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**Senator Theodore Bilbo - Prophet of
Racism**

Lead: Senator Bilbo's racism could make a bigot blush.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: In the American South during the early part of the 20th century, among the most successful politicians were the demagogues. Recognizing the frustrations and fears of lower middle-class and poor whites, they combined populist attacks on aristocratic whites,

railroads and entrenched business interests with overt appeals to racism. Pitchfork Ben Tillman, Cotton Ed Smith, George Wallace, and in his early campaigns, Strom Thurmond, all supported comparatively progressive policies while in office, but secured election by playing the race card. They defended white supremacy with a stridency that overwhelmed their more moderate opponents.

Perhaps the most extreme example of demagogue, a man who was an embarrassment even to many of his racist allies was Theodore Gilmore Bilbo, Democratic Senator from Mississippi from 1935 to 1947.

Despite poverty he attended Peabody and the University of Nashville and law school at Vanderbilt. Bilbo returned home and entered politics winning a seat in the Mississippi Senate running as an anti-railroad populist and supporter of white superiority. He was Governor by 1917, but then his political career hit a rough patch and he lost two elections in the early 1920s.

Bilbo was back in the Governor's mansion in 1928 and won a hard-fought U.S. Senate seat in 1934, but did so by ratcheting up the racial rhetoric. He advocated in the deportation of blacks to Africa, he called Congresswoman Claire Booth

Luce a nigger lover and in 1938 praised Adolf Hitler on the floor of the Senate. As time passed it got worse. He once attacked miscegenation, the intermarriage between races, “one drop of Negro blood placed in the veins of the purest Caucasian destroys the inventive genius of his mind and strikes palsied his creative faculty.”

He just too much even for his relatively tolerant Southern allies who controlled Congress during much of the century, but his fall came less from racism than corruption. A Senate committee found him guilty of accepting bribes from military

contractors during World War II and he was denied his seat in 1947.

Five thousand people attended his funeral later that year, nearly every important politician in Mississippi, but elsewhere his demise was greeted with relief. One newspaper welcomed his departure, calling his actions, “a stench in the nostrils of decent men.”

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Anonymous, “Death of a Demagogue,” *American Heritage* (July-August 1997): 99-100.

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