

RICHARD HARVEY CAIN

“A Nation of Croakers”

Speech in Congress on the Civil Rights Bill, January 1874

MR. SPEAKER, I had supposed “this cruel war was over,” and that we had entered upon an era of peace, prosperity, and future success as a nation. I had supposed that after the sad experience of more than five years, after we had sought to heal the wounds the war had made, after we had passed amnesty bills, and, as we thought, had entered upon the smooth, quiet road of future prosperity, we would meet on a common level in the halls of Congress, and that no longer would we brood over the past; that we would strike out a new line of policy, a new national course, and thus succeed in laying broad and deep the foundations of the future welfare of this country; that every man, of every race, of every section of this country, might strike hands and go forward in national progress.

I regret, however, that it again becomes my lot to answer a member from a neighboring State—North Carolina. It was my misfortune a few Saturdays ago to have to answer a gentleman from the same State [Mr. VANCE] in relation to strictures upon my race. I regret that it becomes my duty again, simply in defense of what I regard as a right—in defense of the race to which I belong—to meet the arguments of another gentleman from North Carolina, [Mr. ROBBINS,] to show, if I can, their fallacy, and to prove they are not correct.

The gentleman starts out by saying that if we pass the pending civil-rights bill it may indeed seem pleasant to the northern people, but to his section, and to the South, it will be death. I do not think he is correct, for the reason that they have in the South suffered a great many more terrible things than civil rights, and still live. I think if so harmless a measure as the civil-rights bill, guaranteeing to every man of the African race equal rights with other men, would bring death to the South, then certainly that noble march of Sherman to the sea would have fixed them long ago. [Laughter.]

I desire to answer a few of the strictures which the gentleman

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has been pleased to place upon us. He states that the civil-rights bill will be death to that section. I cannot see it in that light. We lived together before the war—four millions of colored men, women, and children, with the whites of the South—and there was no special antagonism then. There might have been some friction in some places and in some cases, [great laughter,] but no special antagonism between the two races in the South. I fail, therefore, to see the force of the gentleman's argument. I would like to ask why, in all conscience, after the measures of education, these noble efforts to educate these "barbarians," as he terms us, for two hundred years or more—after all the earnest efforts on their part, with their superior civilization, and all the appliances which the gentleman from North Carolina [Mr. ROBBINS] claims were brought to bear on these "barbarians"—I ask why there was no such antagonism then, but just at this time? Why, sir, if it be true, as the gentleman says, that such philanthropic efforts have been put forth for the education and improvement of the black race, there would be no occasion for antagonism. It is, I believe, a law of education to assimilate, to bring together, to harmonize discordant elements, to bring about oneness of feeling and sentiment, to develop similarity of thought, similarity of action, and thus tend to carry forward the people harmoniously. That does not seem to have been the case, if the argument of the gentleman from North Carolina is correct. Now, look at the fallacy of the gentleman's argument. This race of barbarians, in spite of all their disadvantages, had been educated to such an extent that the white community of the South were not afraid of them after their emancipation. Is not that singular?

The gentleman further states that the negro race is the world's stage actor—the comic dancer all over the land; that he laughs and he dances. Sir, well he may; there are more reasons for his laughing and dancing now than ever before. [Laughter.] There are more substantial reasons why he should be happy now than during all the two hundred years prior to this time. Now he dances as an African; then he crouched as a slave. [Laughter and applause.]

The gentleman further states that not more than eighteen hundred negroes were killed during the four years of the war. The gentleman forgets some battles; he forgets Vicksburgh;

I presume he does not remember Petersburg; he does not know anything of Fort Pillow. He knows nothing about all the great achievements of the black men while Sherman's army was moving on to victory. He forgets who entered Charleston first; he forgets who entered Richmond first; he forgets all this in the blindness of his prejudice against a race of men who have vindicated themselves so nobly on the battle-field. But I will grant the gentleman the charity of dwelling no longer on that point.

