Scottsboro

Michael J. Klarman*
This essay tells the story of Scottsboro, one of the most important legal events of the twentieth century, in which nine black teenagers were falsely accused of rape, sentenced to death, and twice successfully appealed their convictions to the United States Supreme Court. In addition to describing the Scottsboro episode in some detail, the essay seeks to draw some lessons from this story: Why did the Supreme Court’s first modern criminal procedure cases tend to involve southern blacks as defendants? Why did southern states seem to regress in their treatment of black criminal defendants in cases such as Scottsboro? What were the long-term ramifications of these Court decisions for the rights of black criminal defendants in the South? Why were the Court’s rulings so inefficacious on the precise issues involved—appointment of counsel for indigent defendants and the right against race discrimination in jury selection? In what ways might such litigation have advanced the cause of black civil rights even though southern states successfully circumvented the narrow holdings of the decisions? And, finally, how might victories in the Supreme Court have paradoxically harmed the cause of black criminal defendants by legitimizing an unjust status quo that the Court had neither the power nor the inclination to alter?
A Fateful Train Ride

The freight train left Chattanooga for Memphis at 10:20 A.M. on March 25, 1931. Thirty minutes after it had pulled out of Stevenson, Alabama, the station master saw a group of white hoboes walking along the train tracks toward the station. They told him that several black youths had thrown them off the train after a fight. The station master telephoned ahead to the next stop, Scottsboro, but the train had already passed through. It was finally stopped at Paint Rock, where a sheriff’s posse discovered nine black youngsters and, to everyone’s surprise, two young white women dressed in men’s overalls.¹

The nine blacks, known to history as the Scottsboro Boys, ranged in age from 13 to 20. Five of them were from Georgia, though they claimed not to know one another. The other four were from Chattanooga, and they did know one another. All of the nine were vagrants, and most were illiterate.

Twenty minutes after the train was stopped, one of the women, Ruby Bates, called over a posse member and told him that she and her companion, Victoria Price, had been gang raped by

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the blacks. The boys were immediately arrested and taken to the Scottsboro jail. As the sheriff sent the women to two local doctors for medical examinations, news of the alleged attacks spread. By day’s end, a crowd of several hundred had gathered outside of the jail, demanding that the “niggers” be turned over for lynching. Sheriff M.L. Wann pleaded with the mob to allow the law to take its course and threatened to shoot anyone who rushed the jail. He also telephoned the governor for assistance, and by 11:00 PM, twenty-five armed guardsmen were on their way to Scottsboro. To ensure the boys’ safety, they were moved to a sturdier jail in nearby Etowah. The local circuit judge, Alfred E. Hawkins, convened a special session of the grand jury to indict the boys; local citizens complained of the five-day delay. One local newspaper remarked, “It is best for the county that these things be disposed of in a speedy manner as it gives no excuse for people taking the law into their own hands.”

A decade or two earlier, black men charged with raping white women under similar circumstances might well have been executed without trial. Lynchings in the South peaked in the late 1880s and early 1890s, when well over a hundred were reported annually and in some years over two hundred. Most lynchings were linked to allegations of crime—usually murder or rape, though occasionally the alleged “offense” was as minor as breach of racial etiquette or general uppityness. Prior to World War I, lynchings typically enjoyed the support of local communities; efforts to prosecute even known lynchers were rare, and convictions were virtually nonexistent.

By 1930, however, the annual number of reported lynchings had declined dramatically—from 187.5 in the 1890s to 16.8 in the second half of the 1920s. This decline was attributable to many factors, including the threat that federal anti-lynching legislation would be
enacted, the diminishing insularity of the South, more professional law enforcement, and better education. But the decline in lynchings probably also depended on their replacement with speedy trials that reliably produced guilty verdicts, death sentences, and rapid executions. Some jurisdictions actually enacted laws designed to prevent lynchings by providing for special terms of court to convene within days of alleged rapes and other incendiary crimes. In many instances, law enforcement officers explicitly promised prospective lynch mobs that black defendants would be quickly tried and executed if the mob desisted, and prosecutors appealed to juries to convict in order to reward mobs for good behavior and thus encourage similar restraint in the future.4

In such cases, guilt or innocence often mattered little. As one white southerner candidly remarked in 1933, “If a white woman is prepared to swear that a Negro either raped or attempted to rape her, we see to it that the Negro is executed.” Prevailing racial norms did not permit white jurors to believe a black man’s word over that of a white woman; prevailing gender norms did not allow defense counsel to closely interrogate a white woman about allegations involving sex. As one contemporary southern newspaper observed, the honor of a white woman was more important than the life of a black man. And because most southern white men believed that black males secretly lusted after “their” women, they generally found such rape allegations credible. Congressman George Huddleston of Birmingham, whom the NAACP initially approached to represent the Scottsboro boys on appeal, repulsed the overtures, observing that they “had been found riding on the same freight car with two white women, and that’s enough for me!” Scottsboro whites told an investigator from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) that “we white people just couldn’t afford to let these niggers off because of the effect it
would have on other niggers.”

The Scottsboro boys received precisely the sort of “justice” that often prevailed in trials that substituted for lynchings. Both local newspapers treated the defendants as obviously guilty even before the trial. The hometown newspaper of the alleged victims, the Huntsville Daily Times, described the rapes as “the most atrocious ever recorded in this part of the country, a wholesale debauching of society.” Judge Hawkins tried to assign all seven members of the Scottsboro bar to represent the defendants, but all but one of them declined. That one was Milo Moody, nearly seventy years old and later described by one investigator as “a doddering, extremely unreliable, senile individual who is losing whatever ability he once had.”

The trials began on April 6, just twelve days after the train incident. A crowd estimated at five to ten thousand gathered outside the courthouse, which was protected by national guardsmen wielding machine guns. Hawkins appointed as trial counsel a Tennessee lawyer, Stephen R. Roddy, who had been sent to Scottsboro by the defendants’ families to look after their interests. Roddy was an alcoholic, and one observer reported that “he could scarcely walk straight” that morning. When Roddy objected to his appointment on the grounds that he was unprepared and unfamiliar with Alabama law, Hawkins appointed Moody, the local septuagenarian, to assist him. Roddy was permitted less than half an hour with his clients before the trial began. Defense counsel moved for a change of venue based on the inflammatory newspaper coverage and the attempted lynching of the defendants. But Sheriff Wann now denied that the defendants had been threatened, and Judge Hawkins denied the motion.

The state sought the death penalty against eight of the nine defendants—all but the one who was identified as being only thirteen years old. The nine were tried in four groups,
beginning with Clarence Norris and Charley Weems. Victoria Price was the main prosecution witness, and she testified that the black youths had thrown the white boys off the train and then gang raped her and Bates. According to one second-hand account, Price testified “with such gusto, snap and wise-cracks, that the courtroom was often in a roar of laughter.” Judge Hawkins blocked defense counsels’ efforts to elicit admissions that the women were prostitutes and that they had had sexual intercourse with boyfriends the night before the train incident, which would have explained the semen found in their vaginas during medical examinations. Testimony given by the examining doctors raised serious doubts as to whether the girls had been raped: They were not hysterical when examined, nor had they incurred any serious physical injuries. Moreover, Price had so little semen in her vagina that a sequential rape by six men, as alleged, was highly improbable. And the sperm found in the women was non-motile, which virtually ruled out the possibility of intercourse within the preceding few hours. The two women also provided inconsistent accounts of various details of the incident, such as whether they had spoken with the white boys on the train and how long the interracial fracas had lasted. One man present when the train was stopped testified that he had not heard Price make any rape allegations. However, the admission by Norris on cross-examination that the women had been raped by all of the other eight defendants, though not by him, severely undercut his defense. (It later came out that Sheriff Wann had warned Norris that he would be killed if he did not admit that the girls had been raped.) Defense counsel prodded the illiterate and confused Norris to change his story, but he held firm. The defense called no witnesses and made no closing argument. 

While the jury deliberated on the fate of Norris and Weems, the trial of Haywood
Patterson began. When the first jury returned to the courtroom to announce guilty verdicts and death sentences, crowds in and out of the courthouse erupted with delight. According to defense lawyer Roddy, “[i]nstantly, a wild and thunderous roar went up from the audience and was heard by those in the Court House yard where thousands took up the demonstration and carried it on for fifteen or twenty minutes.” Even though Patterson’s jury heard this commotion, Judge Hawkins refused to declare a mistrial.⁹

The prosecution’s case grew stronger with each trial, as previously unhelpful witnesses were dropped, and the alleged victims improved their stories with practice. Patterson contradicted himself on the witness stand within five minutes as to whether he had seen the girls being raped or indeed had seen them at all. Several of the other defendants testified inconsistently as well; one confirmed that the girls had been raped, while others denied even having seen the girls on the train. After less than twenty-five minutes of deliberation, the jury convicted Patterson and sentenced him to death.¹⁰

Five of the defendants were prosecuted together in a third trial. The state’s case against them was even weaker because these defendants did not incriminate each other on cross-examination, the women were less certain in identifying them, and one of the defendants was nearly blind and another had such a severe case of venereal disease that raping a woman would have been very difficult. The jury nonetheless returned five more death sentences. Judge Hawkins declared a mistrial in the case of the last defendant, Roy Wright, when the jury could not agree on whether to sentence the 13-year-old to life imprisonment or death—a sentence the prosecution had not even sought. None of the four trials lasted more than a few hours.¹¹
Representation on Appeal

The Communist party quickly realized the potential for propaganda and fund-raising afforded by the Scottsboro episode, which it saw as the Sacco and Vanzetti case of the 1930s. Communists denounced the trials as “legal lynchings” and assailed the “parasite landlords and capitalist classes of the South.” Less radical voices also protested this “barbarous penalty” imposed on eight black youngsters. By contrast, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), generally reluctant to intervene in criminal cases unless reasonably certain that the defendants were innocent, was slow to act. This enabled the International Labor Defense (ILD), the legal arm of the Communist party, to secure the defendants’ consent to its representing them.12

Stung by criticism from supporters for its dilatory response and finding that “public interest is so deep that we cannot afford not to be in the case,” NAACP leaders aggressively challenged the ILD for control of the boys’ appeals. The NAACP convinced some black leaders in Chattanooga that communist involvement would be a millstone around the boys’ necks, and the defendants were persuaded to retract their consent to ILD representation. The ILD responded by publicly attacking the NAACP as “bourgeois reformists” and “secret allies of the lynchers” who would help “lead the boys to the electric chair.” The communists believed that the boys could be saved only by mass protest, not appeals to the ruling class. They ridiculed the NAACP for its willingness to “kiss the rope that hangs their brothers, if only the rope is blessed by a ruling class judge,” and they accused the association generally of ignoring the interests of the black masses.13

In response, the NAACP warned that communists were using the case for their own
advantage and that their incendiary rhetoric would harm the boys’ chances of winning reversal on appeal or gubernatorial commutation. Walter White, general secretary of the NAACP, told the mother of one of the boys, Eugene Williams, that “the odds against her son were terrific at best—that when Red prejudice was added to Black, she would practically insure her boy’s execution by remaining tied up with the Communists.” White even accused the communists of calculating that “the boys dead will be worth more for propaganda purposes than alive.” By contrast, the NAACP’s strategy was to hire an eminent white lawyer from the South who would avoid publicity and try to win reversal or commutation on narrow legal grounds.¹⁴

