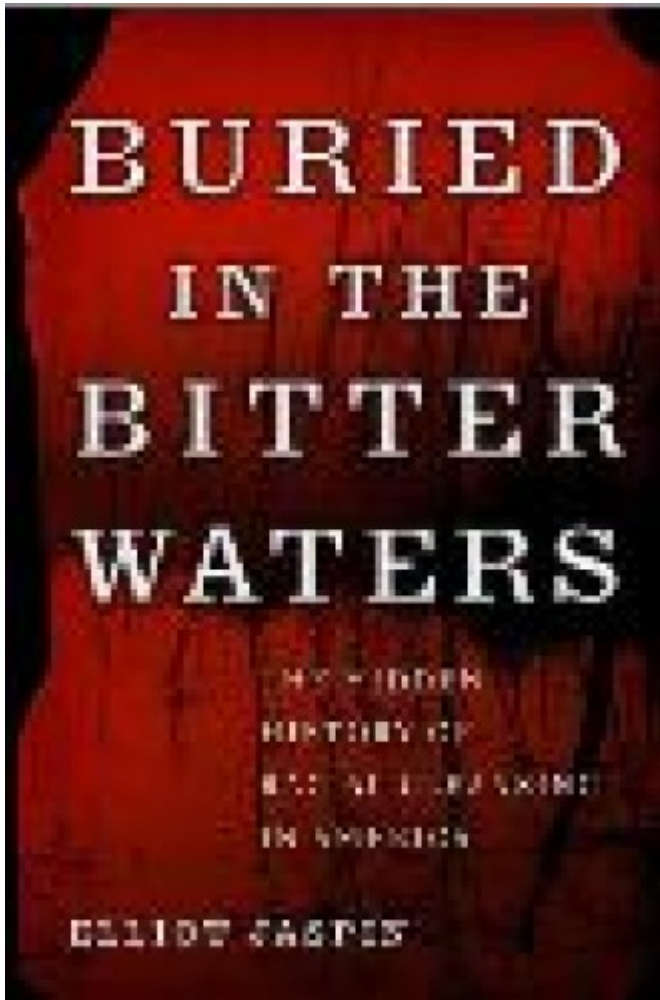


Buried in the Bitter Waters

reviewed by [Eric Arnesen](#) in the [September 18, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Buried in the Bitter Waters: The Hidden History of Racial Cleansing in America

Elliot Jaspin
Basic Books

It is ironic that at the same time some conservatives have declared racial discrimination to be largely a thing of the past, the history of racial inequality is attracting more and more attention from scholars and the public. Exhibits on slavery, the slave trade and lynching can now be found in museums; documentaries on Jim Crow and civil rights crusades are staples on public television; and books on race riots and racially oriented terrorism, along with biographies of civil rights activists, are found regularly on the front tables at Borders and Barnes & Noble.

This attention is not merely academic, for many would argue that the legacies of the past weigh heavily on the present, even four decades or so after the passage of sweeping civil rights laws. Indeed, progressives argue that these legacies decisively and negatively affect the life chances of people of African descent. Contrary to what conservatives might claim, history matters; decades of progress notwithstanding, progressives insist, the playing field today is by no means level.

Journalist Elliot Jaspin is the latest in a long line of writers to embrace that latter claim and to explore the history and enduring legacy of racial violence. His particular contribution is to call attention to the phenomenon of what he calls racial cleansing. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, white residents in numerous communities—Jaspin speculates that the communities number in the hundreds, perhaps even the thousands—targeted the blacks in their midst, ordering them to depart permanently or violently driving them out. Although these cleansings “occurred across the nation,” Jaspin focuses on a dozen instances, the “worst of the worst,” mostly in the South.

The case studies he offers are often chilling and depressing in regard to the savagery of the white mobs and the harsh consequences for the black victims. The trigger for the ouster of black residents varied from community to community. In some cases, it was a crime, real or alleged; in other cases, economic competition; in still others, fear of black citizenship. Whatever the cause, the result was an ultimatum—“Leave or die”—that produced terror, economic loss and permanent dislocation for those driven from their homes.

“The negroes have all left town in obedience to the mandate of the mob,” one local newspaper approvingly observed of the ouster of blacks from Comanche County, Texas, in 1886. Two decades later, the county advertised itself this way: “Entirely and absolutely ALL WHITE; there is not a negro in the county, and the chances are

there will not be any for many years to come.” Indeed, as Jaspin shows, communities that undertook racial cleansing have remained largely white to this day.

Jaspin’s case studies of past racial violence are framed by anecdotes from the present to demonstrate that despite the denials of local whites, racism is alive and well in these communities. Even without knowledge of their predecessors’ violence, contemporary whites rarely welcome blacks into their midst; instead, they harass those who have moved into their communities. The past, Jaspin remarks, is not fenced off from the present. “In truth, we live out our past every day.”

