

‘Lift Every Voice and Sing’ proposed as national hymn

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—House Majority Whip James Clyburn plans to introduce legislation to designate the song “[Lift Every Voice and Sing](#),” long a staple in the Black community, as the country’s national hymn.

“To make ‘Lift Every Voice and Sing’ a national hymn, would be an act of bringing the country together,” a Jan. 12 [tweet](#) from @WhipClyburn states. “The gesture itself would be an act of healing. Everybody can identify with that song.”

“Lift Every Voice and Sing,” sometimes called the unofficial “Black national anthem,” is featured in hymnals of different faith traditions. The hymn, with lyrics about liberty and faith, often is sung on occasions marking Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Black History Month.

But Clyburn, a Democratic congressman from South Carolina, thinks it should be sung more beyond predominantly Black communities.

USA Today quoted Clyburn as distinguishing the hymn from the national anthem, “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

“You aren’t singing a separate national anthem,” he said. “You are singing the country’s national hymn.”

USA Today reported Clyburn asked his staff to create draft legislation last month, before the recent storming of the U.S. Capitol by insurrectionists and after a surge in racial tensions concerning police brutality and racial injustice.

‘Black experience ... wrapped up in that hymn’

The song traces its roots to a 1900 celebration of Lincoln’s birthday in Jacksonville, Fla., according to a 2000 book, *Lift Every Voice and Sing: A Celebration of the Negro National Anthem*. James Weldon Johnson penned the words for the occasion; his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, set them to music.

The lyrics are not explicitly tied to a particular faith tradition but do mention “God” several times in the hymn’s third verse.

The song has played at the start of recent gatherings of the “Beyoncé Mass,” been used to awaken astronauts aboard the Space Shuttle Discovery and was included in the closing prayer of President Barack Obama’s 2009 swearing-in ceremony. This fall, a decision to feature it at NFL games drew praise and criticism.

“It had historicity; it had the religious context,” said Joseph Lowery, when asked by Religion News Service in 2009 why he borrowed the third verse of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” in the inaugural benediction.

Lowery, who died in 2020, said he often used its third stanza as a hymn of praise in his worship services. “The Black experience is sort of wrapped up in that hymn.”

In *USA Today*, Clyburn echoed Lowery and said his plan is not merely a symbolic one.

“It’s a very popular song that is steeped in the history of the country,” he said.

He added “I’ve always been skittish” about it once being described as the

“Negro national anthem.”

Rather, he thinks it’s a song for all and not just some in the nation.

“We should have one national anthem, irrespective of whether you’re Black or white,” he said. “So to give due honor and respect to the song, we ought to name it the national hymn.”

Lyrics to the first verse of the hymn:

Lift ev’ry voice and sing,

Till earth and heaven ring,

Ring with the harmonies of liberty;

Let our rejoicing rise

High as the list’ning skies,

Let it resound loud as the rolling sea,

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.