Mr. Speaker, the gentleman states that during the struggle for freedom four millions of negroes lifted no hand to liberate themselves; that no stroke was made by them to deliver themselves from their thralldom; yet a few moments afterward he makes the statement that their kind-heartedness prevented them from rising up and destroying the wives and children of the rebel soldiers who were at the front. I accept the admission. Sir, there dwells in the black man's heart too much nobleness and too much charity to strike down helpless women and children when he has a chance to do so. No; though the liberty of our race was dear to us, we would not purchase it at such a dastard price as the slaying of helpless women and children, while their husbands and fathers were away. I would scorn the men of my race forever if they had lifted their hands at such a period as that against helpless women and children, who were waiting in silent anxiety the return of their natural and lawful protectors. Our strong black arms might have destroyed every vestige of their homes; our torches might have kindled a fire that would have lighted up the whole South, so that every southern man fighting in the army would have hastened back to find his home in ashes. But our race had such nobleness of heart as to forbear in an hour of such extremity, and leave those men their wives and children.

Sir, I mean no disrespect to the gentleman, but I think the facts will bear me out in the statement that on every occasion on the battle-field where the black man met the white man of the South there was no flinching, no turning back, on the part of the black man. He bravely accepted his part in the struggle for liberty or death.

The gentleman says he still looks upon the whites as the superior race. That may be the case in some respects; but, sir, if they educated us they certainly should not find fault with us

if we follow out what they have taught, and show ourselves obedient servants.

But, Mr. Speaker, there is another point. The gentleman states that we would make no movement to achieve our liberty. Why, sir, the education which those gentlemen gave the southern slaves was of a peculiar kind. What school-house in all the South was open to the colored race? Point to one. Name the academy where you educated black men and black women as lawyers or doctors, or in any other department of science or art. Point out the county. Give us the name of the district. Tell the name of the school commissioner. Name the teacher. I will name one. Her name was Missa Douglas. And for the attempt to educate those of our race she was incarcerated in prison, and remained there for five years. That is the only instance, so far as I remember, of the education of the colored people of the South.

Examine the laws of the South, and you will find that it was a penal offense for any one to educate the colored people there. Yet these gentlemen come here and upbraid us with our ignorance and our stupidity. Yet you robbed us for two hundred years. During all that time we toiled for you. We have raised your cotton, your rice, your corn. We have attended your wives and your children. We have made wealth for your support and your education, while we were slaves, toiling without pay, without the means of education, and hardly of sustenance. And yet you upbraid us for being ignorant; call us a horde of barbarians! Why, sir, it is ill-becoming in the gentleman to tell us of our barbarism, after he and his have been educating us for two hundred years. If New England charity and benevolence had not accomplished more than your education has done we would still be in that condition. I thank the North for the charity and nobleness with which it has come to our relief. The North has sent forth those leading ideas, which have spread like lightning over the land; and the negro was not so dumb and not so obtuse that he could not catch the light, and embrace its blessings and enjoy them. Sir, I hurl back with contempt all the aspersions of the gentleman on the other side against my race. There is but very little difference, even now, between the condition of the whites of the South and the condition of the blacks of the South. I have given some attention to the statistics of education in the Southern States.

I find this pregnant fact, that there is about 12 per cent. more ignorance existing among the whites in the South than there is among the colored people in the South, notwithstanding the slavery of the colored race. I wish I had the reports here, that I might show the gentleman how the facts stand in reference to his own State especially, because, if I remember correctly, his State shows there is a preponderating aggregate of ignorance in the State of North Carolina, amounting to 60 per cent. and upward, compared with the entire number of the inhabitants in that State.

Tell us of our ignorance—the ignorance of the colored race! Why, Mr. Speaker, it appears to me to be presumption on the part of the gentleman to state that we—we whom they have wronged, whom they have outraged, whom they have robbed, whose sweat and toil they have had the benefit of for two hundred years; whose labor, whose wives, whose children, have been at their beck and call—I say it ill-becomes them to taunt us now with our barbarism and our ignorance. Sir, if he will open to us the school-house, give us some chance, we would not have to measure arms with him now. But even now, Mr. Speaker, although there is such disparity between us and him so far as relates to education and resources, even now we fear not a comparison in the condition of education in the last eight years between the whites and the blacks of North Carolina.

