

ARTICLE

# The 1906 Atlanta Race Riot Aftermath: CSR in Action and Woke-washing

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After the murder of George Floyd, businesses across the United States stepped up with pledges and commitments to lessen systematic racism, reflecting a commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR). But are these actions really concerned with social uplift? Or a form of woke-washing? This was not the first time corporate America reacted to racial upheaval and violence. In this paper, the author examines the reaction of the Atlanta business community to the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot. At that time, Atlanta's business elite effectively usurped municipal and state authority to manage the aftermath of the horrific events. They were determined to protect the reputation of Atlanta as progressive and a place of relative racial harmony. How do we consider their actions in the context of CSR and woke-washing? The businesses sought mainly to protect their economic future rather than truly uplifting society or improving racial relations. Still, their actions impacted Atlanta positively for many decades to come, leading to better outcomes during the Civil Rights era and beyond.

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## Introduction

In May 2020, George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis, Minnesota, by police officers in the midst of an arrest. Within days, protest enveloped the nation and a discussion of racial relations came to the foreground of the national consciousness once again. Among the many aftereffects of the murder and the protests, many corporations stepped forward to profess their belief in racial equality. These professions ranged from symbolic (taking the Aunt Jemima logo off company products and eventually changing the name<sup>1</sup>) to financial (fifty of the largest U.S. companies pledged \$49 billion toward efforts fighting systemic

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1. Tiffany Hsu, "Aunt Jemima Brand to Change Name and Image Over 'Racial Stereotype,'" *New York Times*, June 7, 2020, sect. B, 1. [www.nytimes.com/2020/06/17/business/media/aunt-jemima-racial-stereotype.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/17/business/media/aunt-jemima-racial-stereotype.html); Beth Kowitz, "The Inside Story Behind Aunt Jemima's New Name," *Fortune*, February 11, 2021, <https://fortune.com/2021/02/11/aunt-jemima-new-name-pearl-milling-company>.

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racism<sup>2</sup>) to structural (adding diversity measures into procurement strategies<sup>3</sup>). It was clear that corporations felt pressure to do “something.” Failure to act in a socially responsible manner created the risk of damaging a corporation’s reputation, which in turn would have created the risk of damaging the company’s financials. The extent to which companies follow through on these initiatives—and the impact of such actions—will be measured and debated in the years to come.<sup>4</sup>

Observers of these corporate actions in the wake of George Floyd’s murder have, however, questioned their sincerity. Does this era represent a renewed effort to mitigate centuries of racial oppression in this country? Were corporations stepping up to be leaders in the push to improve society for all? Or were “they ... ‘woke-washing’ in an attempt to be relevant and bolster sales in a sagging economy?”<sup>5</sup> Certainly, it would not be a negative if, in the midst of doing good for the community, a corporation also improves its own standing. The issue for most is whether the action is more style over substance. A poll of Americans indicates that two-thirds believe companies overexaggerate their claims concerning helping the environment (greenwashing).<sup>6</sup> It seems reasonable the public might cast a skeptical eye on other types of such social initiatives. But, even if the corporate motives are self-serving, is it not still possible the community will benefit from these corporate actions? Looking at an incident from the past may shine some illumination on these questions.

The past two years certainly were not the first time that business entities faced pressure to respond to matters rooted in racial unrest and violence. In this paper, the author examines the reaction of the Atlanta business community to the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot. Several points become clear in this examination. One, Atlanta business leaders knew something had to be done, as the riot had frozen all activities downtown; thus all businesses were suffering. Two, as in the current day, Atlanta businesses took the lead and were far more proactive than the city, county, or state government in restoring calm after the riot. Three, Atlanta business leaders were more concerned with the reputation of the city than their individual business reputations. A strong belief permeated the community that only if Atlanta had a strong reputation could businesses prosper. Four, the efforts of Atlanta businesses at that time would have far-reaching effects that would show up decades later during the Civil Rights movement. Five, their efforts were successful, in that the 1906 Race Riot became a small stain on the city’s reputation, forgotten for years,<sup>7</sup> but the impact on the underlying issues that led to the riot were minimal.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The next section presents a literature review on the efforts of businesses to affect their communities and the pressure they feel to do so via

2. Tracy Jan, Jenna McGregor, and Meghan Hoyer, “Corporate America’s \$50 Billion Promise,” *Washington Post*, August 24, 2021, [www.washingtonpost.com/business/interactive/2021/george-floyd-corporate-america-racial-justice](http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/interactive/2021/george-floyd-corporate-america-racial-justice).

3. Dan Bigman, “A Year After George Floyd, What Have Business Leaders Learned?,” *Chief Executive*, May 24, 2021, <https://chiefexecutive.net/a-year-after-george-floyd-what-have-business-leaders-learned>.

4. Jan, McGregor, and Hoyer, “Corporate America’s \$50 Billion Promise”; Bigman, “A Year After George Floyd, What Have Business Leaders Learned?”

