive record on economic issues during his Senate tenure, believes that the demagogue label is unfair. Morgan suggests that "The Man" truly believed in racial separation and that Bilbo discussed racial issues only after his opponents first raised the subject. Morgan believes that the southern establishment attempted to discredit Bilbo's progressive economic views through race baiting. For example, Bilbo's Bourbon opponents attacked him for being soft on racial issues because he suggested that the state abolish the poll tax.<sup>20</sup> Bourbons supported the poll tax not only because it eliminated the political power of blacks but also because the measure disfranchised many of Bilbo's poor white supporters.

Still, Bilbo's racist outbursts erupted at suspicious times. His most famous periods of race baiting were in 1938 and 1944, points at which he was beginning re-election campaigns for the Senate, a pattern suggesting political purposes. In all likelihood, both sides of this debate are correct. Perhaps his appeals to class differences superseded his appeals to white supremacy during much of his career; however, as civil rights legislation slowly gained momentum during the 1930s and 1940s, race became increasingly central to his philosophy and he expressed his supremacist views in a more extreme fashion than most of his fellow southern politicians.

Bilbo's career began in the Progressive era and lasted through the New Deal and World War II. His first electoral victory came in a race for the state senate in 1907. He was elected lieutenant governor in 1912 and proceeded to the governor's mansion in 1916. Since Mississippi governors were limited to one term, Bilbo ran for an open seat in the Mississippi House of Representatives in 1920. He lost badly and returned to his law practice.

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, "The Man" has been the subject of discussion in virtually every book on southern demagoguery, from Allan Michie and Frank Ryhlick's *Dixie Demagogues* in 1939 to Carl Logue's and Howard Dorgan's *The Oratory of Southern Demagogues* in 1981. See Michie and Ryhlick, *Dixie Demagogues* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1939), 87–107, and Logue and Dorgan, eds., *The Oratory of Southern Demagogues* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 151–72.

<sup>20</sup> Morgan, *Redneck Liberal*, 237; Key, *Southern Politics*, 244. Bilbo vehemently opposed federal legislation to accomplish the same goal. Morgan's book focuses on his Senate record during the 1930s and does not address the period 1944–47, when Bilbo became a national symbol of racism.

In 1927, Bilbo mounted the first of many political comebacks when he ran for a second term as governor. During the campaign the incumbent governor, Dennis Murphree, called out the National Guard to prevent the lynching of a black man. Bilbo used the incident to his advantage, hinting that he would have acted differently had he been in office. This race-baiting tactic helped Bilbo become the first Mississippian to serve two terms as governor since 1890.<sup>21</sup>

But it was not until the 1928 presidential campaign that “The Man” first achieved national notoriety. In October Bilbo accused Republican nominee Herbert Hoover of dancing with a black woman while investigating conditions in Mississippi following the great flood of 1927. Hoover denied the charge, calling it “the most indecent and unworthy statement in the whole of a bitter campaign.”<sup>22</sup> Bilbo replied that the information had been based on a rumor and that he had said as much in his speech. But the Mississippi governor did not leave it at that. He sent a telegram to Hoover, which the Republican nominee’s campaign released, asking whether “you think it would be offensive to you or indecent, infamous, or disgraceful for you to dance with a women of the negro [*sic*] race.”<sup>23</sup> Hoover did not respond. Reflecting the tenor of the period, the *New York Times* reported the entire episode without comment. No major newspaper or magazine denounced Bilbo. Even though Bilbo race-baited in the midst of a presidential campaign, his reputation did not seem to suffer.

Term-limited once again, Bilbo left the governor’s mansion in 1932. In 1933, Senator Pat Harrison of Mississippi arranged a position for Bilbo in the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, where officials relegated “The Man” to a dead-end job clipping newspapers. This position earned Bilbo the title of “Pastemaster General.”<sup>24</sup> In 1934, Bilbo mounted another comeback, defeating a relatively conservative incumbent, Senator Hubert Stephens, to earn a seat in Washington. As with his 1927 gubernatorial victory, Bilbo’s strongest support came from the poor white regions in the hills of Mississippi.<sup>25</sup> His appeal to the masses continued to generate much interest. “Hypnotic in his power, a master of invective, and making astute

<sup>21</sup> Morgan, *Redneck Liberal*, 24–57; Maxine Block, ed. *Current Biography 1943*, (New York: H. W. Wilson, Co., 1944), 47–50.

<sup>22</sup> *New York Times*, October 20, 1928

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, October 25, 1928.

<sup>24</sup> *Time*, September 29, 1934, p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> Morgan, *Redneck Liberal*, 56; Key, *Southern Politics*, 248.

use of his familiarity with the Bible, he swayed the white tenants, small planters and the bankrupt with his assaults on Wall Street,” wrote Terrence J. Donoghue in the *New York Times*.<sup>26</sup> “Like Huey Long of Louisiana, his stronghold is the rural sections. There he is hailed as a courageous and unflinching defender, and his public appearances have the flavor of revival meetings,” added Donoghue.<sup>27</sup> Upon his arrival in Washington, elites still viewed Bilbo as a dangerous demagogue.

Though Bilbo’s arrival in Washington brought him some attention, he remained a quiet backbencher early in his Senate career. He observed the Senate tradition of not making a speech during his first year, no small feat for someone who made 279 speeches during his campaign.<sup>28</sup> In 1935 Bilbo garnered some attention for his feud with Long.<sup>29</sup> The following year he earned yet more attention when he broke with Harrison, his Mississippi colleague, and supported a primary challenge against his erstwhile benefactor. Harrison won anyway, but Bilbo could take some solace when the senior senator lost his bid to become majority leader in 1937 by one vote—Bilbo’s. He amassed a strong progressive voting record, supporting New Deal legislation such as public housing that gave many southern representatives pause.<sup>30</sup> Still, Bilbo’s Senate career remained relatively nondescript through 1937.

