

Senator Richard Burr
Remarks for the Congressional Record
July 14, 2016

Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crimes Reauthorization Act

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Mr. President, I rise today to applaud the Senate's passage of the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crimes Reauthorization Act, bipartisan legislation that I introduced in April with Congressman John Lewis. We were joined in this effort by Senators Leahy, McCaskill and Blunt, as well as Representative Jim Sensenbrenner.

The goal of this legislation is simple and noble: to bring truth to light and bring justice to the victims of racially motivated murders.

The original bill was championed by Representative Lewis and civil rights activist and cold case researcher Alvin Sykes in 2007, and it aimed to ensure that those who had quite literally gotten away with murder during the civil rights era were prosecuted under the law.

And recognizing that while many of these civil rights era cases can't be prosecuted due to legal challenges, the investigation of these cold cases is important to revealing the truth about the injustices committed against African-Americans and the failure of the legal system to protect them. Uncovering and confronting this dark part of our nation's history is invaluable to strengthening our rule of law.

Mr. President, it was important to pass this bill today because on August 28 – a day that will arrive during the Congressional recess -- the Till family and others in the civil rights community will remember the murder of Emmett Till. As my colleagues know, Emmett Till was a fourteen year old boy from Chicago who was brutally murdered in Mississippi in 1955 after whistling at a white woman.

The two individuals who were charged with the murder of Emmett Till were tried. But after only a 67-minute deliberation of the jury, the two men were acquitted of capital murder. Both men later confessed to the murder to a reporter, but under our Constitution, these individuals could not be retried.

Had Emmett Till not been murdered, his family would have been celebrating his 75th birthday this month instead of remembering his death next month.

The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr once said that “the time is always right to do what is right.” We can’t bring Emmett Till back, but we can honor his legacy and do what is right by uncovering these unimaginable wrongs.

Under the original Emmett Till Act, the Department of Justice and FBI have investigated 105 of 113 cold cases involving 126 victims. There has been one successful prosecution at the state level since the passage of this law, in which a former police officer plead guilty for manslaughter in the death of a civil rights activist.

Yet there is growing evidence gathered by activists, lawyers, and researchers that more unsolved murders exist, and the mandate of the original law is not yet complete. For example, in 2012, the Cold Case Justice Initiative at Syracuse University submitted 196 names of victims of racially suspicious cases to the DOJ that warrant review. To my knowledge, these names have not been investigated.

The Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Right Crimes Reauthorization Act would enable the Department of Justice and FBI to carry on the critical mission of investigating unsolved murders, and when possible, securing justice through our legal system.

It would enable them to investigate a broader time span of crimes than the original bill, recognizing that racially motivated violence did not end in 1969.

And it would provide for increased collaboration among the federal government, state and local officials, and cold case researchers, to ensure a full array of resources are dedicated to this end.

Many of these crimes may not be able to be prosecuted due to statutes of limitations, the death of witnesses, or other legal issues. But even if these investigations do not lead to prosecutions, giving these families the real truth

about what happened to their loved ones is not only important to them as they cope with their grief, it is also important for understanding our history, ensuring the rule of law, and sending the message to future generations that every single American is worthy of the protections of our laws.

In Letter from Birmingham Jail, Dr. King wrote that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.” For many victims, full justice will never be realized because justice has been delayed too long. It is the purpose of this bill to ensure that justice is not delayed any longer, and it is my hope that the House of Representatives will soon pass this bill and the President will sign it into law.

Thank you, Mr. President. I yield the floor.