

A Senate Apology for History on Lynching

Vote Condemns Past Failure to Act

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Tuesday, June 14, 2005

The U.S. Senate last night approved a resolution apologizing for its failure to enact federal anti-lynching legislation decades ago, marking the first time the body has apologized for the nation's treatment of African Americans.

One-hundred and five years after the first anti-lynching bill was proposed by a black congressman, senators approved by a voice vote Resolution 39, which called for the lawmakers to apologize to lynching victims, survivors and their descendants, several of whom watched from the gallery.

"There may be no other injustice in American history for which the Senate so uniquely bears responsibility," Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) said before the vote.

Sen. George Allen (R-Va.), who with Landrieu led the resolution effort, said the vote finally put the Senate "on the record condemning the brutal atrocity that plagued our great nation."

The moment lacked the drama of the fiery Senate filibusters that blocked the legislation three times in the past century. There were few senators on the floor last night and no roll call, no accounting for each vote. But 80 of the Senate's 100 members signed on as co-sponsors, signaling their support.

Missing from that list were senators from the state that reported the most lynching incidents: Mississippi Republicans Trent Lott and Thad Cochran.

"I am personally struck," Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) said, "even at this significant moment, by the undeniable and inescapable reality that there aren't 100 senators and co-sponsors. Maybe by the end of the evening there will be, but as we stand here with this resolution now passed by voice vote, there aren't."

In passing the measure, the senators in essence admitted that their predecessors' failure to act had helped perpetuate a horror that took the lives of more than 4,700 people from 1882 to 1968, most of them black men. At the turn of the last century, more than 100 lynching incidents were reported each year, many of them publicly orchestrated to humiliate the victims and instill fear in others. Lynching occurred in all but four states in the contiguous United States, and less than 1 percent of the perpetrators were brought to justice, historians say.

The U.S. House of Representatives three times passed measures to make lynching a federal offense, but each time the bills were knocked down in the Senate. Powerful southern senators, such as Richard B. Russell Jr. (D-Ga.), whose name was given to the Senate office building where the resolution was drafted, used the filibuster to block votes.

Excerpts from the Congressional Record show some senators argued that such laws would interfere with states' rights. Others, however, delivered impassioned speeches about how lynching helped control what they characterized as a threat to white women and also served to keep the races separate, according to records provided by the Committee for a Formal Apology, a group that has lobbied the Senate.

"Whenever a Negro crosses this dead line between the white and the Negro races and lays his black hand on a white woman, he deserves to die," segregationist Sen. James Thomas Heflin (D-Ala.) said in 1930.

In a 1938 debate, Russell repeatedly referred to a hypothetical lynching victim with a derogatory derivative of the word "Negro."

Seven presidents lobbied Congress for anti-lynching legislation. And in a 1937 Washington Post article, George Gallup, director of the American Institute of Public Opinion, said polls showed 72 percent of Americans, including 57 percent of southerners, supported such a law.

Several advocates would like to see lawmakers do more. The Committee for a Formal Apology would like to see Russell's name stripped from the Senate building.

U.S. Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), who grew up with Jim Crow laws and the specter of lynching, said he wants an apology for slavery.

"The Senate has never issued an official apology for slavery and has never gone on the record condemning slavery," he said. "The U.S. government needs to apologize for the whole system of slavery. Lynching was just a part of it."

The vote culminated a day of events for about 200 descendants and family friends of lynching victims who were invited to Washington to witness the historic vote. They were treated to a luncheon with senators, given a tour of the Capitol and introduced at a news conference, where they were asked about the resolution's significance.

The descendants included Winona Puckett Padgett, 78, of Detroit, whose uncle, Richard Puckett, was lynched in Laurens, S.C., in 1913, after he was accused of accosting a white woman. Also on hand was James Cameron, 91, of Milwaukee, who is believed to be the only living person to have survived a lynching. He was hanged by a rope from a maple tree in Marion, Ind., in 1930 but was cut down when someone in the crowd asked that he be spared.

"We're actually calling this 'Freedom Summer,' " said Doria Johnson, 44, of Evanston, Ill., echoing a reference to the summer of 1964. "We've got the FBI's reopening of the Emmett Till murder case in Mississippi, the trial for the murders of civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner starting and the apology for lynching on the same day. We're finally feeling that our families' suffering is being acknowledged."

At breakfast Sunday, Johnson -- whose great-great-grandfather Anthony P. Crawford was lynched in 1916 in Abbeville, S.C. -- contemplated the Senate's apology with Simeon Wright, 62, a cousin of Till, who was 14 when he was murdered in 1955 after he whistled at a white store owner's wife. The case sparked national outrage.

"Years ago, African Americans were being beaten and hung, and the people who had the power to do something about it were afraid to do anything or just didn't," Wright said. "Now, their sons and daughters realize how wrong they were, and they want to do something. The apology is appropriate. It was a long time coming, but it is here."

The two descendants talked about how their families were altered by lynching. Wright's mother left their home the night Till was abducted and moved to Chicago. Soon after, his father sold what possessions he could, then boarded a train with the children to join his wife.

Johnson said her family scattered and their fortune was lost after Crawford's lynching. His children received his land and \$200 each, but an executor related to a lynch mob member kept thousands, Johnson said. The family later went bankrupt, and the property was sold for a pittance, she said.

"A family's wealth today is often based on what their grandfathers or great-grandfathers did," Johnson said, "but so many of our families had that wealth stolen as a result of lynching."

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