

**Scene on Radio**  
**Season 6, Episode 4: The Forgetting**  
**Transcript**

**John Biewen:** Another content warning: This episode includes the use of a racial slur.

**Michael Betts:** John, this story we're telling has me thinking a lot about the truly immense power of propaganda.

**John Biewen:** Uh, yeah.

**Michael Betts:** And the wildly different meanings that events can take on, depending on who's controlling the narrative. For example, if I say the word "race riot," what do you think comes to mind for the average American, based on the way that phrase usually appears in our news media and history books?

**John Biewen:** Let's see. Los Angeles, 1992, after the verdict in the Rodney King beating. Or the 1960s: Watts, 1965. The unrest in a lot of cities after Dr. King's assassination....

**Michael Betts:** Right. Black people rising up in anger, in response to racial injustice or, some would say, *perceived* injustice. Again in 2020, some news organizations used the word “riots” to describe the uprising after the murder of George Floyd.

**John Biewen:** Those protests were mostly peaceful, though there was destruction in some cities, including Minneapolis where demonstrators set fire to a police precinct. Some people took advantage of the moment to break into stores and loot, in New York City and elsewhere.

**Michael Betts:** I just have to point out that the damage done by those protesters wasn’t much worse than the stuff some people do to their cities – usually white folks – after their sports teams win national championships.

**John Biewen:** That’s true. Tipping over cars, tearing down streetlights, setting stuff on fire. It’s usually not called a riot, is it.

**Michael A Betts, II:** It’s folks celebrating and getting carried away. But look at what happened in Wilmington, North Carolina on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1898. A bunch of white men marched through the city with guns, and they didn’t just set fire to a building – although they did that, too.

**John Biewen:** They burned down the only Black-owned daily newspaper in the United States at the time.

**Michael Betts:** They also killed a couple dozen Black people, and very likely a lot more than that – and they overthrew the local government at gunpoint. And for what reason? What was the grievance? They were outraged by Black people asserting their rights as equal citizens, and by the fact that some powerful and influential white folks supported real, multiracial democracy.

**John Biewen:** And to your point: In the following decades, did this go down in the public narrative as a brutal “race riot”? How were the events of November 10<sup>th</sup> described and remembered in the aftermath? In Episode 3 we talked about the propaganda campaign that *led up to* November 1898, which served to justify in advance whatever the white supremacists were going to do.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** Because the alleged nightmare of so-called “negro rule” was just intolerable. But *after* the massacre and coup, a new propaganda campaign kicked into gear – immediately.

**Voiceover (Mike Wiley):** The Raleigh News and Observer, November 11, 1898:

A Day of Blood. Negroes Precipitate Conflict by Firing on the whites....

### **Music**

**John Biewen:** As we’ve made clear, there’s no evidence that Black people “precipitated the conflict.” But white supremacists controlled most of the printing

presses in North Carolina at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and they told a false story: that Black people got out of control, and brave and heroic white men had to step in with guns to solve the problem.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** That story stuck – until a few years later, when the dominant voices in the state, and the nation, stopped talking about Wilmington 1898 altogether.

### **Theme Music**

**John Biewen:** From the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, this is Scene on Radio Season 6: Echoes of a Coup, Episode 4. I'm John Biewen.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** And I'm Michael Betts.

**John Biewen:** This time: how white elites made the state, and the nation, forget – what was stolen, who was killed, and why it was done.

**Michael Betts:** And the Black people who left breadcrumbs for us to find. Interestingly, one very early and powerful account of Wilmington 1898 was presented as fiction.

Which goes to show you: Sometimes fiction conveys important truths while journalists, presumably working in *nonfiction*, tell outright lies.

**Sound: Cicadas**

**John Biewen:** That day we spent touring around Wilmington with LeRae Umfleet – it was August, and the cicadas were going strong in the big magnolias and willow oaks outside the Bellamy Mansion.

**Sound:** Voices, footsteps going from outside to inside

**Gareth Evans:** My name is Gareth Evans, I'm the director of the Bellamy Mansion Museum. The museum is a site which encompasses an 1859 original urban slave quarters, which as historians we think is the most important building on the site because of its rarity value now. It wasn't rare then, but it's rare to still have it and be interpreted. And then next to it is a 10,000-square-foot, five-story mansion built by slave owners and plantation holders, the Bellamy family, which was finished in 1861, just months before the Civil War starts.

**Michael Betts:** The neoclassical mansion has tall white pillars. It's a place that people visit for its grandeur and its *general* historical significance. But the Bellamy house is also deeply relevant to our story.

**LeRae Umfleet:** The reason I wanted to come to the Bellamy is because of the role that John D Bellamy played in the events that led up to the violence here in Wilmington.