This situation began to change ever so slowly. In January 1938, an anti-lynching bill sponsored by Democratic senators Robert Wagner of New York and Frederick Van Nuys of Indiana came to the floor of the Senate. Similar legislation had failed several times since the early 1920s, but many observers believed the bill had a strong chance to pass this time.<sup>31</sup>

Bilbo and the other southern senators were not going to allow the bill to pass without a battle. On January 6, they began one of the longest filibusters in American history. “To defeat this measure, so help me God, I would be willing to speak every day of the year 1938,” declared Bilbo on

<sup>26</sup> *New York Times*, September 30, 1934.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, August 23, 1936.

<sup>29</sup> *Literary Digest*, September 7, 1935, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> For a thorough look at Bilbo’s New Deal record, see Morgan, *Redneck Liberal*, 132–95.

<sup>31</sup> *Congressional Record*, 75 Congress, 3 Session, 873, 893; Robert Zangrando, *NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 239.



January 21. He expressed his opposition in racially explicit terms, referring to supporters of the anti-lynching bill as “mulattoes, octoroons, quadroons” and to NAACP head Walter White as an “Ethiopian.” Bilbo added, “When once the flat-nosed Ethiopian, like the camel, gets his proboscis under the tent, he will overthrow the established order of our Saxon civilization.” Finally, in rhetoric similar to that of his 1946 campaign, Bilbo seemed to condone violence:

If you succeed in the passage of this bill, you will open the floodgates of hell in the South. Raping, mobbing, lynching, race riots, and crime will be increased a thousandfold; and upon your garments and the garments of those who are responsible for the passage of the measure will be the blood of the raped and outraged daughters of Dixie, *as well as the blood of the perpetrators of these crimes that the red-blooded Anglo-Saxon white Southern men will not tolerate.*<sup>32</sup>

Bilbo’s rhetoric was extreme even by the standards of his fellow southerners. Richard Russell of Georgia, who became one of the Senate’s most respected voices on foreign policy, repeatedly suggested that the Communist Party was behind the bill.<sup>33</sup> James Byrnes of South Carolina, later Harry Truman’s secretary of state, characterized the legislation as little more than an attempt by northern Democrats to curry favor with black voters.<sup>34</sup> Bilbo echoed these arguments, but as the previous comment demonstrates, he went much further. No major white publication, however, reported his remarks. The same rhetoric that would bring about his downfall a decade later went largely unnoticed by white Americans in 1938.

In the same speech, Bilbo speculated for the first time about an idea that would become one of the signatures of his career: a program to return blacks to Africa.<sup>35</sup> “It is essential to the perpetuation of our Anglo-Saxon civilization,” he said, “that white supremacy be maintained, and to maintain our civilization there is only one solution, and that is either by segregation within the United States, or by deportation of the entire Negro race

<sup>32</sup> *Cong. Rec.*, 75, 3 Sess., 893, 873 (emphasis added).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 1106-13.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>35</sup> For a review of this effort, see Michael Fitzgerald, “‘We Have Found a Moses’: Theodore Bilbo, Black Nationalism, and the Greater Liberia Bill of 1939,” *Journal of Southern History*, LXIII (May 1997), 293–321.

to its native heath, Africa.”<sup>36</sup> Despite the fact that Bilbo was calling for the removal of twelve million American citizens, no major news outlet reported Bilbo’s comments. Bilbo reiterated his support for the repatriation proposal on February 2 and February 17. The *New York Times* reported his proposal without comment in back-page stories.<sup>37</sup> No other major white publication even mentioned it.

On May 24, 1938, Bilbo formally proposed legislation to return blacks to Africa. During a floor speech on the proposal, he rejected new social science theories that suggested that environment rather than genetics determined an individual’s capabilities. “It is the height of folly,” he insisted, “to assume that environment, discipline, education, and all other external devices can affect the blood, smooth down inequalities between individuals of the same breed, much less between different breeds, or transmute racial qualities.”<sup>38</sup> Bilbo went on to praise Nazi racial doctrines. “The Germans appreciate the importance of race values. They understand that racial improvement is the greatest asset that any country can have. . . . They know, as few other nations have realized, that the impoverishment of race values contributes more to the impairment and destruction of a civilization than any other agency.”<sup>39</sup>

The national media finally gave the proposal some attention. *Newsweek* wrote, “Last week, in the Senate, Theodore Bilbo finally cut loose with his first unprovoked outburst of rabble rousing.” While the article described Bilbo’s proposal in unflattering terms, it ignored important segments of the speech, particularly Bilbo’s praise of German racial theories. Moreover, Bilbo’s plan received precious little attention elsewhere in the white press. “Hardly a newspaper reported it,” commented *Newsweek*.<sup>40</sup>

Bilbo continued to promote his repatriation plan, even attaining support from some black nationalist organizations.<sup>41</sup> He brought the idea back to the Senate floor in April 1939, claiming that the black American had “no better friend than I am to him.”<sup>42</sup> By this time, Bilbo had developed a detailed plan for the creation of his “Greater Liberia” and claimed he had 2.5 million signatures from blacks who wanted to return to Africa. Bilbo

<sup>36</sup> *Cong. Rec.* 75 Cong., 3 Sess., 881.

<sup>37</sup> *New York Times*, February 3, 1938, and February 18, 1938.

<sup>38</sup> *Cong. Rec.*, 75 Cong., 3 Sess., 7363.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 7361.

<sup>40</sup> *Newsweek*, June 6, 1938, p. 14.

<sup>41</sup> Fitzgerald, “We Have Found a Moses,” 99–321.

