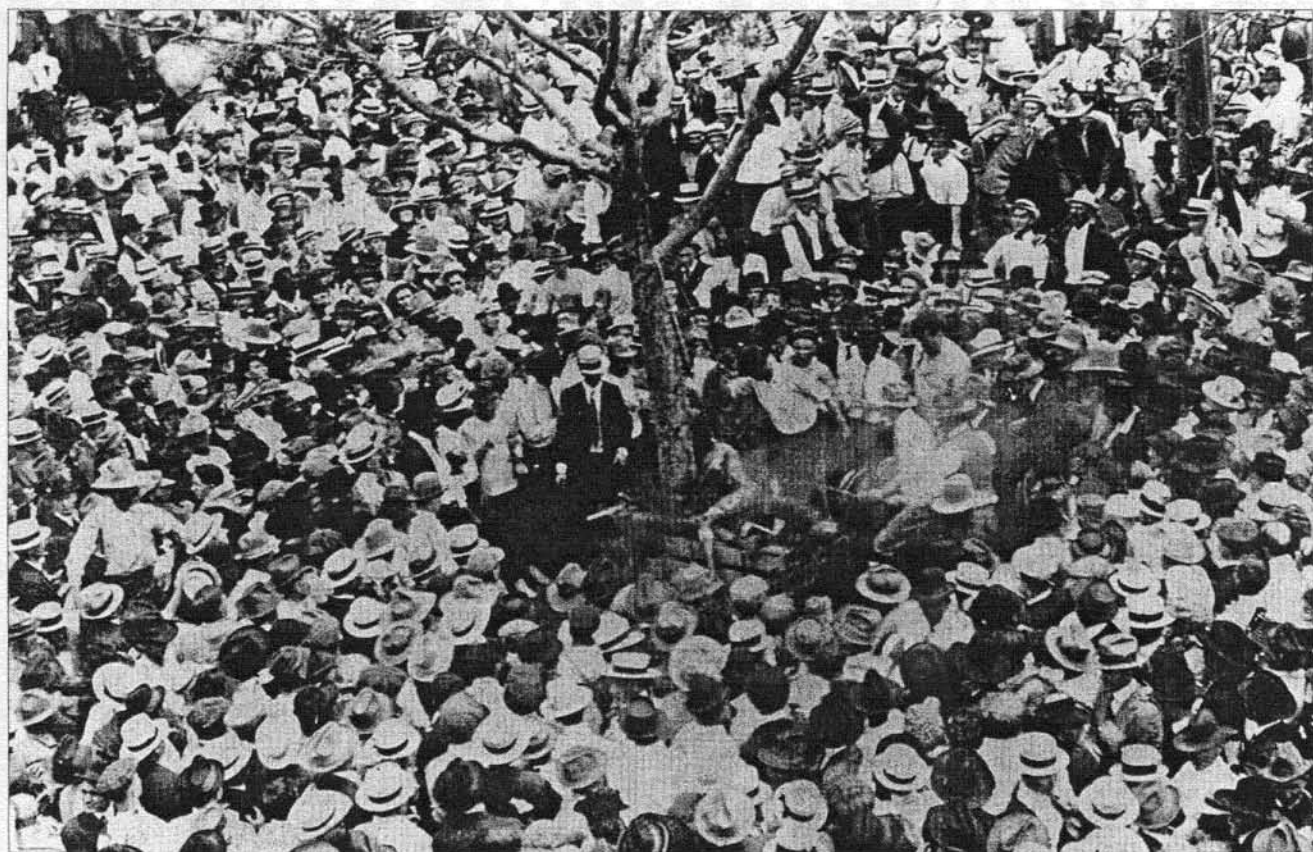


In 1916 in Waco, a crowd of thousands cheered as a 17-year-old was lynched. "We're sorry" is only a start.



Associated Press/The Texas Collection, Baylor University

The crowd's shouts during Jesse Washington's lynching, one newspaper read, were like "a triumphal procession from a ball game."

Legacy of shame

It is refreshing to see that the Senate has passed a resolution apologizing for its role, over many decades, in blocking federal anti-lynching legislation. Of course, it says a lot about the glacial pace of racial healing that this moment didn't arrive until 2005, but it is a positive move, nonetheless.

Oddly, neither Texas senator is among the 85 resolution co-sponsors, although the office of Sen. Mary Landreau, D-La., the sponsor, says Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison did sign on late as a "supporter."

Central Texas was practically ground zero for lynchings during the Jim Crow era. Of the approximately 4,700 documented lynchings — mostly of African-Americans between 1880 and 1930 — about 500 took place in Texas. That's more than any state other than Georgia and Mississippi, and our senators should have been at the forefront.

One of the worst atrocities of the lynching era was the public torture and murder of an illiterate 17-year-old black farm laborer named Jesse Washington on May 15, 1916, behind Waco City Hall. He was beaten, stabbed, hanged and burned in front of 10,000 cheering spectators. The shouts, one newspaper account read, "were like those a crowd will give when leading a triumphal procession from a ball game that has been a big victory."

The fledgling NAACP, founded only seven years earlier, used this episode to



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launch a vigorous anti-lynching campaign. Elisabeth Freeman, a young white veteran of the militant wing of the women's suffrage movement, was sent to Waco to investigate. Using wiles she had acquired in years of street-corner speechmaking and demonstrating, she got the names of the lynch-mob leaders and photos taken by a local commercial photographer.

W.E.B. Du Bois then wrote about the incident in unflinching detail in a special supplement to the NAACP magazine, *The Crisis*. The NAACP sent that supplement to President Woodrow Wilson, his Cabinet, every member of Congress and a long list of newspapers.

Efforts to find a Texas lawyer to bring charges against the mob leaders failed,

but the NAACP was learning that even without legal action, publicity could shame a town into taking action to prevent future lynchings. Towns like Waco, which Mr. Du Bois described as "alert, pushing and rich," were learning that lynchings, when widely publicized, were bad for business.

The NAACP's most effective tool in those dark days was publicity, because local juries simply would not convict lynchers. In the South, it was unusual for a lynch-mob leader to be indicted, much less convicted, and local officials often orchestrated or even participated in lynchings. Thus, the campaign for federal legislation.

In January 1922, less than six years after Jesse Washington was slain and partly because of the hard work of the NAACP, the U.S. House passed an anti-lynching bill that provided for fines and imprisonment of officials who allowed lynchings to occur or failed to prosecute lynchers.

Similar bills passed the House in 1937 and 1940. Each time, Southern senators prevented the bill from even coming up for a vote in their chamber.

Federal legislation, had it passed and been enforced, might have helped bring a quick close to the lynching epidemic. Because of the power of racist Southern senators, however, lynching petered out slowly, retreating from daylight and larger towns and public squares to

smaller communities and rural areas, where it was performed in secret, often in the dead of night, by small groups of increasingly marginalized characters.

There's no way to know how many lives might have been saved if anti-lynching legislation had been passed and enforced in 1922. But the failure to pass it was, beyond question, one of the Senate's more inglorious chapters. How sad that even today, the tragic story of Jesse Washington and nearly 500 other Texas victims did not interest our senators enough for them to vigorously co-sponsor the apology resolution.

Many communities today struggle to deal with these ugly old stories, some now being exposed or told in detail for the first time. These episodes of barbarity must be recognized and atoned for in some way, most importantly to educate our children about the consequences of allowing bigotry to flourish unchecked.

Waco and other lynching towns should follow the Senate's lead and find a way — whether it be a marker, a memorial, a garden or a scholarship — to formally acknowledge and apologize for the worst horrors of Jim Crow.

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