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**STATEMENT OF REP. JOHN LEWIS (GA) ON THE OVERSIGHT AND REFORM COMMITTEE
HEARING ON “VOTER SUPPRESSION IN MINORITY COMMUNITIES: LEARNING FROM THE PAST
TO PROTECT OUR FUTURE”**

February 26, 2020

Good Morning, Chairwoman Maloney, Ranking Member Jordan, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for holding this important hearing. You assembled an excellent panel of witnesses, who can speak to the historic and ongoing effort to combat the persistent, consistent efforts to suppress minority voting rights.

In particular, I would like to express my gratitude to two of the long-time fighters for all people to be included in the democratic process – Diane Nash and Timothy Jenkins. I have known and worked with them for many, many years, and I am saddened that I am unable to join them at the witness table today.

We are part of a generation that believes that the right to vote is precious – almost sacred. In a democracy, it is the most powerful nonviolent tool we have. When faced with seemingly insurmountable barriers to participate in the democratic process, we took matters into their own hands. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) members studied; we practiced; we organized, and we took action.

I do not have to tell the Members of this Committee how daunting our work was. Segregation, literacy tests, lynching, share-cropping, and so many unspeakable horrors created what seemed like insurmountable barriers for African-Americans, but through it all we remained resolute in our pursuit of justice and equality.

Many people marched and protested for the right to vote. Some gave a little blood, and others lost their lives. Historians often state that our work culminated in the adoption of a Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Civil Rights Act of 1968, and a series of statutes seeking to correct the historic, entrenched, systematic injustices facing people of color and marginalized communities in our nation.

I believe that the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the subsequent, bipartisan efforts to reauthorize this important statute, is a model of Congress’ most thoughtful and serious work. The original lead sponsors were Senator Mike Mansfield, a Democrat from Montana, and Everett Dirksen, a Republican from Illinois. The Voting Rights Act was so important because it ensured that those citizens whose rights were -- or would be -- violated did not bear the burden. Since 1965, Congress repeatedly put country ahead of politics by reauthorizing the law five times – in 1970, 1975, 1982, 1992, and 2006.

Seven years ago, the Supreme Court broke the heart and soul of this sacred statute, and as expected the deliberate, systematic campaign to suppress minority voting rights emerged from the shadows once again. Sadly, we no longer have a Department of Justice as the last line of defense to counter these tactics. Since 2013, private citizens are fighting desperately to preserve our democracy with limited, dwindling resources and capacity as they battle the "Hydra" of efforts to chip away at minority-voting rights, which Justice Ginsburg predicted would reemerge.

For example, Georgia adopted an "exact-match" law, which blocked at least 53,000 registered voters from being certified to cast their ballots in 2018. According to multiple press stories, 70 percent of the registrants on hold were people of color -- even though minorities constitute only 32 percent of Georgia's total population. In 2017, Georgia removed nearly 670,000 voter registrations; this is more than the total population in states like Vermont and Wyoming. In December 2019, once again, Georgia purged an additional 309,000 voters from its rolls. These numbers are outrageous but are only a small sample of modern attacks on minority voting rights.

People look at the Civil Rights Movement as the fulfilment of the American dream for communities of color. Every day, student groups ask me about our work during the Movement, our commitment to nonviolent disobedience, and our determination to possess the freedoms promised to us under the law. I respond honestly -- we have come a long way, but we still have far to go. In addition to the systematic efforts to reconstruct barriers to democratic process and roll back civil rights protections, the United States now faces foreign interference in our elections. Our work is vast, and the duty is grave.

There is no cause for despair, but we have a mandate and a mission to act. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. often remarked that, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." We know all too well that the line, the arc, and the path ahead are not straight, clear, or without barriers, but when there is no room for failure and the cause is just, we have no choice but to stay the course.

During times like these, I am often guided by the words of Thoreau that Diane Nash, Timothy Jenkins, and so many of us studied during the Civil Rights Movement -- "*Aim above morality. Be not simply good; be good for something.*" I hope that all the Members of this Committee will hold these words in your heart. Regardless of party or region, we have an opportunity to join the ranks of our predecessors in the history books and act upon a mutual love for our nation, the principles upon which our country was founded, and the aspirations and dreams of all its people.

Again, I thank you Madam Chair, Mr. Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee for inviting me to share a few reflections on this important and grave matter.