<sup>42</sup> *Cong. Rec.*, 76 Cong., 1 Sess., 4652.

spoke at length about the history of colonization proposals, citing Thomas Jefferson, Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and Ulysses S. Grant as past supporters of the concept. He proposed that England and France cede portions of their West African colonies in exchange for the forgiveness of their war debts. Bilbo concluded, "It is further a plan of the almighty that the Negroes may be transferred back to the land of their forefathers."<sup>43</sup>

Again, the press gave the scheme only limited attention. *Time* ran an article on the speech, but its tone was more mocking than condemning.<sup>44</sup> The only other mention in the white press came in a small *New York Times* piece, buried on page 16: "While some 500 Negroes listened with sympathetic interest in the public galleries, Senator Bilbo of Mississippi today urged Federal aid for colonization of large numbers of that race in Liberia."<sup>45</sup> Again, Bilbo's repatriation proposal drew little attention and even less condemnation.

Bilbo ran for re-election to the Senate in 1940, defeating former Governor Hugh White in the Democratic primary in August. Despite Bilbo's repatriation proposal and his shrill opposition to the anti-lynching bill, the *New York Times* still described Bilbo as an obscure member: "[H]e was out of office for three years, then won election to the Senate. There he has seldom spoken on national affairs."<sup>46</sup> The *Times* did not mention Bilbo's militant defense of white supremacy or the repatriation bill.

Furthermore, Bilbo's racism did not seem to bother his fellow Democrats. Following his primary victory in 1940, he stumped for his party brethren in fifteen states during the fall campaign. Bilbo gave the keynote address to the Young Democrats of New York. Senator Joseph Guffey of Pennsylvania, noting that Bilbo's speeches were well received in the Keystone State, called him "tops among Southern statesman as a campaigner."<sup>47</sup>

In addition to Pennsylvania and New York, Bilbo campaigned in several other states where Democrats competed for black votes. For instance, then-senator Harry S. Truman often relied on the African American vote

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 4671.

<sup>44</sup> *Time*, May 8, 1939, pp. 14–15.

<sup>45</sup> *New York Times*, April 25, 1939.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, September 1, 1940.

<sup>47</sup> Press release for September 21, 1940, Bilbo Papers, box 1106, folder 6, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi; R. Mahon to Bilbo, November 5, 1940, Bilbo Papers, box 552.

in Kansas City and St. Louis.<sup>48</sup> Still, Truman—who would desegregate the military less than a decade later—campaigns with Bilbo in Missouri. After his re-election, the future president wrote to Bilbo, “Can’t thank you enough for what you did in Missouri.”<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, elites often expressed or ignored other forms of bigotry. Anti-Italian sentiment, while less acceptable than anti-black sentiment, could still be seen in major news publications before the war. Indeed, this rhetoric appeared in descriptions of the most popular Italian-American of the day, New York Yankees star Joe DiMaggio. In May 1939, *Life* wrote, “Although he learned Italian first, Joe, now twenty-four, speaks English without an accent and is otherwise well-adapted to most U.S. mores. Instead of olive oil or smelly bear grease he keeps his hair slick with water. He never reeks of garlic and prefers chicken chow mein to spaghetti.”<sup>50</sup> The article also included a picture of DiMaggio with Joe Louis, captioned “Like Heavyweight Champion Louis, DiMaggio is lazy, shy, and inarticulate.”<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, anti-Semitism frequently went ignored within the larger culture. For instance, Mississippi congressman John Rankin, one of the few of Bilbo’s contemporaries who could match his bigotry, said in June 1941 that “Wall Street and a little group of our international Jewish brethren” were trying to push the nation into the European conflict. In this instance, Rankin’s language was only slightly more inflammatory than comments from other isolationists such as Montana senator Burton K. Wheeler and Charles Lindbergh.<sup>52</sup> However, New York congressman Michael Edelstein, who represented the Lower East Side, angrily denounced Rankin: “Mr. Speaker, Hitler started out talking about ‘Jewish brethren.’” Edelstein then went into the House lobby and collapsed, dying of a heart attack.<sup>53</sup> Although Rankin’s invective may have contributed to the death of a New York City congressman, the *Times* saw fit to place the story only on page twenty-four. While the *Times* condemned Rankin in an editorial the following day, no other major news organization published an article detailing the incident.

<sup>48</sup> Lawson, *Running for Freedom*, 30.

<sup>49</sup> Harry Truman to Bilbo, November 8, 1940, Bilbo Papers, box 553.

<sup>50</sup> *Life*, May 1, 1939, p. 69.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>52</sup> *New Republic*, September 22, 1941, pp. 360–63.

<sup>53</sup> *New York Times*, June 5, 1941.

### III

The metamorphosis of elite perceptions regarding public racism was not yet apparent in the early years of World War II. It took time for many to perceive the contradiction between American rhetoric and American action and for wartime propaganda to have an impact. *The Nation* wrote in July 1943, "We cannot fight fascism abroad while turning a blind eye to fascism at home. We cannot inscribe on our banners: For democracy and a caste system. We cannot liberate oppressed peoples while maintaining the right to oppress our own minorities."<sup>54</sup> Gunnar Myrdal's famous book on American race relations, *An American Dilemma*, was published in early 1944. Myrdal observed how the war was transforming white perceptions of racism: "To the white American, too, the Negro problem has taken on a greater significance than it has ever since the Civil War . . . . The world conflict and America's exposed position as defender of the democratic faith is thus accelerating an ideological process which was well under way."<sup>55</sup>

White elites' attitudes toward Theodore G. Bilbo followed a similar pattern. Bilbo's racism continued to be ignored during the first two years of the war, even though he led filibusters against anti-poll tax legislation in 1942 and 1943. Bilbo's rhetoric, however, began to receive attention in the spring of 1944.

Bilbo made a speech to the Mississippi State legislature on March 22, 1944, in which typical Bilboisms contained new references to the racial changes brought about by the war. He reiterated his proposal to resettle blacks in West Africa, saying, "When this war is over and more than two million Negro soldiers, whose minds have been filled and poisoned with political and social equality stuff, return and 'hell breaks out' all over the country, I think I'll get more help in settling the Negroes in Africa."<sup>56</sup>

In some ways, the reaction to Bilbo's rhetoric differed little from the reaction to his speeches before the war. Only one national periodical, *Time*, published an article on his remarks.<sup>57</sup> Bilbo's speech, however, drew a great deal of attention in the nation's capital. He had recently become chairman of the Senate District of Columbia Committee, making

<sup>54</sup> *The Nation*, July 3, 1943, p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944), Vol. I, lxix-lxxvii.