**Gareth Evans:** This place is a centerpiece for 1898 because John Bellamy, Junior, was one of the white supremacist Democrats who led the whole lead-up and the actual events at the time...

**John Biewen:** John D. Bellamy, Jr. was the son of one of North Carolina's richest men – the plantation owner and physician who built Bellamy Mansion. In 1898, Bellamy Jr. was a 44-year-old attorney and a Democratic candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** That year, he hosted white supremacist planning meetings, and meetings of the vigilante group, the Red Shirts, at his office. He spoke at the November 9<sup>th</sup> meeting where he and 456 other men signed the White Declaration of Independence. Witnesses said that on November 10<sup>th</sup>, Bellamy was one of the leaders of the mob that burned down the Black-owned newspaper, and he helped to organize the coup d'etat.

**John Biewen:** On November 8<sup>th</sup>, Bellamy “won” election to the U.S. House, defeating a former Congressman, Oliver Dockery. Historian LeRae Umfleet.

**LeRae Umfleet:** Dockery, the Republican candidate, knew that the election had been fraudulently won by the Democratic Party through intimidation, ballot stuffing, and all of those things. And so he challenged the validity of the election, following the protocol within the House of Representatives. And that meant taking testimony, calling a grand jury. And all of that information was collected, and that is in the book that's here at the Bellamy....

**Michael A. Betts, II:** The transcript of that election fraud trial was one of the most crucial sources of information for LeRae Umfleet and other historians, a century later. In the Congressional investigation challenging his defeat, Oliver Dockery and his attorneys brought forth a mass of evidence about the white supremacist Democrats and their efforts to rig the 1898 election.

**LeRae Umfleet:** Dockery brought tons of witnesses to explain how they witnessed the fraud and the intimidation in the leadup to the campaign and even the day of the election. And firsthand accounts of the violence that happened, the ballot stuffing that happened and even the number of guns that were imported into the city prior to the election. However, all of that information did not win the case for him, that the election needed to be redone, because Bellamy was college chums or Masonic brothers of many of the people who were in charge of the investigation.

**Gareth Evans:** He had over seventy witnesses for Dockery, who was suing him for election fraud. Bellamy only called four, and Bellamy won. And then against a lot of opposition in Congress, took his seat in Congress after that.

**Michael A. Betts. II:** Some members of Congress, Republicans and northern Democrats, objected to Bellamy being seated because of the evidence his election was fixed.

**Gareth Evans:** After a while, the other congressmen said, oh, well, come and sit anyway. And so he did, and he served a couple of terms.

## **Music**

**John Biewen:** William Henderson, a leading Black lawyer in Wilmington who was banished from the city after the massacre and coup, wrote of Bellamy Jr.:

**Voiceover (Mike Wiley), William E. Henderson:** [He] walks cheerfully to his seat over broken homes, broken hearts, disappointed lives, dead husbands and fathers, the trampled rights of freedmen, and not one word of condemnation is heard.



## Music

**John Biewen:** An elite white man – and his entire state party – trample the norms of free and fair elections, and when the evidence is laid out in detail, they face no consequences. The court case, like the election that it's supposedly examining, is rigged.

**Michael Betts:** And John Bellamy Jr. is so *unashamed* of this result that he has the court transcript bound into a book so he can share it with visitors at his mansion. The fraudulent election stands, the coup stands, everyone moves on.

**John Biewen:** Michael, I think maybe ten years ago I would have been more shocked about this story – the brazenness, the lack of accountability. I would have seen it more as an artifact from some earlier, less “advanced” historical moment in U.S. history. But now?

**Michael A. Betts, II:** Now it just makes our own time seem a little less strange. It also speaks to the fact that white supremacists were in full control after they took a wrecking ball to North Carolina's democracy in 1898.

**John Biewen:** Yes. They really went on to finish the job over the next couple of years.

**David Cecelski:** The very first thing they do is, you know, when they gain power, you know, they used to call the next state legislature the white supremacy legislature.

**John Biewen:** Historian David Cecelski.

**David Cecelski:** They go through and begin to codify racial discrimination. So they codify that Black people can't sit with white people on trains. They take away the right of African Americans to vote, basically completely.

**John Biewen:** With its new Democratic majority, the North Carolina legislature, in 1899 and 1900, passed laws to disenfranchise Black voters. They made it harder to register, introduced a poll tax, and let registrars disqualify voters based on a subjective literacy test. To make it clear that poor and illiterate white men would not be disqualified, they included a “grandfather clause.” It declared that the test would not apply to anyone who had an ancestor eligible to vote in 1867.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** That is, of course, a date when virtually all voters in North Carolina were white – *before* the Constitutional amendment that guaranteed the right to vote regardless of race. By 1904, state lawmakers had erased Black North Carolinians – one third of the state population – from the voter rolls.

