

Congressman John Lewis betrays Black Cherokee freedmen

Written by

Tuesday, 22 September 2009 15:24

I visited You Tube the other day and was absolutely stunned to see the venerable Congressman John Lewis addressing the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma as the Keynote Speaker for their National Holiday gathering in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. There stood Congressman John Lewis, the man who was beaten unmercifully as he fought for the right to vote to be restored to African Americans, heaping praise on Chief Chad Smith, the man who engineered the disenfranchisement and defacto expulsion of thousands of Black Cherokee Freedmen from the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma (CNO).

The Congressman pledged to the Chief that the "Trail of Tears," where Cherokees and other Native Nations were removed from their ancestral homeland in the Southeast and forced to relocate to Oklahoma, would never happen again. He talked of being moved by scenes in the Museum in Tahlequah depicting the suffering and horrors of the forced march to Oklahoma. The problem is apparently the good Congressman did not see faces of people of African descent who also traversed the Trail of Tears as slaves of the Cherokee. Perhaps, in his understandable quest to identify with the historical plight of Native people, he was totally ignorant of the enslavement and oppression of Africans by the "Five Civilized Tribes," the Creek, Seminole, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Cherokee, prior to the Civil War.

Historically there has been a strong affinity between Red and Black, Native people and Africans. In virtually every class I teach in the social sciences at York College/CUNY, I remind my students that every person who lives in what has become the United States of America is the beneficiary of the dispossession of the indigenous people, Native Americans. I remind them that the two most damaging stains on the American character are the dispossession of Native people and the exploitation of enslaved Africans.

A bond of blood and solidarity was forged among Africans and Native Americans when various Native Nations harbored runaway slaves and often accepted them as full members of their communities. Indeed, the Seminoles are comprised of runaway slaves and contingents of disaffected Natives who came together to create a nation. Historically, there was a tremendous amount of intermingling between Africans and Native Americans, so much so that the majority of African Americans have some Indian blood in their lineage. The African influence on Indian country is also clearly evident when you see the faces in Tribes like the Lumbee of North Carolina and Massapequa of Connecticut.

There have been exceptions to the amicable relationship between Africans and Native Americans. Some Blacks served as Buffalo Soldiers in the U.S. military waging war on Native Americans in the west after the Civil War. And, there is the case of the enslavement of Africans by the governing bodies of the Five Civilized Tribes who fought on the side of the Confederacy during the Civil War [some members of the Five Civilized Tribes broke with their official leaders and fought on the Union side also]. By doing so, these Indian Nations severed their official relationship with the U.S. government. Consequently, after the Confederacy was defeated, the Five Civilized Tribes had to renegotiate their relationship with the U.S. government. Eventually, the government recognized and granted citizenship to the Five Civilized Tribes, including formerly enslaved Africans who are called Freedmen. The Freedmen were granted full citizenship as members of these Tribes irrespective of whether they had Indian blood in their veins or not. In other words, by virtue of having been a captive of these Tribes, Africans with or

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without Native blood were granted citizenship rights.

This background is important because the Five Civilized Tribes are subject to a different set of rules in their relationship with the Federal Government than other Native Nations. Whereas blood quantum is used to determine who is a member of other Native Nations, it is not applicable for the Five Civilized Tribes. By treaty, the Black Freedmen are defined as full citizens to be afforded all rights and privileges on the same basis as members of the Tribe who have blood quantum.

Unfortunately, with rare exception, the Black Freedmen have never really been treated as first class citizens of the Five Civilized Tribes. Perhaps it is inevitable that in a nation infused with racism, it would also poison relations inside these Indian Nations. In addition, as these Nations have gained the right to operate casinos and have secured greater resources from the government, there has been a tendency to invoke measures to deny the Freedmen access to these benefits. One of the tactics has been to pass measures to define membership/citizenship strictly in terms of blood quantum. It is precisely this kind of "Indian purification act" that Chief Chad Smith proposed and was adopted by the governing body of CNO. As a result, thousands of Black Cherokee Freedmen were stripped of the right to vote. This was tantamount to expelling them from the CNO.

Outraged by this racist act, with the support of a number of members of the Congressional Black Caucus, Congresswoman Diane Watson introduced legislation to cut off all federal funds to CNO until the rights of the Black Freedmen were restored. Flush with an abundance of cash from casino operations, however, Chief Chad Smith and his cohorts have spent millions of dollars with lobbyists and public relations specialists in a shameful campaign to defeat the efforts of Congresswoman Diane Watson and the Freedmen. How Congressman Lewis missed these efforts is mystifying to say the least. Perhaps he is just ignorant of the storm that has been swirling around this issue. I would like to give him the benefit of the doubt and not believe that he has been co-opted by the avalanche of cash being heaped on politicians by CNO.

Whatever his motives, Congressman Lewis needs to redeem himself. The image of him pouring his soul out at the Cherokee Holiday with Chief Chad grinning in gleeful gratification was disgraceful. Chief Smith could grin because he was able to dupe one of the most respected members of Congress and a Civil Rights legend to legitimize his racist regime. Congressman Lewis needs to issue an apology to the Black Cherokee Freedmen for betraying their struggle and aspirations.

He needs to wipe the grin off Chief Smith's face by condemning the disenfranchisement and expulsion of the Freedmen from CNO, and enthusiastically join Congresswoman Diane Watson and other members of the Congressional Black Caucus in vigorously demanding that all federal funds be cut off from CNO until the Freedmen are restored with full rights. Then and only then will my faith be restored in John Lewis as a Civil Rights icon!

Dr. Ron Daniels is President of the Institute of the Black World 21st Century and Distinguished Lecturer at York College City University of New York. He is the host of Night Talk, Wednesday evenings on WBAI 99.5 FM, Pacifica New York. His articles and essays also appear on the IBW

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website www.ibw21.org and www.northstarnews.com. He can be reached via email at info@ibw21.org.