The gentleman, moreover, states that the reason why they did not educate the colored race was that the colored man was not ready. Not ready, Mr. Speaker; if I had that gentleman upon the floor, with my foot upon his neck, and holding a lash over him, with his hands tied, with him bound hand and foot, would he expect that I should boast over him and tell him “You are a coward, you are a traitor, because you do not resist me!” Would he expect me to tell him that when I had him down under my foot, with his hands tied and the lash in my hand lashing his back? Would he tell me that, in conscience, I would be doing justice to him? Oh, no, no! And yet such was the condition in which he had my race. Why, sir, the whipping-post, the thumb-screw, and the lash, were the great means of education in the South. These were the school-houses, these were the academies, these were the great instruments of education, of which the gentleman boasts, for

the purpose of bringing these barbarians into civilization. [Applause.] When men boast, they ought to have something to boast of. When I boast, Mr. Speaker, I shall boast of some noble deed. I will boast not of the wrongs inflicted upon the weak; I will boast not of the outrages inflicted upon the indigent; I will not boast, Mr. Speaker, of lashing the weak and trampling under foot any class of people who ought to have my sympathy, nor will I reproach them for being ignorant, when they have been kept away from every means to educate them.

He says we are not ready for it. How long would it have taken us to get ready under their kind of teaching? How long, O Lord, how long! [Laughter and applause.] How long would it have taken to educate us under the thumb-screw, to educate us with the whip, to educate us with the lash, with instruments of torture, to educate us without a home? How long would it have taken to educate us under their system? We had no wives; we had no children; they belonged to the gentleman and his class. We were homeless, we were friendless, although those stars and stripes hanging over your head, Mr. Speaker, ought to have been our protection. That emblem of the Declaration of Independence, initiated by the fathers of the Republic, that all men are born free and equal, ought to have been our protection. Yet they were to us no stars of hope, and the stripes were only stripes of our condemnation.

The gentleman talked something, I believe, about buzzards or crows taking the place of our brave eagle. Sir, the crow would, I think, more beautifully represent the condition of the South now—the croaking bird, you know. They have been croaking ever since the rebellion came on, and they have been croaking against emancipation and the Constitution ever since. They are a nation of croakers, so to speak. Like the crow they are cawing, cawing, cawing, eternally cawing. [Great laughter.] Mr. Speaker, you will pardon me, for I did not expect to speak this morning.

The gentleman says the negro has done less for himself than any other race of men on earth; and he instances the German, the Irishman, the Scotchman, the Englishman, and the Frenchman, as having done something. But he forgets the men of those nationalities come from stations which are the proud, educated, refined, noble, advancing nations of the earth. He

forgets that those nations of which he speaks, from which those men have sprung, have given, and are still giving, to the world some of the brightest minds that ever adorned the galaxy of human intellect.

But he tells us that the negroes never produced anything. Well, sir, it may be that in the gentleman's opinion negroes have never produced anything. I wonder if the gentleman ever read history. Did he ever hear tell of any persons of the name of Hannibal, of Hanno, of Hamilcar, of Euclid—all great men of ancient times—of Æsop, and others? No, sir; no; for that kind of literature does not come to North Carolina. [Great laughter.] It grows, it flourishes, on the free mountain peaks and in the academies of the North. That kind of literature comes to such men as Wendell Phillips, as Lloyd Garrison, as Charles Sumner, as Benjamin Butler, and other distinguished men, men of the North, men that are thinkers, men that do not croak, but let the eagle ever soar high in the conception of high ideas. They are ideas that belong to a free people; they are not consistent with or consonant with slavery. No, sir; they do not tell the negro of Euclid, the man that in his joy cried out "Eureka, I have found it;" no, that is not the language for the slave. No; that is not the language they teach by the whip and the thumb-screw; no, sir; it is not that.