<sup>56</sup> *Washington Post*, March 23, 1944.

<sup>57</sup> *Time*, April 3, 1944, p. 25.

him de facto mayor with jurisdiction over the city's growing black population. In the changing rhetoric of the period, his comments drew condemnation from local leaders. The *Washington Post* editorialized, "Dr. Goebbels himself could not have hewed more faithfully to Nazi racial doctrines" and asked, "Is there any possible reason then for keeping at the head of the District of Columbia a man who is using Hitlerian doctrine to disrupt national unity and sow seeds of discord and make our democracy appear ridiculous before the world?"<sup>58</sup> Ten leading white Washington clergymen petitioned the committee for Bilbo's removal as chairman, saying, "We believe there are days when Washington, as the Nation's capital, should set an example to the Nation and the world, that persons in high positions, such as the chairman of your committee, should show calm, reasoned and sound judgment, together with a clear understanding of our American way of life."<sup>59</sup> For the first time, whites were suggesting that Bilbo's rhetoric made him unfit for a public position. The *Washington Star* observed, perhaps unconsciously, the changing attitudes toward Bilbo:

The Senator is as much surprised as anybody over the notoriety achieved by his proposal to send Negroes to Africa. For that scheme had become a cold potato until revived by the furor among his excited critics when he mentioned it recently. He proposed it as a Senate bill in 1939 and it died a very natural death. He did not even bother to reintroduce it in subsequent sessions. But now it is given the dignity of controversy—something it never possessed before. The same sort of thing applies to the Senator's recent speech before the Mississippi legislature. He undoubtedly has been making the same speech, off and on for years. The feverish reception accorded it here in the District must be the source of profound gratification to Senator Bilbo.<sup>60</sup>

Although groups were demanding Bilbo's removal as committee chairman, no one yet called for his immediate removal from Congress. The *Washington Star* editorialized, "Senator Bilbo is a duly constituted representative of the voters of Mississippi and they have supported him rather faithfully for over three decades. It is a waste of effort to quarrel with Senator Bilbo over his views or with the fact that he is here."<sup>61</sup> The *Wash-*

<sup>58</sup> *Washington Post*, March 23, 1944.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, March 25, 1944.

<sup>60</sup> *Washington Star*, March 25, 1944.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

*ington Post* concurred: "So long as Mississippi wishes this kind of representation in the Senate the preponderant majority of citizens who believe in democracy and tolerance, live and let live, will have to endure it."<sup>62</sup>

The debate over appropriations for the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) in the summer of 1944 also demonstrated a heightened awareness of Bilbo's racism. Bilbo again proposed the repatriation of blacks to West Africa and, referring to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's opposition to such a scheme, said, "Of course, she did not understand my ultimate plan. If I can succeed eventually in resettling the great majority of Negroes in West Africa— and I propose to do it—I might entertain the proposition of crowning Eleanor queen of Greater Liberia."<sup>63</sup> While this language was incendiary, it was not dramatically different from Bilbo's rhetoric during the 1938 anti-lynching debate.

But by early 1944, such blatant bigotry drew more notice. The *New York Times*, which had ignored earlier instances of Bilbo's racism, noted that "From the opening until the final passage vote, debate was conducted with a bluntness as to racial questions which appeared to surprise and at times astound observers in the visitor's galleries."<sup>64</sup> Allen Drury, a UPI reporter, wrote in his diary, "The FEPC appropriation was sustained today, after a vicious, dirty speech by Bilbo, who was hissed from the galleries and deserved it."<sup>65</sup>

Bilbo added anti-Semitism to his arsenal when Congress debated the FEPC again in June 1945. He delivered a long speech denouncing the legislation and submitted for the record a series of letters he had received from his constituents. The following letter came from a man Bilbo described as "an old friend of mine": "I continuously travel the United States and give my word from close examination that the birds behind all this social race equality stuff are Jews—from that rat Winchell to the most illiterate second-hand man."<sup>66</sup> Bilbo then proceeded to discuss the ethnic composition of the FEPC's employees, noting that many of them were black, Jewish, and Japanese. He asked, "Do Senators propose that we spend \$446,000 of the people's money for 66 Negroes, 12 Jews, a few gen-

<sup>62</sup> *Washington Post*, March 23, 1944.

<sup>63</sup> *Cong. Rec.*, 78 Cong., 1 Sess., 6253.

<sup>64</sup> *New York Times*, June 21, 1944.

<sup>65</sup> Allen Drury, *A Senate Journal: 1943-1945* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 200.

<sup>66</sup> *Cong. Rec.*, 79 Cong., 1 Sess., 6809.

tiles, and two Japs, just to be 'lollypops' for this country, 'sugar boys' going around pacifying?"<sup>67</sup>

Following this speech, the *Nation* wrote, "Senator Bilbo's exhibition last Thursday made it appear that at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives we had destroyed Hitler's racial obscenity in Europe only to have it parade in all its shameless arrogance at the very center of our democracy."<sup>68</sup> The liberal journal added, "Perhaps we should warn the other nations that Bilbo is an atavistic survival and not an effective symbol of American democracy . . . the challenge is nothing less than to extirpate from American public life all the evil intolerance that Bilbo and Rankin personify."<sup>69</sup>

The anger at Bilbo only intensified in the summer of 1945 when it was revealed that he wrote a letter to a New York woman, Josephine Piccolo, on July 1, with the introduction, "Dear Dago." Vito Marcantonio, Piccolo's representative in Congress, demanded that Bilbo apologize. Bilbo responded that he would apologize if she apologized to him for writing a "nasty, insulting, pusillanimous letter."<sup>70</sup> Needless to say, the matter was not settled.

