

Benjamin R. Tillman: The Use of Violence Against Southern Blacks (1900)

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, southern whites brazenly accelerated their efforts to restore "all-white" rule in the region's social, economic, and political life. Senator Benjamin R. Tillman, whose nickname was "Pitchfork Ben" (because he once threatened to stick a pitchfork in President Grover Cleveland because of his conservative financial policies) played a leading role in the efforts to disenfranchise blacks and enforce racial segregation. A vocal white supremacist from Edgefield County, South Carolina, Tillman recruited and inspired racist white militias and vigilantes. He served as governor of South Carolina from 1890 to 1894. Elected to the Senate in 1895, he promoted the interests of small farmers and greater regulation of railroads. He also continued to promote white supremacy-by any means necessary. In the following speeches to the Senate, Tillman defended the use of violence to intimidate African Americans.

From "Speech of Senator Benjamin R. Tillman, March 23, 1900: *Congressional Record*, 56th Cong., 1st sess., pp. 3223-3224. [Editorial insertions appear in square brackets-Ed.]

It cannot be denied that the slaves of the South were a superior set of men and women to the freedmen of today, and that the poison in their minds-the race hatred of the whites-is the result of the teachings of Northern fanatics. Ravishing a woman, white or black, was never known to occur in the South till after the Reconstruction era. So much for that phase of the subject....

... And he [Senator John C. Spooner of Wisconsin] said we had taken their [blacks'] rights away from them. He asked me was it right to murder them in order to carry the elections. I never saw one murdered. I never saw one shot at an election. It was the riots before the elections, precipitated by their own hot-headedness in attempting to hold the government, that brought on conflicts between the races and caused the shotgun to be used. That is what I meant by saying we used the shotgun.

I want to call the Senator's attention to one fact. He said that the Republican Party [during Reconstruction] gave the negroes the ballot in order to protect themselves against the indignities and wrongs that were attempted to be heaped upon them by the enactment of the black code. I say it was because the Republicans of that day, led by [Congressman] Thad Stevens, wanted to put white necks under black heels and to get revenge. There is a difference of opinion. You have your opinion about it, and I have mine, and we can never agree.

I want to ask the Senator this proposition in arithmetic: In my State there were 135,000 negro voters, or negroes of voting age, and some 90,000 or 95,000 white voters. General [Edward] Canby set up a carpetbag government there [after the Civil War] and turned our State over to this majority. Now, I want to ask you, with a free vote and a fair count, how are you going to beat 135,000 by 95,000? How are you going to do it? You had set us an impossible task. You had handcuffed us and thrown away the key, and you propped your carpetbag negro government with [federal] bayonets. Whenever it was necessary to sustain the [Reconstruction] government you held it up by the Army.

Mr. President, I have not the facts and figures here, but I want the country to get the full view of the Southern side of this question and the justification for anything we did. We were sorry we had the necessity forced upon us, but we could not help it, and as white men we are not sorry for it, and we do not propose to apologize for anything we have done in connection with it. We took the government away from them [blacks] in 1876. We did take it. If no other Senator has come here previous to this time

who would acknowledge it, more is the pity. We have had no fraud in our elections in South Carolina since 1884. There has been no organized Republican party in the State.

We did not disfranchise the negroes until 1895. Then we had a constitutional convention convened which took the matter up calmly, deliberately, and avowedly with the purpose of disfranchising as many of them as we could under the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments. We adopted the educational qualification [for voting] as the only means left to us, and the negro is as contented and as prosperous and as well protected in South Carolina today as in any State of the Union south of the Potomac. He is not meddling with politics, for he found that the more he meddled with them the worse off he got. As to his "rights" – I will not discuss them now. We of the South have never recognized the right of the negro to govern white men, and we never will. We have never believed him to be equal to the white man, and we will not submit to his gratifying his lust on our wives and daughters without lynching him. I would to God the last one of them was in Africa and that none of them had ever been brought to our shores....

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is Tillman's underlying premise for justifying the forceful restoration of all-white rule in South Carolina?
2. How does Tillman justify the benefits of slavery to slaves?