But I must pass on. The gentleman says that the black men in the South, since emancipation and enfranchisement, have put bad men into office. Well, sir, that may be true, and I regret that we have put so many bad men in office. No one regrets it more than I do, but they were not colored men after all. [Great laughter.] They were not black men, those bad men in office, who have done so much to deteriorate the value of the country. Not at all. Why, sir, they did not elect our distinguished friend [Mr. VANCE] from North Carolina by black votes. They did not elect Mr. Holman, or a gentleman of some such name, in North Carolina. They did not run the State in debt. They were not the men who took the cash; they were simply mudsills who did the voting, while another class of individuals did the stealing. That is the difference.

Well, Mr. Speaker, I beg to say that we did the best we could; and one of the results of our education was that we had been taught to trust white men in the South. We trusted them, and

if they did wrong it was no fault of ours; not at all. I presume the gentleman who addressed the House to-day had some colored constituents who voted for him and sent him here. I will not dare to say, however, that he is a bad man. He may be one of the very best of men; but I think he has some very bad ideas, so far as my race is concerned. [Applause.]

The gentleman says that this is a white man's land and government. He says it has been committed to them in a sacred relationship. I ask in all conscience what becomes of our black men and women and children, to the number of five millions; have we no rights? Ought we to have no privileges; ought we not to have the protection of the law? We did not ask any more. The gentleman harps upon the idea of social equality. Well, sir, he has not had so much experience of that as I have had, or as my race have had. We have some objections to social equality ourselves, very grave ones. [Applause.] For even now, though freedom has come, it is a hard matter, a very hard matter, to keep sacredly guarded the precincts of our sacred homes. But I will not dwell upon that. The gentleman knows more about that than I do. [Laughter.]

The gentleman wishes that we should prepare ourselves to go to Africa, or to the West Indies, or somewhere else. I want to enunciate this doctrine upon this floor—you have brought us here, and here we are going to stay. [Applause.] We are not going one foot or one inch from this land. Our mothers and our fathers and our grandfathers and great-grandfathers have died here. Here we have sweated. Here we have toiled. Here we have made this country great and rich by our labor and toil. It is mean in you now to want to drive us away, after having taken all our toil for two hundred years. Just think of the magnitude of these gentlemen's hearts. After having taken all our toil for two hundred years; after having sold our wives and children like so many cattle in the shambles; after having reared the throne of great king cotton on our labors; after we have made their rice-fields wave with luxuriant harvests while they were fighting against the Government and keeping us in bondage—now we are free they want us to go away. Shame on you! [Applause.]

Now, Mr. Speaker, we are not going away. We are going to stay here. We propose to stay here and work out this problem. We believe that God Almighty has made of one blood all the nations upon the face of the earth. We believe we are made just

like white men are. [Laughter.] Look; I stretch out my arms. See; I have two of them, as you have. Look at your ears; I have two of them. I have two eyes, two nostrils, one mouth, two feet. I stand erect like you. I am clothed with humanity like you. I think, I reason, I talk, I express my views, as you do. Is there any difference between us? Not so far as our manhood is concerned, unless it be in this: that our opinions differ, and mine are a little higher up than yours. [Laughter.]

The gentleman states that this idea of all men being created equal is a fallacy, announced some years ago by Thomas Jefferson, that old fool-hardy man, who announced so many ideas that have been woven into the woof of the nation, who announced so many foolish things that have made this nation strong, and great, and powerful. Sir, if he was in error, I accept the error with pleasure. If he was a foolish man, I would to God that North Carolina had been baptized in that foolishness about two hundred years ago. [Great laughter.]

The gentleman also states that if you pass this bill your power over the South will pass away; that the power of the republican party in the South will pass away. Sir, let me tell the gentleman that behind this bill are nine hundred thousand voters; that, like the warriors of the tribe of Benjamin, every one of them is left-handed and can "sling a stone at a hair's breadth;" that each will come up stronger and mightier and more infused with power than ever before when you pass this bill giving them their rights, as other men have them. They will come up as never before to the support of the republican party, and they will make the South a source of joy and gladness.