Bilbo continued to deepen his difficulties with his anti-Semitism. For instance, he replied to criticism from radio commentator Walter Winchell, "I have just heard this Sunday night's broadcast by you, the most limicolous liar and notorious scandalizing kike radio commentator of today."<sup>71</sup> Bilbo also attacked Leonard Golditch, executive secretary of the National Committee to Combat Anti-Semitism, in even more stark terms:

There are five million Jews in the United States and the majority of them are fine public citizens, but if Jews of your type don't quit sponsoring and fraternizing with the Negro race you are going to arouse so much opposition that they will get a very strong invitation to pack up and resettle in Palestine, the homeland of the Jews, just as we propose to provide for the voluntary resettlement of the American Negro in West Africa their fatherland. Now do not pop-off and say I am in favor of sending the Jews to Palestine. What I am trying to say to you is that there are just a few of you New York 'kikes' that are fraternizing and socializing with the Negroes for selfish and political

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 6812.

<sup>68</sup> *The Nation*, July 7, 1945, p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Cong. Rec.*, 79 Cong., 1 Sess., 7995.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, appendix, 3702-03.



reasons and if you keep it up you will arouse the opposition of the better class of your race.<sup>72</sup>

Rhetoric this wild might have drawn some notice before the war, but delivered only months after the liberation of the concentration camps, Bilbo's statements had a more ominous tone. *Newsweek* recognized this fact: "But elsewhere in the nation, still with fresh memory of the savagery against European minorities, there was a murmuring of real concern . . . he [Bilbo] had chosen the aftermath of a war against the Nazis to invoke mob invective against 'dagos' and 'kikes' who had urged equal opportunity for the Negro."<sup>73</sup> Other publications joined in the criticism. *Commonweal* called Bilbo "an incurably vulgar personage."<sup>74</sup> *The Nation* wrote, "Bilbo is a one-man chamber of horrors, an unanswerable argument in favor of elimination of an obscene evil from a free society of men."<sup>75</sup>

A number of groups also sharply criticized Bilbo, among them the Committee of Catholics for Human Rights: "Your conduct is a chilling deterrent to the world-wide belief that America is the symbol of democracy and human rights."<sup>76</sup> Senators Robert F. Wagner and James Mead of New York stated:

For a long time now we have engaged in a long and bloody war to wipe out a regime which fostered racial antagonism . . . . Statements insulting to one or more of the many diverse groups which make up our great nation are a disservice to the principles on which this nation was founded and to those of our boys of all races and creeds who during the past few years have fought and in all too many instances died for the preservation of these principles.<sup>77</sup>

New York state senator Lazarus Joseph echoed this criticism. "I am one of those unfortunates whose kids did not come back [from the war], and there were thousands of them, Catholic, Protestant and Jews, Negro and white, who died to keep this sweet land free. I hate and despise those bigots, like the nefarious Senator Bilbo of Mississippi."<sup>78</sup>

<sup>72</sup> *Newsweek*, August 6, 1945, p. 39.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Commonweal*, August 10, 1945, p. 397.

<sup>75</sup> *The Nation*, August 4, 1945, p. 101.

<sup>76</sup> *New York Times*, August 10, 1945.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, August 11, 1945.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, August 17, 1945.

Groups used the new rhetoric in calling for Bilbo's removal. The Communist Party passed a resolution on August 15 asking for "proceedings [on removal] as soon as possible so that the people of our nation may retain the fruits of the victory which we have gained in the successful waging of war against Hitlerism, fascism, and Japanese militarism."<sup>79</sup> Even conservative organizations began to support his removal. In November 1945, the Jewish War Veterans called for Bilbo's impeachment.<sup>80</sup>

Opposition to Bilbo continued to grow during the first half of 1946. By January of that year, protesters were picketing Bilbo's Washington, D.C., apartment on a regular basis.<sup>81</sup> On February 25 Senator Mead presented a petition from the Citizen's Committee of the Upper West Side that called for Bilbo's expulsion for "conduct unbecoming a member of Congress."<sup>82</sup> A few days later Jimmy Roosevelt, discussing the future of his father's party, said, "I would gladly give Bilbo and Rankin to the other side. Speaking personally, I'd be glad to see them both out of public life altogether."<sup>83</sup>

Bilbo seemed to relish these attacks. In January 1946 he announced that he would seek re-election, saying, "I am ready to wage the most strenuous fight of my life to defeat the Fair Employment Practices Commission, the anti-poll tax bill, the anti-lynching bill, and the \$4 billion loan to England." He added, "If you draft Negro boys into the army, give them three good meals a day, a good uniform and let them shoot craps and drink liquor around the barracks for a year, they won't be worth a tinker's damm thereafter."<sup>84</sup> Bilbo was clearly not going to step aside.

Anti-Bilbo sentiment now emerged from unexpected sources. Prior to 1946 most media opposition to him had come from progressive publications such as the *Nation* and the *New Republic*. In June 1946, as Bilbo began his bid for re-election, the *Saturday Evening Post*, traditionally an organ of small-town American conservatism, published a cover story on Bilbo entitled, "Bilbo: America's Worst Demagogue Runs Again." The story called Bilbo "America's most notorious merchant of hatred." Reflecting the growing awareness of Bilbo's racism, Milton Lehman wrote, "It's been six years since the voters have seen him, six years since they elected him as their senior senator to Congress. In that time, he has made him-

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, August 16, 1945.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, November 26, 1945.

<sup>81</sup> *Time*, January 7, 1946, p. 17.

<sup>82</sup> *New York Times*, January 31, 1946.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, March 1, 1946.

<sup>84</sup> *Time*, January 7, 1946, p. 17.

self known throughout the nation.” Employing the same rhetoric as the *Saturday Evening Post’s* liberal counterparts, Lehman wrote, “Indeed, his infamy has spread across the high seas. In Germany, today, citizens of the Reich sometimes ask the American military, ‘What kind of man is this Senator Bilbo?’”<sup>85</sup> The magazine supported immigration restriction on racist grounds in the 1920s and Hitler’s coming to power in 1933 because of his anti-communism. Now, in the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust, the journal condemned Bilbo. The attitudes of white elites, liberal and conservative, were changing.

