

Senator Ben Tillman from an exchange with Senator John Spooner in the United States Senate (1907)

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Background: A prominent member of the Farmer's Alliance and ex-governor of South Carolina, Benjamin Ryan Tillman served as a United States senator from 1895 to 1918. Tillman was an outspoken advocate of the South's successful efforts to disfranchise African Americans in the 1890s and early 1900s. When a series of violent racial skirmishes culminated in a shoot-out between black soldiers and white policemen in Brownsville, Texas, in 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt had the soldiers dishonorably discharged. Tillman saw an opportunity to advance his cause by calling for legislation to deny African Americans their 14th Amendment rights due to their alleged inferiority. On January 21, 1907, he engaged in heated debate in the U.S. Senate with Wisconsin Senator John Coit Spooner.

...At this stage of the debate it dawned on me for the first time that the Senator from Wisconsin had intentionally and in cold blood brought things to this pass in order to give him the opportunity to carry out his preconceived plan, and I recalled that in a preceding part of his speech he had used language which caused me at the time to feel aggrieved, but I let it pass, because I had no desire to get into an altercation with the Senator or to indulge in any of those running discussions which have marked our debates in the past, when it was a case of cut and thrust with no blows below the belt....

... I will repeat the statement of fact and circumstances. It was in 1876, thirty years ago, 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.

Our lawmakers never adjourned. They were getting a per diem. They felt that they could increase their income by remaining in session all the while. They were taxing us to death and confiscating our property. 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. The sun of hope had disappeared behind a cloud of gloom and despair, and a condition had arisen such as has never been the lot of white men at any time in the history of the world to endure. 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. We had 8,000 negro militia organized by carpetbaggers. The carpetbag governor had come to Washington and had persuaded General Grant to transcend his authority by issuing to the State its quota of arms under the militia appropriation for twenty years in advance, in order to get enough to equip these negro soldiers. They used to drum up and down the roads with their fifes and their gleaming bayonets, equipped with new Springfield rifles and dressed in the regulation uniform. It was lawful, I suppose, but these negro soldiers or this negro militia—for they were never soldiers—growing more and more bold, let drop talk among themselves where the white children might hear their purpose, and it came to our ears. This is what they said:

The President is our friend. The North is with us. We intend to kill all the white men, take the land, marry the white women, and then these white children will wait on us.

Those fellows forgot that there were in South Carolina some forty-odd thousand ex-Confederate soldiers, men who had worn the gray on a hundred battlefields; men who had charged breastworks defended by men in blue; men who had held lines of battle charged by men in blue; men who had seen real battles, where heroes fought. They forgot that putting in uniform a negro man with not sense enough to get out of a shower of rain did not make him a soldier. So when this condition of desperation had reached the unbearable point; when, as I say, despair had come upon us, we set to work to take the government away from them.

We knew—who knew better?—that the North then was a unit in its opposition to southern ideas, and that it was their purpose to perpetuate negro governments in those States where it could be done by reason of there being a negro majority. Having made up our minds, we set about it as practical men.

I do not say it in a boastful spirit, although I am proud to say it, that the people of South Carolina are the purest-blooded Americans in America. They are the descendants of the men who fought with Marion, with Sumter, with Pickens, and our other heroes in the Revolution. We have had no admixture of outsiders, except a small trickling in from the North and from other Southern States.

Clashes came. The negro militia grew unbearable and more and more insolent. I am not speaking of what I have read; I am speaking of what I know, of what I saw. There were two militia companies in my township and a regiment in my county. We had clashes with these negro militiamen. 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.' After the troops came and told us, 'You must stop this rioting,' we 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. So we thought we would let you see that it took something else besides having the shape of a man to make a man.

Grant sent troops to maintain the carpetbag government in power and to protect the negroes in the right to vote. He merely obeyed the law. I have no fault to find with him. It was his policy, as he announced, to enforce the law, because if it were bad then it would be repealed. 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.

It is undoubted that the Republicans will assume all responsibility for the condition in the South at that time. They have never shirked it. The Senator from Wisconsin acknowledged his participation in it the other day. He has no apology to make for it. I do not ask anybody to apologize for it; I am only justifying our own action. 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.] Eighteen hundred and seventy-six happened to be the hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and the action of the white men of South Carolina in taking the State away from the negroes we regard as a second declaration of independence by the Caucasian from African barbarism.