5. Savage, “Aunt Jemima,” 190.

6. Pope and Wæraas, “CSR-washing Is Rare,” 173.

7. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 19

corporate social responsibility (CSR). The third section presents an abbreviated discussion of the riot. The fourth section discusses the efforts of the Atlanta businesses in the aftermath. The final section discusses the impact (or lack thereof) of those efforts.

## Literature Review

CSR can and has been defined in a multitude of ways. In this paper, the author uses the broad definition of Davis as quoted in Carroll: “It (CSR) refers to the firm’s consideration of, and response to, issues beyond the narrow economic, technical, and legal of the firm (p. 312).”<sup>8</sup> Though Friedman would later argue a business’s sole focus should be the shareholder, 93 percent of businessmen surveyed in 1946 by *Fortune* believed that businessmen were responsible for the consequences of their actions in the social sphere beyond that measured by profit/loss statements.<sup>9</sup>

Given that broad definition and belief, that is, businesses have a responsibility to the society around them, CSR is certainly not a new phenomenon. Evidence can be cited as far back as Hammurabi’s code, which delineated a builder’s responsibility to innocent bystanders,<sup>10</sup> and the writings of Ptah-hotep on the responsibilities of those with wealth and power.<sup>11</sup> However, the advent of the Industrial Revolution, when larger corporations became more influential, forced business leaders to wrestle more with the idea of their responsibility to society in the context of today’s CSR.<sup>12</sup> In this time of laissez-faire policies and Social Darwinism, many businesses had little concern for the overall community.<sup>13</sup> But there were exceptions. Andrew Carnegie in his “Gospel of Wealth” spoke of his responsibility to manage his wealth as a “trustee” and to ensure that it was used to benefit the world.<sup>14</sup> Other examples include Pullman, Cadbury, and Hershey. In this time period, similar to the one under consideration at the time of the riot, most views of CSR consisted of an elite ruling class (merchants, not royalty) paternalistically using their wealth and knowledge for the benefit of the lower classes.

An exception to this is the Black business community in the United States, which has always possessed a strong social responsibility to the Black community in a way usually not recognized in CSR literature. Prieto and Phipps have an excellent discussion of the use of *ubuntu* and cooperative economics in early Black business history.<sup>15</sup> Notable examples included Charles C. Spaulding, Maggie Lena Walker, Annie Turnbo Malone, Alonzo Herndon, James Tate, Heman Perry, and Pierre Toussaint.<sup>16</sup> Most Black entrepreneurs not only managed their businesses but were also active in their communities and developed means to help other community members to progress.

8. Carroll, “Evolution,” 277.

9. Carroll, “Evolution,” 270; Carson, “Friedman’s Theory of CSR,” 3.

10. Husted, “Corporate Social Responsibility,” 126.

11. Ciulla, “Business Ethics,” 336–337.

12. Husted, “Corporate Social Responsibility,” 126.

13. Husted, “Corporate Social Responsibility,” 129–130.

14. Husted, “Corporate Social Responsibility,” 129.

15. Prieto and Phipps, *African American Management History*.

16. Prieto and Phipps, *African American management history*; Hollingsworth, “Legitimizing.”

Before the 1950s, these activities would not have been known as CSR. Instead, “business ethics,” “morality of the merchant,” and “corporate welfare” all referred to efforts by writers and philosophers to discuss the responsibility of businesses to society at large.<sup>17</sup> These efforts were certainly not restricted to the Western world. In Japan, the concept of *shonindo* (code of the merchant) was developed to reflect the code of the samurai that spoke of a merchant’s responsibilities.<sup>18</sup>

In the 1950s, the theories of CSR began to be codified, and there has been tremendous research in this area since that time.<sup>19</sup> Long lists of activities that can be considered CSR have been created.<sup>20</sup> In general, though, CSR is often based around three basic pillars: economic, environmental, and social.<sup>21</sup> (Baumgartner and Ebner referred to them as economic, ecological, and social.<sup>22</sup>) Economic activities are those that permit the company to remain in the market and that lead to economic, not just financial success.<sup>23</sup> For example, emphasizing product quality and safety can be considered an economic activity: It may be expensive in the short run, but dividends will be paid over time in brand name and reputation. Environmental activities are those that seek to minimize any ecological damage. For example, minimizing waste and emissions would be included here.<sup>24</sup> (Historically, some of the first examples of environmental CSR were efforts to reduce smokestack emissions in the nineteenth century to improve air quality.<sup>25</sup>) Finally, social activities are those that aim to improve an organization’s relationship with both employees (internal) and society at large (external). Equal pay for your employees (internal) and philanthropic gifts (external) are examples.<sup>26</sup>

The value of the triad structure of economic, environmental, and social is that it allows us to identify some sense of motivation, though this is far from perfect and the delineations are not always clear. Is the primary purpose to maintain the economic viability of the firm? Or to promote the general welfare of society? An investment in a training center directly next to a factory would generally be considered a means by which to improve the company’s labor force and have an economic motive. A donation to provide mosquito nets to the poor on the other side of the globe, though it may have benefit a company’s reputation, would generally be seen as more societal and philanthropic. Simply trying to burnish a company’s reputation (increasing the chances of economic success) without really changing the underlying social conditions would be an example of CSR-washing (or greenwashing or woke-washing).