**Music**

**David Cecelski:** And they began laying out a system of, that we eventually began to call Jim Crow, that whites and Blacks have to live in separate areas, this whole system. And that's a created thing. And it all comes out of the white supremacy movement of 1898, 1900. And for the next, I'm just going to say, at least the next 60 years, not a single white elected politician in North Carolina speaks out against white supremacy. Not a single white church leader. Not a single head of the state Board of Education is not committed to white supremacy. For the first 30 years, all the heads of the State Board of Education had been members of white supremacy clubs, as was every single governor.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** In another episode we mentioned George H. White, who'd been elected to several terms in the United States House, representing North Carolina's Second District. Of the 22 Black men from Southern states who served in Congress after Reconstruction, White was the last. With Black voting rights being wiped away in his state, he did not seek re-election in 1900. White moved to Washington D.C. and returned to his other career, as a banker.

**John Biewen:** North Carolina would not send another Black person to Congress until 1992.

## **Music**

**John Biewen:** With white supremacy and Jim Crow firmly established in North Carolina, and the rest of the South, the people in power could also take firm control of the narrative and commence the forgetting. As the years passed, white folks who told the story of North Carolina simply said less and less about Wilmington 1898.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** North Carolina's most influential historian during the whole first half of the 20th century was J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton. He studied at Columbia University under William Dunning, the founder of the Dunning School – a dominant group of U.S. historians who advanced a racist and grossly misleading understanding of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Hamilton spent 45 years at the University of North Carolina, as a history professor and director of the Southern Historical Collection.

**William Sturkey:** And he was a person who was very sympathetic to the slaveholders of the Antebellum South.

**John Biewen:** Historian William Sturkey.

**William Sturkey:** And in building the Southern Historical Collection, one of the things he wanted to do, and we have a smoking gun on this, he did say at one point in one of the letters, he was looking for documents that wanted to make slavery appear better for historians. And so one of the things that he wanted to do was capture document, documentary records that would accomplish that

goal. And so, you know, he went across the South and got a bunch of the old rich white families' correspondence. But that was largely his goal.

**John Biewen:** In 1927, Hamilton wrote in a letter to the president of UNC:

**Voiceover (Wiley), J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton:** There must be no yielding on the question of the admission of the negro to equality.

**John Biewen:** Hamilton applied his distorted, white supremacist view of Southern history to his account of Wilmington 1898. In short, for Hamilton, there was nothing to see here. Sturkey says Hamilton was asked in the 1930s whether the state should put up a marker to commemorate what happened in Wilmington.

**William Sturkey:** And he said, no, there shouldn't be anything about Wilmington that might offend the sensibilities of the leading white citizens of the space. And that, you know, that's basically how the history was treated. If it makes white people upset, then you just don't tell it.

**John Biewen:** At the time of our interview with him, William Sturkey's office was in a building at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, named after J.G. de Rouhlac Hamilton. Sturkey says Hamilton had all the information he needed to tell the truth.

**William Sturkey:** I mean, everything is right over there. It's all right in the library.  
But, yeah, a century of silence.

## **Music**

**Michael A. Betts, II:** A century of silence is no exaggeration. As we've said, I was educated in North Carolina schools in the 1990s and 2000s. I didn't hear about the Wilmington massacre and coup until graduate school. Cedric Harrison, who runs those Black History tours in Wilmington – he's about my age and he *grew up in Wilmington*. *He* didn't learn about 1898 until he went to college at UNC-Pembroke.

**John Biewen:** It seems the story of 1898 got written out of the state's history curriculum before it could ever be added.

**Voiceover, (Mike Wiley), UCV letter:** From the headquarters of North Carolina  
Division of the United Confederate Veterans, Wilmington, NC. January 5th,  
1899....

**John Biewen:** This is a letter addressed to two new members of the state assembly,  
both from Wilmington.

**Voiceover, (Mike Wiley), UCV letter:** Gentlemen; I think it my duty to remind  
you that it is most desirable that the Legislature should take the necessary steps

to prohibit the use in Public Schools of the State of all objectionable Histories of the United States....

**John Biewen:** The men who received the letter were no doubt sympathetic to its message. They had just won seats in the state legislature as part of that rigged 1898 election: Democratic State Assemblymen Martin Willard and George Rountree. Both were Wilmington elites. Willard was an insurance man and owner of a shirt factory, Rountree a powerful attorney. In the days after the coup d'etat and massacre, Willard wrote a flurry of letters to out-of-town newspapers that, in his view, weren't getting the story right.

