

Bobby Rush: The Significance of the Emmett Till Antilynching Act

On August 28, 1955, one of the worst events of racial violence occurred within the Mississippi Delta Region against Emmett Till, a fourteen-year old born in Illinois. Till, while on a vacation near Money, Mississippi, was accused of soliciting Carolyn Bryant, a white, married woman, whose husband owned a local grocery store. Once the perpetrators, who were Bryant's husband and his half brother, learned of Till's supposed actions, they kidnapped the young boy several nights after. His captors then proceeded to lynch him, kill him, and leave his body in the Tallahatchie River. His deceased corpse, once found, sparked one of the largest outrages pertaining to racial violence within the history of our country. This was furthered when the all-white jury present upon the case found the two perpetrators to be innocent. However, a recent, greatly revolutionary act, proposed has staged the foundation towards ending the effects of racial violence within our country, known as the Emmett Till Antilynching Act.

This law was first proposed on January 3rd, 2019, by Illinois Representative Bobby Rush. The law's primary intent is, according to Congress.gov, is to consider lynching a federal hate crime. "Specifically, the bill imposes criminal penalties—a fine, a prison term of up to 30 years, or both—on an individual who conspires to commit a hate crime offense that results in death or serious bodily injury or that includes kidnapping or an attempt to kidnap, aggravated sexual abuse or an attempt to commit aggravated sexual abuse, or an attempt to kill." One aspect of the significance behind this is the magnitude which lynchings were committed upon during the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. As stated by NBC News, "A report by the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit

organization providing legal representation to prisoners who have been wrongly convicted, found that nearly 6,500 lynchings took place in the U.S. from 1865 to 1950.” However, a frequently-asked question is what an anti-lynching law truly means within our contemporary society. The most common interpretation of this is a battle against an innate human nature of hatred. As stated by Till in an article of Vox, “Lynching is a clear example of one’s inhumanity toward another. It’s a uniquely American act of terrorism that is motivated by hatred, and, before today, was never punished by our legal system.” This further reflects the innate flaws within our country’s respect towards minorities, and how despite vast improvements, there are still major flaws. This further highlights the significance behind this act, and how Rush’s actions attempt to directly counteract this “uniquely American” hatred. According to an article by NBC News, 200 attempts had been made to pass an anti-lynching law since 1900, all of which have amounted to no change within the government. Therefore, Bobby Rush’s actions have proven to be an extremely radical instance of political courage.

Another instance of the significance of Rush’s actions against the hegemonic effects of racial hatred within our modern society is due to the consequences imposed upon Emmett Till’s captors. It reflects how even within our own law system, a system which supposedly intends to battle against hatred within our society, has proven on several occasions to have unjustful effects, regardless of the truth behind an incident. This is especially significant in regards to the massive numbers of lynchings present in our country over the span of merely 85 years, and the relative lack of legal assessment against the perpetrators of these horrific gatherings. Legal corruption, especially in regards to racial prejudice, has always been present within American society. While it

may not be on the scale that it was during the period of the Civil Rights Movement, events of racial violence such as the death of George Floyd continue to emphasize these flaws within our law enforcement. Therefore, this new act of political courage by Rush not only counteracts hatred within the lives of civilians, but further counteracts the effects of racial discrimination within our nation-wide legal system as well.

This radical act of political courage by Bobby Rush may seem unnecessary, as many consider lynching to no longer be a threat. However, the effects of racial violence, especially lynching, have in fact risen in our country, and will only continue to do so. As stated in an article of NPR News, “Vice President Kamala Harris said that lynching is ‘not a relic of the past...Racial acts of terror still occur in our nation. And when they do, we must all have the courage to name them and hold the perpetrators to account,’” This further reflects how Rush’s actions intend to not only eliminate the threats of racial violence that may be present within our past, as displayed by the statistic regarding the number of lynchings from 1865 to 1950, but to remove the causal effects of racial violence within our future.

Bobby Rush has expressed great joy that the unjust nature of lynching is soon to be resolved. However, he has also expressed his great sadness that action was not taken sooner in order to prevent the death of Emmett Till and several others. In an article for Vox News, Rush discusses the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year old killed in February of 2020 during a racial hate crime near Glynn County, Georgia. “The three men convicted in 2021 of murdering Ahmaud Arbery — Travis and Gregory McMichael and William ‘Roddie’ Bryan — could have been charged with lynching if the law were in

effect, Rush told Vox. On top of the state-level charges that they were convicted of — among them malice murder, felony murder, and false imprisonment — their crime could have been tried as a “lynching” at the federal level.” However, with the law now in place, many are ecstatic in hopes of bringing an end to the horrific nature of lynching, and for Bobby Rush’s monumental act of political courage.

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