CSR-washing is when a business attempts to get the benefit of appearing to do something for the community but, in effect, the efforts are more public relations than actual change. The term “greenwashing” became prominent when environmental groups began calling out businesses making big announcements about environmental concerns and changes but actually doing

17. Sluyterman, “Dutch Entrepreneurs,” 315.

18. Husted, “Corporate Social Responsibility,” 131.

19. Carroll, “Evolution,” 269-270; Latapí Agudelo, Jóhannsdóttir, and Davídsdóttir, “Literature Review.”

20. Vashchenko, “Organizational CSR Portfolio,” 352–354.

21. Vashchenko, “Organizational CSR Portfolio,” 351.

22. Baumgartner and Ebner, “Corporate Sustainability Strategies,” 77.

23. Vashchenko, “Organizational CSR Portfolio,” 355.

24. Vashchenko, “Organizational CSR Portfolio,” 355.

25. Husted, “Corporate Social Responsibility,” 128, 130–131.

26. Vashchenko, “Organizational CSR Portfolio,” 355.

very little.<sup>27</sup> As previously noted, in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder and the move by many corporations to condemn racism, some authors spoke of woke-washing, as the corporations were saying they were deeply concerned about racism but actually were not changing their policies that had a deleterious effect on the Black community.<sup>28</sup>

In this context, one way to promote economic success can be easily tied to building a company's reputation. Corporate reputation is "the overall estimate in which a company is held by its constituents. A corporate reputation represents the 'net' affective or emotional reaction—good or bad, weak or strong—of customers, investors, employees, and the general public to the company's name."<sup>29</sup> A reputation (or brand) signals to the public information about a company. It can lead to economic success by inhibiting the mobility of rivals, allowing the charging of premium pricing, enhancing access to markets, and attracting investors.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, a corporation might perform a social service enhancing its reputation, which increases its chances of economic success, without really influencing the society it purports to help.

Just as corporations see the benefit of building a strong reputation, so too does a city or locale, and for the same reasons. They seek to inhibit the mobility of rivals (other cities), allow charging of premium prices (rents, etc.), enhance access to markets (new corporations, tourists, and citizens), and attract investors. Cities build large advertising campaigns with multiple social and cultural meanings to show their most attractive sides while playing down any issues all in the hopes of persuading visitors and investors to part with their money.<sup>31</sup> The South was greatly concerned with its reputation, particularly after the Great Depression, as it sought industrial investment. But Atlanta, in particular, was known as a leader in such marketing campaigns dating back to the time directly after the Civil War. As early as 1886, Atlanta was considered "one of the best advertised cities in the United States," and its rapid growth to become a leader in the New South was attributed in no small part on the city's single-minded focus to promote its charms to the world.<sup>32</sup> Atlanta's focus on its reputation would come to dominate the city's and the business community's response to the riot.

In this paper, the author is looking the Atlanta Race Riot of 1906 and the actions of the white business community afterward. The discussion will place their actions within the context of CSR and whether it was effective or just woke-washing.

## 1906 Atlanta Race Riot

The seeds of Atlanta's 1906 Race Riot were planted in the gubernatorial campaign that year between Hoke Smith and Clark Howell, publishers of Atlanta's two largest newspapers (*Atlanta Journal* and *Atlanta Constitution*, respectively); the men had been bitter rivals for years. In a campaign that grew increasingly acrimonious during the year, each candidate, in

27. Baumgartner and Ebner, "Corporate Sustainability Strategies," 76.

28. Savage, "Aunt Jemima," 190.

29. Fombrun, *Reputation*, 37.

30. Fombrun and Shanley, "What's in a Name," 233.

31. Ward, *Selling Places*, 1.

32. Ward, *Selling Places*, 189.

essence, spent his time advocating the best way to control Black people and keep them in their proper place in the social hierarchy. The debate centered on voting disenfranchisement and how much would be sufficient but it soon veered over into social areas.<sup>33</sup> Hoke Smith's stump speech was essentially "Give black men political equality and, the next thing you know, they'll want social equality. And nothing means equality like sex. Giving black men the vote equals giving them your wives and daughters."<sup>34</sup> Given both men were publishers of Atlanta newspapers, this debate was constantly in the media.