**Michael Betts:** Some northern papers had reported, accurately, that November 10<sup>th</sup> was essentially a race riot by white men. When we visited the New Hanover County Library with LeRae Umfleet, research librarian Shannon Vaughn showed us a letter that Martin Willard wrote to one of those newspapers, the Boston Transcript, twelve days after the massacre and coup.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** Alright, so this...

**LeRae Umfleet:** To the Boston...

**Michael A. Betts, II:** Transcript.

**Shannon Vaughn:** Transcript.

**LeRae Umfleet:** Newspaper, yeah.

**Shannon Vaughn (Reading Willard letter to Boston Transcript):** “I'm a subscriber to the transcript and believe it to be the best daily newspaper, but you have a number of articles about the recent troubles and all of them, so far as I have observed, have failed to comprehend the exact situation of affairs as they existed here before the troubles. If you wish to get a correct idea of the whole matter, I commend to you the article in the Wilmington Messenger which I sent you today. I can vouch for it being a true statement of the occurrences, and I believe it has a correct diagnosis of the whole trouble.” And this is November 22nd, 1898. And he sent a couple to New York and things like that....

**Michael A. Betts, II (in scene):** Who all do we see him sending this to? We have....

**Shannon Vaughn:** New York Observer, same situation. Yeah, so he does,

**LeRae Umfleet:** He's trying to sell the alternate narrative.

**Shannon Vaughn:** Yes, that's precisely what he's doing.

**Music**

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** All right, I'm gonna start recording on my end?



**John Biewen (Zoom recording):** Yes, please do.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** All right, check check check. Put the mic slightly to the left just like John Biewen taught me.

**John Biewen:** A lot of you all know that voice – from Seasons 2 and 4 of Scene on Radio.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** My name is Chenjerai Kumanyika, and I'm a professor in NYU's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute....

**John Biewen:** He makes podcasts, and he's a teacher and a scholar.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** My research and teaching in journalism, part of it is that I use media to critique the ideology of American myths. Some consistent themes that you see in ways that the media has been involved, and really fairly directly complicit in a lot of racial terror, and just in shaping, you know, some of those racial politics, basically presenting, you know, the idea of democracy that includes Black folks as like a real threat.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** We've seen, over several episodes, how the news media amplified messages from white supremacist politicians in North Carolina. They pushed

narratives designed to instill fear in their white readers about the danger of allowing Black people to have equal rights.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Even in some of the stuff that I was looking at related to Wilmington, it's like, you know, these themes about taxpayers and, you know, the way that they're gesturing toward the idea that Black men are going to rape white women or just even that they'd have access to white women – like, the consistency of these kinds of images and appeals across time is amazing.

**John Biewen:** Chenjerai points to the work of Media 2070, a consortium of media makers and activists who examine the role of media in society, and advocate for what they call media reparations.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** They've written this incredible essay – I'm looking at it right now – that really documents a timeline going all the way back to the 18th century of the different ways that media has been complicit in maintaining a kind of white supremacy, trying to stop Black media power, and as a result, it's just been complicit in these systems of oppression.

## **Music**

**Michael A. Betts, II:** Journalism plays an essential role in a democracy, of course, and can be a force for positive change. But as we've seen, sometimes the “news” is really

fiction. At other times its failures are more subtle, when news organizations tell half-truths and leave out crucial context.

**John Biewen:** Then again, sometimes we can look to fiction to find true stories that journalists in the mainstream fail – or refuse – to tell.

**[BREAK]**

**Voiceover (Mike Wiley), *Marrow of Tradition*:** Chapter VIII. The campaign for white supremacy was dragging. Carteret had set out, in the columns of the Morning Chronicle, all the reasons why this movement, inaugurated by the three men who had met, six months before, at the office of the Chronicle, should be supported by the white public. Negro citizenship was a grotesque farce— Sambo and Dinah raised from the kitchen to the cabinet were a spectacle to make the gods laugh....

**Michael A Betts, II:** That's a passage from a novel published in 1901: *The Marrow of Tradition*. Its author, Charles Waddell Chesnutt, was perhaps the most prominent Black American fiction writer in the decades after the Civil War.

**Doug Jones:** Chesnutt was raised in North Carolina.

**Michael Betts, in interview:** So he, because you said he was born in Ohio.

**Doug Jones:** He was born in Ohio and they come back after the war.

**Michael Betts, in interview:** Got you, OK...

**John Biewen:** Doug Jones is an associate Professor of Theater Studies at Duke, and a Charles Chesnutt scholar. Chesnutt was very light-skinned, like many Black elites of his time – so light he could have “passed” as white, but he didn't. Before he was born, his free Black parents had moved from North Carolina to Cleveland, but after the Civil War they moved back home, when Charles was nine.