Prior to 1946 most of the political opposition to Bilbo had come from liberals such as Robert Wagner of New York. However, in March 1946 *Life* quoted Senator Robert Taft of Ohio, the conservative leader of the Senate Republicans, as referring to Bilbo as “a disgrace to the Senate.”<sup>86</sup> In June 1946 Taft wrote to a constituent:

We have considered filing a petition to oust him [Bilbo] by a two-thirds vote, but he would revel in the publicity of a trial. Of course, as a general thing, senators cannot begin denouncing other senators because they disagree with them, but certainly Bilbo is not on the same basis as any other senator that I know of.<sup>87</sup>

While Taft did not yet support an effort to remove Bilbo, he appeared very close to approving one.

Between the spring of 1944 and the summer of 1946, changing perceptions of racism and nativism transformed Theodore Bilbo from an unremarkable southern senator to a national, and indeed, international symbol of bigotry. His anti-black rhetoric, which had changed little since the late 1920s, became an outrage outside of the South as white elites became more conscious of the contradiction between American ideals and American practice. His anti-Italian and anti-Semitic statements, which appeared to be a relatively new part of his rhetorical arsenal, were especially unwelcome in the aftermath of the war and the Holocaust.

When Bilbo went home to campaign in the summer of 1946, he faced a dramatically different situation from that of 1940. Northern and border state Democrats no longer wished to campaign with him. An extraordi-

<sup>85</sup> *Saturday Evening Post*, June 29, 1946, p. 18.

<sup>86</sup> *Life*, March 11, 1946, p. 10.

<sup>87</sup> *Saturday Evening Post*, June 29, 1946, p. 19.

narily broad coalition of elites—including both the *Nation* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, the Communist Party and the Jewish War Veterans, Robert Wagner and Robert Taft—desired and/or seriously considered his expulsion from the Senate.

Bilbo, however, now faced another problem in his native Mississippi. Some African-Americans in Mississippi were challenging segregation after a pair of changes created opportunities for black voting. In 1944, the Supreme Court had ruled the all-white Democratic primary unconstitutional in *Smith v. Allwright*.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, the Mississippi legislature unintentionally opened the door to black participation when it exempted veterans from the poll tax in 1946. The legislature expected other measures, such as the literacy test, to prevent African-American veterans from voting.<sup>89</sup> Emboldened by these measures, some black veterans, including a young man by the name of Medgar Evers, attempted to vote in the Democratic primary on July 2, 1946, the first statewide election after *Smith v. Allwright*.

With blacks engaged in an attack on a bulwark of white supremacy, Bilbo stepped up his rhetoric and engaged in incitements that had been unnecessary in the past. “I’m calling on every red-blooded American who believes in the superiority and integrity of the white race to get out and see that no nigger votes,” he proclaimed, “and the best time to do that is the night before!”<sup>90</sup> As a result of Bilbo’s inflammatory statements and the incitements of the local press, some white Mississippians responded with a campaign of intimidation and violence. Evers and a group of veterans made two attempts to vote in Decatur, but on both occasions white mobs prevented them from doing so. Their experience was replicated across the state, and few African-Americans were able to exercise their constitutional rights.<sup>91</sup>

In the end, Bilbo defeated his four opponents, garnering fifty-one percent of the vote to avoid a runoff and win re-election to a third term. Although Bilbo’s opponents shared his views on segregation, the attacks by northern politicians and newspapers had allowed “The Man” to portray himself, in classic southern tradition, as defending Mississippi’s way of

<sup>88</sup> *Smith V. Allwright*, 321 U.S. 649 (1944).

<sup>89</sup> Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 103.

<sup>90</sup> *Senate Report No. 1, Parts 1 and 2*, 80th Congress, 1st Sess, 1947, p. 9.

<sup>91</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 1–3.

life against outside interference. The New Orleans *Times-Picayune* commented that

Thousands who voted for him would have preferred to cast their ballots for a candidate of finer character and better qualification . . . . But the major issues in her senatorial campaign were shaped by outside extremists and propagandists of demagogue stripe whose stupid tactics made Bilbo's election all but inevitable from the campaign start. The Senator shrewdly capitalized and exploited their stupidity.<sup>92</sup>

Indeed, Bilbo achieved his broadest geographic support ever, winning seventy-six out of eighty-two counties, including all but one in the Delta, the traditional center of anti-Bilbo sentiment.<sup>93</sup>

Bilbo's mail revealed what a polarizing figure he had become. Defenders of racial supremacy sang his praises. A man from Mississippi said, "I heartily indorse [*sic*] the stand you have taken against the Social Equality of the negroes."<sup>94</sup> This kind of support did not come from his fellow southerners only. A Winnetka, Illinois, man referred to Bilbo's repatriation proposal and declared, "I thank God that there are men like you who are not afraid to tell the truth about the past."<sup>95</sup> His opponents also had strong feelings. One World War II veteran told him he was "a menace to democracy and to the people defending it."<sup>96</sup> Another commented on his re-election, "I see Mississippi had disgraced itself again."<sup>97</sup>

Bilbo's victory would prove to be short-lived, however, as "The Man's" election-eve comments provided his enemies with the opportunity to expel him from the Senate. On June 27 Senator Glenn Taylor (D) of Idaho, a New Dealer who would run as Henry Wallace's vice-presidential candidate in 1948, asked the Senate Privileges and Election Committee to investigate Bilbo's conduct.<sup>98</sup>

The attacks on Bilbo only intensified in August when he revealed his old Klan membership on the radio program "Meet the Press." He was unrepentant. "No man can leave the Klan. He takes an oath not to do

<sup>92</sup> New Orleans *Time-Picayune*, July 4, 1946.

<sup>93</sup> Morgan, *Redneck Liberal*, 250.