The other day the Senator from Wisconsin defined liberty. 'Liberty is that,' I believe he said, 'which is permitted by law to be done.' The Senator has the right to give whatever idea of liberty he may have, and I have no objection to that. In a general way it is a very good definition. But I here declare that if the white men of South Carolina had been content to obey the laws which had been forced down our throats at the point of the bayonet and submit to the reconstruction acts which had thrust the ballot into the hands of ignorant and debased negroes, slaves five years before, and only two or three generations removed from the barbarians of Africa, the state of South Carolina to-day would be a howling wilderness, a second Santo Domingo. 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.

South Carolina and Louisiana were the two last States to throw off the blood-sucking vampires which had been set over them by the reconstruction acts....

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.

Mr. President, the Senator from Wisconsin speaks of 'lynching bees.' As far as lynching for rape is concerned, the word is a misnomer. When stern and sad-faced white men put to death a creature in human form who has deflowered a white woman, there is nothing of the 'bee' about it. There is more of the feeling of participating as mourner at a funeral. They have avenged the greatest wrong, the blackest crime in all the category of crimes, and they have done it, not so much as an act of retribution in behalf of the victim as a duty and as a warning as to what any man may expect who shall repeat the offense. They are looking to the protection of their own loved ones.

The Senator from Wisconsin prates about the law. He erects the law into a deity which must be worshiped regardless of justice. He has studied law books until his mind has become saturated with the bigotry which ignores the fundamental principle in this Government: 'Law is nothing more than the will of the people.' There are written laws and unwritten laws, and the unwritten laws are always the very embodiment of savage justice. The Senator from Wisconsin is incapable of understanding conditions in the South or else he has lost those natural impulses which for centuries have been the characteristics of the race to which we belong.

Tacitus tells us that the "Germanic people were ever jealous of the virtue of their women." Germans, Saxons, Englishmen, they are practically one, springing from the same great root. That trinity of words, the noblest and holiest in our language, womanhood, wifehood, motherhood, have Saxon origin. I believe with Wordsworth—it is my religion—

A mother is a mother still, the noblest thing alive.

And a man who speaks with lightness or flippancy or discusses cold-bloodedly a matter so vital as the purity and chastity of womanhood is a disgrace to his own mother and unworthy the love of a good wife.

Look at our environment in the South, surrounded, and in a very large number of counties and in two States outnumbered, by the negroes—engulfed, as it were, in a black flood of

semi-barbarians. Our farmers, living in segregated farmhouses, more or less thinly scattered through the country, have negroes on every hand. For forty years these have been taught the damnable heresy of equality with the white man, made the puppet of scheming politicians, the instrument for the furtherance of political ambitions. Some of them have just enough education to be able to read, but not always to understand what they read. Their minds are those of children, while they have the passions and strength of men. Taught that they are oppressed, and with breasts pulsating with hatred of the whites, the younger generation of negro men are roaming over the land, passing back and forth without hindrance, and with no possibility of adequate police protection to the communities in which they are residing.

Now let me suppose a case. Let us take any Senator on this floor—I will not particularize—take him from some great and well-ordered State in the North, where there are possibly twenty thousand negroes, as there are in Wisconsin, with over two million whites. Let us carry this Senator to the backwoods in South Carolina, put him on a farm miles from a town or railroad, and environed with 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 undertakes to visit a neighbor or 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. Moore has drawn us the picture in most graphic language:

One fatal remembrance, one sorrow that throws
Its bleak shade alike o'er our joys and our woes,
To which life nothing darker or brighter can bring,
For which joy hath no balm and affliction no sting.

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? Shall men coldbloodedly stand up and demand for him the right to have a fair trial and be punished in the regular course of justice? So far as I am concerned he has put himself outside the pale of the law, human and divine. He has sinned against the Holy Ghost. 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!”

I do not know what the Senator from Wisconsin would do under these circumstances; neither do I care. I have three daughters, but, so help me God, I had rather find either one of them killed by a tiger or a bear and gather up her bones and bury them, conscious that she had died in the purity of her maidenhood, than have her crawl to me and tell me the horrid story that she had been robbed of the jewel of her womanhood by a black fiend. The wild beast would only obey the instinct of nature, and we would hunt him down and kill him just as soon as possible. What shall we do with a man who has outbruted the brute and committed an act which is more cruel than death? Try him? Drag the victim into court, for she alone can furnish legal evidence, and make her testify to the fearful ordeal through which she has passed, undergoing a second crucifixion?...

