

# **APPENDIX H**

## **PSYCHOLOGY OF THE WILMINGTON RIOT**

## The Psychology of the Wilmington Riot

This short essay seeks to understand the psychology of the Wilmington Riot through the use of a comparative analysis study done by psychologist Arnold Goldstein. In his book, *The Psychology of Group Aggression*, Goldstein explained theories developed by other experts and brought examples of group aggression from throughout history together in his work. While he did not specifically study the Wilmington riot, many of the theories put forth in Goldstein's are directly applicable to the development of an environment in the city that facilitated the rise of violence on November 10, 1898.<sup>1</sup>

Goldstein defined a mob as "a crowd acting under strong emotional conditions that often lead to violence or illegal acts." He further explained that a riot is "an instance of mob violence, with the destruction of property or looting, or violence against people." (105-106) To Goldstein, "mobs are the product of a process of evolution" and they are formed by people sharing the same "conscious or unconscious needs." (108-109)

By his theory, the participants in a riot go through a process of "de-individuation," which he defines as "the process of losing one's sense of individuality or separateness from others and becoming submerged in a group." De-individuation results in the loss of one's "individual responsibility" as well as the creation of a sense of anonymity, particularly from potential punishment for actions. De-individuated group members are characterized by un-inhibited behavior that is generally against the norm of accepted behavior. De-individuation can be facilitated by the inclusion of other factors such as sensory overload and the introduction of drugs or alcohol. (30-33)

Another psychological theory described by Goldstein that is pertinent to the understanding of the Wilmington riot is the concept of "groupthink." Members of the mob were influenced by concepts put forward in this theory. Groupthink is the result of several factors: immense pressure to conform (Democratic Party propaganda tools that made white men feel inadequate if they did not participate in White Government Union and Party activities), self-censorship of dissenting ideas (suppression of previous Populist or Republican ideals), the presence of "mindguards" that divert "controversial information away from the group" (Democratic Party leaders would not permit opposing viewpoints to be seen or heard at rallies or in papers), and apparent unanimity of the group (Democratic leaders focused on areas where everyone agreed --- the importance of the subordination of black presence and re-emergence of white leadership). (32-33)

Another of Goldstein's theories of mob violence stipulates that individuals who participate in a mob do so because of a sense of deprivation – "the belief that others are climbing up the economic ladder while oneself is not, or the belief that one's own earlier economic gains are being lost." He believed that this "sense of blocked opportunity and unjust exclusion from economic gain has been an especially potent specific instigator of

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold P. Goldstein, *The Psychology of Group Aggression*, (Sussex, England: John Wiley and Sons, 2002)

riot and rebellion in American history.” Goldstein argued that riots need a “trigger” or a “precipitating event” to begin. (111-112)

Goldstein demonstrated that the precipitating event for a riot may take place well before the violence because members of the pending riot may need to “plan and mobilize.” In this context, the precipitating events serve to “confirm the threatening nature of the target group, mobilize ordinary citizens and justify the violence they are about to perpetrate.” Such events could be: “ethnic processions, demonstrations, and mass meetings.” These types of events show participants that there are a number of other citizens who are similarly motivated and that if action is taken, it will be done in unison. Therefore, the white supremacy parades, Red Shirt rallies and WGU meetings, combined with the mass meeting on November 9 at which the White Declaration of Independence was passed, could all be considered triggers for the violence of November 10. (114)

Following Goldstein’s theories further, riots follow a “common progression” of triggering mechanisms before a final “flashpoint” ignites the riot. Riots begin well before violence breaks out with broad, non-specific factors, including “media sensationalism,” widespread rumors, a large population of unemployed males, and the expectation that rioting will result in change. He believed that any number of sudden, immediate events could trigger a riot. Other events in the progress of the riot, such as “seeing friends and allies under attack, the desecration or flourishing of flags, statues, or other sacred symbols” or the “appearance of an especially tempting target” or “particular enemy figure” sustain the riot and act as new triggers to perpetuate the violence. Using his psychological theory, the end of a riot happens when police or authority figures stop the violence in a variety of ways – through distractions, re-individuation, dispersion, isolation of leaders – or when “participants come to believe they have succeeded in their goals.”(112-113)

Psychologists have observed that riots develop a life of their own once they begin. The first stage of the riot is an attack on property and the riot then moves to attacks on people. As the riot grows and more people join in, the duration of the riot depends on the resistance met by rioters, their organization and leadership, the “success” of their violence and the “degree to which extant authorities send permissive signals encouraging continuance or vigorously intervene.” The riot may also spread to other areas, sometimes distant from the precipitating site, because of several factors. In the case of Wilmington, the spread of the riot from one side of town to another was due to “overt ratification of violence” by leadership such as Waddell and a “new precipitating event at the new location” such as the argument over occupation of the street corners at Fourth and Harnett. Goldstein explained that riot sites “tend to be urban, mixed ethnic residential, close to the location of the attacker’s homes and ..... at the borderlines or boundaries” where the two opposing sides meet. Goldstein clearly described the violence in Wilmington – the area of the first murders, the intersection Fourth and Harnett Streets, was a mixed neighborhood on the borders of both the black and white neighborhoods and many of the earliest rioters in that section of town were residents of the area.(114-115)

Ethnic riots, or those based on race, as explained by Goldstein and others, have a “more or less predictable course, flow or rhythm” although they “appear to be random, chaotic and irrational.” The psychologists describe such riots as “lethal attacks by the members of one ethnic group upon another, designed to degrade the targeted group, inflict harm or kill them, and thus reduce the ethnic heterogeneity of one’s region or state.” These riots grow just as other riots but also incorporate “selective destruction” of the target group as well as attacks on symbols of “the other side.” By this standard, the events in Wilmington fit a pattern of racial violence and group aggression similar to later riots in Atlanta and Tulsa. (116-117)