<sup>94</sup> Bilbo papers, Box 932, Folder 5, June 18, 1946.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, Box 945, Folder 5.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, Box 1037, Folder 1, June 23, 1946.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, Box 938, Folder 6, July 20, 1946.

<sup>98</sup> *New York Times*, June 28, 1946.

that. Once a Ku Klux, always a Ku Klux," declared Bilbo.<sup>99</sup> The reaction to his admission was another example of changing elite perceptions. *Dixie Demagogues*, published in 1939, had exposed Bilbo's Klan membership but drawn little notice; in 1946, however, the Federation of Italian Americans and the Shriners joined the chorus demanding Bilbo's removal.<sup>100</sup> Bilbo's admission of his Klan ties also exacerbated his difficulties with his Senate colleagues. *The Nation* wrote, "His endorsement of the Ku Klux Klan and his boast of membership appear to have genuinely shocked many Senators."<sup>101</sup>

Bilbo's problems continued to grow. On September 19, 1946, an interracial group of Mississippians filed a complaint with the U.S. Senate Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, asking that Bilbo be removed from office. In October, a separate congressional investigation into Bilbo's questionable relationships with defense contractors began.<sup>102</sup> On November 30 the *Amsterdam News*, one of several black newspapers that were important in the anti-Bilbo effort, editorialized, "He has become so vile that the men who would sit with him in Congress can bear him no longer."<sup>103</sup> "The Man" was under siege from all fronts.

A Senate committee went to Mississippi to investigate whether Bilbo's campaign rhetoric had prevented blacks from voting in the Democratic primary. Although the Republicans had regained control of the Senate in the 1946 elections, the Democrats remained in the majority until January. As a result, the committee was composed of three Democrats and two Republicans and chaired by a Democrat, Allen Ellender of Louisiana. The group conducted three days of hearings in Jackson between December 2 and December 5, and the proceedings records provide a remarkable window into the brutal nature of the Jim Crow system. African American veterans, many appearing in uniform, testified about the white campaign of intimidation and disenfranchisement, several witnesses recalling that election officials discarded their ballots without explanation while others, such as Elroy Fletcher, described acts of violence:

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, August 10, 1946.

<sup>100</sup> Michie and Ryhlick, *Dixie Demagogues*, 97; *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 24, 1946; August 31, 1946.

<sup>101</sup> *The Nation*, September 28, 1946, p. 341.

<sup>102</sup> *New York Times*, October 15, 1946. This seems to have been a way for the Congress to push Bilbo out of the Senate without addressing racial issues.

<sup>103</sup> *Amsterdam News*, November 30, 1946.

Well, when I went out to register, the circuit clerk told me to go to another room upstairs to the man that handled the veterans, and when I went up to see this man he told me that we weren't allowed to vote, and I went on out; and I was standing across the street waiting for a bus, and a car came up before me and three of the men got out and got around me, and told me to get in the car, and I couldn't resist, so I got in, and another car followed with two or three men in it, and they took me down in the wood and whipped me.<sup>104</sup>

Another witness, Dr. William Bender, said that a white man jumped in his face with a pistol and dared him to enter the voting area.<sup>105</sup> Other blacks told the committee that whites had paid them to urge other African Americans not to vote.<sup>106</sup>

Although numerous witnesses testified that Bilbo's remarks frightened them away from the polls, Ellender repeatedly tried to demonstrate that tradition and custom, as opposed to Bilbo's incitements, were responsible for these events.<sup>107</sup> He asked virtually every witness some variance of the following question, "Isn't it true that for many years it has been taken for granted that the white people of Mississippi, not only Mississippi, but of many Southern states, have made every effort to maintain the primary elections for themselves and did all they could to prevent the colored people from voting in their primaries?"<sup>108</sup>

The hearings concluded with Bilbo's own testimony in which he claimed that he had never advocated violent means to prevent blacks from voting, suggesting that a hostile media had distorted his remarks. Bilbo declared, "I deny that I exhorted, agitated, and made any inflammatory appeals to the passions and prejudices of the white population to foster, stimulate, inspire, create and intensify a state of acute and aggravated tension between the white and Negro races in the state of Mississippi."<sup>109</sup> He added, "I want to say right here off the record that the Negroes of Mississippi have never had a better friend."<sup>110</sup>

<sup>104</sup> United States Senate, 79th Congress, 2nd session, *Hearings Before the Special Committee to Investigate Senatorial Campaign Expenditures, 1946* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1947), 46 (hereinafter cited as *Bilbo Hearings*).

<sup>105</sup> *Bilbo Hearings*, 89.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 245–55, 260–69.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 102, 113, 120, 122.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Senate Report No. 1, Parts 1 and 2, 80th Congress, 1st Sess., 1947, pp. 1-23.

The committee split along party lines. The three Democrats on the committee, Ellender, Burnet Maybank of South Carolina, and Elmer Thomas of Oklahoma, were from southern or border states and exonerated Bilbo. The majority concluded that tradition rather than Bilbo's incitements prevented blacks from voting. The two Republicans, Styles Bridges of New Hampshire and Bourke Hickenlooper of Iowa, disagreed, saying that Bilbo had abused the First Amendment by engaging in inflammatory rhetoric.<sup>111</sup> Although the committee cleared Bilbo, the Republicans who opposed Bilbo were poised to take power in the Senate and were prepared to ignore the majority's conclusions. The stage was set for a confrontation between Theodore G. Bilbo and the United States Senate.

