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Lynching Lessons

by Peter Dreier

On June 13, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution apologizing for its failure to adopt federal anti-lynching legislation, first proposed 105 years ago at a time when lynchings were a frequent occurrence. In the first half of the 20th century, several hundred anti-lynching laws were filed in Congress, and three were passed by the House of Representatives, but the Senate -- controlled by Southern Democrats, who used the filibuster -- consistently refused to adopt the law. One of the most powerful was Richard Russell (D-Georgia), whose name now adorns the Senate office building where the resolution was crafted.

What is outrageous is that 20 Senators initially declined to cosponsor the resolution, drafted by Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-Louisiana). Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) insisted on a voice vote, rather than a roll call vote, to avoid forcing members to put themselves on record. Even so, pressure from constituents pushed seven additional Senators to add their names as co-sponsors after the vote was taken.

Thirteen Republicans -- including Trent Lott and Thad Cochran from Mississippi, the state with the most lynchings - continued to avoid joining the list of cosponsors. (The other holdouts include Lamar Alexander [TN], Robert Bennett and Orrin Hatch [Utah], John Cornyn [TX], Michael Crapo [Idaho], Michael Enzi and Craig Thomas [Wyoming], Chuck Grassley [Iowa], Judd Gregg and John Sununu [NH], and Richard Shelby [Alabama]). Even today, it seems, lynching remains controversial.

The Senate resolution is purely a symbolic act, but if it reminds us of the horrors of racial hatred and helps us address contemporary forms of bigotry, it will have served its purpose. What lessons should we learn from the sordid history of lynching in America?

Many news reports of the Senate's action noted that there were 4,732 recorded lynchings between 1882 and 1951, although there were certainly many undocumented lynchings before and during that period. Most of the recorded lynchings occurred before 1930. The vast majority of lynchings took place in the South and the border states, although lynchings were not unknown in the North and Midwest, too. Three-fourths of the victims were black.

Missing from most recent news accounts of the Senate's apology are the underlying social conditions that led to most lynchings and the resulting

fluctuations in lynchings.

Between 1880 and 1930, 2805 people - 2500 of them black - were killed by lynch mobs in the 10 southern states. According to Stewart Tolnay and E.M. Beck's authoritative study, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings*, on average, "a black man, woman, or child was murdered nearly once a week, every week" during those years by a white lynch mob.

But the number of lynchings each year fluctuated widely, highly correlated with the price of cotton. Low cotton prices -- an indication of poor economic conditions -- led to an increase in lynchings. When economic conditions improved, lynchings declined.

This suggests that while most Southern whites -- especially rural farmers and workers -- held racist beliefs, they did not always act on these beliefs through mob violence. Economic hard times brought out the worst in these people, pushing them to act out their frustrations.

Obviously, the victims of lynchings were not responsible for the value of cotton or the general level of business activity. In that way, lynching was an irrational act, a form of scapegoating, not unlike the way the German people vented their frustrations by vilifying and killing Jews when their country was thrown into economic depression in the 1930s.

Most lynchings took place in small towns and isolated rural communities, characterized by widespread poverty and illiteracy. Participants in lynch mobs were typically sharecroppers, tenant farmers and common laborers. Their economic position was similar to that of African Americans.

Of course, most people who joined lynch mobs were probably unaware of the underlying conditions that triggered their behavior. Rather than blame general economic conditions or specific people and institutions with economic power, they justified their actions by pointing to the behavior of blacks, especially violations of racial manners. Lynchings were often triggered by a rumor of a sexual offense such as rape (typically unfounded) by a black man against a white woman or by other offenses which whites interpreted as blacks not "knowing their place," such as insulting a white person, trying to vote, murder, or stealing.

Back then, rural southern white society was divided into two major classes -- the dominant planters and major employers, and the class of day laborers, sharecroppers, and tenant farmers. The planters and big employers depended on cheap white and black labor. When economic conditions worsened, poor whites felt threatened by competition from even cheaper black labor. At the time, groups like the Farmers Alliance were trying to mobilize a coalition of white and black laborers and tenant farmers to regulate the banks and railroads that were gouging small farmers. But racial fears and violence undermined the Southern Populist movement. By identifying with the ideology of white supremacy and segregation, most poor Southern whites chose to form political alliances around race rather than class lines.

Most upper-class and middle-class Southern whites, and most white politicians, condoned lynching as a form of maintaining the racial hierarchy. Although the white elite may not have directly participated in most lynchings, they benefited from them.

The number of lynchings peaked at 230 in 1892, which coincided with a dramatic softening in demand for southern cotton. The bloody 1890s were followed by several years of rising cotton prices and a decline in violence against southern blacks. Following World War One, cotton prices bottomed out, accompanied by a new wave of racist extremism - white-on-black riots in northern cities like Chicago and Detroit and the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan in the South.

By the 1930s, lynchings had declined to about ten a year, falling to three a year the following decade. Historians and sociologists credit the urbanization of the South, the accelerating migration of blacks to Northern cities, the NAACP's persistent (though unsuccessful) campaign for a federal anti-lynching law, and the growing embarrassment of Southern opinion leaders (including some newspaper editors and businessmen) by the stain of lynching.

Although the number of lynchings fell by the 1940s, segregationists continued to use violence and terror to keep African Americans second-class citizens and to thwart the civil rights movement. Indeed, the Senate's apology comes at a time when a number of prominent racist murder cases -- including the killings of 14-year old Emmett Till in 1955 and civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Mickey Schwerner in 1964 -- are being reopened.

What are lynching's lessons for American society today? If there is one truism about race relations, it is that overt bigotry, hate crimes, and discrimination flourish during economic hard times. These acts of racism decline when the economic improves, when almost everyone who wants to work has a job at decent wages, and when people have economic security.

Although it is simplistic to argue that if you give people a job, their hearts and minds will follow, it is certainly true that full employment at decent wages makes interracial co-operation much more likely. Otherwise, competition over economic crumbs will lead to resentments, bitterness, and racial tensions. In recent times, economic hard times are correlated with increases in the murder rate, racial violence, hate crimes, and opposition to immigration and remedies like affirmative action.

This is exactly what occurred during the 1990s. Aided by a tight labor market, the nation's poverty rate dropped from 15.1% in 1993 to 11.3% by 2000 -- the lowest rate since 1973. The poverty rate fell significantly in central cities and for black Americans. These trends also account for the decline in violent crime in America's cities during this period. . Because unemployment was low, employers hired people who they may not have hired when there was a "surplus" of workers. Workers with fewer skills and less education, particularly black men, got "pulled" into the labor market. Because whites were doing better, too, there was less competition for jobs and fewer incidents of racial hatred.

In contrast, when times are tough -- or when economic prosperity primarily benefits the wealthy, and the gap between the rich and everyone else widens - racial prejudice is more likely to trigger hate crimes and a political backlash against minorities and the poor.

The history of lynching should remind us that economic justice is a

precondition for racial justice. Currently, the vast majority of Americans -- white, black, brown, yellow, and all shades in-between -- are not benefiting from the nation's recent economic upturn and will certainly suffer even more during the next inevitable downturn of the business cycle.

Is it just a coincidence that the Bush Administration - and almost all of the Senators who failed to cosponsor the apology for lynching -- steadfastly opposes policies to promote full employment, raise the minimum wage, provide universal health care, and guarantee affordable housing for all?

Peter Dreier, professor of politics and director of the Urban & Environmental Policy program at Occidental College, is coauthor of [Place Matters: Metropolitcs for the 21st Century](#) (University Press of Kansas, 2005) and [The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City](#) (University of California Press, 2005).

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