

# Neglected Voices

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

*Representatives James T. Rapier and Alonzo J. Ransier, responding on June 9, 1874, to Representative Lamar's argument that the Bill was unnecessary because Blacks already had equal civil rights:*

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Mr. RANSIER. Mr. Speaker, I am obliged to my friend for yielding a portion of his time to me while I am sorry that by doing so he has interrupted himself in his eloquent speech. I had intended, if I had had the opportunity, to say something on this occasion by way of reply to a part of a recent speech by the gentleman from Mississippi, [Mr. Lamar,] and that of the gentleman from Tennessee, [Mr. Butler.] The few minutes allowed me, however, are not sufficient to enable me even to briefly sketch what I had hoped to be able to say.

The remarks on yesterday of the distinguished Mississippian [Mr. Lamar] who somewhat electrified the House, and who by the way seems to be somewhat in advance of those for whom he spoke in the matter of a sincere and hearty acquiescence with some of the results of the late war, attracted my attention for more reasons than one. The first was because to many of his utterances importance ought to be attached, coming from the gentleman who spoke. But when he said that the negroes in this country were possessed of all the rights and privileges attaching to other citizens, I cannot admit that he stated what was exactly true. For if that were the fact five millions of people would not be asking the Congress of the United States today for the passage of the civil-rights bill. Nor would the dying words of Charles Sumner, addressed to Mr. Hoar, have been uttered, "Do not let the civil-rights bill fail." Nor would the Senate of the United States sit twenty consecutive hours to pass a useless measure. Hence I say that the statement of the distinguished Mississippian that the colored people of this country possessed all the rights attaching to American citizenship, followed up by the imploring appeal that we ought to pay some attention to the rights and interests of the white people of the South, was not exactly true; else we would not be here today asking the congress of the United States to pass the civil-rights bill; nor would we be here today reminding the republican party of the country of their solemn obligation to pass such a bill, nor would we be here to remind the republican party today that if Congress adjourns without the passage of such a bill, to which it is committed, they will demoralize nine hundred thousand voters in this country and withhold an act of justice from five millions of people. I repeat that the statement of the gentleman from Mississippi is not exactly true, as has already been abundantly proven.

But it is a sign, Mr. Speaker, of the rapid strides of progress we have made as a nation that the distinguished gentleman from Mississippi, identified in the manner he is with the past, is now seeking to blot out that past, so far as clinging to its dead issues is concerned. I hail the spirit of his speech as indicative of the progress and advancing strides we are making as a nation. But I say today, and I speak, if I can, to the country, that so far as there is an impression that the colored man in this country had obtained all that attaches to American citizenship, or that the passage of the civil-rights bill will work injuriously to either whites or blacks, there never was a greater mistake made. If that were the fact, I say again there never was a more useless or unnecessary imploration uttered than that embodied in the dying words of Charles Sumner, "Take care of the civil-rights bill."

Now, sir, let me say in the brief moment allowed me that what pains me most in this matter is that men coming from the South, from Tennessee and from Virginia, indebted for their elevation to the position of members of Congress on this floor in part at least to colored votes, are to be found declaring that colored men do not want the civil-rights bill. They misrepresent that portion of their constituencies. I say to them, in the language of Charles Sumner to a Senator of the United States, "They are not your constituency; they are mine." You misrepresent them and have added insult to the injury you would inflict.

When the gentleman from Tennessee [Mr. Butler] said that the colored people did not want civil rights, that portion of his constituency almost at that same moment were, in a State convention called for the purpose, engaged in making a protest against the position assumed by Mr. Brownlow, of Tennessee, who had written against the bill.

The convention referred to passed the following resolutions:

Whereas the Congress of the United States by public authority, have made large donations and endowments to many educational institutions, to citizens of the several States of this Union; and whereas Tennessee has received the fund allowed and provided by this supreme authority of our country, and the colored citizens form a large part of the population of the State, and have received none of the benefits of this liberal provision for public improvement; and whereas there is now a bill before the Congress of the United States conferring on the colored citizens civil rights, and as it is our duty as men to arrange means of instruction for the perfect development of posterity, we call the attention of the Congress of the United States to the fact that the public institutions of Tennessee are defective in point of principle and practice, are anti-republican and proscriptive, and their tendency is to breed discord between citizens and stimulate the spirit of caste and hate: Therefore,

*Resolved*, That we most respectfully ask the passage of the civil-rights bill as introduced by Hon. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, and reported by the Judiciary Committee, containing the provisions of an impartial education afforded to us and our children by the public schools of this country, as the most potent power to develop true republicanism and love of country, good feeling and personal regard mutually.