When the 80th Congress began on January 3, 1947, the new Republican majority did not allow Bilbo to take his seat. A debate over Bilbo's seating ensued that reflected familiar themes. Glenn Taylor, the leading Democrat in the anti-Bilbo effort, argued, "To those on the lowest rung of the ladder he does not offer a lift; he merely offers to create another rung, still lower, so that the progress of man will be a series of descending steps. This is the same sort of cheap thrill that was peddled in Germany by an ambitious house painter some ten years ago."<sup>112</sup> Senator Ellender retorted,

The same groups which for the past four years have been fighting Senator Bilbo and what he stands for are behind this movement. But instead of having the courage to come into the Senate and say, "Throw him out because of his views on the poll tax bill," they have camouflaged the issue.<sup>113</sup>

Democratic senator John Overton of Louisiana proposed two procedural measures to allow Bilbo to take his seat while the investigations continued. These maneuvers were very important because only a majority vote was required to deny him his office before he was seated. If Bilbo were seated, however, a two-thirds majority would then be required to expel him from the Senate. The votes on these motions revealed a historically important split within the Democratic Party, as ten northern and western Democrats joined with the Republicans to defeat one or both of the motions. J. William Fulbright of Arkansas, then a freshman senator,

<sup>112</sup> *Cong. Rec.*, 80<sup>th</sup> Cong. 1 Sess., p. 13.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.



and Claude Pepper of Florida were the only southern Democrats to break with regional loyalties.<sup>114</sup>

Virtually the entire national media supported the move against Bilbo. The *Boston Globe*, the *New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times* all editorialized in favor of his removal.<sup>115</sup> In a sign that Bilbo's support was declining in the South, the *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* strongly approved of his removal, although it cited the war profiteering charges rather than his racist incitements as its rationale. "There are diverse opinions as to the parliamentary means of preventing Theodore Bilbo from taking or holding a seat in the United States Senate, but there can be no reasonable or honest doubt of his unfitness to do so," it editorialized.<sup>116</sup>

The anti-Bilbo forces still faced many obstacles. Mississippi governor Fielding Wright, who was to serve as Strom Thurmond's running mate on the States' Rights Democratic ticket in 1948, declared that if the Senate removed Bilbo, he would simply name "The Man" as his own replacement.<sup>117</sup> Southern Democrats threatened a filibuster, and it appeared that Truman's State of the Union Address might be delayed because of the impasse.<sup>118</sup> The two sides, however, reached a settlement. Democratic senators Clyde Hoey of North Carolina and Pepper separately approached Bilbo about stepping aside. Bilbo appeared willing but said he needed his salary to pay for surgery for his throat cancer. As a result, the Senate agreed to delay action on certifying his credentials until his health allowed.<sup>119</sup> While Congress did not accept Bilbo's credentials, "The Man's" colleagues refused to completely reject him.

Despite this compromise, the anti-Bilbo coalition believed it was victorious. The *New York Times* editorialized, "The Bilbo compromise reached by the Senate late Saturday afternoon was really a victory for those who carried on the fight against the Senator-elect."<sup>120</sup> The *New Republic* agreed: "The chances were very slim that he [Bilbo] would ever enter it [the Senate] again as a U.S. Senator."<sup>121</sup> Bilbo's supporters were disappointed.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 20; *New York Times*, January 4, 1947. The votes on the two motions were 39-19 and 38-20, respectively.

<sup>115</sup> *Boston Globe*, January 4, 1947; *New York Times*, January 6, 1947; *Los Angeles Times*, January 3, 1947.

<sup>116</sup> *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 3, 1947.

<sup>117</sup> *New York Times*, January 5, 1947.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, January 4, 1947.

<sup>119</sup> *Newsweek*, January 20, 1947, p. 27.

<sup>120</sup> *New York Times*, January 6, 1947.

<sup>121</sup> *New Republic*, January 13, 1947, p. 6.

The New Orleans *Times-Picayune* said, "The Senate 'compromise,' so-called, on the issue of Senator Bilbo's admission, may be defended on the grounds of expediency, but not it seems to us, upon constitutional or moral grounds."<sup>122</sup> Both sides felt the anti-Bilbo forces had succeeded.

Bilbo's correspondence shows that he still had his supporters after this fight. A West Virginia woman wrote, "I am very sorry that you are physically unable to continue your 'fight' in Washington at this time." She went on to praise his opposition to miscegenation, adding, "As I see it, our civilization is already in the evening twilight of its existence, and nothing can stop it."<sup>123</sup> The opposition of the national media and northeastern politicians continued to strengthen his support in Mississippi. One man from Jackson declared, "Like everybody in Mississippi, I have been watching the newspapers and listening to the radio and have kept up with you, and just want you to know that friends and foes alike are for you 1000%." He added, "In Kemper, Winston, and Sunflower counties I have heard, during the past week, a score or more men who have never voted for you in their lives say that if the election was being held now they would vote for you regardless of who opposed you."<sup>124</sup>

Bilbo never took his Senate seat again. He went to a New Orleans hospital to have surgery for throat cancer and died there six months later on August 21, 1947. In death, he was hailed as a hero by defenders of white supremacy and condemned as a symbol of racism by Jim Crow's opponents. Senator Ellender said, "Senator Bilbo died a martyr to southern traditions, and his name will long be remembered when those of his most bitter critics will be forgotten before they are cold in their graves."<sup>125</sup> *The Nation* wrote, "We would be hard put to find a kinder word for Theodore G. Bilbo than the classic observation that he was not always as bad as he was sometimes."<sup>126</sup> The *Richmond Afro-American* declared, "News of Senator-Elect Theodore G. Bilbo's death in New Orleans brought on unparalleled rejoicing throughout civilized America," adding that "bartenders throughout the country [are] giving free drinks with which to toast the end of four decades of racial hatred."<sup>127</sup>

<sup>122</sup> New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, January 7, 1947.

<sup>123</sup> Bilbo Papers, Box 957, Folder 1, January 8, 1947.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, Folder 9, January 13, 1947

<sup>125</sup> New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, August 23, 1947.

<sup>126</sup> *The Nation*, August 30, 1947, p. 195.

<sup>127</sup> *Richmond Afro-American*, August 30, 1947.

**IV**

The Senate's effort to deny Bilbo his seat was clear evidence of change. The war against Nazi Germany, the unifying effect of World War II, and America's new role as the leader of the Western world altered elite attitudes outside of the South toward public racism. By 1947, such extreme rhetoric had become unacceptable from a major public figure.