Furthermore, in this environment where racial tension was being provoked, a series of alleged assaults occurred between Black men and white women in the Atlanta area over the last days of the summer. Each occurrence, often ending with posses and occasionally a lynching if the law did not intervene, created fodder for the competition between the sparring candidates and their newspapers. Even though the campaign was settled in August (as only the Democratic primary was relevant) in Smith's favor,<sup>35</sup> the tension created did not dissipate. Starting September 20, 1906, a series of alleged assaults occurred in and around Atlanta that ratcheted up the anger and fear in the city. With each incident, the two main newspapers, and other newspapers competing with them, heralded egregious headlines and lurid stories, often in extra editions that were distributed around Atlanta's downtown areas. On the day the riot began, four extra editions were printed by one paper, with newsboys standing downtown screaming out the details of these alleged assaults.<sup>36</sup>

On Saturday, September 22, 1906, the riot began in the central business district. Thousands of white men roamed the area, attacking any Black person they saw on the street or on streetcars. They ransacked and destroyed Black businesses, often attacking and killing the Black occupants. Streetcars were often overwhelmed, with Black occupants brutally beaten or killed. Atlanta police and government authorities were overwhelmed early, with the mob ignoring entreaties from the mayor and chief of police.<sup>37</sup> Local hardware businesses did a brisk trade selling guns, ammunition, and other weapons to the white rioters.<sup>38</sup> Reports were also heard of policemen who did nothing to intervene and indeed even helped the rioters.<sup>39</sup> Fire hoses were turned on the crowd, but they were ineffective. The mob was finally dispersed in the early hours of Sunday morning by a heavy rainfall.<sup>40</sup>

Many of Atlanta's citizens were terrified that members of the Black community would also respond with violence.<sup>41</sup> What really happened was that the city came to a standstill. Black people stayed at home and off the streets. Streetcars shut down. Instead of the Black community retaliating, white rioters continued unmolested, moving into the closest Atlanta suburbs and neighborhoods, such as East Point, southwest of Atlanta's central district. On Monday, September 24, 1906, the riot spread to Brownsville, a Black neighborhood southeast of

33. Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 64–72; Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 33–35.

34. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 33–34.

35. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 116–117.

36. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 131–137; Dittmer, *Black Georgia*, 124.

37. Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs*, 502.

38. Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 88–89.

39. Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 88–89.

40. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 149; Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 1.

41. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 154.

downtown Atlanta and home to Gammon Theological Seminary.<sup>42</sup> However, there the rioters met armed resistance, as Black residents had by this time established a roadblock and were armed. A white police deputy was shot dead, and the militia returned Tuesday morning, September 25, 1906, to do house-to-house searches and arrest more than two hundred Black citizens.<sup>43</sup>

This description of the riot is a very cursory description of what was a horrific event. The official story was twelve dead, two white and ten Black.<sup>44</sup> These numbers, however, are almost certainly an undercount. The true casualty rate was never known, as many Black families gathered their dead at night for quick burials to protect the bodies from desecration.

This article focuses more on the aftermath than the riot itself. In consideration of the actions that followed, two things should be noted. One, due to the riot, the central business district came to a standstill. Black porters, drivers, servers, nurses, businessmen, and other workers remained in their homes due to fear. The Black workforce that white Atlanta depended upon had disappeared. As Ray Stannard Baker noted:

The riot for a week or more practically paralysed the city of Atlanta. Factories were closed, railroad cars left unloaded in the yards, the streetcar system was crippled, and there was no cab-service (cabdrivers being Negroes), hundreds of servants deserted their places, the bank clearings slumped by hundreds of thousands of dollars, the state fair, then just opening, was a failure.<sup>45</sup>

In addition, hundreds of Black Atlantans left the city during this time for other locales, never to return.<sup>46</sup> White leaders began to advocate very quickly that the riot must be ended so that business could return to normal.

Two, the news of the riot became widespread very quickly. The riot was headline news from New York to San Francisco. By the end of the first day, Atlanta's mayor James Woodward was fielding calls from national newspapers, explaining what was happening and what the city was doing.<sup>47</sup> Before the riot was over, *Le Petit Journal* in Paris, France, had published an article about it, and within two weeks had a front cover illustration showing the "Negro Massacre in Atlanta Georgia."<sup>48</sup> The majority of the newspapers blamed the riots on the assaults by Black men on white women, but regardless, Atlanta was being portrayed as a lawless place. To a city that was heavily preoccupied with its reputation, this was a disaster.

42. Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 109–110.

43. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 164–166.

44. Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs*, 504.

45. Baker, *Following the Colour Line*, 17.

46. Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 122; Dittmer, *Black Georgia*, 129.

47. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 153.

48. "Un Lynchage Monstre," *Le Petit Journal*, September 23, 1906, 3, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6176609/f3.image>; "Lynchings in the United States," *Le Petit Journal: Supplement Illustré*, October 7, 1906, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k7167163/f1.item>.

