The Progressive Era and Race: Reaction and Reform, 1900 - 1917
David W. Southern

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DESCRIPTION

In this comprehensive, unflinching account, David W. Southern persuasively argues that race was the primary blind spot of the Progressive Movement. Based on the voluminous secondary works produced over the last forty years and his own primary research, Southern's synthesis vividly portrays the ruthless exploitation, brutality, and violence that whites inflicted on African Americans in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In the former Confederate states, where almost 90 percent of blacks resided, white progressives followed the lead of racist demagogues such as “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman and James Vardaman by consolidating the Jim Crow system of legal segregation and the disfranchisement of blacks, resulting in the emergence of the one-party Democratic South. When legal discrimination did not sufficiently subordinate blacks, southern whites resorted liberally to fraud, intimidation, and violence—most notably in ghastly lynchings and urban race riots.

Yet, most northern progressives were either indifferent to the fate of southern blacks or actively supported the social system in the South. Yankee reformers obsessed over the concept of race and became ensnared in a web of “scientific racism” that convinced them that blacks belonged to an inferior breed of human beings. The tenures of both Theodore Roosevelt, who wrote more about race than any other American president, and Woodrow Wilson, who was reared in the Deep South, proved disastrous for African Americans, who reached their “nadir” even as Wilson led the United States on a crusade to make the world safe for democracy.

Southern goes on to persuasively reveal that African Americans courageously fought to change the implacably racist system in which they lived, against overwhelming odds. Indeed, it was the rise of the militant “New Negro” during the Progressive Era that provoked much of the anti-black repression and violence. Dr. Southern further examines how the origins of the modern civil rights movement
emerged in the wake of the rivalry between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, going beyond an analysis of their leadership to illuminate other important African American activists who held strong views of their own.

Finally, an epilogue assesses the malignant racial heritage of the progressives by looking at the discrimination against African Americans, both those in and newly returned home from the armed forces, during World War I and the numerous race riots in northern cities that were in part occasioned by the large-scale migration of southern blacks.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David W. Southern is Professor of History at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. He received his B.A. at Alderson-Broaddus College and his M.A. and Ph.D., respectively, at Wake Forest and Emory Universities. He has authored three books on black-white relations in the United States: The Malignant Heritage: Yankee Progressives and the Negro Questions, 1901—1914 (1968), which won the William P. Lyons Master’s Essay Award in 1967; Gunnar Myrdal and Black-White Relations: The Use and Abuse of An American Dilemma, 1944—1969 (1987); and John LaFarge and the Limits of Catholic Interracialism, 1911—1963 (1996). The Myers Center Award for the Study of Human Rights in North America cited the books on Myrdal and LaFarge as outstanding works on intolerance in North America. Professor Southern was awarded a Fellowship by the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1982—1983.