

# Neglected Voices

## Speeches of African-American Representatives Addressing the Civil Rights Bill of 1875

*Representative James T. Rapier, responding on February 4, 1875, to an assertion by Representative White of Alabama, that blacks in Alabama did not support the Bill:*

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Mr. RAPIER. I have sought the floor today for one purpose only. I had hoped that there would be no further discussion upon this bill, and I would not have spoken now but for the fact that I think my colleague from Alabama [Mr. White] has not properly represented the sentiments of the people of my State. I ask the Clerk to read just what my colleague did say.

The Clerk read as follows:

He was a southern man, born and raised on southern soil, and desired to secure the highest advantages that could be attained; and peace and harmony secured. It was urged, he said, that there was a prejudice on the part of the white man against the colored man. He would say to the gentlemen they were as much prejudiced against the whites in behalf of the blacks. It was not prejudice; it was pride of race and pride of country. The substitute he offered did not come from him. It came from higher authority--the colored people of Alabama.

Mr. RAPIER. That I deny, Mr. Speaker. The last time the colored people in Alabama were heard from upon this subject they expressed their opinions in a platform one clause of which I ask the Clerk to read.

The Clerk read as follows:

As citizens of the United States and of the State of Alabama, we claim all the civil and political rights, privileges, and immunities secured to every citizen by the Constitution of the United States and of the State of Alabama; and we will be satisfied with nothing less.

Mr. RAPIER. That class of people commissioned me to speak for them upon this subject in this House. If any man in the State of Alabama is acquainted with the colored people, I hold that I am the man. And when my colleague [Mr. White] says that the "colored people of Alabama" instructed him to offer such a bill as that, I have only to say that he has placed them in a very false position.

The platform which he had read from the Clerk's desk yesterday, and which he said was the platform of the republican party in the State of Alabama, was never framed or adopted by them. They never read that platform and never saw it until it was read in the republican convention of the State of Alabama, and there were not more than eighteen colored men in the convention at the time when that platform was adopted. The reason why the colored men there did not oppose that platform was that the republicans in the northern part of Alabama said that unless such a platform was put forth they were afraid they could not secure the white vote of that portion of the State. Therefore we allowed them to have their platform; and that platform was sent forth to the people of Alabama, and they repudiated it. I am unqualifiedly opposed to the White substitute, but favor the Senate bill as it stands.

I have no compromise to offer on this subject; I shall not willingly accept any. After all, this question resolves itself into this: either I am a man or I am not a man. If I am a man, I am entitled to all the right and privileges and immunities that any other American citizen is entitled to. If I am not a man, then I have no right to vote, I have no right to be here upon this floor; or if I am tolerated here, it is in violation of the Constitution of our country. If the negro is not a man, and has no right to vote, then there are many occupying seats here in violation of law.

Sir, if any man is entitled to the protection of the laws of his country, I hold that the colored man is that man. When he had no particular reason for liking this Government; when your Government was threatened with destruction, when those who had always been fostered and cared for by the Government hesitated as to what they should do, when this great Republic was in the act of going down, then it was that the negro came forward, made bare his breast and in it received the thrusts of the bayonets aimed at the life of the nation. And now you hesitate to say whether I shall be regarded as a man or not in this country, being a representative of that race.

[Here the hammer fell.]

Mr. RAPIER. In the name of my constituents I demand the passage of the Senate bill.