NAACP leaders were torn between wanting not to jeopardize the boys’ chances of winning the support of moderate whites in the South and wishing not to alienate its more radical members who favored vocally condemning the white South for its willingness to execute the boys on dubious evidence. By distancing itself from the ILD, the NAACP alienated many blacks, who saw little reason to repudiate the communists’ assistance, which they saw as “sincere and whole hearted.” The editor of one black newspaper observed that the NAACP had “outlived its usefulness if it now feels that fighting the spread of communism is more important than fighting white southerners who will lynch, massacre, and slaughter and expect to get away with it.” Another black editor accused the NAACP of having “an Uncle Tom attitude in this case.” Yet Walter White was convinced that it would be “suicidal” for the NAACP “to be tied up in any way with that outfit of lunatics (the communists).” Most black newspaper editors saw the battle between the NAACP and the ILD as “deplorable” and a “sad spectacle,” and one observed that “we have too few friends to have the quarrel as to which we shall lend a helping hand in any given case.”¹⁵
After months of repeatedly changing their minds over the choice of legal representative, by the end of 1931 all of the boys had settled on the ILD, partly because of the NAACP’s occasionally condescending attitude toward them and their parents. For example, one NAACP official, William Pickens, referred to some of the boys’ parents as “the densest and dumbest animals it has yet been my privilege to meet”–a statement that the ILD ensured the parents heard about. The communists also sent small monthly checks to the boys’ families and treated the parents with kindness and respect.16

In a last effort to win back control of the cases, the NAACP persuaded Clarence Darrow to participate in the appeals. Not wishing to be perceived as rejecting assistance from the nation’s most eminent criminal defense lawyer, the ILD professed eagerness to have Darrow’s help. But the organization insisted that Darrow sever his connections with the NAACP and take orders from the ILD, which prompted Darrow and the association to withdraw from the case. One black newspaper predicted that the consequence of Darrow’s withdrawal “is almost surely to be murder in Scottsboro” and that the boys’ “innocent blood will be a crimson stain on the [ILD].”17

Because communists generally viewed courts as simply “instruments of . . . class oppression,” they did not place much faith in litigation. Rather, they favored “revolutionary mass action outside of courts and bourgeois legislative bodies.” Communists believed that the Scottsboro cases could educate the masses and increase party membership, especially among blacks. Throughout the spring and summer of 1931, communists organized large demonstrations in the North–often featuring the boys’ mothers–to protest the boys’ treatment and to petition Governor Benjamin Meeks Miller of Alabama and President Herbert Hoover for redress. In
Dresden, Germany, communists threw rocks through the windows of the American consulate and condemned the “bloody lynching of our Negro co-workers”–a scene repeated elsewhere in Europe that summer. Even in Tallapoosa County, Alabama, communists used the “Scottsboro lynch verdict” to organize black sharecroppers into a union demanding higher wages and the release of the boys; whites responded with violence and murder.18

By the summer of 1931, Governor Miller was receiving thousands of abusive letters from around the world. One typical protest condemned “the brutal slave drivers of Alabama acting through a Ku Klux Klan judge and jury inflamed by race hatred . . . to send nine innocent children to the electric chair.” ILD attacks on white Alabamians as “lynchers” were reprinted in local newspapers, increasing resentment toward the Scottsboro boys. Local whites grew more defensive, insisting that the boys had been given “as fair a trial as they could have gotten in any court in the world.” The Commission on Interracial Cooperation, which often supported the appeals of southern blacks convicted in obviously unfair trials, refused to support the Scottsboro defendants because of hostile public opinion. The governor’s secretary explained that Scottsboro had become “a white elephant” for Miller and that the ILD’s inflammatory statements had “tied his hands.” One white constituent warned the governor not to let any “threat or demand from dirty yankees or damn communists from the North and throughout the world . . . sway you.” Judge Hawkins confided to defense lawyer Roddy that he did not “really think the boys should be put to death, but . . . the Communists are more of an issue than are the FACTS of the case.” One white Alabamian captured the view of many, observing that “I might have been for acquittin’ them at the first trial, but now after all this stink’s been raised, we’ve got to hang ‘em.”19
Alabama Supreme Court

It was in this climate that the cases were appealed to the Alabama supreme court. In recent decades, state supreme courts in the South had become somewhat more protective of the procedural rights of black criminal defendants, frequently reversing convictions, even in cases of murder or rape, on grounds such as prejudicial racial statements by prosecutors, the refusal of trial judges to change venue or grant defense counsel adequate time to prepare, and the use of coerced confessions. To be sure, criminal justice for southern blacks remained unequal: Blacks still could not serve on southern juries; black lawyers could not command fair hearings in southern courtrooms; black witnesses were treated as less credible than white witnesses; and the death penalty was never imposed on white rapists or on men who raped black women. Still, some progress had been made. Yet in explosive cases that generated outside criticism of the South or that were otherwise perceived to threaten white supremacy, southern courts regressed in their treatment of black defendants.20

Alabama whites were especially incensed by criticism over Scottsboro because they felt they deserved praise for avoiding a lynching. The Scottsboro Progressive Age complimented local citizens for their “patience and chivalry” after the alleged rapes, and the Chattanooga Daily Times praised them for setting “the rest of the South an impressive example in self-restraint.” A Georgia newspaper warned that appealing the convictions of black men for raping white women was “playing with fire”; a hasty trial was preferable to a lynching and indeed was “a first step, and a very important one.” Many southern newspapers predicted a resurgence in lynchings if outsiders persisted in criticizing trials such as those at Scottsboro.21
When the Scottsboro appeal reached the state supreme court, its justices were said to be seething with anger at the protests and threats directed at them. The Communist party newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, had called the court an “instrument of the Wall Street Imperialists,” which would surely affirm the boys’ convictions. Chief Justice John C. Anderson publicly criticized such statements, which he said had been made with “the evident intent to bulldoze this court,” and he insisted that the justices “will not be intimidated.”

In their appeal, the ILD lawyers raised the issues of race discrimination in jury selection and the inadequacy of defense counsel, but they emphasized the unfairness of the trials and especially the mob’s influence on the juries. In reply, the state attorney general denied that “a curious mob” had influenced the outcome of the trials. The headline in the *Montgomery Advertiser*’s report of the oral argument observed, “Negro Partisans ‘Dictate’ Course to High Court.”

The Alabama supreme court had previously reversed convictions in similar cases of mob domination. Other southern courts in less publicized cases had reversed convictions when defense counsel had been appointed even *a couple of days* before trial. Yet on March 24, 1932, the Alabama supreme court voted six to one to uphold the death sentences of seven of the defendants (the court granted a new trial to Eugene Williams because he had been a juvenile–thirteen years old–at the time of conviction). The court emphasized that the speed of the trials was “highly desirable” because it instilled greater respect for the law and that the presence of national guardsmen surrounding the courthouse gave “notice to everybody that the strong arm of the state was there to assure the accused a lawful trial.” The court also ruled sufficient the appointment of counsel on the morning of trial. In a letter to the NAACP’s Walter
White, Chief Justice Anderson, the sole dissenter, explained that the communists “had been very imprudent and injected a lot of irrelevant bunk into the controversy and instead of helping it possibly injured these defendants.” Anderson, who much preferred that “these defendants be tried under different circumstances,” regretted that his colleagues had not been “above permitting outside influence to prejudice these defendants.” (As a reward for his efforts, Anderson received a telegram from an ILD branch assailing him as a “traitor to the masses” for his willingness to abide by the majority’s decision.24

The Montgomery Advertiser opined that the court’s ruling “should satisfy all reasonable persons” that the Scottsboro boys had received fair trials. Yet several other Alabama newspapers regretted that the court had not granted a new trial to allay doubts regarding the defendants’ guilt. The Birmingham Age-Herald observed, “the fact remains that there was an element of mob feeling in the air,” and the Birmingham News insisted there was “ground for divergence of opinions regarding these cases.” Moderate whites in Alabama blamed the ruling on communist efforts at intimidation, which they suspected the state jurists had “leaned unconsciously backwards” to resist. A black newspaper similarly concluded, “it is possible that the highest legal tribunal in Alabama affirmed these death sentences because it did no[t] want to appear as being swayed, cowed or bluff[e]d by a group of radicals.” Communists thought the ruling revealed the “highest courts working hand in glove with owners of America against the working class.”25

The Daily Worker predicted that review by the U.S. Supreme Court—just another “capitalist court”—would be a “mere gesture aimed at facilitating the legal lynching of these children.” A black newspaper in the North professed greater faith in the high court, reasoning
that “America, grasping for the moral leadership of the world, cannot afford to set the example of staging a legal lynching.” The liberal Nation agreed that the boys’ prospects were “very bright” because “the conscience of the world will be profoundly shocked” if the Court affirmed their convictions and thus “encourag[ed] legal lynchings in the South.”

The U.S. Supreme Court

In 1932 the U.S. Supreme Court was hardly the champion of racial equality that it would one day become in popular mythology. Around 1900, the Court had sustained the constitutionality of laws mandating racial segregation and disfranchising blacks, leading the fledging NAACP to conclude in 1915 that the Court “has virtually declared that the colored man has no civil rights.” To be sure, the Court in the second decade of the twentieth century struck down residential segregation ordinances, certain laws that promoted peonage (compulsory labor to discharge debts), and the grandfather clause (a device insulating illiterate whites from the disfranchising effect of literacy tests). But in 1927 the Court strongly implied that state-mandated racial segregation in public schools was constitutionally permissible, and in 1935 the Court would unanimously sustain the exclusion of blacks from Democratic primaries—the only elections that mattered in the one-party South. In 1932, virtually nobody thought of the Court as a heroic defender of the rights of racial minorities.

Nor had the Court yet taken substantial strides toward protecting the procedural rights of criminal defendants in state courts. Prior to Moore v. Dempsey in 1923, the Court had reversed state criminal convictions on federal constitutional grounds in only a handful of cases involving race discrimination in jury selection. In other cases, the Court had denied that the Fourteenth
Amendment converted the procedural protections of the federal Bill of Rights into safeguards against state governments and had narrowly construed the Due Process Clause of that amendment, which does explicitly constrain the states.\textsuperscript{28}

\textbf{Moore v. Dempsey} was the progenitor of modern American criminal procedure. The case arose from an infamous racial massacre in Phillips County, Arkansas, in 1919. Black tenant farmers and sharecroppers had tried to organize a union and to hire white lawyers to sue planters for peonage practices. Local whites cracked down with a vengeance. When whites shot into a church where black unionists were meeting, blacks returned the gunfire. A white man was killed, and mayhem quickly ensued. Marauding whites, supported by federal troops ostensibly dispatched to quell the disturbance, went on a rampage, tracking down blacks throughout the countryside and killing dozens of them. Seventy-nine blacks, and no whites, were prosecuted and convicted for their actions during this “race riot,” and twelve received the death penalty.

