

Neglected Voices

Speeches of African-American Representatives Addressing the Ku Klux Klan Bill of 1871

Representatives William D. Kelley, speaking on March 29, 1871 in response to an argument that the Ku Klux Klan was a necessary and reasonable reaction to the foundation of "negro militias" and to the claim that black people in the South in fact did not suffer from discrimination. [\(1\)](#)

Mr. KELLEY. Mr. Speaker, I approach the discussion of the pending question with no hostility to the people of the South or any part of them, but with an interest in their welfare and prosperity that I scarcely feel for the people of my own colder section of the country. They are the children of the past; and appreciating the trials they are compelled to endure, I give them my sympathy, and am ready to labor with them to convert the cross they bear into a crown of triumph. I thank the gentleman from Tennessee [Mr. Whitthorne] for alluding to the material resources of the South, and thus diversifying the argument on that side of the House, on this and kindred questions, by referring to them and proposing them as a subject worthy of consideration.

Sir, as I listened to his statement of the productions of the South, as shown by the recent census, and which he seemed to think startling by reason of their grand totals, I could but grieve at the meager result and ask myself what they would have been had the people of the South frankly accepted the condition of affairs at the close of the war, and, looking to the future, had welcomed immigrants from the North and from other countries with their enterprise, their industries, their capital, and, if you please, their cupidity; for I know that there is no part of our country, and doubt whether there is any part of the world, that presents such golden invitations to the poor man of skill and enterprise, or the rich man, who would, by legitimate and productive industry, speedily double, treble, or quintuple his capital, as the territory embraced in the States lately in rebellion.

As I have traveled through that section two causes of wonder have been steadily presented to me: one the amazing natural wealth of the country, and the other the terrible poverty and ignorance of the mass of the people. How vast and varied are the resources of the South when compared with those of the North! Its cotton, tobacco, rice, and sugar fields, of which it enjoys the monopoly, are surrounded by fields on which every production of the North may be grown in greater abundance, in proportion to the labor expended, than we can produce them; its water-power, greater certainly than that of the eastern and middle States of the North, runs, as it has done through centuries, to waste; its mineral resources are in such variety and combination as are nowhere else found within the limits of our broad country; its sun shines all the year round, so that while they of cold New England or the far Northwest are housed around the hearthside and the glowing fire, and the children and good-wife are robed in woolens, they of the South are sporting in the open fields and consuming fuel only for culinary purposes. And yet with all these resources the people of the South are today--in a less degree, thank God, than I found them in the spring of 1867--steeped in poverty and unfamiliar with many household and other conveniences which the working people of the North are used to and regard as essential to their comfort and that of their families. The homes of the working people of Philadelphia, lighted with gas and supplied with hot and cold water and bathrooms, afford comforts which you will find only in dwellings recently erected in the large cities or principal towns of the South.

I speak of these things not to disparage the people of the South or to wound their sensibilities. Their deplorable condition is the result of the infernal system of slavery, which denied wages to the laborer, and so robbed toil of its dignity and aspirations and capital of its just rewards. When and where labor is well paid capital turns rapidly, for there are many consumers of its productions, and with each turn comes profit. Where industry is honored and rewarded and capital is safe cities spring up, and that which was farm land, little better, in the absence of a near market for its productions, than valueless, becomes priceless with the growth of the city, around which farm land increases with marvelous rapidity in both its marked and its intrinsic value.

No; the statistics presented by the gentleman from Tennessee do not prove his case. The results he disclosed with such an air of triumph are so meager that they militate against his conclusion. When the census of 1880 shall be taken thoughtful men will study it, and looking back upon the results he has presented will see how terrible have been the results of the madness of the southern Democracy as exhibited in their treatment of the freedmen and of northern and other immigrants, and in permitting secret armed societies to intimidate capital and enterprise, and constrain them to remain without her borders or to flee from them after having had the temerity to enter. I ask gentlemen on the other side of the House whether the proposition is true, as to any considerable part of the South, that a northern man can take his capital, his family, and his skilled workmen with him, and, having established himself quietly, identify himself with the Republican party, and still live undisturbed and unharmed?

Mr. DOX. I say it is true; and I speak for the district which I represent and for a great portion of the State of Alabama.

Mr. KELLEY. I am glad to see one gentleman from the broad South who can say so.

Mr. RAINEY. I will say that it is not true as to the State which I have the honor to represent in part on this floor.

Mr. KELLEY. I can say in reply to the gentleman from South Carolina that citizens of Pennsylvania have within sixty days appealed to the President of the United States to protect them and their laborers in working a gold mine in South Carolina which they had been foolish enough to purchase; and that within a fortnight several State and county officers of that State have been notified by the Ku Klux that they must, under pain of assassination, resign their offices and leave the State, which some of them have done.