**Michael A Betts, II:** So he grew up in Fayetteville, North Carolina, ninety miles from Wilmington. As a young man he became a teacher, then principal of a Black school in Fayetteville. In the 1880s he moved to New York and then back to Ohio to pursue his writing career, but he knew North Carolina, its politics and its racial politics.

**Doug Jones:** In the era of literary realism, an understanding of the project of literary realism is, this fiction reveals not only the truth of circumstances and environments, but a sort of truth about, like, the human condition, about races, about gender. That these were ways of shedding 19th century romanticism, the overly wrought nature of earlier writings which were very ornamental, were very maybe apolitical, some people thought.

**Voiceover (Mike Wiley), W.E.B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art”:** All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. ... I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.

**John Biewen:** That’s from an essay by the Black author and scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, writing near the end of Chesnutt’s life, in 1926. Du Bois meant propaganda not in the purely negative sense, as it’s usually used today – a deliberate distortion of the truth – but propaganda meaning that the work serves a political or social goal. Doug Jones.

**Doug Jones:** Chesnutt believed in fine craft, and he believed in writing good novels, which he did. But he never divorced his literary practice generally from the politics of race and the politics of destroying the color line and the barbarities and racial terror that attended the color line. So for him, he might not call it propaganda, but I think he would agree that literary writing and culture

generally must work towards the betterment of African Americans precisely because it worked so much against them, then and leading up to then.

## **Music**

**Voiceover (Mike Wiley), *Marrow of Tradition*:** The Wellington riot began at three o'clock in the afternoon of a day as fair as was ever selected for a deed of darkness. The sky was clear, except for a few light clouds that floated, white and feathery, high in air, like distant islands in a sapphire sea....

**Michael A. Betts, II:** Chesnut's *The Marrow of Tradition* is presented as fiction. Its characters and many of the story's details are made up. But in the bigger picture, it's a thinly veiled account of Wilmington 1898. Notice, "Wellington" in place of Wilmington.

**John Biewen:** The story features a pre-election white supremacist campaign by politicians and newspapers, a white mob burning down a Black-owned newspaper and shooting Black people in the streets, and a mayor and council forced out of office.

**Voiceover (Mike Wiley), *Marrow of Tradition* ["Watson," Black lawyer]:**

"Matter!" exclaimed the other. "Everything's the matter! The white people are up in arms. ... They have forced the mayor and aldermen to resign, have formed a

provisional city government *à la Française*, and have ordered me and half a dozen other fellows to leave town in forty-eight hours, under pain of sudden death.

## **Music**

**Michael A. Betts, II:** In its outline, and its portrayal of the characters' motives, Chesnutt's novel was a far more truthful account of the events of 1898 than anything the major white-owned newspapers were putting out at the time.

**John Biewen:** But the literary establishment, also dominated by white men, did not applaud Chesnutt's effort. In particular, William Dean Howells, a leading writer and critic of the time, dealt a lasting blow, not only to Chesnutt's novel, but to his career.

**Doug Jones:** He reviews *Marrow of Tradition* and he takes Chesnutt to task for being, uh, bitter. And bitterness in Howells's estimation was seen as a lack of gratitude, was seen as that which blinds one to the world and they're not exercising their full gifts. And Chesnutt resents that, and he begins to question his own abilities. Is it in my writing? He rejects being bitter, and what Chesnutt says is, the reason why the book is not selling, besides this review, is that it's the subject matter. And the subject matter is the thing that readers and people like Howells can't get through because they're not ready for serious Black political writing.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** Chesnut had been seen not as a firebrand but as a moderate writer about race, trying to bridge the divide between Black and white Americans. Many of his readers were white. The sharper edge of his Wilmington novel didn't go over well, and the book soon dropped out of sight.

### **Music**

**John Biewen:** Charles Chesnut's brand of propaganda – reaching for essential truths through art – has often been swamped by another kind, in the hands of more powerful people: white supremacist ideas and policies, packaged as factual, political speech.

**Lee Atwater:** Uh, race didn't become an issue in the South again until 1954. Race *could* become an issue if someone happened to be soft on the issue, but no one was, so everyone was operating within the framework of a segregated society, so race never became an issue.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** That was Lee Atwater, the leading Republican Party strategist during the Reagan years. In 1981 he gave an infamous interview to the political scientist Alexander Lamis. They're talking about the Southern Strategy. This was the move by Republicans to win the support of white southerners, who had traditionally voted for the Democrats, using race as a wedge, in the years after the southern Civil Rights Movement.



**Lee Atwater:** Obviously, from 1954 to 1966, that twelve-year period, race was *the* issue. The segregation candidate, the candidate who best handled the segregation issue, between '54 and '66, basically, was the winner.