The gentleman also talks about the colored people deteriorating. Sir, who tills your lands now? Who plants your corn? Who raises your cotton? I have been in the South during the last ten years. I have traveled over the Southern States, and have seen who did this work. Going along I saw the white men do the smoking, chewing tobacco, riding horses, playing cards, spending money, while the colored men are tilling the soil, and bringing the cotton, rice, and other products to market.

Sir, I do not believe the gentleman from North Carolina wants us to go to Africa; I do not believe it. It was a slip of the tongue; he does not mean that the black people should leave North Carolina; not a bit of it. If they did you would see such an exodus of white people from that State as you never saw

before, for they would follow them wherever they might go. [Laughter.]

Sir, we feel that we are part and parcel of this great nation; and as such, as I said before, we propose to stay here and solve this problem of whether the black race and the white race can live together in this country. I make the statement that I regard it as essential to their welfare and interests that they should live together in this country. Why not? I can see no reason why not, if they contribute their quota to the advancement of progress and civilization. Sir, the mechanics of the South are almost altogether colored people. The carpenters, the machinists, the engineers—nearly all the mechanics in the Southern States are colored people. Why can we not stay here and work out this problem?

I ask Congress to pass this bill for the reason that it would settle this question, once and forever. The gentleman says that he does not desire that the colored people shall be crowded into the schools of the white people. Well, I do not think that they would be harmed by it; some few of them might be. But experience has taught us that it is not true that great harm will come from any such measure. I think, therefore, that if we pass this bill we will be doing a great act of justice, we will settle for all time the question of the rights of all people. And until that question is settled there cannot be that peace and harmony in the country that is necessary to its success.

The gentleman says the colored people and the white people are living together now in North Carolina in amicable relations. I am glad for that admission, for he rounded off all that he had said before by that last sentence. He said that the two races could not live together, and yet at the close of his speech he says that the whites and blacks are now living in North Carolina in amicable relations. Sir, if they are so living now, why not hereafter? Will peace and good order be destroyed because all are to have their rights? Sir, I do not think so.

I close with this thought: I believe the time is coming when the Congress of the United States, when the whole nation, will recognize the importance of the passage of this bill in order to settle this question once and forever. I regard the interests of the black man in this country as identical with the interests of the white man. I would have that set forth so

clearly and unmistakably that there should be no antagonism between the races, no friction that should destroy their peace and prosperity. I believe Almighty God has placed both races on this broad theater of activity, where thoughts and opinions are freely expressed, where we may grasp every idea of manhood, where we may take hold of every truth and develop every art and science that can advance the prosperity of the nation. I believe God designed us to live here together on this continent, and in no other place, to develop this great idea that all men are the children of one Father. We are here to work out the grand experiment of the homogeneity of nations, the grand outburst of the greatness of humanity, by the development in us of the rights that belong to us, and the performance of the duties that we owe each other.

Our interests are bound up in this country. Here we intend to stay and work out the problem of progress and education and civilization. I say to the gentleman from North Carolina, [Mr. ROBBINS,] and to the gentleman from Virginia, [Mr. HARRIS,] and to the gentleman from New York, [Mr. COX,] who discussed civil rights the other day, and to gentlemen from the other States, that we are going to remain in this country side by side with the white race. We desire to share in your prosperity and to stand by you in adversity. In advancing the progress of the nation we will take our part; and if the country should again be involved in the devastation of war, we will do our part in the struggle. We propose to identify ourselves with this nation, which has done more than any other on earth to illustrate the great idea that all races of men may dwell together in harmony, working out together the problem of advancement and civilization and liberty.

Mr. Speaker, we will drive the buzzard away; we will scare the crow back to North Carolina. We will take the eagle as the emblem of liberty; we will take that honored flag which has been borne through the heat of a thousand battles. Under its folds Anglo-Saxon and Africo-American can together work out a common destiny, until universal liberty, as announced by this nation, shall be known throughout the world.

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