Report: Nearly 4,000 African Americans Were Lynched

By Frederick Lowe
The NorthStar News News Report

Nearly 4,000 black men, black women and black children were lynched between 1877 and 1950 in 12 Southern states, and their violent murders were celebrated, attracting huge crowds including some who used the occasion to hold picnics.

The Equal Justice Initiative on Monday published, "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror." They reported that 3,959 African Americans were victims of terrorist lynchings in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.

More than 90 percent of terrorist lynching victims were black men, and some of the victims were boys as young as 12 and 13, Bryan Stevenson, executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative told *NorthStar News*. EJI is based in Montgomery, Ala.

The study noted that at least 700 more African Americans were murdered in lynchings than had been previously reported. The report focuses on racial terrorist lynching, which whites, including the police, elected officials, ordinary citizens and federal bureaucrats participated in the murders or condoned them to enforce Jim Crow laws and racial segregation.

"These lynchings were not frontier justice because they generally took place in communities where there was a functioning criminal justice system that was deemed too good for African Americans," the report stated. "Terror lynchings were horrific acts of violence whose perpetrators were never held accountable….Indeed, some of public spectacle lynchings were attended by the entire white community and conducted as celebratory acts of control and domination," the report said.

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On May 21, 1947, 28 men were acquitted in the lynching of Willie Earle, a black man, in Greenville, South Carolina.

Terror victims were murdered without being accused of any crime; they were killed for minor social transgressions, including bumping a white person, wearing their military uniforms after World War I and not using the appropriate title to address a white person.

For example, General Lee, a black man, was lynched in 1904 by a white mob in Reevesville, Ga., for knocking on the door of a white woman's home. In 1919, a white mob in Blakely, Ga., lynched William Little, a soldier returning from World War I, for refusing to take off his uniform.

And in 1916, white men lynched Jeff Brown in Cedarbluff, Miss., for accidentally bumping into a white girl as he ran to catch a train.

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In one newspaper report, between 3,000 and 10,000 individuals attended the lynching of John Hartfield in Ellisville, Miss., on June 26, 1919.The mob murdered Hartfield for allegedly assaulting a white girl.

Mississippi Gov. Theodore G. Bilbo, one of this nation's most racist governors, ordered police to hold Hartfield in custody before releasing him at 5 p.m. to the mob. The NAACP asked Bilbo to intervene, but he, the sheriff and federal officials said they were powerless to stop the lynching.

New Orleans States, a newspaper, described Hartfield as "sullen and jerky" hours before his lynching.

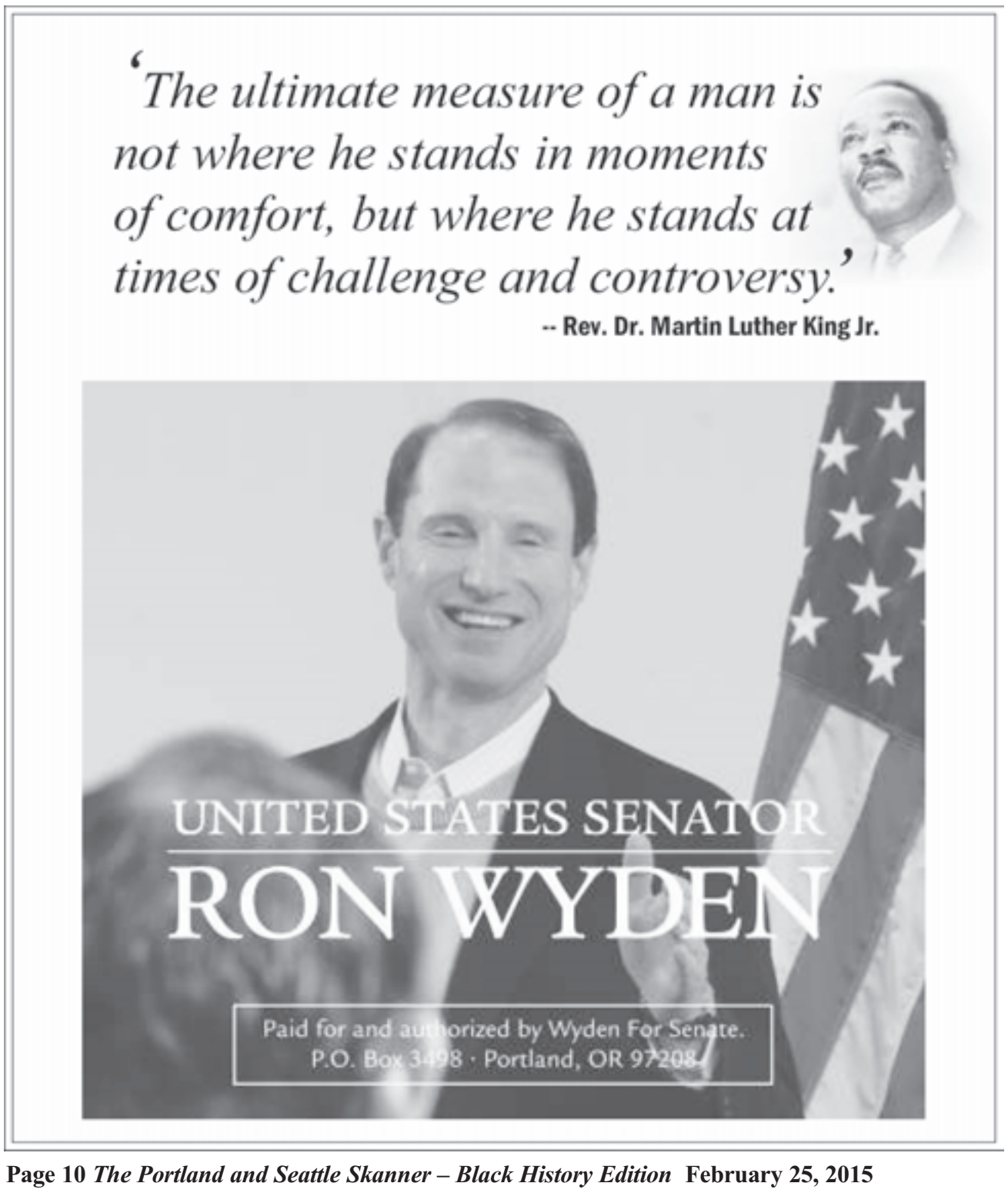
The study reported that most terror lynching resulted from a wildly distorted view of interracial sex, casual social transgressions, and allegations of a serious violent crime. The murders included public spectacle lynchings, lynchings that targeted entire African-American communities and lynchings of sharecroppers, ministers and community leaders who refused to be mistreated.

The data and stories for the report were gathered over four years by Equal Justice Initiative staff.

The report names the states that were particularly terrifying for African Americans. Florida, Mississippi, Arkansas and Louisiana had the highest statewide rates of lynchings. Georgia and Mississippi had the highest number of lynchings. And Phillips County, Ark., and Lafourche and Tensas parishes in Louisiana were sites of mass killings of African Americans.

Fearing they would be lynched, African Americans fled the South for the North and West during the first half of the 20th Century. Ironically, the state of Rhode Island was the epicenter of the nation's slave trade.

"The history of terror lynching complicates contemporary issues of race, punishment, crime and justice," the report stated. "Mass incarceration, excessive penal punishment, disproportionate sentencing of racial minorities and police abuse of people of color reveal problems in American society that were framed in the terror era."

Stevenson said EJI intends to place markers where lynchings occurred.

"I live in the South and there are all these statutes honoring the Confederacy and the defense of slavery. Now we want some truth and reconciliation about the real consequences of what happened to blacks after the Civil War," he said.