The trials of those twelve lasted only an hour or two each, and the juries, from which blacks had been systematically excluded, deliberated for only a few minutes. Huge mobs of angry whites surrounded the courthouse, menacing the defendants and the jurors and threatening a lynching. Six of the defendants appealed their death sentences to the Supreme Court, arguing that mob-dominated trials violate the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. By a vote of seven to two, the Supreme Court agreed, reversed the convictions, and ordered a federal district judge to conduct a hearing on whether the defendants’ trial had been influenced by the mob.\textsuperscript{29}

\textbf{Moore} offered some hope that the Scottsboro defendants might find justice in the Supreme Court. Their lawyers raised three constitutional claims in their appeal: mob domination of the trials in violation of the Due Process Clause; intentional exclusion of blacks from the
grand and petit juries in violation of the Equal Protection Clause; and denial of the right to
counsel in violation of the Due Process Clause. On the day of the oral argument, extra police
officers patrolled the Supreme Court building and grounds; the plaza facing the Capitol was
cleared; and elaborate preparations were made to preempt the mass communist demonstrations
that had been promised. Mary Mooney, mother of the imprisoned California labor leader Tom
Mooney (who had been wrongfully convicted for the Preparedness Day bombing in San
Francisco in 1916), attended the Court session, noting her interest in seeing that other mothers’
sons received justice. Several of Alabama’s congressmen also attended the argument, as did an
unusually large number of blacks.30

The Court reversed the defendants’ convictions on the ground that the right to counsel
had been denied, and it declined to reach the other two issues. Perhaps the justices chose the
basis for decision that they deemed least controversial. Reversing the defendants’ convictions
because of mob domination would have required extending Moore, as the Scottsboro trials were
not quite so farcical as those of the Phillips County defendants: the Scottsboro boys received a
genuine defense; their trials lasted for several hours (not forty-five minutes); the juries trying
them deliberated more than the five minutes in Moore; their cases did not raise the broader
implications of the Phillips County race riot; and they had not been tortured into confessing. For
the Court to have reversed the Scottsboro convictions on the basis of Moore might have required
basic changes in Jim Crow justice. Similarly, to invalidate their convictions because of race
discrimination in jury selection would have been far more provocative to white southerners
because preserving white supremacy in the courtroom required excluding blacks from juries. By
contrast, overturning the convictions because the defendants had been denied the right to counsel
was unlikely to affect the outcome of any retrials or Jim Crow justice in general.\textsuperscript{31}

Prior to \textit{Powell}, the Court had never ruled that due process requires the states to provide counsel to indigent defendants in capital cases, but neither had it rejected that position. Every state court confronting that issue had required the government to appoint counsel in such circumstances. To be sure, Powell had received a court-appointed lawyer. He made two arguments as to why this appointment failed to satisfy federal constitutional standards. First, the state had not afforded him adequate opportunity to hire counsel of his own choice. Second, the court appointment was inadequate because it had been made the morning of the trial, and thus defense counsel was denied an adequate opportunity to consult clients, interview witnesses, and prepare a defense.\textsuperscript{32}

The Alabama court had deemed this last-minute appointment of counsel sufficient to satisfy the state constitutional requirement of a court-appointed lawyer in capital cases. In general, the U.S. Supreme Court has no authority to review state court interpretations of state law. Thus, for the Court to reverse Powell’s conviction, it would have to construe the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to require the assistance of counsel in capital cases. American constitutional history reveals that the justices are least reluctant to expand constitutional rights when doing so involves holding a few renegade states to the norm already espoused by the vast majority. As of 1932, not a single state had rejected the right of indigent defendants in capital cases to state-appointed counsel. Indeed, one reason that state courts had not yet considered whether the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteed such a right is that all of them confronting the issue had interpreted their state constitutions to do so.
Once the justices determined that due process required the appointment of counsel for indigent capital defendants, reversing Powell’s conviction was easy. First, Powell had been denied the opportunity to hire a lawyer of his own choice. Second, to most disinterested observers, the trial judge’s appointment of counsel had been obviously inadequate. At the trials, although defense counsel did cross-examine prosecution witnesses, they made only a feeble effort to change the trial venue, presented neither opening nor closing arguments, and called none of their own witnesses other than the defendants, some of whom implicated each other in a desperate effort to avoid the death penalty. The Scottsboro trials may not have been quite the sham affair under review in Moore, yet most lawyers would have considered obviously inadequate the representation afforded to the defendants.\(^3\)

Moreover, the trial record revealed a high probability that the boys were innocent—a circumstance likely to be significant to Supreme Court justices reviewing their convictions, even if technically irrelevant to the merits of their appeal. Because criminal procedure safeguards often shield the guilty from punishment, they are usually controversial, and the justices are probably more inclined to identify new rights in cases where defendants have a strong claim of innocence. As we have seen, the medical evidence introduced at the Scottsboro trials raised serious doubts as to whether any rape had occurred, and the accusers had provided inconsistent testimony. Moreover, the women possessed a clear motive for fabrication: avoiding a possible Mann Act prosecution for traveling across state lines for immoral purposes (prostitution).

Many newspapers, even in parts of the South, applauded the high court’s decision in Powell. The Richmond Times-Dispatch went so far as to say that the ruling “will be welcomed throughout the country, with the possible exception of Alabama.” The New York Times likewise
hailed the ruling, which it said “ought to abate the rancor of extreme radicals, while confirming the faith of the American people in the soundness of their institutions and especially in the integrity of their courts.” Professor Felix Frankfurter of the Harvard Law School called the decision “a notable chapter in the history of liberty” and observed that the same Court that had recently served the interests of property owners was now protecting “illiterate” and “vagrant” blacks from oppression. A black newspaper proclaimed the ruling “a great stroke in the name of justice,” and the NAACP saw it as a “vindication” of its view that victories for racial justice “are best won by strictly legal means.” By contrast, the Daily Worker condemned Powell for instructing Alabama authorities on “how ‘properly’ to carry through such lynch schemes.” The liberal lawyer Morris Ernst likewise assailed the decision as “empty and meaningless” and “cunningly uncourageous” because it disregarded the issues of “deep social significance” and left the defendants in “horrid shape” for a retrial, which was likely to feature a half-hearted lawyer “who will saunter . . . before a white jury while mobs outside sing anthems and shout for hangings.”

On Remand

The Court’s ruling seemed only to make Alabama whites more defensive. After the initial trials, some of them had doubted whether the defendants had been treated fairly. However, after what the Birmingham Post called the high court’s “stinging rebuke” of the state supreme court, anyone publicly expressing doubts about the defendants’ guilt or the fairness of their trials was courting physical danger. White Alabamians also greatly resented northern newspaper accounts that portrayed them as barefooted, tobacco-chewing illiterates. Judge
Hawkins opined with regard to the retrials that “[t]he presence of troops will be more imperative now than ever.”

The ILD asked Samuel Leibowitz, a New York Jew and one of the nation’s leading criminal defense lawyers, to represent the defendants at their new trials. Leibowitz agreed to serve without fee in exchange for a promise of independence in orchestrating the defense and a commitment from the ILD to lower its public profile regarding Scottsboro. Upon arriving in Alabama, Leibowitz sought to distance the case from the communist issue and professed no intention to tell Alabamians how to run their affairs.

As the retrials began, Leibowitz moved for a change of venue, which was granted—to Decatur, Alabama, fifty miles west of Scottsboro. Nearly all whites there were already convinced of the defendants’ guilt. A large crowd attended the first of the retrials, though the threat of violence that pervaded the original proceedings was initially absent. The Scottsboro episode had attracted so much national attention that representatives of several New York newspapers and the wire services were in attendance.

Leibowitz moved to quash the original indictments on the ground that no blacks had served on grand juries in Jackson County since Reconstruction, even though they were nearly ten percent of the county’s population. Summoned to testify, the county’s jury commissioners denied that blacks were excluded because of their race. Leibowitz also called as witnesses several blacks from Jackson County to demonstrate that they satisfied the statutory jury-selection standard of “integrity, good character, and sound judgment.” The prosecutor tried to humiliate and intimidate these black witnesses, but they held up well under cross-examination, and Leibowitz established that they were as well qualified as many whites to serve as jurors.
Nevertheless, Judge James Edwin Horton overruled the motion to quash the indictments.\textsuperscript{38}

Leibowitz then challenged the jury-selection system in Morgan County, site of the new trials. He called as witnesses ten prominent blacks from the county to demonstrate their qualifications to serve as jurors. These educated and refined blacks, most of whom held college degrees, made impressive witnesses.\textsuperscript{39}

When Leibowitz had demanded that the prosecutor refer to black witnesses with courtesy titles, courtroom spectators had been merely puzzled, but when he questioned the honesty of county jury commissioners, they grew visibly angry. A crowd of 200 young men gathered in town to “protest[] against the manner in which Mr. Leibowitz has examined the state’s witnesses.” After Judge Horton rejected the defense’s challenge to jury selection, he admonished courtroom spectators about the death threats being made against Leibowitz on Decatur streets and warned that he would order the national guardsmen to shoot to kill if any effort was made to harm the defendants.\textsuperscript{40}

The prosecution’s strategy at Patterson’s retrial was to have Victoria Price testify as graphically as possible about the rapes. Leibowitz’s cross-examination was brutal, as he tried to demonstrate that Price was a prostitute and that her account of what happened on the train was riddled with contradictions. Price proved a feisty witness who yielded no ground, although Leibowitz was able to elicit from her some contradictory statements. Any damage he did to Price’s credibility, however, came at the cost of alienating courtroom whites, who were outraged at this attack on the chastity and honesty of a southern white woman. One courtroom spectator whispered to another, “It’ll be a wonder if ever he leaves town alive,” and two hundred angry local residents gathered to protest the manner in which Leibowitz had cross-examined Price,
Judge Horton responded by strongly defending the rule of law, denouncing the “mob spirit,” and insisting that he would defend the lives of the defendants and anyone else involved in the case.41

Doctor R.R. Bridges testified that all of the sperm found in Price’s vagina was non-motile, which should have been conclusive exculpatory evidence, given that the alleged rapes had occurred only ninety minutes before the medical examination. A second doctor, Marvin Lynch, privately confessed to Judge Horton that he had never believed that the young women had been raped. But Lynch rejected Horton’s exhortations to state this view publicly, explaining that “[i]f I testified for those boys I’d never be able to go back into Jackson County.” The defendant’s medical expert, Dr. Edward A. Reisman, testified that a woman raped by six men could not possibly have in her vagina only the small traces of semen found in the medical examination of Price. Reisman also declared that women who had just been raped could not have appeared as calm and collected as Price and Bates had been. One local resident was unimpressed by this testimony: “When a nigger has expert witnesses, we have a right to ask who is paying for them.”42

The star witness for the defense was Ruby Bates, who made a dramatic entrance and testified that no rapes had occurred. However, her credibility was necessarily compromised by the blatant contradictions with her testimony in the original trials. The prosecutor further impeached her credibility by suggesting that she had been paid to testify—an allegation that apparently convinced most locals. In closing arguments, one prosecutor referred to the “fancy New York clothes” worn by Bates and, pointing at the Jewish defense attorneys (Leibowitz and Joseph Brodsky of the ILD), appealed to the jury to prove that Alabama justice could not be bought “with Jew money from New York.” Another prosecutor told the jury, “If you acquit this
Negro, put a garland of roses around his neck, give him a supper and send him to New York City,” where “Dr. Harry Fosdick [the liberal Protestant minister from New York who had provided support for Bates] [will] dress him up in a high hat and morning coat, gray-striped trousers and spats.”

