Chapter Seven

Challenging “Alleged Causes”

Ida B. Wells’s third text on terrorist tactics, *Mob Rule in New Orleans*, is a succinct analysis of legal complicity, silent conspiracy, and the economics of lynching. I draw upon the following timeline\(^1\) as a basis from which to suggest that it is highly probable that concerns about a police-precipitated incident that fueled extreme mob brutality, without intervention from elected officials, would not have been raised had New Orleans’s bond rating not been adversely impacted:

- Monday, July 24, 1900—at approximately 10:30 p.m. police instigated an unwarranted assault against two colored men sitting outside a residence on Dryades St.
- Tuesday, July 25, 1900—manhunt located Charles, between 2:30 and 5:00 a.m., at 2023 4th Street; an unidentified innocent man subjected to mob rule; two officers killed.
- Wednesday, July 26, 1900—manhunt continued as rampant lawlessness escalates.
- Thursday, July 27, 1900—mob rule continued.
- Friday, July 28, 1900—concern surfaces regarding financial impact of mob rule as rioting continued; house in which Charles hid set on fire by besiegers, forcing Charles to confront the mob who riddled his body with bullets.

In his analysis of the crisis of the new South, historian Edward L. Ayers’s description of what he described as deliberately orchestrated insanity suggests that whites were not necessarily conscious that they were, in effect, responsible for the chaotic fear-based society in which they were the primary architects. According to Ayers, “[W]hites, it seems fair to say, did not know they were battling a foe of their own creation.”\(^2\) After all, as Ayers explained, “when white Southerners
read of a widely publicized lynching...they automatically assumed that a rape had indeed occurred and began to look for warnings of the crime in their own community.” Tangible proof was not required. “The ‘insolence’ of local blacks, the appearance of a ‘strange nigger,’ a rash of breaking and entering—all could be taken as evidence that an ‘outrage’ might be imminent.” For this reason, “every accusation, every suspicion, every lynching of an innocent ‘rapist’ echoed throughout the South, so that all sense of proportion disappeared.”

Wells illustrated quite effectively that from the perspective of law enforcement officials, the issue at hand more often than not dictated that a public image be maintained by whatever means necessary. The evidence, according to Wells, indicated that “legal sanction was given to the mob to kill Charles at sight by the Mayor of New Orleans, who publicly proclaimed a reward of two hundred and fifty dollars, not for the arrest of Charles, not at all, but the reward was offered for Charles’ body, dead or alive.” Does it stand to reason that to lie, then, is to ensure that a prescribed way of life will not be interrupted?

People lie for different reasons. But once set in motion, initiators must continue to build upon the fabrication in order to safeguard their public persona. All too frequently this means that persons will go to extreme measures to misrepresent the facts. When this occurs, alleged accusers rarely consider the impact that falsification of details will have upon families and communities. The supposed victim, in most cases, is also oblivious to what could occur should the truth of the matter be discovered or revealed at some future time. This line of thinking demonstrates that “to deny either the irrationality or rationality of lynching...is to miss its essence” since “lynching was madness, but with a method,” as Ayers’s research confirmed.

In a context where provocation by authority figures fueled unmitigated terror without fear of retribution it is perhaps no coincidence as Brundage, concurring with Wells, noted that “at work stirring up mobs and focusing their wrath upon certain targets were social, economic, and political concerns rooted in the dramatic changes that the South underwent between 1865 and 1930.” Echoing the prophet Habakkuk (2.2b), Wells’s stated purpose for documenting this particular incident and providing supporting statistics is to “present the facts in a plain, unvarnished, connected way, so that he who runs may read.”

According to Wells, an unpredictable meeting resulted in many individuals combining forces to destroy Robert Charles who, from all accounts, was guilty of daring to defend himself against arrogant