## Atlanta's Business Community Steps Up

Atlanta leaders' concern about reputation was long-standing. After the Civil War, Atlanta quickly began to rebuild and was eager to show that it had left the past behind it. Starting in the 1880s, Henry Grady, the publisher of the *Atlanta Constitution*, began to speak of the "New South" that was more interested in growth and business success than relitigating the conflicts of the Civil War. He wrote and traveled to make the case that Atlanta welcomed northern investment.<sup>49</sup> Although he died young in 1889, his vision dominated Atlanta for decades, leading to events such as the Cotton States Exposition in 1895, where Booker T. Washington delivered his well-known "Five Fingers" speech, in essence endorsing separate but equal policies.<sup>50</sup> Atlanta eagerly sought the world's approval and investment. In 1898, Atlanta produced *The Handbook to the City of Atlanta*, which stated: "Atlanta is an orderly city and scenes of mob violence have never occurred here. There has never been a lynching or a forcible rescue of prisoners, and the bloody scenes which have saddened the history of other communities are wholly absent from the records of Atlanta's life."<sup>51</sup> The riot stood as a threat to all of those efforts to demonstrate racial peace and prosperity.

The riot effectively ended on the morning of Tuesday, September 25, 1906, with the raid on Brownsville, the Black community southeast of downtown. By this time, the Georgia militia patrolled the streets. At 11 a.m. on Tuesday, Mayor Woodward called a meeting with various Black leaders, but little progress was made.<sup>52</sup> The most important meeting of that day began at 3 p.m. The Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, led by President Sam Jones, issued an open invitation to Atlanta's "better" citizens to attend a meeting at Fulton County Superior Court House. More than one thousand men crowded into the room, including around one dozen of the city's most prominent Black leaders.<sup>53</sup> One of the white speakers, Charles Hopkins, lawyer for Clark College, said,

We don't want to do anything rash or foolish but, for God's sake, let us be men! *Here in one night the reputation of our fair city has been blasted and we are held up to the scorn of the world* by the brutal murders committed by a cowardly mob. If we allow this helpless and dependent race to be slaughtered before our eyes we cannot face God in judgment!<sup>54</sup>

The first order of business was to write and pass a resolution condemning the riot and the slow police response. The assembly also immediately raised money for a riot relief fund to be distributed by a subcommittee to help those affected by the riot (particularly those needing to

49. Pomerantz, *Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 59.

50. Pomerantz, *Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 60–61.

51. Martin, Thomas H., Comp, Volckert V. Bullock, Ga. General Council of Atlanta, and Ga. Chamber of Commerce Atlanta, *Handbook of the City of Atlanta; a comprehensive review of the city's commercial industrial and residential conditions* [Atlanta, The Southern Industrial Publishing Co., 1898]. [www.loc.gov/item/04025636](http://www.loc.gov/item/04025636), 87.

52. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 169.

53. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 172.

54. Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs*, 503 (emphasis added).



cover funeral expenses).<sup>55</sup> At this meeting, a Committee of 1000 was set up to help establish a post-riot Atlanta. This meeting also established a more elite Committee of 10, to be advised by the Committee of 1000 and the Chamber of Commerce, chaired by James English Sr., businessman and police commissioner. (The Committee of 10 was composed solely of white businessmen.) English, through this committee, encouraged the judicial system to spare no effort to track down the rioters and directed the outgoing governor to set up a fund to pay for their apprehension. Members of the committee were sent to the various newspapers to remind them of the proper role of the press. The current militia captain, the mayor and the sheriff were directed to “appear and confer with the committee” at English’s office.<sup>56</sup> In essence, this Committee of 10, established by the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, set itself up as the arbiter of post-riot outcomes. Atlanta’s business elites were determined to protect the city’s reputation.

While the complexion of this large meeting was overwhelmingly white, a small group of Black leaders were included, such as Alonzo Herndon and Rev. H. H. Proctor, and did speak, pledging their support to “suppress disorder.”<sup>57</sup> Dr. William Penn, a Black medical doctor who just that morning had been roughed up by the militia, begged the question of the assembled group: “What am I to do if I cannot protect myself and my family?”<sup>58</sup> As minor as it may seem, this meeting did mark the beginning of interracial communication in Atlanta between the white and Black elites. In the days to come, a Black Committee of 10 was also established to coordinate with the overall Chamber and Committee of 1000.<sup>59</sup> Without the power of their white compatriots to enforce change, this committee was expected to get the message from the overall group to the Black community and to work to prevent such an uprising again (which characteristically had been blamed on the Black community<sup>60</sup>). However, this was one of the first serious attempts in the South for white and Black leaders to meet to discuss possible solutions.<sup>61</sup> White leaders asked the Black leaders for a list of issues that were causing problems, and they responded with descriptions of the way Black men were treated on the streetcars and by the police. Atlanta leaders pledged to look into it.<sup>62</sup>

The Atlanta Chamber of Commerce was determined to protect and uphold the reputation of Atlanta as a progressive town open for business and investment. Henry Grady had made the point in the 1880s that in Atlanta’s eyes, slavery and secession were a thing of the past.<sup>63</sup> Booker T. Washington’s speech had helped make the case that, in relative terms of the South, Atlanta was a place of racial harmony and progress. According to Ward, “Seeking northern investment, Atlanta’s promoters were anxious to portray the city as the vigorous and progres-

55. Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs*, 503–504; Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 174; Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 119.

56. Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 118–119.

57. Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 118.

58. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 173.

59. Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 124.

60. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 169.