Even if this had been a run-of-the-mill, black-on-white rape case, it would have been difficult for a jury of southern whites to have acquitted Patterson. But Scottsboro was no ordinary case. With communists attacking white Alabamians as lynchers, and Leibowitz assailing white jury commissioners as liars, an acquittal was out of the question. The trial had ceased to be about determining Patterson’s guilt or innocence and had become instead a challenge to southern white supremacy. With the issue framed this way, the jury took just five minutes to convict (though one juror held out against the death penalty for hours before finally capitulating). Leibowitz called the result “a triumph of bigotry,” and the Chicago Defender, one of the leading black newspapers in the country, denounced the trial “as a mockery, a pretension of justice and a crime against our national honor.” New York newspapers professed “shock” at the verdict, while some southern newspapers blamed any unfairness on outside agitation, which Alabama whites naturally resented.

The day Patterson was convicted, twenty thousand blacks in New York City signed a petition promising to join a protest march in Washington, D.C. later that spring. Huge crowds gathered in New York to hear Ruby Bates proclaim herself a victim of the oppression of the Scottsboro ruling class and to hear Leibowitz denigrate Alabama whites as “bigots whose mouths are slits in their faces, whose eyes pop out like a frog’s, whose chins drip tobacco juice, bewhiskered and filthy.” The New York press faithfully reported such comments, which were
then widely reprinted in Alabama newspapers, making Leibowitz even more anathema to southern whites. One Alabama journal retorted, “the New York Jew says there is no such thing as a fair trial in Alabama. It seems to this paper . . . [that] this recent recruit from Russia is a poor sort of chap to try to blight the good name of Alabama.”

After pronouncing sentence on Patterson, Judge Horton delayed the other retrials because Leibowitz’s statements to the press were a “millstone around the necks of the defendants.” Meanwhile, some southern newspapers outside of Alabama for the first time declared the boys innocent. Douglas Southall Freeman, editor of the Richmond News Leader, observed that “[t]he men are being sentenced to death primarily because they are black” and because of the “unwritten law’ that when a white woman accuses . . . a Negro he must prove his innocence.” Josephus Daniels, editor of the Raleigh News and Observer, called the verdict “shocking” and “outrageous.” The Chattanooga News declared that one could not “conceive of a civilized community taking human lives on the strength of this miserable affair.” By contrast, newspapers in the Deep South tended to defend the fairness of the trials.

In Alabama, the few whites who continued to raise doubts were forcefully suppressed. A sociology professor at Birmingham Southern University who was sympathetic to the boys was denied an extension of his contract. Rabbi Benjamin Goldstein, another supporter, was forced to resign from his temple in Montgomery and then to leave the state; his congregants worried that the rabbi’s controversial stand on Scottsboro would unleash a wave of antisemitism. One observer noted that many whites conceded the defendants’ probable innocence but nonetheless insisted, “[i]f we let Negroes get by with this case, no white woman will be safe in the South.” Many moderates apparently hoped that the governor would commute the sentences to life.
imprisonment, apparently deeming this an acceptable compromise for black men falsely accused of raping white women.\textsuperscript{47}

In June 1933 Judge Horton, whom Leibowitz had called “one of the finest jurists I have ever met,” granted the defense motion for a new trial, explaining that he found the evidence against Patterson unconvincing. Horton secretly hoped that his action would forestall further prosecutions of the defendants.\textsuperscript{48}

The \textit{Birmingham Post} applauded Horton’s decision and declared the defendants probably innocent, but it was the only newspaper in the state to do so. Some prominent whites in Alabama, including the president of the state bar association, also endorsed Horton’s ruling, but the predominant reaction in the state was hostile. Tom Heflin, a former U.S. senator from Alabama, declared that Horton’s ruling was “putting wicked thoughts in the minds of lawless negro men and greatly increasing the danger to the white women of Alabama.” The state attorney general who had helped prosecute the case, Thomas E. Knight, Jr., sought to have the judge—whom one critic derided as having “no more backbone than in an angle worm”—removed from the case. The following year, Horton, who had faced no opposition when he stood for election six years earlier, was defeated for reelection. By contrast, Knight was elected lieutenant governor.\textsuperscript{49}

The Scottsboro retrials resumed in November 1933. Recent developments raised doubts as to whether the defendants and their lawyers could be protected from mob violence. That summer in Tuscaloosa, three ILD lawyers defending blacks charged with raping and killing a white woman had been turned over by deputy sheriffs to a firing squad, and two of them were killed. In September, an elderly black man accused of raping a mentally retarded white
woman–even the police found the allegation incredible–was lynched. The local newspaper blamed the ILD for spreading communist propaganda among “our contented Negro population,” while the Montgomery Advertiser attributed the lynchings to “hotheads who . . . fear[ed] that outside interference would block the course of justice.” Yet, with Birmingham newspapers noting an “extremely grave” probability of a massacre, Judge W.W. Callahan declined to request militia protection for the trials, and the governor sent none. Callahan also denied the defense motion for a change of venue, despite sworn statements in affidavits submitted by ILD investigators that a national guardsman had conceded he and his colleagues would offer only token resistance to a lynching attempt and that local whites had admitted they would conceal their belief that the boys should be executed in order to get on the jury.50

Before the new trials had begun, the jury commissioners in Jackson County had altered the jury lists by adding the names of several blacks. A defense handwriting expert testified that the names of most or perhaps all of the blacks had been fraudulently added after the lists had been initially compiled. Despite this uncontradicted testimony, Judge Callahan invoked the presumption that jury commissioners had acted lawfully and rejected the defense motion to quash the indictments.51

At Patterson’s retrial, Judge Callahan refused to permit Leibowitz to question Victoria Price about whether she had had sexual intercourse the night before the train trip, and he nearly ruled Leibowitz in contempt when the lawyer persisted in trying to get such evidence before the jury. Callahan repeatedly rescued Price when she became bogged down in contradictions and denied Leibowitz the opportunity to undermine the credibility of prosecution witnesses. Intimidated by death threats and recovering from surgery in a New York hospital, Ruby Bates
refused to return to Alabama to testify. The prosecution used against Patterson his earlier admission that he had seen some of the black youths raping the women. Yet the prosecutor’s most effective point may have been the question he posed to jurors in his closing argument: Did they really wish to believe the defendant’s account, which essentially charged their neighbors in Scottsboro with doing “a lot of awful things over there”? Callahan instructed the jury that “there is a very strong presumption under the law that [a white woman charging rape] would not and did not yield voluntarily to intercourse with . . . a Negro” and that this was true “whether she be the most despised, ignorant and abandoned woman of the community, or the spotless virgin and daughter of a prominent home of luxury and learning.” He glowered at Leibowitz while instructing the jury to ignore any of defense counsel’s intimations regarding Price’s prior sexual history, then forgot—before Leibowitz reminded him—to give the jury the instruction form for rendering a verdict of acquittal, an oversight the significance of which the jury was unlikely to miss. The jury convicted Patterson and sentenced him to death, and then a second jury did the same in the retrial of Clarence Norris. Leibowitz left the courtroom under heavy guard because of death threats.52

On appeal, both defendants challenged their convictions on the ground of race discrimination in jury selection. Supreme Court precedents from around 1900 made it very difficult to prove such discrimination. The Alabama supreme court rejected Norris’s claim on the basis of these precedents. The court refused to presume discrimination by the jury commissioners, denied any affirmative duty to place blacks on juries, and deferred to the commissioners’ denials of race discrimination. With regard to the appellant’s claim that Callahan’s administration of the trial was reversible error, the Alabama jurists found only that
“on one or two occasions [he had] manifested slight impatience.” The court did not even reach the merits of Patterson’s appeal because of an arguable failure to comply with Alabama’s rules of appellate procedure. The flaw was highly technical: Patterson’s claim was untimely only if the ninety-day period in which to file a bill of exceptions commenced at the date of judgment rather than the date of sentencing and if his new-trial motion, which would have tolled the ninety-day period, was nugatory because filed after expiration of the trial court’s term. (And even then, the bill of exceptions had been filed late only because of a plane crash.) Technical though it was, this procedural gaffe placed Patterson’s life in jeopardy. The Alabama supreme court refused to consider the merits of his jury-discrimination claim, which apparently meant that the U.S. Supreme Court could not do so either, even though Patterson’s appeal rested on precisely the same ground as Norris’s.53

The U.S. Supreme Court–Again

Late in 1934, two ILD attorneys were caught trying to bribe Victoria Price to change her story. An infuriated Leibowitz declared that the ILD had “assassinated the Scottsboro boys with that sort of business,” and he threatened to withdraw from the case unless the communists did so. The Daily Worker responded by accusing Leibowitz of joining forces with the “Alabama lynch rulers,” and the ILD tried to fire him on the pretense that he was inexperienced in constitutional appeals. But Leibowitz convinced Patterson, Norris, and their parents to stick with him. As in 1931, however, a subsequent visit from ILD lawyers promptly convinced the boys and their families to change their minds. Another unseemly battle for control of the case ensued—this time between Leibowitz and the ILD. Only after the boys had switched back and forth numerous
times was a compromise finally reached: Leibowitz represented Norris in the Supreme Court, while the lawyers hired by the ILD represented Patterson.\textsuperscript{54}

Norris’s appeal focused on race discrimination in jury selection. Alabama responded by invoking \textit{Thomas v. Texas} (1909), which held that federal courts must defer to state court findings of fact on that issue. During Leibowitz’s argument, Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes interrupted to ask if the lawyer could prove his allegation that the names of blacks had been forged on the jury rolls. Leibowitz said that he could, and in a moment of high drama, the justices examined the jury rolls of Jackson County through magnifying glasses–apparently the first time they had ever engaged in independent evidence-gathering in appellate proceedings.\textsuperscript{55}

Six weeks later, the justices overturned Norris’s conviction–the first time in decades the Court had done so on the ground of race discrimination in jury selection. To be sure, \textit{Norris} created no new substantive constitutional law; since \textit{Strauder v. West Virginia} in 1880, the Court had consistently construed the Equal Protection Clause to bar race discrimination in jury selection. However, \textit{Norris} did alter the critical rules governing how such claims were to be proved; for over a generation, these rules had doomed to failure virtually all such claims. The justices now reinvigorated the long-dormant dicta of \textit{Neal v. Delaware} (1881), which approved inferring intentional discrimination from the lengthy absence of blacks from jury service. If, under such circumstances, the state was not obliged to go beyond simply denying the existence of race discrimination, then the constitutional safeguard “would be but a vain and illusory requirement.” Further, \textit{Norris} held, when an alleged constitutional violation turned on disputed facts, the federal courts must find those facts for themselves, not simply defer to state findings.\textsuperscript{56}
race discrimination in jury selection for two reasons. First, not only had blacks been absent for decades from juries in these Alabama counties, but local court officers had been caught in an embarrassing lie, the only plausible explanation for which was the desire to cover up the intentional exclusion of blacks from juries. Second, by 1935 the innocence of the Scottsboro boys, in the words of one northern journal, had “long been established before the bar of public opinion.” Most Americans apparently found Ruby Bates’s recantation more persuasive evidence of the defendants’ innocence than had the Morgan County jury. Even many southern newspapers “rejoiced” in the Court’s decision reversing Norris’s conviction because, as one of them put it, “[t]he conscience of the nation and the world is convinced that the seven Negroes are not guilty of the crime of which they were charged.”

