

Testimony of Congressman John Lewis
Senate Judiciary Committee
Hearing on S.598, The Respect for Marriage Act: Assessing the Impact of DOMA on
American Families
July 20, 2011

Chairman Leahy and Ranking Member Grassley, Members of the Committee, I thank you for inviting me to testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee today. It is an honor to be here.

I am very happy to see the Judiciary Committee holding hearings to address the issue of marriage equality. But at the same time, Mr. Chairman, I must admit I find it unbelievable that in the year 2011 there is still a need to hold hearings and debate whether or not a human being should be able to marry the one they love.

I grew up in southern Alabama, outside of a little city called Troy. Throughout my entire childhood, I saw those signs that said “white restroom,” “colored restroom,” “white water fountain,” “colored water fountain.” I tasted the bitter fruits of racism and discrimination, and I did not like it. And in 1996 when Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act, the taste of that old bitter fruit filled my mouth once again.

The Defense of Marriage Act is a stain on our democracy. We must do away with this unjust, discriminatory law once and for all. It reminds me of another dark time in our nation’s history, the many years when states passed laws banning blacks and whites from marrying. We look back at that time now with disbelief, and one day we will look back on this period with that same sense of disbelief.

When people used to ask Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. about interracial marriage, he would say, “Races do not fall in love and get married. Individuals fall in love and get married.” Marriage is a basic human right. No government, federal or state, should tell people they cannot be married. We should encourage people to love and not hate.

Human rights, civil rights, these are issues of dignity. Every human being walking this Earth, man or woman, gay or straight, is entitled to the same rights. It is in keeping with the American promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These words mean as much now as they did at the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

That is why Congress must not only repeal the Defense of Marriage Act, but work to ensure full marriage equality for all citizens, together with the privileges and benefits marriage provides. All across this nation, same-sex couples are denied the very rights you and I enjoy. They are denied hospital visitation rights, and they are denied equal rights and benefits in health insurance and pensions, simply because the person they love happens to be of the same sex. Even in states where they have achieved marriage equality, these unjust barriers remain, all because of the Defense of Marriage Act.

Unfortunately, too many of us are comfortable sitting on the sidelines while the federal government and state governments trample on the rights of our gay brothers and sisters. As elected officials, we are called to lead. We are called to be a headlight, and not a taillight. So I applaud the work of Congressman Nadler and Senator Feinstein, and I applaud the Senate Judiciary Committee for holding this hearing.

I urge this Committee, the Senate as a body, and the United States Congress as a whole to pass the Respect for Marriage Act as soon as possible. Justice delayed is justice denied, and passing this bill is simply the right thing to do.

More than just our constituents, these are our brothers and sisters. We cannot turn our backs on them. We must join hands and work together to create a more perfect union. We are one people, one family, the American family, and we all live together in this one house, the American House.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you again for inviting me to testify.