61. Baker, *Following the Colour Line*, 20.

62. Baker, *Following the Colour Line*, 21.

63. Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 18.

sive antithesis of ‘Old South’ torpor and backwardness.”<sup>64</sup> Now this sense of racial peace and progress was at risk. At this point, a key element of Atlanta’s story about itself came to the surface. In 1903, a Chamber of Commerce brochure stated, “Whatever local interests may clash, the good of Atlanta is always the rallying cry.”<sup>65</sup> Of course, this was propaganda, but in the aftermath of the riots, one does see the various elements of the city come together to mitigate the damage.

One example highlights the Committee of 10’s work in this area of damage control. On September 24, 1906, *Atlanta Georgian* editor John Temple Graves’s story in the *New York World* placed the blame for the riot solely at the feet of lawless Black men who had committed a “carnival of rapes.”<sup>66</sup> He also asserted the riot had cleared the atmosphere by whipping Black people into submission for a few more years. J. Max Barber, Black owner of the *Voice of the Negro*, contacted the *World* and begged to respond. In his September 27 editorial, he portrayed the other side of the story. He refuted that the rapes had even occurred and placed the blame on the white newspapers that had promoted the stories so luridly and irresponsibly in order to publicize the governor’s election contest. He even asserted that the incoming governor, Hoke Smith, was partially to blame with his rabid anti-Black attacks throughout the contest.<sup>67</sup> Barber did not sign his name to the editorial but wrote it as “A Concerned Colored Citizen.” The day after his editorial appeared, he was summoned to the office of Captain English, the chair of the Committee of 10. There, facing a “star chamber” of white business elites, he was instructed to deny that he had written the letter and to denounce its findings. Barber denied writing it but was told the telegram used to send the letter had been traced to his office. He was directed to “straighten it out” or he would serve time on the chain gang.<sup>68</sup> Barber left on a train that night to Chicago and went into exile.<sup>69</sup> Although he would continue to publish and monitor the situation in Atlanta, he would not return. This incident demonstrates the power of the Chamber and the concern with the story that would be told concerning the riot.<sup>70</sup>

As the holidays approached in 1906, Hopkins created an Atlanta Civic League, composed of white men to work on racial relations, among other issues. Eventually two thousand men joined. A Colored Cooperative Civic League, composed of 1500 Black men, was founded at the same time, and the two groups would work to project a united front.<sup>71</sup> This work continued the interracial collaboration begun in the days immediately after the riots. Many expected further riots or disturbances over the holidays, but both groups and the authorities were determined to prevent unrest, if possible. No further violence ensued, and Atlanta entered 1907 at peace.

64. Ward, *Selling Places*, 210.

65. Ward, *Selling Places*, 210.

66. John Temple Graves, “Separation of the Races Is the Inevitable Solution,” *New York World*, September 24, 1906, 2.

67. J. Max Barber, “Letter to the Editor from A Colored Citizen,” *New York World*, September 27, 1906, 2; Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 121.

68. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 178.

69. J. Max Barber, “Shall the Press Be Free?,” *Voice of the Negro*, III, no. X (October 1906).

70. Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 120–121.

71. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 189–190.

## Discussion

In the context of CSR, we see the white business leadership (Chamber of Commerce and others) taking action to bring peace to the community. Under this interpretation, we would say that their actions were associated with the social (external) pillar of CSR.<sup>72</sup> After all, they were working to bring an end to the riots, to bring law, order, and peace back to the community. They raised money to be given to the families of the victims of the riots.<sup>73</sup> They were also seeking justice for the innocents killed in riots and wanted those responsible brought to justice as they clearly communicated to the legal system.<sup>74</sup> All of this shows a concern for the welfare of the community at large.

But upon closer reflection, we might ask whether the motivation of these business leaders was purely social, seeking the best for the community? Or were they more concerned with the economic impact of the riots? The leaders were acting outside the normal bounds of business activity to help the community, so their response would fit the definition of CSR, but one could easily argue their actions were more in line with the economic pillar than the social pillar.<sup>75</sup> In the days of the riot and immediately afterward, downtown Atlanta was a ghost town. Not only were customers staying away, but employees (white and Black) were refusing to come to work out of fear. This work stoppage was having a strong negative effect on the economic viability of all businesses in town.<sup>76</sup> It is reminiscent of the days following the 9/11 attack or the lockdown days of the COVID-19 pandemic. The economic repercussions would have been devastating. Therefore, these business leaders were acting to prevent economic ruin for many of the businesses in downtown Atlanta. They could not hope to remain viable long term if customers and employees stayed away.