The reversal of Norris’s conviction need not necessarily have helped Patterson because of the alleged procedural flaw in his appeal. Yet the justices, after acknowledging Alabama’s right to dismiss federal claims not raised in compliance with its own appellate-procedure rules, nonetheless remanded Patterson’s case to the state court to reconsider in light of Norris. As justification for this unprecedented move, the justices professed themselves unwilling to believe that Alabama judges would have condemned Patterson to death because of procedural flaws in his appeal had they foreseen that the Supreme Court would soon invalidate the jury-selection procedures used in his case.

Subsequent history

The ILD regarded its victory in the high court as “another proof of the might of mass pressure and mass protest.” By contrast, Leibowitz saw it as a “triumph for American justice
and . . . an answer to all those subversive elements who seek to engender hatred against our form of government.” The *New York Times* similarly declared that the decision “shows that the highest court in the land is anxious to secure and protect the rights of the humblest citizens.”

Governor D. Bibb Graves of Alabama proclaimed that the Court’s decisions were the “supreme law of the land” and that “we must put the names of Negroes in jury boxes in every county.” He even mailed a copy of the rulings to all circuit judges in the state with instructions to comply. Newspapers outside of the South applauded the governor’s stance, but in the Deep South the reaction was different. The Charleston *News and Courier* declared that putting blacks on juries was “out of the question” because it “would revolutionize Southern jurisprudence and demoralize Southern civilization.” Thus, the Supreme Court decision “can and probably will be evaded.” Because the Fourteenth Amendment had been “imposed on the South when it was bound hand and foot and gagged, . . . [it] is not binding upon [the] honor or morals” of the South.

The Court’s second round of Scottsboro reversals did not, as some had hoped, deter Alabama from trying again. Leibowitz tried to persuade Governor Graves to block further prosecutions, but the Court’s interventions had only further inflamed public opinion in Alabama. The state’s high court faithfully quashed the indictments but clarified that this would not prevent retrials, and Lieutenant Governor Knight immediately announced that the cases would “be prosecuted to their conclusion.”

Meanwhile, organizations supporting the Scottsboro defense effort were beginning to quell their intramural divisions. After the Communist International in 1935 decided to support a popular front with liberal organizations against the “towering menace of fascism,” the ILD
ceased attacking NAACP leaders as “capitalist lackeys” and agreed to share control of the Scottsboro retrials. The ILD, the NAACP, the ACLU, and other organizations now formed the Scottsboro Defense Committee (SDC), which orchestrated the defense for the next round of trials, relegated Leibowitz to the background, and enlisted a respected white lawyer from the South to do most of the courtroom work. For the first time, some Alabama moderates were willing to form a state Scottsboro committee, but they resisted affiliating with Leibowitz, whose ILD connections and intemperate remarks had thoroughly alienated white Alabamians, and they wanted the ILD muzzled. Even if these conditions were satisfied, most of them refused to commit themselves publicly on the defendants’ guilt or innocence, and some insisted that the boys accept compromise prison sentences. The Alabama Scottsboro Fair Trial Committee that they formed accomplished little—most notably, failing in efforts to secure a new trial judge and prosecutor.62

Late in 1935, a new grand jury in Jackson County, consisting of thirteen whites and one black, returned another indictment against all nine of the defendants. (Alabama law required only a two-thirds supermajority of the grand jury to return an indictment.) Early in 1936, Patterson was retried. Twelve blacks appeared on the 100-person venire from which his jury was drawn, but actually getting blacks to serve was another matter. Seven of the prospective black jurors were excused at their own request—“looking anything but regretful” as they left the courthouse, according to one newspaper reporter. The prosecutor used peremptory challenges to strike the other five blacks from the jury. Many whites on the venire admitted that they believed blacks were inferior, but Judge Callahan refused to strike them for that reason.63

At the trial, the state concocted new evidence against Patterson, producing a prison guard
who testified to a supposed confession he had made. Although the defense demonstrated that it was almost certainly a fabrication, Callahan admitted the confession into evidence. He also obstructed defense counsel at every turn, failed to disguise his irritability with them, and glared at Patterson while defining the crime of rape. One prosecutor informed jurors of their duty to “protect the fair womanhood of this great State” and reminded them that after returning a verdict they would have to go home and face their neighbors.64

Observers were shocked when the jury imposed only a 75-year prison sentence on Patterson. A Birmingham newspaper called this “probably the first time in the history of the South that a Negro has been convicted of a charge of rape upon a white woman and has been given less than a death sentence.” The jury foreman reported that he had been convinced of Patterson’s innocence, but his colleagues had felt that an acquittal would effectively banish them from their communities; the lengthy prison sentence was a compromise.65

Soon after Patterson’s conviction, three of the Scottsboro defendants—Norris, Powell, and Roy Wright—were in a car returning them to the Birmingham jail when Powell slashed a sheriff with a knife—whether he had been provoked was disputed, though the stabbing was not—and then was himself shot in the head (though not fatally). Northern newspapers tended to doubt the veracity of the sheriff’s account that the shooting was in self-defense.66

By 1936, Alabama officials, reflecting growing public weariness over the Scottsboro episode, began hinting at a compromise on sentences less than death. The SDC was reluctant to have the boys plead guilty to crimes they had not committed, but some members worried that the grounds for federal appeals were disappearing and that refusing to compromise could lead to more death sentences. A deal was negotiated under which some of the defendants would be
released immediately, while others would be prosecuted only for assault and receive sentences of less than five years in prison. By the summer of 1937, editorial opinion in Alabama both supported and predicted a compromise solution. But Judge Callahan blocked it, insisting that the defendants be retried in his courtroom.67

Norris went on trial again in Decatur in the summer of 1937, and the jury returned another death sentence. Enlightened public opinion, as reflected in newspaper editorials urging a compromise, apparently went unrepresented on Morgan County juries. The prosecutor now hinted that with the convictions of the two “ringleaders of the crime”—Patterson and Norris—the state was prepared to compromise. Andy Wright was the next defendant to be retried, and the state did not even seek the death penalty. The prosecutor delivered an impassioned attack on New York City, and the jury imposed a ninety-nine year sentence. Next, Charley Weems was reprosecuted, convicted, and sentenced to seventy-five years in prison. The state then dropped the rape charges against Powell and charged him only with assaulting the deputy sheriff; he pled guilty and received a twenty-year sentence. The state abandoned its cases against the other four defendants—the two youngest and the two most physically disabled at the time of the alleged rapes—and they were released. One observer wryly noted that this resolution left Alabama in the “anomalous position of providing only 50 per cent protection for the ‘flower of southern womanhood.’”68

Newspapers outside of Alabama treated the dropping of charges against the four as a virtual admission that all of the defendants were innocent. Later in 1937, the Supreme Court, having exhausted plausible grounds under the federal constitution for reversing the Scottsboro convictions, declined to review Patterson’s seventy-five-year sentence. The justices probably
believed the boys were innocent, but that was not, unfortunately, a sufficient basis for reversing their convictions.69

With judicial appeals evaporating, the SDC focused on securing a gubernatorial pardon. Governor Graves agreed that Alabama could not justifiably continue to imprison some of the boys on evidence deemed insufficient to hold the others. Late in 1937, he told the boys’ representatives that he would release them before his term expired. In the summer of 1938, after the Alabama supreme court had affirmed the death sentence of Norris and the prison sentences of the others, Graves commuted Norris’s sentence to life imprisonment. Major Alabama newspapers now supported clemency for the remaining prisoners, but the governor had a last-minute change of heart and reneged on his promise to free them.70

Walter White then went to the White House to ask Eleanor Roosevelt to urge the president to intervene. President Roosevelt wrote to Graves, a political supporter, and urged him to pardon the remaining Scottsboro prisoners. But the governor had tested the political waters and concluded that releasing them would finish him politically. This pattern of negotiated compromise followed by repudiation was repeated several times over the next eleven years. Members of the parole board feared that if they recommended release, “some candidate may seize upon it as an issue and endeavor to discredit the whole parole and probation system.” Finally, in 1943-1944, three more of the Scottsboro prisoners were released; but two of them promptly violated the terms of their parole by heading North in search of better employment opportunities, and the prison board threw them back in jail. The last of the Scottsboro prisoners, Andy Wright, was not freed until 1950. The nine Scottsboro boys together spent more than 100 years in prison. Not until 1976 had the racial attitudes of whites in Alabama changed
sufficiently for Governor George Wallace to issue an unconditional pardon to Norris, which
effectively acknowledged his innocence.71

Long-term Ramifications

The Court’s interventions probably saved the Scottsboro boys from execution, though not
from years of wrongful incarceration. What were the broader consequences of these decisions
for black criminal defendants in the South?

