

John Lewis, US civil rights legend and congressman who worked with Martin Luther King, dies at 80

By: Jenn Selby
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Democratic congressman John Lewis, who fought alongside Martin Luther King as one of the Big Six civil rights activists, has died aged 80.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi confirmed his passing late on Friday night, praising Lewis – who has represented parts of Atlanta in Congress for 33 years – as “one of the greatest heroes of American history”.

Tributes have been paid from all sides of politics, as they were in December when it was announced that Mr Lewis had been diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer.

“Not many of us get to live to see our own legacy play out in such a meaningful, remarkable way,” former President Barack Obama said. “John Lewis did.”

Civil rights titan

In the UK, Labour MPs David Lammy and Dawn Butler were among those who marked his passing.

“We used to say that ours is not the struggle of one day, one week, or one year,” Ms Butler wrote on Twitter. “Ours is not the struggle of one judicial appt or presidential term. Ours is the struggle of a lifetime, or maybe even many lifetimes, and each one of us in every generation must do our part. #JohnLewis”

Bloody Sunday and the Voting Rights Act

Mr Lewis was famous for helping to galvanise the opposition to racial segregation in the southern states of America in 1965 when he led some 600 protesters in a Bloody Sunday march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma.

Aged 25, walking at the head of the march with his hands tucked in the pockets of his tan overcoat, he was knocked to the ground and beaten by police, fracturing his skull. The brutality endured by protesters that day was nationally televised, and the eyes of the world turned to the oppression of black Americans in the United States, piling pressure on the Government to take action.

Days later, Martin Luther King led another march in Selma, joined by leaders of different faiths and communities from around the US who sympathised with the movement. It was one of the key moments in the civil rights movement that led to President Lyndon B Johnson pressing congress to pass the Voting Rights Act. The Act, which became law a year later, removed the barriers that had previously prevented many black Americans from voting in elections.

Political career

In 1981, Mr Lewis was elected to the Atlanta City Council. He won his seat in Congress in 1986 and spent much of his career in the minority. After Democrats won control of the House in 2006, Mr Lewis became

his party's senior deputy whip, a behind-the-scenes leadership post in which he helped keep the party unified.

At 78, he told a rally he would do it again to help reunite immigrant families separated by the Trump government.

"There cannot be any peace in America until these young children are returned to their parents and set all of our people free," he said in June, recalling the "good trouble" he got into protesting segregation as a young man.

"If we fail to do it, history will not be kind to us," he shouted. "I will go to the border. I'll get arrested again. If necessary, I'm prepared to go to jail."

In a speech the day of the House impeachment vote of President Trump, Mr Lewis explained the importance of that vote.

"When you see something that is not right, not just, not fair, you have a moral obligation to say something, to do something. Our children and their children will ask us 'what did you do? what did you say?'"

"We have a mission and a mandate to be on the right side of history."

Mr Lewis's wife of four decades, Lillian Miles, died in 2012. They had one son, John Miles Lewis.