

THE EMMETT TILL ACT: New funds unneeded for 'cold' civil rights murders

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The racist murderers of the civil rights era and the callous juries that acquitted them stain Southern history.

In the past 20 years, the FBI and state authorities in the South have successfully revisited many of these cases where justice was denied.

Modern-day juries have convicted the most high-profile monsters from the 1950s and '60s. Mississippi murderers Sam Bowers and Byron de la Beckwith died in prison after late-in-life trials. In 2001 and 2002, the state of Alabama imprisoned Thomas Blanton and Bobby Frank Cherry, who killed four young African-American girls when they bombed a Birmingham church. Just last year, a Mississippi jury convicted Edgar Ray Killen, 80, in the deaths of three civil rights workers in 1964. Any surviving killers from that time who have escaped punishment should suffer the exact same fate.

On Wednesday, the U.S. House passed the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act, sponsored by my fellow Georgian, Rep. John Lewis (D-Atlanta). The bill authorizes more than \$100 million over 10 years to investigate murders committed before 1970 that have gone unpunished. The House passed the bill overwhelmingly, 422-2. I was one of those two no votes because I think current federal and state law enforcement units can handle the handful of open cases where there are good leads on suspects.

In fact, there's already an FBI civil rights unit that handles cold cases. In February, the U.S. attorney general and the FBI director announced a partnership with the NAACP, the Southern Poverty Law Center and the National Urban League to investigate unsolved crimes from the civil rights era. The FBI reports that it has prioritized a dozen unsolved cases after each of its field offices spent a year poring over evidence and determining which cases were best to pursue.

I encourage the Justice Department to go where the trail of evidence leads. But I have to wonder why we need to designate \$100 million to look into — at best — a dozen cold cases, especially when the FBI is already working on it with existing resources.

The case of the bill's namesake, Emmett Till, illustrates the point. Till, a 14-year-old African-American from Chicago, was brutally murdered by two white men while he was visiting relatives in Mississippi in 1955. Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam tortured the boy and threw his disfigured body into the Tallahatchie River. An all-white jury acquitted the murderers, who later bragged about the killing in a magazine interview.

Moral outrage demands retribution for this crime. But the killers were never convicted. One died in 1980; the other in 1990. One assumes that in these crimes, the vast majority of those who escaped justice 40, 50 and 60 years ago are already dead. If there are killers out there who have escaped justice, I think we can look into those cases without spending \$100 million.

As should be clear to Georgia taxpayers who send more money to Washington than they get back, the fact that the House passed this bill by a lopsided margin doesn't mean it's fiscally responsible; it doesn't even mean that it's needed. If members of the House were half as scared of overspending as they are of taking politically tough votes, we wouldn't

have almost \$9 trillion in debt. To even begin getting our credit-card-spending government under control, we not only have to oppose new spending, we have to shave significantly from old spending.

That's what this issue — and tons of other issues before the House — come down to for me, and I'm exasperated beyond description that so few members of Congress seem to care that we're passing on oppressive levels of red ink and massive tax liabilities to future generations of Americans. Government by political correctness leaves taxpayers holding the bag.

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