Justice George Sutherland wrote a narrow opinion in Powell; not only did it cover only
capital cases, but it was ostensibly limited to the circumstances of the Scottsboro boys—“the
ignorance and illiteracy of the defendants, their youth, the circumstances of public hostility, the
imprisonment and close surveillance of the defendants by the military forces . . .” In 1942 the
Court in Betts v. Brady refused to extend Powell to all indigent felony defendants. However,
several subsequent decisions held that under certain circumstances, such as a defendant’s youth
or low intelligence, state-appointed counsel was constitutionally required in felony prosecutions.
Most of these cases involved white defendants from northern states. The facts were generally
less egregious than those in Powell, and the justices usually divided.72

Despite these extensions of Powell, the justices said almost nothing about the quality of
defense representation that the Constitution required. The one partial exception was Avery v.
Alabama in 1940, where the Court ruled that an appointment three days before a capital murder
trial began was permissible unless the defendant could show prejudice resulting from the
shortness of time. Thus, despite Powell and its progeny, southern blacks could be woefully
underrepresented without there being a constitutional violation. And so they were. Because the
value of most constitutional rights depends on having competent lawyers to raise them, southern blacks benefitted little from those rights to which they were entitled.\textsuperscript{73}

Most black criminal defendants in the South could not afford to hire their own lawyers, and thus their fates rested upon court-appointed counsel. The NAACP financed a few cases its lawyers considered likely to succeed. But the association rarely got involved in criminal litigation until after trial; it had limited funds for such cases; and it did not regard itself as a legal aid bureau. Thus, the NAACP’s involvement was limited to cases where “there is injustice because of race or color, and where there is a possibility of establishing a precedent for the benefit of Negroes in general.” These restrictive ground rules led the association to reject many cases of obvious racial injustice.\textsuperscript{74}

Even the rare black defendant who could afford to hire a lawyer could not be certain that he was getting his money’s worth. Very few black lawyers practiced in the South in the 1930s or 1940s. The number in Mississippi declined from twenty-one in 1910 to three in 1940, and the number in South Carolina fell from seventeen to five. Outside of major cities, there were essentially none. Furthermore, the few black lawyers who did exist were a distinct liability in most Jim Crow courtrooms, both because of the racial prejudice of white judges and jurors and because of the inferior legal training most of them had received (being barred from southern law schools).\textsuperscript{75}

Yet at least one might assume that black lawyers generally would have had the best interests of their clients at heart. Black defendants never knew what they were getting with white lawyers. To be sure, some white lawyers proved genuinely committed to serving their clients’ interests and pursued cases without adequate compensation while risking reprisals for
defending unpopular causes. But most white lawyers shared the prejudices of their communities, assumed their clients deserved whatever sentences they received, and barely went through the legal motions to collect a fee. \(^{76}\)

Willie Francis, a sixteen-year-old Louisiana black who was sentenced to death for murdering a white man, was victimized by this sort of inept lawyering. Francis achieved national prominence in 1946-1947 when Louisiana sought to execute him “by installment” after the electric chair malfunctioned during the initial execution attempt. At trial, Francis’s two court-appointed lawyers had failed to challenge the all-white jury or to file a change-of-venue motion, even though Francis had been transferred to another county’s jail to protect him from threatened mob violence. Defense counsel also failed to object to Francis’s possibly coerced confession, which was the only direct evidence linking him to the crime. His lawyers made no opening argument, called no witnesses, and neglected to inform the jury that the police had “lost” the alleged murder weapon. Then they failed even to appeal Francis’s conviction, thus forfeiting any valid constitutional claims he may have had. Francis may have been innocent of murder, yet no appellate court ever scrutinized his trial record. His case was unique, however, not because of this inept lawyering—which was all too common in the trials of indigent southern blacks—but because of the bungled execution attempt. In 1947 the U.S. Supreme Court, by a five-to-four vote, rejected Francis’s claim that a second execution attempt would constitute cruel and unusual punishment or violate due process. The justices did not even consider whether his trial representation had been adequate. \(^{77}\)

White lawyers risked severe social sanctions for defending black clients too vigorously when local communities were demanding blood. Most chose not to do so. Sonny Dobbs, a
black man charged with murdering a white man in Atalla County, Mississippi, in 1946, was defended by court-appointed whites, whom the NAACP thought did an excellent job under the circumstances. Still, they “lived in Mississippi and wanted to stay here” and thus dared not take the steps that were essential to an effective defense, such as demanding a change of venue or challenging race discrimination in jury selection. White lawyers who refused to capitulate to such pressure found their legal practices crippled and sometimes suffered physical violence. Joseph Murray, who in 1939-1940 ably represented two blacks from McCormick, South Carolina, who were probably falsely accused of murder, reported that he had “incurred the ill will of so many people here that I am now unable to secure any practice and it looks as if I might have to move to some other place and begin over to try and again build up a practice.” Stanley Belden, a white ACLU lawyer who ably represented a black man facing possibly trumped-up murder charges in Hugo, Oklahoma, in 1941, saw his legal practice ruined and was forced to leave the state.78

Southern courts refused to extend Powell to require effective representation of indigent defendants. The justices had ruled that appointment of counsel on the morning of trial was inadequate, so southern judges would appoint lawyers a few days before trial. Black defendants whose lives were in jeopardy were routinely provided lawyers so near to trial that no serious investigation of facts or preparation of trial strategy was possible. In the most explosive cases, moreover, court-appointed lawyers were strongly discouraged from seeking continuances by threats to lynch their clients. Lawyers who persevered against such pressure generally saw their motions for continuances denied anyway, or else judges granted much shorter delays than they had sought.79
Placing blacks on southern juries probably would have benefitted black defendants more than ensuring adequate representation of defense counsel. This is why contemporary observers believed the jury-discrimination claim of the Scottsboro defendants was more significant than their right-to-counsel argument. Yet, in practice, *Norris* had little impact on black jury service in the South.

Southern newspapers predicted that *Norris* would be easily circumvented. The Jackson (Mississippi) *Daily News* deemed the decision only a minor nuisance because lawyers would have to invest time in evading it. In states such as Mississippi and South Carolina, where jury service was linked to voter registration, *Norris* made little if any difference because blacks remained almost universally disfranchised in the 1930s. *Norris* also left open the possibility of using jury-selection schemes that vested enormous discretion in the hands of (white) jury commissioners. Proving race discrimination in the administration of such schemes was difficult, especially because state courts still made the initial factual determinations.80

Southern whites correctly concluded that *Norris* could be circumvented by placing the names of a few blacks on the jury rolls. Such blacks were often superannuated, dead, disabled, or departed, and they never appeared in numbers approximating the percentage of a county’s black population. Even those blacks making it onto the rolls were rarely called for service, and if they were, they could often be intimidated. When a black college president in Texas refused to be excused from jury service in 1938, white hoodlums removed him from the jury room and threw him head first down the steps of a Dallas courthouse. Moreover, the presence of an occasional black on a grand jury could be nullified by rules requiring only a supermajority, not unanimity, for indictment. The even-more occasional black called for service on trial juries
could be excluded through challenges for cause, over which trial judges exercised enormous discretion, or through prosecutors’ peremptory challenges, the number of which some states increased after *Norris*.81

The most that *Norris* seems to have accomplished was to place a single black on an occasional jury in large cities of the peripheral South. In the deep South and in rural areas throughout the region, exclusion of blacks from juries remained the rule. In a Louisiana case that reached the Supreme Court in 1939, a rural parish with a black population of nearly fifty percent had “complied” with *Norris* by placing the names of three blacks, one of whom was dead, on a jury venire of 300. A study conducted in 1940 found that the vast majority of rural counties in the deep South “have made no pretense of putting Negroes on jury lists, much less calling or using them in trials.”82

Because southern states reformed their jury-selection practices so little after *Norris*, the justices continued to find easy cases for reversing convictions because of race discrimination in jury selection. By the late 1940s, they were growing frustrated at the inefficacy of their decisions, but they still declined to take the steps necessary actually to place blacks on southern juries. The Court refused to condemn the practices of limiting jury service to registered voters and of conferring virtually unfettered discretion over jury selection to commissioners. The Court did not even flatly prohibit the insidious practice of commissioners limiting prospective jurors to their personal acquaintances—meaning white people. In *Akins v. Texas* in 1945, the Court inexplicably deferred to a state court’s finding that there had been no race discrimination in jury selection despite the testimony of all three jury commissioners that they had refused to permit more than one black to sit on Akins’s grand jury. The justices declined even to hear a case
contesting the constitutionality of prosecutors using peremptory challenges to exclude blacks from juries because of their race. As a result, southern juries remained almost entirely white for another generation. Every one of the fifteen black men executed by the border state of Kentucky between 1940 and 1962 had been convicted of a crime against a white person by an all-white jury.83

The famous Martinsville Seven case illustrates how the exclusion of blacks from jury service invited racial injustice. Seven young black men were charged with raping a white woman in the southside region of Virginia in 1949. The woman had indisputably been raped, and all seven defendants had indisputably engaged in forcible intercourse with her or been present as accomplices. No lynch mob attempted to execute the defendants, and the trial was conducted in a mob-free atmosphere. The defendants were not beaten into confessing. The trials did not occur until five months after the crime, and defense counsel was appointed four months before trial. Both the judge and the prosecutor avoided references at trial to the defendants’ race. Three blacks sat on the grand jury that indicted the defendants, and blacks appeared in each of the jury pools for the six separate trials. Although black newspapers and some radical journalists compared these proceedings to those at Scottsboro twenty years earlier, the dissimilarities are actually more striking: The Martinsville Seven had real trials with real lawyers that were conducted with relative dispassion before a fair judge.84

Yet the trials, convictions, and executions of the Martinsville Seven were fundamentally unjust for two reasons having to do with race. First, although blacks were in the jury pools for all of the defendants’ trials, every one of the seventy-two jurors who tried and convicted them was white. Blacks were excluded from the juries because of their opposition to the death penalty
or through the prosecutors’ use of peremptory challenges. Second, every one of the 45 death sentences imposed for rape or attempted rape in Virginia between 1908 and 1950 involved a black man and a white woman. (Similarly, between 1925 and 1950, Florida executed thirty-three blacks and only one white for rape, and in its entire history Mississippi had executed no whites for rape.)

Thus, although the Martinsville Seven enjoyed ostensibly fair trials, their fate ultimately depended on their race. In rape cases in Virginia, only blacks who assaulted whites ever received the death penalty, and only white jurors adjudicated their guilt and imposed sentence. Oliver Hill, a black lawyer from Richmond who helped represent the Martinsville Seven, concluded that white Virginians knew that “we don’t need to lynch the niggers. We can try them and then hang them.” Virginia executed the Martinsville Seven in February 1951—the largest mass execution or lynching for rape in American history.

Black jurors probably would have benefitted black defendants in other cases as well, assuming their independent judgment could have been guaranteed (quite possibly an unwarranted assumption in the South of this era). Odell Waller was another black Virginian whose death sentence attracted national attention. He was a sharecropper convicted of murdering a white farmer, Oscar Davis, in Pittsylvania County, Virginia, in 1940. Waller had undeniably killed Davis, but he had a plausible self-defense claim. The two men had an unpleasant history, including Davis’s mutilation of Waller’s dog. Immediately before Davis’s death, they had quarreled over the distribution of crop shares. Waller claimed that Davis was known to carry a gun and that he was reaching for it when Waller shot him. The all-white jury rejected Waller’s self-defense claim. How could having blacks on Waller’s jury—and one-third
of Pittsylvania County’s population was black—not have made a difference? When the race of the defendant and decedent were reversed in another sharecropper homicide case in Pittsylvania County around the same time, the all-white jury deliberated just fifteen minutes before acquitting the defendant, apparently crediting his self-defense claim. Yet Governor Colgate Darden repulsed entreaties to commute Waller’s death sentence, and he was executed in 1942.87

Because most white men in the South presumed that sex between a black man and a white woman was rape, black defendants who pleaded consent as a defense to charges of raping white women had essentially no chance before all-white juries. Even black defendants who pled mistaken identity might have benefitted from having blacks on their juries. In 1935, a white Birmingham physician was quoted as saying that if a black man raped a white woman, “an example and a spectacle of punishment” was necessary. “If possible get the right Negro and string him up. String up one or two of his nearest relatives, at the same time. And if the right one can’t be found, take some other Negro.” It seems safe to assume that all black jurors would have disagreed with that sentiment.88

