

**A Panegyric
To the Memory of His Honor Counselor Johnnie N. Lewis
Former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Liberia
Delivered by H.E. Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia
Monrovia, Liberia**

We assemble today as a people loaded with heavy hearts and mournful spirits to remember, with gratitude, the life of our compatriot – His Honour Johnnie N Lewis, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Liberia.

Mr. Chief Justice Lewis was a patriot – loyal to this Country, dedicated to the rule of law, and committed to high principles of justice.

His loyalty to Country, although self-evident from previous assignments, was again made manifest when, despite the devastating effects of civil war on our Nation, he accepted my nomination and subsequently the appointment as the 18th Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Liberia. Counselor Lewis had served ably as an international lawyer and international civil servant for the United Nations; but when the call to national duty came, he gave up his external engagements, sacrificed the personal comforts he was enjoying from being in a developed country, and courageously returned home to meet the challenge and render service for the reconstruction of our Country.

Partial results of his outstanding service to this Country are visible in the physical infrastructure constructed during his tenure and left behind when he retired from Office.

As leader of one of the three Branches that constitutes our Government, Mr. Chief Justice Lewis labored collaboratively with us to obtain the resources required to renovate the Temple of Justice, and to build courtrooms and courthouses not only in our Nation's capital, but also in counties of the Republic. His insistence to construct one of the most impressive edifices in this Country as the home of the 16th Judicial Circuit Court stands out in Bopolu, Gbarpolu County, as a testament to his desire for widespread development across the Country. Courts built during his tenure with his name engraved in marble shall stand as physical monuments, which for many years shall call to memory his service to the Liberian Judiciary.

But Mr. Chief Justice Lewis will not be remembered most because of physical infrastructure. He shall be remembered chiefly for his incisive thinking, stern principles, and erudition. Students of law who passed through his classroom at the Louis Arthur Grimes School confirm overwhelmingly that their Dean, Professor Lewis, was studious, Socratic, and scholarly. He was learned in the law. Lawyers appearing before the Supreme Court Bench during his tenure knew they had to be well-prepared and knowledgeable about the facts, the issues, and the law pertaining to the matter at bar. Staff of the Judiciary knew the Chief Justice would query them for lapses in the execution of their responsibilities. And the other Branches of Government knew, whether they agreed or not with the conclusion, that they would get a hearing and judicious decision from the Bench under the Chief Justice Lewis' gavel.

The late Chief Justice was wise in judging cases, hardworking, and unwaveringly devoted to duty. He was respected for his outstanding legal acumen, for the logic of his arguments, and for the clarity of his writings. Chief Justice Lewis' opinions on constitutional issues across the spectrum from due process rights to judicial independence were well-reasoned. As a result, they are frequently cited and will continue to impact our society and influence decisions of cases brought to the courts. Quickly, he could narrow the issues arising from the facts to determine the applicable law and the appropriate decision.

Indeed, his sense of patriotism may be credited properly to his own understanding of nationalism that must have been inculcated to him as a child of public servants, who hailed from Sinoe County. It might well be that because he saw his father, Judge Roderick Lewis, serve as an ad hoc Justice of the Supreme Court; knew his grandfather John N. Lewis, served as Speaker of the House of Representatives; was aware that his great-grandfather James N. Lewis, served as Superintendent of Sinoe County; was taught that his great-great grandmother Susanna Lewis chaired the committee of women that designed our national ensign- the Lone Star, which today is hoisted at half-mast in his honor; and read that his great-great grandfather J.N Lewis, a scholar, was a signatory to the Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Liberia, that Johnnie N. Lewis was inspired to dedicate the greater portion of his life to public service.

At an Opening Term of the Supreme Court of Liberia a few years ago, Mr. Chief Justice Lewis, knowing this day would come, said he felt as Mr. Chief Justice James A.A. Pierre must have felt, when on the occasion of Chief Justice Pierre's induction into office by President William V.S. Tubman, Chief Justice Pierre said, and Chief Justice Lewis quoted him as saying:

"I, for my humble self wish only, and I shall work hard for that day, when the shadow shall cross my path and my dying hands shall drop the working tools of life, that it might be said of me: he was a patriot, loyal to his Country and to its constituted authority; who was devoted to his duties, and who loved his fellow citizens."

And now at the end of Mr. Chief Justice Lewis' earthly sojourn, I submit that we can fairly say: "Yes, His Honor Johnnie N. Lewis was a patriot, loyal to his Country and to its constituted authority; who was devoted to his duties, and who loved his fellow citizens." Indeed, those words would be true for a well-deserved cenotaph.

And now, as we make this valedictory and deliver this panegyric, we do so conscious that everyone who is born must certainly die. What transpires between birth and death, our interactions and our deeds, done or left undone, mark the memories of those left behind.

May his family take consolation from his great legacy and may our memories of Mr. Chief Justice Johnnie N. Lewis be filled with those good and positive deeds that he did for our people. May he now rest in peace and light perpetual shine upon him!