... Our rule is to make the woman witness, prosecutor, judge, and jury. I have known Judge Lynch's court to sit for a week while suspect after suspect has been run down and arrested, and in every instance they were brought into the presence of the victim, and when she said, 'That is not the man,' he was set free; but when she said, 'That is the man,' civilization asserted itself, and death, speedy and fearful, let me say—certainly speedy—was meted out. I have never advocated, I have deprecated and denounced, burning for this or any other crime. I believe it brutalizes any man who participates in a cruel punishment like that. I am satisfied to get out of the world such creatures.

As far as the people of the South are concerned, it is said I do not represent them here. Somehow or other I seem to represent one State, and I do not hesitate to assert that it is my religious belief that on this subject of rape I voice the feeling and the purpose of 95 per cent of the true white men of the Southern States. Whether I do or not, I voice my own. I am not ashamed of them. I have no apologies to make for them.

The Senators from Wisconsin and Colorado may rave, the newspapers may howl, but men who were reared by virtuous mothers and who revere womanly purity as the most priceless jewel of their civilization will do as we of the South have done. On this question I take back nothing and apologize for nothing. I spurn and scorn the charlatanry and cant, the hypocrisy and cowardice, the insolence and effrontery of any and all men who call my motives in question....

... You can not pick up a paper any day but that you will find an appeal from some negro in the North, some convention, some resolution of some kind somewhere denouncing the wrongs done the negroes in the South and demanding justice for them. Those papers circulate in the South. They go everywhere. Our schools, supported by the taxes paid by

the white people, are educating these negroes to read such appeals....

The Republican party itself has forsaken its old war cry of 'the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.' It has denied the Filipinos any participation in the Government, proclaiming that they are not fit. The southern people know they are unfit. We do not dispute it; but in the name of common sense and honest dealing, if the Filipinos are unfit, why are the negroes fit? Everybody knows that the Caucasian stands first, the Mongolian second, the Malay third, the Indian fourth, and the negro fifth in the scale of civilization as fixed by ethnologists. We have had to deal with the other four races besides our own. We have excluded the Chinese. Why? In order to satisfy the selfish desire of white men who are interested. We have butchered the Indian and taken his land. We have settled him. We have denied that the Malay is fit. Yet here we stand proclaiming that the African is fit.

The disfranchisement of the negro in the South for the time being has been acquiesced in by the people of the North without protest, but the fourteenth and the fifteenth amendments are the law of the land. Of course there is great doubt as to whether they were ever adopted in a constitutional way. I should like to hear the Senators from Wisconsin and Ohio, after studying the question a little, argue the point as a purely legal one, without reference to political conditions.

As a discussion of the race question in general goes on throughout the country and the future status of the negro in the United States and how to ameliorate conditions which are well-nigh intolerable now will more and more attract attention to the fundamental question as to whether or not the races are equal, must come to the front. It will be settled finally on that basis, yes or no. If the majority of the white people make up their minds that the negroes are not their equals, they will sooner or later put it in the law that they shall not have a part of the inheritance of the white race.

There was an irrepressible conflict in 1860 between slavery and freedom: between the idea of a confederation of States and a perpetual Union. Is there any man bold enough to deny that there is an irrepressible conflict now between civilization and barbarism and that the living together upon an absolute plane of equality of the two races in the South—one the highest, the other the lowest in the scale—is an impossibility without strife or bloodshed?

Let the newspapers of the country answer. Take up on any day you please a paper published anywhere and read of these conflicts and murders and ravishings, and all that sort of thing. Is it too much for me to say that the American people want this question investigated and discussed calmly and without passion or partisan bias, and have their lawmakers here set about trying to do something? That is all I am trying to accomplish. I do not expect to live to see any change in the Constitution of the United States one way or another. I doubt if there is a man in this Chamber who will ever see it changed by

amendment.

But I do not plead for the white people of the South alone. In the ultimate conclusion of this issue we will take care of ourselves, and if we can not do it without help we will get in the North all the recruits who believe in white supremacy and white civilization that we want or need. Thank God, 'blood is thicker than water.' But we do not want to have to go through the fearful ordeal and crime of butchering the negro.

I realize that there are millions of good negroes, if they are let alone and not taught heresies and criminal thoughts and feelings and actions. I should like to see this good, easy, good-for-nothing people given a chance to live. Give them justice; give them equal rights before the law; enable them to get property and keep it, and be protected in its enjoyment; give them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, provided their happiness does not destroy mine....

Race hatred grows day by day....

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