**Why Powell and Norris Were So Inefficacious**

One reason decisions such as *Powell* and *Norris* had so little impact is that southern black defendants could not ordinarily appeal their sentences. State appellate and federal judges were more likely than state trial judges to vindicate the constitutional rights of southern blacks, because they were better educated, more professionalized, and more independent of local opinion that often proved hostile to the rights. Yet cases of black criminal defendants usually did not proceed beyond trial courts, mainly because state provision of counsel to indigents did
not generally extend to appeals, but also because procedural defaults frequently insulated trial error from appellate review.89

The criminal procedure cases that reached the Supreme Court did so only because of outside financial assistance. Incidents such as the race riot in Phillips County, Arkansas, and the alleged rapes and ensuing trials at Scottsboro captured national attention. Because the criminal trials deriving from these incidents revealed Jim Crow at its worst, they provided outstanding fundraising opportunities for the NAACP and the ILD, respectively. However, the NAACP took relatively few criminal cases, and the association was absent from most of the rural South and thus could not intervene in cases when it would have done the most good—when the trial record was being created. Thus, in run-of-the-mill criminal cases, indigent black defendants were represented not by elite legal talent hired by these organizations, but by court-appointed lawyers, who could not invariably be counted upon to aggressively defend their clients’ rights because of the “personal odium” that attached to those challenging “the venerable system.”90

Furthermore, enlistment of competent counsel on appeal frequently came too late to do defendants much good, as inept or careless lawyering at trial produced procedural defaults that insulated constitutional violations from appellate review. The issue of race discrimination in jury selection was procedurally defaulted in both Moore and Powell and very nearly so in Patterson. In Brown v. Mississippi (1936), the landmark decision holding that criminal convictions based on coerced confessions violated due process, the issue nearly failed to gain a hearing in the Supreme Court because defense counsel had challenged the voluntariness of the confessions at the wrong point of the trial. Until the Supreme Court in the 1960s changed the rules regarding federal court deference to state procedural defaults, many valid federal
constitutional claims were denied a hearing in any appellate court.\textsuperscript{91}

The ruthlessness of the Jim Crow system made it difficult for lawyers to compile the sort of trial record necessary for effective appellate review. Fear of economic and physical reprisals deterred all but the most intrepid blacks from signing affidavits supporting a change in trial venue. When Walter White of the NAACP traveled to Phillips County to investigate the facts in \textit{Moore}, he was nearly lynched. One of the blacks whom Leibowitz had called to testify at the hearing challenging race discrimination in jury selection in Morgan County had a cross burnt on his front yard for “stepping out of line.” Rigorous cross-examination of white witnesses, especially women in rape cases, not only alienated white jurors but also jeopardized the safety of defense counsel.\textsuperscript{92}

Finally, public officials in the South had little direct incentive to abide by the constitutional rights of black defendants because civil and criminal sanctions for violations were generally unavailable. After \textit{Screws v. United States} in 1945, it was far from certain whether the justices would permit the imposition of federal criminal liability even on sheriffs who beat defendants into confessing. Nor was it clear in the 1940s that courts would construe federal civil rights statutes to authorize the imposition of monetary liability on public officers who contravened state law as well as the federal constitution; and every state required the appointment of counsel for indigent capital defendants and forbade race discrimination in jury selection.\textsuperscript{93}

For all these reasons—the inability of most southern black defendants to afford counsel, the relative absence of alternative sources of legal assistance such as the NAACP, the difficulty of maneuvering around state procedural default rules, the obstacles to compiling a favorable trial
record, and the absence of effective sanctions against rights violators—few criminal cases like Powell and Norris reached the Court. As one black newspaper observed after Powell, “Out of the thousands of cases where Negroes are convicted without fair trials, few ever reach the Supreme Court, and even if they do the results are rarely altered . . . We are afraid it will take more than decisions of the Supreme Court to rectify the flagrant evils of our judicial system.”

**Intangible Benefits of Litigation**

Litigation in defense of the rights of southern blacks may have been more important for its intangible effects: convincing blacks that the racial status quo was malleable, educating them about their rights, helping to mobilize protest, and instructing northern whites about Jim Crow conditions. A social movement for civil rights faced intimidating obstacles in the South. One of the most formidable was simply convincing blacks that the status quo of racial subordination was contingent rather than inevitable. As Walter White observed, the NAACP’s greatest difficulty was “getting over to the masses of our folks the significance of these fights.”

In theory, black protest could have assumed a variety of forms: migration, violent revolt, political mobilization, economic pressure, street demonstrations, or litigation. In practice, however, options were limited. Violent protest would have been suicidal, given overwhelming white physical power and the will to use it. Political protest was unavailable to southern blacks, who remained almost universally disfranchised. Few southern blacks commanded sufficient financial resources to leverage social change through economic pressure. Street demonstrations, which proved so effective in the 1960s, were not yet a realistic option; the South was still too violent, segregation and disfranchisement too deeply entrenched, and the threat of national
intervention too remote. Black leaders observed, no doubt correctly, that a Gandhian strategy of nonviolent protest in the South would have led to “an unprecedented massacre of defenseless black men and women.” Only two protest options were realistically available to southern blacks: migration and litigation. Hundreds of thousands pursued the former; many fewer chose the latter.\textsuperscript{96}

Most civil rights leaders appreciated the limited potential of litigation given prevailing racial mores. Charles Houston, the principal legal strategist of the NAACP in the 1930s, recognized that law “has certain definite limitations when it comes to changing the mores of a community,” because “[i]t is too much to expect the court to go against the established and crystallized social customs.” Yet even if litigation could not “bring on a social revolution,” as Ralph Bunche observed, it could advance long-term objectives. Litigation educated blacks about their rights and inspired them to challenge the racial status quo. The NAACP’s national office wrote letters to southern blacks explaining their rights and the obligation of whites to respect them. Some black communities in the South felt so hopeless and isolated that for the national office merely to make inquiries on their behalf would “do a lot of good.” A memorandum by Houston declared that a principal objective of litigation should be “to arouse and strengthen the will of local communities to demand and fight for their rights.”\textsuperscript{97}

Houston and Thurgood Marshall thought that organizing local communities in support of litigation was nearly as important as winning lawsuits. They frequently made speeches at mass rallies while visiting southern communities for court appearances. “On occasion,” a recent biographer writes, Marshall “appears to have been brought to town nominally to work on pending litigation but actually to rally the troops.” Because of the need “to back up our legal
efforts with the required public support and social force,” Houston referred to himself as “not only lawyer but evangelist and stump speaker.” Because cases such as Scottsboro demonstrated to blacks the importance of binding together in self-defense, they provided unparalleled fund-raising and branch-building opportunities for the NAACP. As one black editorialist observed, “[w]hatever else happens in the Scottsboro case, . . . [i]t has given us one of the greatest chances for consolidated action we have had since emancipation.”98

Litigation also provided southern black communities with salutary examples of the accomplishments and courage of black Americans. Watching a skilled black lawyer subject a white sheriff to a grueling cross-examination educated and inspired southern blacks, who virtually never witnessed such scenes of blacks confronting whites on an equal footing. Bold and capable performances by black lawyers in southern courtrooms seemed to contravene the very premises of white supremacy. Marshall explained this dynamic in connection with a criminal trial in Hugo, Oklahoma, in 1941, where no black lawyer had ever before appeared in the courtroom. Marshall and his white co-counsel, Stanley Belden of the ACLU, had agreed that Marshall would cross-examine all of the police officers, “because we figured they would resent being questioned by a Negro and would get angry and this would help us. It worked perfect. They all became angry at the idea of a Negro pushing them into tight corners and making their lies so obvious.” Marshall continued: “Boy, did I like that—and did the Negroes in the courtroom like it. . . . You can’t imagine what it means to those people down there who have been pushed around for years to know that there is an organization that will help them. They are really ready to do their part now. They are ready for anything.”99

Litigation may also have raised the salience of the race issue for whites. Houston
observed that “[t]he truth is there are millions of white people who have no real knowledge of
the Negro’s problems and who never give the Negro a serious thought.” As Bunche noted,
“[c]ourt decisions, favorable or unfavorable, serve to dramatize the plight of the race more
effectively than any other recourse; their propaganda and educative value is great.” Criminal
cases may have afforded the best educational opportunities, as they revealed Jim Crow at its
worst–southern blacks, possibly or certainly innocent of the crimes charged, being railroaded to
the death penalty through farcical trials. As one black newspaper observed, “No single event
touching the Negro question in this country has been forced into the conscience, the life and the
public opinion of the American people as has the Scottsboro case.”

Finally, litigation, when successful, provided blacks with one of their few reasons for
optimism before World War II. As one black leader observed in 1935, even if court victories
produced little concrete change, at least they “keep open the door of hope to the Negro.” Roscoe
Dunjee, the NAACP’s principal agent in Oklahoma, noted after one such court victory, “It is just
such rifts in the dark clouds of prejudice which cause black folks to know that a better day is
coming by and by.”

Intangible Harms of Litigation Victories

Rulings such as Powell and Norris may have produced intangible harms as well as
benefits. By 1950 or so, lynchings were nearly obsolete in the South, and legal lynchings had
been tempered and confined to narrower portions of the Deep South. Yet nowhere in the South
did blacks serve as jurors in inflammatory cases of alleged black-on-white crime. All-white
juries applied unwritten substantive liability rules decreeing that only black men could be
executed for raping white women and only whites were permitted to kill other whites in self-defense. Criminal justice outside of the rural Deep South may have acquired a veneer of legitimacy by the 1940s. The justices could find no constitutional error in cases such as those of the Martinsville Seven or that of Odell Waller because the trials had ostensibly been fair. Yet black men were still being executed under circumstances where whites almost surely would not have been.  

Given this state of affairs, one may wonder whether the Court’s criminal procedure interventions were not insidious. In landmark decisions protecting the rights of southern black defendants, the justices employed some of their boldest rhetoric about the high court’s heroic role in defending unpopular minorities from majoritarian oppression. For example, in *Chambers v. Florida* (1940), which extended *Brown v. Mississippi*’s bar on coerced confessions to cover interrogation practices other than physical violence, the Court proudly proclaimed the obligation of judges to “stand against any winds that blow as havens of refuge for those who might otherwise suffer because they are helpless, weak, outnumbered or because they are non-conforming victims of prejudice and public excitement.” Newspapers reported the decision in banner headlines such as, “Justices Rededicate Themselves as a Haven of Refuge for all Non-Conforming Victims of Public Prejudice.” A glowing editorial in the *Nation* quoted some of the Court’s rhetoric and basked in the happy ending of *Chambers*: Americans should “be proud” because the Court had freed “obscure and humble” black men who implicated no larger political or economic concerns.  

Yet *Chambers* apparently had little effect on southern sheriffs, who continued to coerce confessions from black suspects. Nor, as we have seen, did rulings such as *Powell* and *Norris*...
significantly alter Jim Crow justice. Were blacks clearly better off because of rulings that had little practical consequence for southern criminal justice but that enabled the Court to trumpet the vigilant defense that judges offered against racial prejudice in law? Before the Court’s interventions, at least everyone could see mob-dominated trials for what they were—farcical substitutes for lynchings. After such rulings, however, casual observers might have been misled into believing, along with the New York Times, that “the High Court stands on guard with flaming sword over the rights of every one of us.”

