

JAMES E. CLYBURN REMARKS

JUDICIARY – SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE CONSTITUTION, CIVIL  
RIGHTS, AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

“Examining the History and Importance of Lift Every Voice and Sing”

February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Thank you very much Chairman Cohen, Ranking Member Johnson, and Members of this committee. Before I begin, I ask unanimous consent to enter into the record two letters in support of this legislation: one from Reverend Dr. James Forbes, Jr. and the other from Mr. Jarrett Johnson.

I am very appreciative for the opportunity to speak about my legislation to make “Lift Every Voice and Sing” the National Hymn of the United States.

Recently, I have been reflecting upon the reported response of Benjamin Franklin when asked what he and the Founding Fathers had wrought. “A Republic, if you can keep it,” is reported to have been his reply. Franklin would

later join with John Adams and Thomas Jefferson to propose that the Latin phrase, *E Pluribus Unum* (“Out of many, one”), be placed on our currency as the nation’s motto.

Our nation continues to struggle with issues of race and equity. I feel very strongly that as the people’s representatives the threads of our fragile democracy are fraying

It is encumbered upon us to make every effort to heed Franklin’s words of concern and his and Adams and Jefferson’s expression of unity. It is our responsibility to demonstrate not only with our **words** but by our **actions** that we **can** and **will** keep this Republic intact and its people unified.

That is why I introduced H.R. 301 to designate the iconic hymn “Lift every Voice and Sing” the National Hymn of the United States of America. Enshrining “Lift

Every Voice and Sing” as our national hymn would be one such substantive step forward.

“Lift Every Voice and Sing” was written by James Weldon Johnson as a poem and set to music by his brother John Rosamond Johnson. The hymn was first performed on February 12, 1900, by a choir of 500 school children from the segregated Stanton School in Jacksonville, Florida.

In 1905, Booker T. Washington recognized the hymn, and it became popular throughout Black communities across the United States. In 1919, the NAACP designated “Lift Every Voice and Sing” as its official song and it was dubbed the “Black National Anthem.”

I and scores of people with whom I have interacted, have never been comfortable with that designation. We believe that out of our many backgrounds and experiences there should be but one national anthem. And we believe “Lift Every Voice and Sing” is a hymn that is so cherished

by people of all faiths, creeds, backgrounds, and experiences; that designating it as our “National Hymn” would be very fitting and proper.

Its wide appeal is no accident. It is currently produced and distributed by approximately 40 religious publishing houses throughout the United States. It is sung by all faiths and persuasions. Recent renditions have proven just how wide its appeal is, from Alicia Keys’ performance at the Super Bowl to Beyonce’s rendition in 2018 Coachella..

The lyrics of “Lift Every Voice and Sing’s” are applicable to the experiences of nearly every ethnic background in America. They also acknowledge the challenges of our future. Just consider the following words:

*“Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past  
has taught us*

*Sing a song full of the hope that the present has  
brought us*

*Facing the rising sun of our new day begun*

*Let us march on till victory is won”*

I thank the committee for holding this hearing and look forward to hearing from today’s witnesses. I am hopeful that this hearing and this legislation will help us more fully realize our nation’s motto as we continue our “pursuit of a more perfect Union.” Thank you.