

WASHINGTON, DC – Congressman Steny H. Hoyer (MD-5) spoke on the House Floor today in support of a resolution directing the Office of the Historian to compile oral histories from current and former members of the House who either participated in the historic 1965 Selma to Montgomery, Alabama marches, participated in the annual civil rights march along the historic trail from Selma to Montgomery to recognize the achievements of the civil rights movement, or were involved in the civil rights movement in general. Below are his remarks:

“I thank John Lewis for his service to our country, to its principles, to its values, to its people. I thank John Lewis for being my friend, and I thank John Lewis for allowing me for the ninth time to walk with him across that bridge, and as I do I will be holding the hand of John Lewis and holding in my other hand the hand of my 10-year-old granddaughter, Alexa.

“This coming week marks the 47th anniversary of the Bloody Sunday for voting rights. I want to say to Dan Lungren, my friend, I thank him for the remarks he just gave. They were heartfelt and on target. The ‘Letter from the Birmingham Jail’ to which he referred is certainly one of the great epistles, as he refers to it, to the people of America, to the people of conscience, to the fierce urgency of now, which he referenced in that letter.

“On March 7, 1965, our friend and esteemed colleague from Georgia, John Lewis, was among the leaders of that march. He was the leader – he and Hosea Williams. Two by two they walked, some 600 with John and Hosea at the front of the line. That day, in an extraordinary practice of nonviolence, he and other marchers were brutally beaten while trying to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. They were on their way to Montgomery, the state capital, to protest the murder of a young man, Jimmie Lee Jackson, who had been shot and killed while protecting his mother during a voting rights rally. And they were marching to Montgomery to say in a nonviolent way every American deserves the right to be able to register and to vote.

“Every moment has its darkest hours when the exuberance of hopes yields to the reality of difficult and painful struggle. Selma brought that reality into homes across the country. News of that Bloody Sunday awakened millions of Americans to the horrors of Jim Crow. It opened their eyes to the injustice that had cut off so many of our people from participation in their

government. It made it clear that we said in our Declaration of Independence that we believe in equality, we hope that all men, and I hope to say all women, all people are endowed by God with certain inalienable rights.

“We were not doing that in this country. That’s what this epistle from the Birmingham jail was about. That’s what this march was about. That march led to another march two weeks later that could not be stopped, one that saw 8,000 Americans from a diversity of backgrounds join together in solidarity and with the faith, the enduring promise of America provided.

“John Lewis, our colleague, our friend, our brother, was one of the compelling figures of that time and of this time. I have been blessed with the privilege of traveling to Selma, as I said, nine times with John Lewis to worship in Terri [Sewell’s] church. The visit this weekend will be another instructive lesson for me and for others of how we need to be continually aware of the discrimination and prejudice that exists today – the attempts at exclusion that exists today. Frankly, the attempts to not empower people to vote even today.

“What happened in Selma 47 years ago ought to be remembered as a moment when America chose to fight hatred with love and put faith in the values of our constitution. In his memoir, which I hope all of you have read, *Walking With the Wind*, John Lewis explains, ‘If you want to create an open society, your means must also be consistent with the society you want to create. Violence, he said, begets violence, anger begets anger. Every minute of the day in the smallest of moments as well as the largest.’

“Ladies and gentlemen, we remember the difficult path we trod as a nation to ensure the participation of all, and we ought to do everything we can to preserve it in our own day. It is not just history that we want to learn, it is the lesson for today that we must remember and learn.

“I thank John Lewis for his leadership. I thank the thousands, black and white, young and old, rich and poor, who join together to make America a better place.”

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