Hence the importance of bringing to light what he believes is “America’s family secret,” that “over the years, whites and blacks would unwittingly join together in a fellowship of silence.” The fact that whites might be embarrassed about or ashamed of their actions years later is one explanation for silence—as is the fear that they could be rendered liable in lawsuits for recovery of lost property. But even African Americans seem to have missed the opportunity to address the cleansings, he argues. As an example, Jaspin criticizes the NAACP for failing to publicize or protest the cleansings. W. E. B. DuBois and other NAACP leaders “did not seem to understand” what was occurring, he suggests at one point. The lack of analytical tools and vocabulary—the term *racial cleansing* is of very recent origin—“would certainly have inhibited their ability to understand what was happening.” Yet, Jaspin implies, if local white newspapers accurately captured what was happening, the NAACP should have been able to do the same.

Perhaps, but Jaspin’s criticism is unfair and his explanation overly speculative. The struggling NAACP—hardly a wealthy and powerful organization in the early 20th century—had its hands more than full addressing lynchings, race riots, housing discrimination and numerous other oppressions confronting black Americans. At the same time, it was defending itself—often unsuccessfully—from legal and extralegal attacks on its southern branches. Given the frequency in these years of lynchings and race riots, and the relative infrequency of racial cleansings, the NAACP’s focus seems understandable and Jaspin’s criticism petty.

Jaspin’s work is stronger when he is identifying the phenomenon of racial cleansings than when he is in explaining why or how they occurred. Too often the source materials do not allow for a precise reconstruction of what happened. In his opening chapter on the expulsion of blacks from Washington County, Indiana, in 1864, he admits: “Documents have been misplaced and newspapers destroyed. Witnesses

have long since died.” He does know that after the murder of several prominent blacks during the Civil War years, “the remaining blacks left.” Decades later, one local historian attributed the exodus to “persecution, intimidation and all manner of ill treatment.” On those brief lines his story hinges.

Jaspin’s explanations for why racial cleansings occurred are equally thin. Why, for instance, did Washington County whites drive blacks out? Jaspin draws on a 1934 account that suggests that the proslavery element possessed a “strong feeling against negroes” and believed that emancipation would confer citizenship upon blacks. If blacks could vote, “they were by definition part of ‘the people’” and were the “social equals” of whites. Connecting the nonexistent dots—and with little specific evidence—Jaspin concludes that the whites of Washington County did not see blacks as “worthwhile people”; “to drive home that point,” they determined that “they would not belong physically.”

The problem with this reasoning is threefold. First, the prospect of emancipation had nothing at all to do with voting rights. In the early 1860s, few white Americans envisioned a new black electorate emerging out of the ashes of war. Second, Jaspin produces no evidence to establish whites’ feelings about black citizenship or voting. And third, vast numbers of whites across the nation shared Washington County, Indiana, whites’ negative assessment of African Americans but never resorted to threats, violence or racial expulsions.

At other times, Jaspin invokes the prospect of economic competition: white workers, possessing a sense of “entitlement,” simply thought it “acceptable to terrorize blacks into leaving.” Yet economic competition led to expulsions only on the rarest of occasions. To suggest that “in turn-of-the-century America, race trumped all other considerations” is an axiom that explains little.

Jaspin writes like a man on a mission. In his final chapter, he lays out in considerable detail the circumstances spurring him on. In the course of investigating the history of a 1912 racial cleansing in Forsyth County, Georgia, he came into sharp conflict with his employer—the Cox News Service—which allegedly threw up innumerable obstacles to the publication of his exposé. Editors challenged his facts (questioning whether or not what took place in Forsyth County was actually racial cleansing), his terminology (managers substituted the phrase “racial expulsion”) and his criticisms of the coverage of the event by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, a Cox newspaper.

In Jaspin's recounting, Cox officials behaved unethically and unprofessionally, subjecting him to "threats" and "harangues," and eventually demoted him to the rank of reporter. Jaspin gets a lot off his chest, but the account, which is cast as a modern case study of how the truth about racial cleansings was "concealed in a thicket of lies, half-truths, and euphemisms," comes off as self-serving and self-righteous.

Buried in the Bitter Waters makes a genuine contribution by adding the occasional, forcible expulsion of African Americans from their communities to the long list of outrages white Americans have perpetrated against their black counterparts. Ultimately, though, Jaspin presses history into political service as he didactically lectures his readers on the persistence of American racism in every chapter. He neglects to draw on the small but important literature by historians on "whitecapping"—that is, forcing people to abandon their home and property—or the much larger literature on racial violence, vigilantism and American race relations. In his explanations for how and why racial expulsions occurred, why the silence about them has persisted, and what their longer-term impact was on the individuals who were expelled, Jaspin's argument too often exceeds his evidence, substituting an understandable but exasperating moralism for analysis.

For all of his hand-wringing about the silence over racial cleansing, Jaspin never pauses to consider America's very real, ongoing, uneven and complicated engagement with racial violence in the nation's past. *Buried in the Bitter Waters* unfortunately tells us more about Jaspin's moral and political stances than it does about the history it purports to explore.