The Atlanta business community's efforts to protect the reputation of *Atlanta*, the city, is a very interesting nuance of this situation. CSR generally refers to the efforts of a business to protect its own interests, and the business may move to enhance its reputation as a means of doing so. But in this scenario, the quotes and actions of Atlanta's business leaders are more concerned with the reputation of the city. We see no evidence that a business sought to promote its own reputation as a direct result of its actions during or after the riot. (Contrast this with the efforts of companies following the George Floyd murder to demonstrate their own commitment to anti-racism with logo changes, donations, commitments to civil rights organizations, etc.<sup>77</sup>) Instead, the Chamber and other leaders saw the reputation of Atlanta as one that needed protecting. During the riot itself, Mayor Woodward was reputed to have said: "I beseech you not to cause this blot on the fair name of our most beautiful city. What you may do in a few minutes of recklessness will take Atlanta many years to recover

72. Vashchenko, "Organizational CSR Portfolio," 355.

73. Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs*, 503–504; Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 174; Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 119.

74. Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 118–119.

75. Vashchenko, "Organizational CSR Portfolio," 352–355.

76. Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 105, 122.

77. Hsu, "Aunt Jemima Brand to Change Name and Image Over 'Racial Stereotype'"; Kowitz, "The Inside Story Behind Aunt Jemima's New Name"; Jan, McGregor, and Hoyer, "Corporate America's \$50 Billion promise."

from.”<sup>78</sup> Note the words by Charles Hopkins during the interracial meeting on Tuesday, September 25: “Here in one night the reputation of our fair city has been blasted and we are held up to the scorn of the world.”<sup>79</sup> The concern is not for his reputation as an attorney but the city’s reputation.

On the one hand, this argues for their actions being related to the social pillar. After all, the concern is for the external reputation of the city, not the reputation of the individual businesses. On the other hand, one can argue this is in line with the economic pillar, as the Atlanta community had been working for years to build the city’s reputation as one that had moved past the horrors of slavery and the results of the Civil War. From Henry Grady onward, the city leaders, along with the newspapers, had been encouraging investment dollars from the North but touting their “enlightened” viewpoints.<sup>80</sup> This riot threatened to undo all of that work and could, hypothetically, cause the northern investment dollars to dry up.

If the Atlanta business leaders’ actions were more related to the economic pillar than the social one, was it woke-washing, performative acts claiming to represent racial progress that had no real impact? Considering their actions as aligned with the economic pillar, we can see real success. No subsequent riot of this magnitude ever occurred. Downtown Atlanta opened up again, and within a few months, economic activity was as it was before the riot. In addition, the reputation of Atlanta was salvaged and even enhanced. Within a short time, the riot left the news and became a footnote to history. As we progressed into the twentieth century, many of Atlanta’s residents were not even aware a riot had occurred.<sup>81</sup> It was only the arrival of its centennial in 2006 that brought it and its impact to the forefront. Atlanta would remain an example of the New South that Henry Grady had envisioned.

In fact, Atlanta’s reputation would become enhanced by one aspect of the post-riot activities. The meetings held after the riot were the beginning of interracial communication that would last for decades.<sup>82</sup> Often, in the years to come, disputes in Atlanta would be solved by meetings between the Black leaders (often ministers) and the white business elite. This engagement helped Atlanta build the reputation of “the city too busy to hate.”<sup>83</sup>

In 1919, an Interracial Commission was formed with leaders from the Black and white communities. Though W.E.B. Du Bois would criticize the commission as having too many Black “yes” men (other than Dr. John Hope, Morehouse College president), the commission did have an impact. For example, its members persuaded Governor Hugh Dorsey to publicly release his findings on the mistreatment of Black people in Georgia in which he condemned the actions of his Southern peers. Referring to this commission, the NAACP discussed at one of its conventions the pursuit of the “Atlanta Plan.”<sup>84</sup>

In the 1960s, when sit-ins and protests were breaking out across the South, Atlanta’s white business leadership (Richard Rich, Ivan Allen, and Mills B. Lane) would meet with Atlanta’s Black leadership (Martin Luther King Sr., Benjamin Mays, and Rufus Clement) to discuss an

78. Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs*, 502.

79. Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs*, 503.

80. Pomerantz, *Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 59.

81. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 20.

82. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 20.

83. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 195.

84. Dittmer, *Black Georgia*, 207–209.

end to segregation in downtown stores.<sup>85</sup> Though protests and picket lines would occur (due to the belief by student leaders that the older Black leadership was too moderate<sup>86</sup>), Atlanta did not endure the violent protests that rocked Birmingham and Selma. When negotiations were underway to desegregate the downtown lunch counters, the local newspapers agreed to keep the negotiations private, still remembering their part in instigating the 1906 Race Riot.<sup>87</sup> Even in the days after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s murder, Atlanta was quiet relative to other cities. The huge crowd and ceremonies accompanying his funeral went off with little protest due to the close communication between white leadership and the Black community.<sup>88</sup> Atlanta is still in many ways the economic engine of the South as a result of work through the years to maintain the city's reputation as a place where Black and white power structures could cooperate.