*Resolved*, That the institutions endowed by the General government be so regulated that the colored citizens shall be admitted to them impartially, in proportion to their population, and provision shall be made to carry out the apportionment of this class of citizens; and whereas the common or public schools of the country is the medium through which an education will reach the masses of the citizens we, as American citizens, demand that we shall enjoy them impartially, that we may encourage protection in a republic where all are equal before the law, and promote a high and useful career for the young upon the enduring basis of a true and consistent republic, which generously showers its blessings upon all alike, regardless of external circumstances or condition.

*Resolved*, That we will consider the omission of the republican party to enact this measure a baseless surrender of the rights of humanity to your insidious foes, who have contested upon the avenues of civil life every right we enjoy, as they did every right of freedom on the field of battle; and we will do our utmost to stamp upon every demagogue who seeks to betray the privileges of our children to the full enjoyment of impartial and equal privileges in the public schools the brand of the traitor Judas, as deserving politically a traitor's doom, with whom we will never, never join hands nor support, but will regard as our public and private enemy, more terrible to meet than a savage beast, more injurious than any catastrophe that could befall us, or any calamity that could be devised by any wicked unseen power that could reap a carnival of misery; but equal and impartial rights will secure to posterity their just and true relations, order will come from chaos, good will spring up where spite and hate exist, Ethiopia will in this fair country stretch forth her hands to God, peace will prevail, God will bless us, and we will walk hand in hand.

Also the following:

Whereas it has been asserted without authority and unwarrantably that the colored citizens of Tennessee and the South do not want civil rights, with impartial school privileges to all the colored children in the South in the public schools, and all the other privileges demanded and allowed in civil laws this convention of colored citizens repel indignantly and with contempt the misanthrope who would seek to fasten and fetter with prejudice our children and posterity, and we earnestly invoke the national Congress to pass the civil-rights bill, giving to our children impartial school privileges in every public school, State and national, throughout the United States, and deny to any the privileges of invidious distinctions against our race in any of the institutions of the country; and present our thanks to General Benjamin F. Butler, of Massachusetts, for his management of

the bill in the House of Representatives of the United States, so ably vindicated by the lamented Charles Sumner.

I ask for the passage of the civil-rights bill before we shall adjourn. We ask it as a measure of justice to those people who have been true to the nation and to the party in power. We ask it at the hands of President Grant and the republican party. We ask it too, sir, as a matter of sound public policy in the interest of the republican party and the country. To say that the intelligent colored people are not desiring this measure is, sir, I repeat, adding insult to injury. We ask it; we are not in a position to demand it. We plead for it respectfully, but in no uncertain voice, and confidently look for its early passage.

Mr. Speaker, the condition of affairs in South Carolina, Arkansas, Louisiana, and elsewhere in the South is lugged into these debates here and into the writing of newspaper articles as evidences of the unfitness of the negro for the franchise and for civil rights. Sir, that affairs in some of these States are not in a satisfactory condition is unfortunately true; but, sir, these people have done as well under all the circumstances as any other race similarly situated could have done. They have made mistakes and are alive to the fact, and so far as they are concerned are endeavoring to rectify them. They have been deceived in men whom they elected to fill important positions, as the too-confiding colored people of portions of Tennessee and Virginia and elsewhere have been deceived and are being misrepresented by some of those towards whose election they contributed largely.

As to affairs in my own State, sir, I could wish that there were no grave constitutional obstructions in the way of an investigation into our affairs, as is asked for by a portion of our people. The masses of our people, white and black, would rather invite investigation and a thorough understanding of our affairs than shrink from it. None but those who may be guilty of such practices as are charged against them, and are or may be directly responsible for the misuse of the public moneys and abuses in other directions, could reasonably object. But, sir, because some officials in these States have abused the public confidence and prostituted their office, is violence to be done to a great principle of justice, and a whole race denied therein equal rights in a government like ours? It cannot be, Mr. Speaker. Let justice be done though the heavens fall.