**John Biewen:** In other words, in the years that coincided with the Brown v. Board of Education decision, the Montgomery bus boycott, Freedom Summer and the Selma to Montgomery march, the candidate taking the hardest pro-segregation line usually won. But after the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Atwater said, Democratic candidates who were moderate on issues of race and equality started winning primary elections in the South, because politicians now had to appeal to Black voters.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** Which brings us to the infamous part of the interview: Atwater describing how conservative white Republican candidates learned to couch their policy positions in language that, on the surface, made it sound like they weren't talking about race at all.

**Lee Atwater:** You start out in 1954 by saying nigger, nigger, nigger. By 1968, you can't say nigger, that hurts you, it backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff. And you're getting so abstract now, you're talking about cutting taxes, and all of these things you're talking about are totally economic things, and the byproduct of them is, Blacks get hurt worse than white. And subconsciously, maybe, that is part of it, I'm not saying that, but I'm saying....

## Music

**Michael A. Betts, II:** Atwater went on to make the claim that this shift to more race-neutral rhetoric in political speech meant that white racism was in fact a diminishing force in American life.

**Lee Atwater:** ... that if it is getting that abstract and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me?

**John Biewen:** But that's a shaky argument, isn't it. Atwater himself just conceded that the language is "coded," and that...

**Lee Atwater:** ...all of these things you're talking about are totally economic things and the byproduct of them is, Blacks get hurt worse than white.

## Music

**Michael A. Betts, II:** Lee Atwater died a few years after that interview, at the age of forty, from brain cancer. But he'll long be remembered for saying the quiet part out loud.

**John Biewen:** What's so striking about Atwater's confession – isn't that what it is? – is how bluntly he acknowledged the intention, the careful calculation, behind that right-wing rhetorical strategy in the 1970s and 80s. The fact that those politicians knew very well the game they were playing.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** Just as politicians still do today, and as they did in North Carolina at the turn of the last century.

Music

**Adriane Lentz-Smith:** Historians hate the word inevitable. Nothing is inevitable.

**John Biewen:** We sat down with Adriane Lentz-Smith, a historian of U.S. Modern and African American History at Duke University. She told us, it's easy to look back on U.S. history after the end of Reconstruction, from the 1870s to 1900, and conclude that Black people and their allies never stood a chance in the face of an overwhelming tide of white supremacy. Which took the form, for example, of what historians call the Mississippi Plan.

**Adriane Lentz-Smith:** Mississippi innovated in the 1880s in finding ways to push black folks out of politics, right? Rewriting state constitutions to remove Black voters, enforcing codes of segregation that were maybe there in practice but really got locked in, right? Like, Mississippi did it and other states followed suit. And we see that, right? If you ever saw the movie, I think it's "The Neverending Story," where there's the dark cloud that's ravaging kind of across the sky? Like, on some level, part of me sees the coming of Jim Crow sweeping the deep south as that kind of dark cloud ravaging across the sky. But we know

that people lived their lives not assuming that what was happening next door was going to happen to them, right? Because local politics, local configurations of power, local kind of alliances or what have you, mean that things could have gone a lot of different ways. Which also means that in North Carolina, when we talk about what will be the, you know, the Wilmington coup, certainly in 1898, but what is actually a longer overturning of democratic processes, right? We need to understand that that was work. Hard work, that people put a lot of thought and planning into because they couldn't take for granted that, just like, the darkness was going to sweep across the sky.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** In other words, Adriane says, we should *not* look back on the Wilmington, North Carolina of the 1890s and think ... that world was doomed.

**Adriane Lentz-Smith:** I mean, that's one of the tragedies of it, right? Wilmington was a wonderful place to be a Black person until it was not. Right? And it was not, *not* because people kind of locked into place something that was already happening, but because they went out of their way to snatch away a life that folks had built over decades.

**Music**

**John Biewen:** Michael, these comments by Adriane Lentz-Smith – and by the way, I just want to remind our listeners that she appeared in Season 2, our *Seeing White* series, in the episode on the 1919 racial cleansing in Corbin, Kentucky. Adriane’s point, that none of this was inevitable, really echoes her fellow historian, William Sturkey, who made a similar point in Episode 1.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** Exactly. He said we shouldn’t see the case of Wilmington in the 1890s as an exception, but as a place where people were simply following the rule of law and the stated values of a multiracial democracy – which, in theory, the United States of America had become by that point.

**John Biewen:** Let’s take a minute, though, and talk about the importance of this idea, since we keep bringing it up, beyond a kind of parlor discussion about history. Why is it crucial, for all of us here today, that we grasp, and let it sink in, that things could have gone another way. And I think a central point is, as Adriane Lentz-Smith put it, that *folks went out of their way*.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** Yes. We need to see the *labor* that white supremacists have put in over these many years. And that goes back to a point you’ve made on Scene on Radio before – in particular, in that *Seeing White* series you just mentioned. The point that none of this “just happened.” White supremacy *itself* didn’t just happen – it didn’t emerge “organically” out of human prejudice.

