

# OPINION

**Q: THE REAL REASON DEMOCRATS FAVOR STEM CELL RESEARCH?**



**A: IT'S THEIR BEST SHOT AT REGENERATING SOME BACKBONE**

## Outstanding Medal of Freedom Honorees:

Angelou, Lewis and Russell

BY MARC H. MORIAL

With all the drama surrounding jobs and tax cuts lately, you may have missed a recent bit of good news. On Nov. 17, President Obama announced that next year, he will present the 2010 Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, to 14 outstanding individuals. Among them are Maya Angelou, Bill Russell and John Lewis, three African Americans who overcame barriers of hatred and racism to make historic contributions to American democracy, human dignity and civil rights.

Dating back to the Administration of President Truman, the Medal of Freedom is "presented to individuals who have made especially meritorious contributions to the security or national interests of the United States, to

world peace, or to cultural or other significant public or private endeavors."

Past winners have included Mother Teresa, Colin Powell, Dorothy Height, Thurgood Marshall and Duke Ellington. We applaud President Obama for adding Maya Angelou, John Lewis, and Bill Russell to that esteemed company. In making his announcement here is what the President said:

"Dr. Maya Angelou is a prominent and celebrated author, poet, educator, producer, actress, filmmaker, and civil rights activist, who is currently the Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University. She has served on two presidential committees, was awarded the Presidential Medal for the Arts in 2000 and the Lincoln Medal in 2008.

"John Lewis is an American hero and a giant of the Civil Rights Movement. He served

as chairman of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, helped to organize the first lunch-counter sit-in in 1959 at the age of 19, and was the youngest speaker at the 1963 March on Washington. In May 1961, he participated in the initial Freedom Ride, during which he endured violent attacks in Rock Hill, South Carolina, and Montgomery, Alabama.

"In 1964, he helped to coordinate the Mississippi Freedom Project, and, in 1965, he led the Selma-to-Montgomery march to petition for voting rights where marchers were brutally confronted in an incident that became known as "Bloody Sunday." Eight days later, President Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress, condemned the violence in Selma, and called for passage of the Voting Rights Act, which was enacted within months. Since 1987, John Lewis has continued his service to the nation as the U.S. Representative for Georgia's 5th District,

which encompasses all of Atlanta.

"Bill Russell is the former Boston Celtics' Captain who almost single-handedly redefined the game of basketball. Russell led the Celtics to a virtually unparalleled string of eleven championships in thirteen years and was named the NBA's Most Valuable Player five times. The first African American to coach in the NBA—indeed he was the first to coach a major sport at the professional level in the United States—Bill Russell is also an impassioned advocate of human rights. He marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and has been a consistent advocate of equality."

As we enter the holiday season, let us pause to give thanks for these three outstanding Medal of Freedom honorees who continue to light our way.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.



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