And Atlanta, with its business community, is still considered a leader in the promotion of peace. It is no accident that Atlanta has such a strong reputation for racial harmony. Starting in the Civil Rights era, Atlanta promoted itself as the "city too busy to hate" to attract business investment. When striving for the Olympics in 1996, a key component of the story was the racial progress made in Atlanta by showing its strong, Black professional class.<sup>89</sup> Ward, in his book *Selling Places*, has an extensive discussion of Atlanta now using Black imagery and history to promote the city as one of racial equality.<sup>90</sup>

We see far less success, however, when viewing the actions of the Committee in 1906 in the context of the actual racial progress for the community. The goal of the Committee appears to have been salvaging the reputation of Atlanta, not structural change that might ameliorate the conditions that led to the riot. First, the Chamber's Committees did not even accurately count the dead, officially finding only twelve dead, when there are eyewitness accounts of more than that the first night alone.<sup>91</sup> Second, the committees did not seek to find the true cause of the riots. Though the committees did place some blame upon the newspapers for the way they hyped the stories,<sup>92</sup> nothing was done to find the truth behind the stories printed. Years later, the official historian of Atlanta, Franklin Garrett, would state the riots had been precipitated by a "series of assaults upon white women by brutal Negroes."<sup>93</sup> Ray Stannard Baker's work in the year or two after the riot found that several of the purported rapes were false and that similar attacks by white men were ignored.<sup>94</sup> The example of J. Max Barber and his letter to the editor demonstrates the business community's reluctance to call out the implicit involvement of the white power structure. In fact, the attitude of the white committees toward the Black community was, in essence, "You need to do a better job of policing your own."<sup>95</sup> Third, although the committee did step in over the next few months to enforce a fair trial or two against a Black

85. Pomerantz, *Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 265–268.

86. Pomerantz, *Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 270–271.

87. Pomerantz, *Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 266.

88. Pomerantz, *Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 356–358.

89. Ward, *Selling Places*, 280.

90. Ward, *Selling Places*, 280–285.

91. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 192; Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 119.

92. Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 118; Dittmer, *Black Georgia*, 130.

93. Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs*, 504.

94. Baker, *Following the Colour Line*, 4–7.

95. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 169.

defendant (to show their belief in justice and fairness),<sup>96</sup> one Black man was sentenced to life in prison for allegedly killing a white officer during the riot (on the basis of one eyewitness who saw him nearby), but no white people were ever sent to prison for the riot or the killing of Black people.<sup>97</sup>

Finally, the horror of the riot did not persuade anyone that the voting restrictions created and enforced in the couple of years preceding the riot needed to be rescinded nor that the Jim Crow laws coming into effect were immoral. Black leaders would ask for Black police officers, but this would not happen for another four decades and then only in Black neighborhoods.<sup>98</sup> They also asked for integration on public transportation, but again, this was not seriously considered. In fact, the opposite occurred. The riots actually created an impetus for increased segregation. In the eyes of many whites, this would never have occurred if not for the many casual encounters between white and Black (particularly white women and Black men) as each went about their daily routines. The chance of an odd encounter on the streetcars, in elevators, and on the sidewalks that could provoke another riot was not to be borne.<sup>99</sup>

Interestingly, this push for segregation also came from the Black community (but in a voluntary manner, not in support of legalized segregation), and it helped create one of the nation's most vibrant Black communities. After the riot, many in the Black community realized they could not depend upon the white community to be fair or just. Therefore, there was a movement of voluntary segregation as more Black businesses relocated from downtown to the Black neighborhoods on Auburn Avenue in the east and Hunter Street in the west.<sup>100</sup> One way to protect Black lives and livelihoods was to prevent such casual occurrences by creating Black neighborhoods where there was a modicum of freedom.

So, how should the actions of the Atlanta business community be classified? The businesses appear to have looked beyond individual needs to the benefit of the community at large, and we see CSR at work. However, the focus appears to have been on economic, not social values. Though the rhetoric was one of doing the "right" thing (protecting the helpless Black), the emphasis was on bringing peace as quickly as possible and ensuring potential investors were not frightened away. No results were seen in terms of relieving the social and communal inequalities that created the conditions for the riot. In this sense, woke-washing applies. The business community wanted the appearance of peace and progress.

As with the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot, we saw corporate America respond after the George Floyd murder with calls for peace and justice. With protests in the streets and destruction occurring in some places, business leaders saw the need to act to calm the waters. Corporations spoke of their desire to end racism, eliminated racist logos, and offered large gifts to Black institutions. Is this real CSR? Or just woke-washing? To some degree, this depends on the motivation of the corporations. Are they simply trying to maintain their customer base? It would be rare for a corporation to not realize that their future customer base will be less white than in the past, given current demographic changes. Were they like the Atlanta business

96. Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 123; Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 183–186.

97. Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 123; Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 182.

98. Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 126.

99. Burns, *Rage in the Gate City*, 187; Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 125.

100. Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot*, 126.

community that mainly sought to protect their reputation and future economic security? Or, considered another way, do these corporations actively seek to improve the social environment for Black people everywhere? It will take time to know for sure, as we see whether companies truly follow through on their commitments or make other commitments that might have longer effects. One thing we learned from the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot is that even the actions taken with sometimes selfish motives may still have beneficial effects decades in the future.

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