**John Biewen:** Right. The very notion of whiteness itself, and Blackness: these ideas were invented at the very time that Europeans – and, a little later, people in the American colonies – were building systems and legal structures that would advantage so-called white people at the expense of the people labeled “Black” – as well as other folks deemed “not white.” Those systems were the goal. Systems that allowed for the *hyper-exploitation* of some groups of people, so that a relative few at the top, the richest “white” people, could rake in even bigger profits. The invention of a racial hierarchy was a means to those ends – a source of justification, and a tool to leverage the political will to maintain those exploitative structures.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** And it matters today because that’s still how it works. And by failing to see how much labor goes into building and maintaining white supremacist systems, we also fail to see how much work it will take to *unmake* them.

**John Biewen:** Yeah. Those economic and social structures are not gonna unmake themselves just because some of us may think that racism is out of style and all of that is in the past.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** In fact it’s not in the past. We heard Lee Atwater talk about politicians in the 1970s and 80s. They changed their vocabulary for talking about policies that hurt Black people more than white people. Policies that also, maybe even

more importantly – as far as folks’ bottom-line motivations were concerned – protect the interests of corporations and the people who own them.

**John Biewen:** By minimizing taxes, regulations, worker protections, and things like a higher minimum wage. And opposing the sorts of government action that might actually, you know, help the people at the bottom of the economic ladder in this country to get a foothold and catch up – people who are disproportionately Black and Brown for very solid and unmysterious historical reasons.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** Yes. And a lot of this pressure is applied from behind the scenes. Sort of like the Secret Nine in Wilmington – and remember, those men were rich captains of industry. So in our time, at the national level, we’ve had folks like the Koch Brothers, the billionaire oilmen – Charles and his late brother David. They’ve poured billions of dollars over the last half-century into building a whole network of right-wing think tanks and advocacy groups.

**John Biewen:** The Heritage Foundation; the Federalist Society; the American Legislative Exchange Council, aka ALEC; the list goes on and on. They’ve also hosted a series of secret gatherings, seminars, involving a few hundred of the nation’s richest people. They meet to discuss how to advance a conservative, libertarian political agenda.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** I recently came across an interview that Charles Koch did with Kai Ryssdal, of the public radio show Marketplace, in 2015. And this exchange jumped out at me.

**Kai Ryssdal, Marketplace:** How come you guys are so secretive?

**Charles G. Koch:** How am I secretive? I'm here talking to you.

**Kai Ryssdal:** You are here talking to me, and I appreciate it. And I'll tell you what, you, you are everywhere lately, right? CBS Sunday morning, you guys are in Popular Mechanics for crying out loud.

**Charles G. Koch:** Yeah.

**Kai Ryssdal:** So, so clearly there's, whoever's doing your PR is doing a great job. But over the past decade, plus or minus, since 2003 and starting the seminars, you have made an art of not letting yourself be known in the public arena. How come?

**Charles G. Koch:** Well, see, I always believed what the mother whale told the baby whale. She said, son, the time you get harpooned is when you come up to spout off.



**John Biewen:** Does kind of remind you of those reactionary leaders in North Carolina, funded by corporate interests, quietly plotting to overthrow multiracial democracy in 1898, doesn't it?

## **Music**

**Michael A. Betts, II:** You know, John, as I was working on this episode, it was hard for me not to feel overcome by immense grief.

**John Biewen:** I can imagine, but say more about that.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** When we're talking about the fictions that people embrace, I think about something Chenjerai said in our interview with him. Let's just roll the tape.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** I think that part of the way that the media becomes complicit is that these issues constantly get cast in these terms of, like, rebuilding trust. We need to rebuild our connection, and all these, I don't know, there's just a way that the media talks about sort of political and economic projects of racial terror as just like a family who just got in a dispute, or something like that, right? I think in that way it may help, it may, you know, there hasn't been a long history of the media really just naming exactly what was going on, right? Even the idea of white supremacy, right? There was one

moment where I was like, people need to actually sit with, for a minute, with the fact that leaders who are being celebrated in other contexts, you know, who might have statues and buildings named after them, who might be, you know, the kinds of folks that folks revere, like, these people believed in white supremacy, and they believed that white folks were superior to other folks. And I was like, people just need to sit with that for a minute. Without saying anything else. And just really absorb that, right? Like, before we get to the explanations, why people want to say, oh, it was the times, just sit with the fact that these folks believed this. And they built society and crafted political campaigns and structured all these institutions around that idea.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** That's a harrowing thing to realize, that we as a global society don't seem willing to really take in the fact that these fake ideas about a racial hierarchy have been a guiding force for the construction of our world.