Blacks could be excused if they demurred from such sentiments. Even in states such as Virginia, where the formal requirements of due process were more attentively observed, blacks did not sit on juries in racially explosive cases, and all-white juries applied informal liability rules that discriminated against blacks. In the postwar period the justices had opportunities to redress these problems. Defendants appealed cases to the Court that attacked the racially motivated use of peremptory challenges by prosecutors and racial disparities in the administration of the death penalty. The justices refused even to grant review. Not until the 1970s would the Court invalidate the discriminatory administration of the death penalty, and not until the 1980s would it forbid the race-conscious use of peremptory challenges. Yet the rhetoric of Chambers suggests that the justices believed they had already taken enormous strides toward eliminating race discrimination from southern criminal justice. They had not. Their accomplishments were fairly trivial—more a change in form than in substance. To the extent that the justices and their admirers were deluded into thinking otherwise, these criminal procedure rulings may have caused actual harm to the interests of southern blacks.

The Court’s denial of review technically does not indicate approval of the lower court’s
decision (though it may imply this, given the justices’ self-proclaimed role as heroic defender of minority rights). Yet this Court did not simply fail to intervene against certain racial inequalities in the criminal justice system of the South; it actually affirmed unjust convictions. In *Akins v. Texas* in 1945, each of the jury commissioners had admitted his intention to limit the number of blacks per grand jury to one, yet somehow the justices found the record unclear on this point. Moreover, Akins had an especially appealing case for reversal of his murder conviction because his self-defense claim almost certainly would have prevailed had he been white. Yet the justices affirmed his death sentence. *Lyons v. Oklahoma* in 1944 was the most compelling coerced confession case since *Brown v. Mississippi*; the record contained convincing testimony by several whites that Lyons, a black man, had been savagely beaten with a blackjack for several hours in an effort to obtain his confession. Lyons, too, had a strong claim of innocence. Yet the justices decided to defer to the jury’s determination that Lyons’s second confession, obtained just twelve hours after his brutal beatings had ended, was voluntary. For anyone convinced by the *Chambers* rhetoric, the force of the claims by Lyons and Akins that they had been unjustly treated was necessarily diminished. A Court serving as a “haven[] of refuge for . . . [the] helpless, weak, . . . or . . . non-conforming victims of prejudice” would surely have intervened on behalf of these defendants had their claims been meritorious. But their claims were meritorious. By affirming their convictions, the Court probably helped legitimize the unjust treatment of black criminal defendants.105

**Conclusion**

It was no accident that modern American criminal procedure was born in cases involving
southern black defendants. For the Supreme Court to begin monitoring the state criminal process required a departure from 150 years’ worth of tradition and legal precedent grounded in federalism concerns. The justices were not prepared to take that step in cases of marginal unfairness, but only where the trial had been a complete sham. Such legal travesties occurred most frequently in the South in cases involving black defendants charged with interracial rape or murder.

The state-imposed death penalty in such cases was little more than a formalization of the lynching process. The purpose of a mob-dominated trial was simply to avoid a lynching, and the purpose of a lynching was as much to ensure black subordination as to punish guilt. The southern appellate courts and the U.S. Supreme Court applied different paradigms when reviewing such trials. Southern courts saw praiseworthy progress in the mere avoidance of lynchings. By contrast, Supreme Court justices expected criminal trials to be about adjudicating guilt or innocence, not simply preempting a lynching.

The trials in such cases were so egregiously unfair that national public opinion probably endorsed the Court’s interventions. Even within the South, these rulings had many supporters, as they simply bound southern states to behavioral norms that they usually had embraced on their own. Thus, these early criminal procedure rulings probably do not represent the sort of countermajoritarian judicial decision making one often associates with landmark decisions such as *Mapp* or *Miranda*; it is more accurate to see them as the Court imposing a national consensus on recalcitrant outliers. Indeed, southern state courts themselves might have rectified the obvious injustices had the circumstances been slightly different. In the early decades of the twentieth century, southern courts had become more committed to procedural fairness, even in
cases involving black defendants charged with serious interracial crimes. Yet in cases that generated outside criticism of the South or that were perceived to pose broader challenges to white supremacy, southern appellate courts regressed. Cases that might otherwise not have reached the U.S. Supreme Court slipped through the state system uncorrected and provided the occasion for landmark criminal procedure rulings.

Considered against the backdrop of the Court’s other contemporaneous race decisions, these early criminal procedure rulings demonstrate that not all Jim Crow measures were of a piece. During this era, the Court unanimously affirmed the constitutionality of public school segregation, the white primary, and the poll tax. The justices apparently thought it one thing to segregate and disfranchise blacks, quite another to execute possibly innocent blacks after farcical trials.

Finally, evaluating the consequences of decisions such as *Powell* and *Norris* is complicated. The Court probably saved the lives of the Scottsboro boys, but it could not protect them from unjust prison sentences. The more the Court intervened on their behalf, the more determined white Alabamians seemed to punish them. Thus, despite two Supreme Court victories, the Scottsboro boys each served from five to twenty years in prison for crimes they did not commit.

In terms of broader effects, the rulings proved disappointing. The quality of defense representation for indigent southern blacks did not significantly improve as a result of *Powell*, and few if any blacks sat on southern juries as a result of *Norris*. The litigation producing these and other decisions may have had intangible benefits for the civil rights movement: teaching blacks about their rights, convincing them that racial change was possible, helping to organize
them, and educating whites about the atrocities of Jim Crow. But by implying that the Court had
effected meaningful changes in the southern criminal justice system when in fact it had not,
Supreme Court victories may also have harmed southern blacks.

2. Carter, 6-17 (quotation at 17); Goodman, 21-22; *NYT*, 25 March 1931, p.21.

3. Carter, 105; Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the


Cases”, 7 May 1931, Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
(August Meier, ed., University Publications of America, 1982, microfilm edition) (hereafter,
“NAACP”), part 6, reel 2, frames 893-94 (Huddleston); H. Ransdell, “Report on the Scottsboro
Case” (27 May 1931) (hereafter, “Ransdell Report”), ibid., reel 3, frames 150-80, p.26/frame
175, (“white people”); Carter, 133-35.

6. Carter, 13, 17-18, 20 (Huntsville *Daily Times*); “Memorandum on visit to National Office,
May 18, 1931, of Mrs. Hollace Ransdall [sic],” 19 May 1931, NAACP, part 6, reel 3, frame 27


8. Carter, 24-35; Ransdell Report, supra note __, at p.7 (Price).

9. Carter, 35-38; “To the Friends and Relatives of the Nine Negro Boys Charged with Rape, in
Jackson County, Alabama,” 11 Apr. 1931, NAACP Papers, part 6, reel 2, frames 624-27
(quotation at p.4/frame 627).


12. Carter, 48-60 (quotations at 49-50); Goodman, 7-8, 25-29.
13. Walter White to Bob & Herbert, 3 May 1931, NAACP, part 6, reel 2, frames 825-31 (“so deep” at p.5/frame 829); Carter, 61-68 (other quotations). See also Roy Wilkins to White, 7 May 1931, NAACP, part 6, reel 2, frames 889-90. See also William Patterson to NAACP, 30 June, 1933, ibid., frames 459-72.


16. William Pickens to White, 6 June 1931, NAACP, Part 6, reel 3, frames 355-57; Carter, 90-96; Goodman, 7-8.


reported Hawkins as saying).


22. Carter, 156 (first two quotations); NYT, 8 Nov. 1932, p.13 (third quotation); Goodman, 49.

23. Carter, 156-58; Goodman, 50.


28. Twining v. New Jersey, 211 U.S. 78 (1908); Maxwell v. Dow, 176 U.S. 581 (1900); Hurtado
v. California, 110 U.S. 516 (1884).


35. Carter, 113, 179-81 (“presence of troops” at 181), 189-90 (“stinging rebuke” at 190); *Birmingham News*, 25 March 1932; *NYT*, 12 March 1933, p.27.


37. Carter, 183-84, 190-92; Goodman, 118-20, 152 (check); “Fight for Negroes Opens in

38. Carter, 194-99; Goodman, 120-23 (*consult myself; Jessica likes quotes on p.121*).


41. Carter, 204-13, 223-24 (quotations); Goodman, 125-27.


47. Carter, 253-62 (quotation at 261).
48. Carter, 239, 264-70; Goodman, 176-82. Jessica suggests reading this chapter myself.
50. Carter, 276-80 (newspaper quotations at 277); NYT, 20 Nov. 1933, p.1 (“extremely grave”); “Lynching Feared in Scottsboro Case, NYT, 10 Nov. 1933, p.7; “Troop Threat to Scottsboro Boys Bared,” Daily News, 10 Nov. 1933, ?? (asking Refdesk to copy); “Plans to Lynch the Scottsboro Boy Exposed by Detectives,” Washington Sentinel, 25 Nov. 1933, ibid., reel 9, frame 262. See also Roy Wilkins, Memorandum on the Scottsboro Case, 3 Nov. 1933, ibid., reel 2, frames 516-17.
53. Carter, 303-08; Klarman, 127-28; Goodman, 238; Patterson, 229 Ala. 273 (full cite); Norris v. State, 156 So. 556, 564 (Ala. 1934).


land is determined that substantial justice shall be accorded to all citizens”).


68. Carter, 369-77 (“ringleaders” at 371; “anomalous position” at 376); Goodman, 304-08; NYT, 25 July 1937, ?? (need page).

(noting after Norris that “[i]t is a pretty fair suspicion . . . that the learned justices acted as they did because they don’t believe the Scottsboro boys are guilty”).


71. Carter, 391-426 (quotation at 406); Eleanor Roosevelt to Walter White, 10 Dec. 1938, NAACP Papers, Part 6, reel 2, frame 277.

72. Powell, 287 U.S. at 71; Betts v. Brady, 316 U.S. 455 (1942); Klarman, 230 (citing and discussing other cases).


74. Thurgood Marshall to John Henry Joseph, 10 July 1941, NAACP, part 8, series B, reel 7, fr. 426

75. Klarman, 156, 271.


78. Klarman, 272-73.


85. Rise, 85, 102, 126, 156-57; Klarman, 279.

86. Rise, 3, 93.


89. For this and the following paragraphs, see Klarman, 155-58. See also “When Negro Convicts Kill,” Charleston News & Courier, 9 Apr. 1935, p.4 (noting that “negroes will not get their cases into the supreme court unless some agency or society shall put up the money to hire lawyers . . . and pay the expenses of the appeal”).

90. Klarman, 459 (quotation).


92. Carter, 201 n.21 (quotation).


95. For this and the following paragraphs, see Klarman, 162-67 (quotation at 163), 284-86.

96. Klarman, 163.


100. Klarman, 166 (Houston and Bunche quotes); “Group of National Negro Leaders Will Attack All Segregation and Injustice,” *Richmond Planet*, March 4, 1933, NAACP, part 6, reel 8, frame 810.


102. For this and the following paragraphs, see Klarman, 282-84.

103. Chambers v. Florida, 309 U.S. 227, 241 (1940); Klarman, 282 (other quotations).
