



**The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Salutes the
Life and Legacy of John Lewis**

July 24, 2020

The highest tribute is to be remembered as a person not just admired by your country, but as one whose life inspired it. Today, by unanimous vote, the United States Commission on Civil Rights salutes the life and legacy of Congressman John Lewis, an American champion of civil rights and human dignity.

John Lewis, the Conscience of the United States Congress, will always be an inspiration for our nation. As a teenager and young man he committed himself fully to the fight for civil rights, and made an indelible mark in his fight for voting rights. He was a founder and leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and one of the original Freedom Riders. He was the youngest and last surviving speaker from the historic 1963 March on Washington. He was a beacon for democracy who lit the path toward justice.

John Lewis, who died at 80 years old on July 17, 2020, made the nation better because he challenged it to live up to its promise of equal justice under law. His lifelong example, unwavering commitment to racial justice and to broader principles of equality was rooted in the dignity of all human beings.

He will be remembered as a humble and gentle man with a deep respect for others and belief in their capacity to do what is right. He will be remembered as a faithful public servant driven by an internal resolve and ferocity that made him unafraid to speak out, again and again, for the cause of the disenfranchised, whatever the price.

John Lewis' love of country was so deep that he was impelled to march for it, protest it, exhort and serve it all in pursuit of the ideal that the union could become "more perfect"¹ and that we must accept the duty to make it so. Throughout his life, he squared his shoulders to the task of tending to the union, and to the labor and sacrifice that it requires because the American ideal of equal protection under law is never self-executing. John Lewis' life stands for the proposition that there is no higher service than to be unyielding in one's efforts to perfect the union, and that even in the face of long

¹ Congressman John Lewis, Address at the Democratic Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina (Sep. 6, 2012) (text available at <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/2012-democratic-national-convention-remarks-as-prepared-for-delivery-by-the-honorable-john-lewis-member-of-the-us-house-of-representatives-georgia-168866266.html>).

odds against total success, we must remain undaunted and committed to this common and worthy goal.

In many ways, John Lewis is the model of what it means to be fully committed to democracy, not because it is perfect, but because, if we work at it, it is better than every other form of government.² There is perhaps no American whose life's work as a civilian and political leader so closely parallels the mission, aspiration and lifespan of the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, and today we recognize his extraordinary contributions to the nation.

His iconic image clad in his trench coat and backpack, on the bridge in Selma, Alabama, with his peaceful fellow voting rights marchers, reminds us of the courage that forged the rights that this Commission works to protect and enhance through our inquiries. From his days as a young civil rights leader, he learned some things that he would never forget and always share—you must “get in the way”³ of injustice, you must confront it and never shrink from or tolerate it.

It is ennobling that in the full sweep of his life, from what he frequently described as growing up as one of ten kids in a “shotgun house”⁴ in segregated Troy, Alabama, to receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Obama, our nation's highest civilian honor, John Lewis never wavered from his mission of delivering more fully on the promise of America for everyone. During his life he was rightly recognized for doing the right thing, in the right way and always with fortitude, resilience and optimism.

John Lewis's character, courage and commitment led him to become known as the Conscience of Congress, and during his decades of service he lent his voice to the causes of a broad range of people without power that touched the economically vulnerable, and those affected by race, national origin, immigration, gender, LGBTQ issues, and gun violence, among others. As a civilian and Congressman he was arrested more than 40 times when protesting. He authored a stirring personal memoir about his life in the civil rights movement, and a trilogy of graphic novels so that work and story could reach a new generation. Throughout all of the awards, accolades and appellations, John Lewis remained focused not on all he had done, but rather on the power of what others could do if they joined the pursuit for justice and equality. His ability to look forward with expectation and hope and to encourage others, made him a leader whose example is followed by generations of Americans, even if it is hard to imagine that any could ever match it.

Each person will find their own meaning and lessons in John Lewis's exemplary life and they should, but today we highlight some of what his life demonstrated and underscored about the cause of civil rights in America.

² “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.” Winston Churchill

³ Congressman John Lewis, Address at Washington University in St. Louis' 2016 Commencement (May 20, 2016) (transcript available at <https://source.wustl.edu/2016/05/john-lewis-2016-commencement-address-washington-university-st-louis/>).

⁴ *Id.*

- Moral courage is the commitment do the right thing even if it may have costs and the outcome is uncertain;
- Young people can and do make a difference;
- The fight for freedom and equality requires both urgency and perseverance in equal measure;
- Racism and discrimination diminish the humanity of both their victims and perpetrators and corrode the democracy;
- The power of one's example can be as important as the power of one's actions;
- Make a habit of standing up for the human dignity of others;
- Democracy rests on a belief in the human capacity to improve people's lives through self-governance and principled engagement; and
- History makes an important judgment about courage and the righteousness of one's cause.

Many may have wondered what John Lewis carried in his backpack as he crossed the bridge in Selma in 1965. Over time, however, we learned that it was the very soul of our nation and conscience of our Congress. It was a heavy bag and a burden from which he never shrank. As we remember all that John Lewis stood for as a citizen and Congressman, we recall a life well lived, and a life of service. John Lewis encouraged generations of Americans to get into “good trouble”⁵ and to get in the way of injustice, by which he meant to act and to be fearless in the fight for justice. May we all continue to be inspired by his example.

John Lewis has left us, but his legacy is eternal.

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The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, established by the Civil Rights Act of 1957, is the only independent, bipartisan agency charged with advising the President and Congress on civil rights and reporting annually on federal civil rights enforcement. Our 51 state Advisory Committees offer a broad perspective on civil rights concerns at state and local levels. The Commission: in our 7th decade, a continuing legacy of influence in civil rights. For information about the Commission, please visit <http://www.usccr.gov> and follow us on Twitter and Facebook.

⁵ E.g., John Lewis (@repjohnlewis), Twitter, (Jun. 27, 2018, 11:15 am), <https://twitter.com/repjohnlewis/status/1011991303599607808> (“Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble. #goodtrouble”); Devan Cole, *John Lewis urges attendees of Selma’s ‘Bloody Sunday’ commemorative march to ‘redeem the soul of America’ by voting*, CNN (Mar. 1, 2020, 5:36 PM), <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/01/politics/john-lewis-bloody-sunday-march-selma/index.html> (quoting John Lewis’ remarks on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, in Selma, AL before the anniversary march).