**John Biewen:** I hear that. But Chenjerai didn't stop there, did he? He had more to say.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** But then I thought for a minute and was like, did they actually believe that?! Is that actually a precise way to talk about it – is actually saying that they believed it, is that actually letting those people off the hook, or not really getting to a precise analysis of how those appeals to racial hate were a technology to achieve other things? I mean, I'm not saying they loved –

nobody who's making cartoons that sort of paint Black people as rapists and as like these monsters and savages and clowns, like I don't think any of those people had love for Black people. But is white supremacy really about people believing that white folks are superior, or is it about cultivating a certain kind of fear of, you know, is it about what that appeal does for other people? It's kind of an interesting puzzle.

## **Music**

**John Biewen:** I've thought about this puzzle a lot, and I think Chenjerai would agree with me about this – that's it's easy to spend a lot of time, a lot of unproductive time, trying to sort out questions like, does this or that person “really” believe Black and Brown folks are inferior? Or are they pushing folks' buttons, playing white identity politics, as a tool, a means to some other end? Because the more crucial thing to understand is that we've built a social structure in which it *pays* to advance the interests of white people at the expense of Black and Brown people – especially the interests of the white folks who own lots of stuff and therefore actually get most of the spoils. And it pays to reinforce the narratives that justify and bolster that hierarchical system, right?

**Michael A. Betts, II:** And that's why history keeps echoing itself. Not to say that things haven't changed, that we haven't made progress, thanks to social movements over the

decades and centuries. But we do keep hearing a similar song, whether it's from Alfred Moore Waddell in Wilmington, or Lee Atwater, or Donald Trump. People using coded or not so coded white supremacist language because it *works* for them in some way. Or, for that matter, Nikki Haley.

**John Biewen:** Ah. You're talking about the Civil War question. Nikki Haley on the campaign trail in New Hampshire.

**Michael Betts:** I'm gonna just roll the tape.

**Audience Member at campaign forum:** What was the cause of the United States Civil War?

**Nikki Haley:** [Pause.] Well, don't come with an easy question or anything. I mean, I think the cause of the Civil War was basically how government was gonna run, the freedoms and what people could and couldn't do. What do you think the cause of the Civil War was?

**Michael Betts:** You can't hear the man well, but he says *he's* not running for president. He wants *her* answer.

**Nikki Haley:** I mean, I think it always comes down to the role of government. We need to have capitalism. We need to have economic freedom. We need to make

sure that we do all things so that individuals have the liberties, so that they can have freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom to do or be anything they want to be without government getting in the way.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** The voter replies, he's astonished that in 2023, she could answer his question without using the word slavery.

**Nikki Haley:** What do you want me to say about slavery?

**Questioner, off-mic:** That's fine, you've answered my question.

**Nikki Haley:** Next question.

**Michael A. Betts, II:** So much lives in that answer – that non-answer. A century and a half of polite lies, to make white southerners feel better about their Confederate ancestors, and to avoid appearing too apologetic, or sympathetic, toward the descendants of those enslaved Black people. Such a rich tradition of gaslighting, really.

**John Biewen:** There was a firestorm of criticism, so the next day Haley said “of course,” the Civil War was about slavery. But if an allegedly “moderate” Republican – that is, a member of Abraham Lincoln's political party – if she's reluctant to state that simple fact about the cause of the Civil War almost 160 years after the war ended,

because some of her potential voters won't like to hear her say it? Well, let's just say, there's continuity between that moment in New Hampshire in late 2023 and the century of silence about the Wilmington massacre and coup.

## **Music**

**Michael A. Betts, II:** What do you say, in the next episode we think about a way forward? And hear from some folks in Wilmington, North Carolina about how they're trying to build a different future.

**John Biewen:** Sounds like a plan. Next time, our series conclusion. What would it look like if people in Wilmington, and across this country, worked together and mounted a real effort to address the crimes of the past – really – and to heal those wounds?

Credits:

**John Biewen:** Echoes of a Coup is an initiative of America's Hallowed Ground, a project of the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University. It is written and produced by Michael A. Betts the Second, and me. Our story editor is Loretta Williams. Voice actor, Mr. Mike Wiley. Music by Kieran Haile, Blue Dot Sessions, Okaya, Jameson Nathan Jones, and Lucas Biewen. For more on the America's Hallowed Ground project, see [americashallowedground.org](http://americashallowedground.org). Logistics by kidSweater Design Group, Ltd.

Our website is [Sceneonradio.org](http://Sceneonradio.org). The show is distributed by PRX. Scene on Radio comes to you from the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University.