

3. Lynch Law (1907) Benjamin Tillman

In Brownsville, Texas, on August 13, 1906, a company of black soldiers got in a gunfight with the local police after a series of racist provocations. That incident became a national issue, leading many Southern members of Congress to argue that no blacks should be allowed to serve in the military. One of those endorsing that position was South Carolina's Senator Benjamin "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman. In the following speech, delivered on the floor of the United States Senate on January 21, 1907, Tillman constructed an imagined history of the South since the Civil War as a justification for the denial of rights to, and the lynching of, black Americans.

Questions to Consider

- How does Tillman justify stealing elections through such methods as "stuffed ballot boxes"?
- Why does Tillman refer to African Americans as "creatures"?
- Is lynching a form of law?

I will repeat the statement of fact and circumstances. It was in 1876, ...and the people of South Carolina had been living under negro rule for eight years. There was a condition bordering upon anarchy. Misrule, robbery, and murder were holding high carnival. The people's substance was being stolen, and there was no incentive to labor. Our legislature was composed of a majority of negroes, most of whom could neither read nor write. They were the easy dupes and tools of as dirty a band of vampires and robbers as ever preyed upon a prostrate people. There was riotous living in the statehouse and sessions of the legislature lasting from year to year.

... We felt the very foundations of our civilization crumbling beneath our feet, that we were sure to be engulfed by the black flood of barbarians who were surrounding us and had been put over us by the Army under the reconstruction acts.... Life ceased to be worth having on the terms under which we were living, and in desperation we determined to take the government away from the negroes.

We reorganized the Democratic party with one plank, and only one plank, namely, that "this is a white man's country and white men must govern it." Under that banner we went to battle....

Clashes came. The negro militia grew unbearable and more and more insolent.... The Hamburg riot was one clash, in which seven negroes and one white man were killed. A month later we had the Ellenton riot, in which no one ever knew how many negroes were killed, but there were forty or fifty or a hundred. It was a fight between barbarism and civilization, between the African and the Caucasian, for mastery.

It was then that "we shot them;" it was then that "we killed them;" it was then that "we stuffed ballot boxes." ... [W]e had decided to take the government away from men so debased as were the negroes—I will not say baboons; I never have called them baboons; I believe they are men, but some of them are so near akin to the monkey that scientists are yet looking for the missing link. We saw the evil of giving the ballot to creatures of this kind, and saying that one vote shall count regardless of the man behind the vote and whether that vote would kill mine. ...

... Then it was that we stuffed ballot boxes, because desperate diseases require desperate remedies, and having resolved to take the State away, we hesitated at nothing.

... I want to say now that we have not shot any negroes in South Carolina on account of politics since 1876. We have not found it necessary. [Laughter.] ...

... It took the State fifteen years to recover and begin to move forward again along the paths of development and progress; and in consequence of the white men interpreting the word "liberty" to mean the liberty of white people and not the license of black ones, the State is to-day in the very vanguard of southern progress, and can point to the result as the absolute justification for every act which we performed in '76, however lawless our acts may be in the eyes of the Senator from Wisconsin....

Have I ever advocated lynch law at any time or at any place? I answer on my honor, "Never!" I have justified it for one crime, and one only, and I have consistently and persistently maintained that attitude for the last fourteen years. As governor of South Carolina I proclaimed that, although I had taken the oath of office to support the law and enforce it, I would lead a mob to lynch any man, black or white, who had ravished a woman, black or white. This is my attitude calmly and deliberately taken, and justified by my conscience in the sight of God....

Now let me suppose a case. Let us take any Senator on this floor.... Let us carry this Senator to the backwoods in South Carolina, put him on a farm miles from a town or railroad, and environed by negroes. We will suppose he has a fair young daughter just budding into womanhood; and recollect this, the white women of the South are in a state of siege; the greatest care is exercised that they shall at all times where it is possible not be left alone or unprotected, but that can not always and in every instance be the case. That Senator's daughter...is left home alone for a brief while. Some lurking demon who has watched for the opportunity seizes her: she is choked or beaten into insensibility and

ravished, her body prostituted, her purity destroyed, her chastity taken from her, and a memory branded on her brain as with a red-hot iron to haunt her night and day as long as she lives....

In other words, a death in life. This young girl thus blighted and brutalized drags herself to her father and tells him what has happened. Is there a man here with red blood in his veins who doubts what impulses the father would feel? Is it any wonder that the whole countryside rises as one man and with set, stern faces seek the brute who has wrought this infamy? Brute, did I say? Why, Mr. President, this crime is a slander on the brutes. No beast of the field forces his female. He waits invitation. It has been left for something in the shape of a man to do this terrible thing. And shall such a creature, because he has the semblance of a man, appeal to the law? ...So far as I am concerned he has put himself outside the pale of the law, human and divine.... He has invaded the holy of holies. He has struck civilization a blow, the most deadly and cruel that the imagination can conceive. It is idle to reason about it; it is idle to preach about it. Our brains reel under the staggering blow and hot blood surges to the heart. Civilization peels off us, any and all of us who are men, and we revert to the original savage type whose impulses under any and all such circumstances has always been to "kill! kill! kill!"...

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