



TESTIMONY OF LEON W. RUSSELL

CHAIRMAN, NAACP NATIONAL BOARD OF DIRECTORS

**BEFORE THE HOUSE JUDICIARY SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE CONSTITUTION, CIVIL RIGHTS
AND CIVIL LIBERTIES**

ON

EXAMINING THE HISTORY AND IMPORTANCE OF THE INSPIRATIONAL SONG

LIFT EVERY VOICE AND SING

February 4th, 2022

Good morning Chairman Cohen, Ranking Member Johnson, and members of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties.

Founded on February 12, 1909, the 100th Birthday of Abraham Lincoln, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the NAACP, is our Nation's oldest, largest and most widely-recognized grassroots civil rights organization. Our membership consists of hundreds of thousands of card carrying individuals representing diverse racial, ethnic, social and economic backgrounds, participating in more than 2,200 units throughout our Nation. We have active units on college and University campuses and even units within prison walls. These units are supported by millions of digital followers and military members serving in units throughout the world.

I am Leon W. Russell, Chairman of the 64 member National Board of Directors of the NAACP, the governing body of our national organization. In this capacity, I am responsible for overseeing the development of the Associations policies, strategy implementation and monitoring.

I was delighted to receive your invitation to testify with respect to H.R. 301 *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. So allow me to first thank our longtime friend Congressman Jim Clyburn for introducing this important bill.

This morning, I will address the history and significance of the song and why we at the NAACP believe it should be designated as the National Hymn. Let me, from the outset, recognize that we do not call for this great Hymn to supplant or replace the National Anthem. The composers



never intended that to be the case. It is clear, however, that they wrote a song that spoke reverently to the lived experience of a people who were here from the beginning of this great experiment in democracy and that they intended, through its words and its triumphal melody, to ensure that our nation be ever mindful of the people's role in the development of our democracy. The fact, that this song has been sung continuously for more than 122 years since it was first performed in venues large and small, by children in school, by civil rights activists in mass meetings in the midst of the civil rights struggle, by college choirs, by the Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square, and even lately by crowds at National Football League stadiums is a testament to its spiritual impact and meaning for millions of Americans.

The song was written by James Weldon Johnson and set to music by his brother John Rosamond Johnson from Jacksonville Florida. The inspiration for the song was a request that James Weldon Johnson provide a poem to be included in a community celebration of the birthday of the "Great Emancipator," President Abraham Lincoln in February of 1900.

It is important to note that James Weldon Johnson was principal of Stanton School in Jacksonville. The school was the primary school serving the Black Community of Jacksonville when Johnson became the principal, however, it added high school classes under his leadership. Johnson's life experience was reflective of the lived experience of black folks that is so eloquently described in the words of the song. Facing the threats posed by racism in his hometown, Johnson and his brother would move north to New York City where he would become a historically recognized civil rights activist, diplomat, author, politician, journalist, poet, educator, lawyer, songwriter, and one of the prime movers of the Harlem Renaissance.

He was indeed the embodiment of many early African American trail blazers. Most people recognize Johnson as author of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," however, few are aware of his hard work and dedication to the cause of civil rights and social justice advocacy exemplified by his fight against racism and his fight for equality during the ten years he served as the Executive Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

I need to note here that James Weldon Johnson succeeded John Schilladay, a white man who had served in the position until he was beaten nearly to death by a white mob in Texas where he had gone to investigate a lynching in 1919. Johnson had been hired as Field Secretary by the Association in 1916. When Schilladay resigned because of the severity of his injuries, Johnson became the first 'Negro' to hold the senior staff position at the Association in 1920. For context, I remind you that the



NAACP was founded in 1909. Johnson's personal story is emblematic of much of the spiritual meaning that I recognize in the song. I commend it to you for further study.

Asked to speak at the 1900 Abraham Lincoln birthday celebration, Johnson wrote a poem for the occasion. While reflecting on what he had written, he decided to change the poem to a song, so he asked his brother, music professor John Rosamond Johnson, to write the music. There is much speculation about what the Johnsons intended "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" to be. What is clear is that a song written as part of that celebration has become synonymous with, if not the theme for, the modern civil rights movement.

Although "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" was written to be sung as part of a program in tribute to President Abraham Lincoln, Lincoln's name never appears in the song. What is clear, is that the invitation to participate in the Lincoln Day Celebration inspired the creation of the song. Also clear, is the fact that the children who sang the song were inspired and carried it with them the rest of their lives. The celebration included the students of the city, 500 voices according to the record, taking the song with them to their churches and family celebrations and public meetings in Florida and as they moved around the country. It would not be forgotten, but there is no record that says it was promoted, that I have seen.

The song became the National NAACP Hymn during Johnson's tenure as Executive Secretary. He served from 1920-1930. The Board adopted the Song in 1923.

All that said, why should the song, "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," be made the National Hymn?

The word Hymn derives from the Greek and means "a song of Praise". A Hymn can be devotional and it may be written as a form of adoration or a prayer. The Johnson brother's song is all of that and more.

Johnson is writing only 35 years removed from the end of the civil war and thereby the end of slavery. He clearly paints the picture of a world viewed from the perspective of a Black person in America. He wrote lyrics that included the inescapable facts of the lived experience in America. The history of America. Yet he wrote lyrics that challenge the listener and the singer not to despair because "we will march on 'til victory is won." He was not gazing into some crystal ball and invoking a march across the Edmond Pettus Bridge, nor did he see the March on Washington, which would come. Victory would come based on faith, belief, hope and trust in God.

The song should be made a National Hymn because as noted sociologist E. Franklin Frazier points out, “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing...endowed the African American enslavement and struggle for freedom with a certain nobility.” He said Johnson expressed an acceptance of the past and a confidence in the future. I would say that the song tells what our experience has been and challenges us not to deny it. It’s part of us, we must fight on for the bright future we all deserve.

When we think about the verse we need to consider each one separately.

First verse—

Lift every voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring,

Second verse—

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chastening rod,

Third verse—

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who has by thy might
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray

The song is at once a song of praise, a devotional and a prayer. It is a Hymn about our National experience. It reflects our true history.

I would point finally to the fact that although the song speaks to the Black experience, any American who has experienced oppression can relate to its words.

Although written in the heart of Jim Crow America, it was adopted as the NAACP Hymn at a time when on average 3-5 Blacks were lynched every day in this country, the song admonishes us not to lose faith. It inspires us to be uplifted.

As my predecessor Julian Bond and Dr. Sondra Wilson wrote in their book, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” “is ingeniously crafted and does not fuel the fires of racial hatred.” It challenges us to seek



higher ground.

I am no theologian, But I hear James Weldon Johnson's immortal words, "Shadowed beneath thy hand, may we forever stand, true to our God, true to our native land," I hear this HYMN telling us to maintain our faith in God, and to maintain an unwavering faith in this nation's founding principles and the promise of America. That message is a message to the nation about ourselves.

For those reasons, I want to again thank Congressman James Clyburn the original sponsor, and the other Members of the House, for their courage and leadership in introducing this important legislation. I also strongly urge this committee and the Congress to support HR 301 through passage and make "Lift Every Voice and Sing" our National Hymn.