

John Lewis (1940-)

Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and U.S. Congressman

John Robert Lewis was born on February 21, 1940, in Troy, Alabama. He was the third of ten children born to Eddie and Willie Mae Lewis, who supported their family by raising cotton and peanuts as tenant farmers. They did not own the land they farmed, but leased it in exchange for a portion of their crops. Lewis recognized at an early age that the tenant farming system kept families like his locked in poverty, and he grew determined to forge a different path with his life.

At first, Lewis thought he would become a minister. He had a strong religious faith, and by the time he was a teenager he had overcome his shy nature to make guest preaching appearances at Baptist churches throughout the area. Lewis was also inspired to pursue the ministry by the example of Martin Luther King, Jr., a young Southern clergyman whose sermons were broadcast every week on a black radio station.

Lewis graduated from high school in 1957. He then enrolled at the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, Tennessee, to study for the ministry. As he began his studies there, though, he felt a great restlessness inside him. Lewis hated the many ways in which African Americans were terrorized and discriminated against in the South. As early events in the civil rights movement began to unfold, like the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955, he became convinced that he needed to be a part of that effort. "I was stirred ... to put myself in the path of history," he recalled. "I wanted to be involved. I didn't want to stand on the sidelines anymore."¹

Founding SNCC

The first step that Lewis took into civil rights activism was to challenge the policy that prohibited black students from enrolling at Alabama's Troy



State College. He was helped in this effort by King and Ralph David Abernathy, leaders of a newly formed civil rights organization called the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). King and Abernathy admired the bravery and idealism of Lewis, and they assisted him in determining the best way to legally challenge Troy State. But Lewis reluctantly abandoned his lawsuit several weeks later at the urging of his mother, who was terrified that their whole family might be targeted for violence because of his stand.

This setback deeply depressed Lewis, but he refused to give up his dreams of civil rights activism. Instead, he returned to Nashville and enrolled at Fisk University, one of the South's finest black colleges. At Fisk he divided his time between philosophy studies and explorations of nonviolent forms of social protest. During this time, a clergyman and teacher named James Lawson became an important mentor to Lewis. Lawson convinced him that the black community could effectively protest Southern segregation through a campaign of peaceful protests and civil disobedience of Jim Crow laws.

In early 1960 Lewis organized several student sit-ins at segregated Nashville lunch counters. These sit-ins, which included both black and white volunteers, sparked a furious response from white residents. They lashed out at the protestors with racial taunts and physical attacks, and the demonstrators were arrested multiple times for disturbing the peace. But Lewis and his friends returned to the lunch counters again and again, to the growing dismay of their tormentors.

In April 1960 Lewis was invited to attend a conference of African-American student activists at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. During this meeting, veteran civil rights activist Ella Baker urged the student activists to establish a new civil rights group that could take full advantage of their youthful spirit and thirst for action. Lewis heartily endorsed this view, and by the end of the conference he had helped found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC quickly became one of the most important groups of the entire civil rights era.

Leading with Heart and Conviction

Lewis was a leader of SNCC from the group's first days of existence. He was quiet and soft spoken, but he became widely known for his personal integrity, his fearlessness, and his dedication to the philosophy of peaceful protest. Throughout the early 1960s, he could be found organizing and par-

ticipating in sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and protest marches. He never backed down, despite vicious physical attacks from white mobs and many nights spent in jail cells across the South.

In 1963 Lewis was unanimously elected chairman of SNCC. Later that year he was the youngest keynote speaker at the famous March on Washington. In his speech, Lewis boldly criticized President John F. Kennedy for not being more supportive of civil rights.

In 1964 Lewis was an important force in the Mississippi Freedom Summer, a campaign to obtain greater voting rights for African Americans living in the state. He helped organize SNCC voter registration drives and community action programs all across Mississippi. “Southern states were riddled with legal obstacles to keep black men and women from voting—poll taxes, literacy tests,” recalled Lewis in his memoir *Walking with the Wind*. “But those states were perfectly willing to resort to terrorism as well. . . . We would learn almost immediately that voter registration was as threatening to the entrenched white establishment in the South as sit-ins or Freedom Rides, and that it would prompt the same violent response.”²

In early 1965 the drive for equal voting rights took Lewis to Selma, Alabama. On March 7 he and fellow activist Hosea Williams organized a group of peaceful marchers for a march to Montgomery, the state capital. But as Lewis and the other marchers crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge on the outskirts of town, they were confronted by a large group of Alabama state troopers. When Lewis and Williams refused the troopers’ orders to disperse the marchers, the troopers launched a brutal assault on the protestors. Men, women, and children were all targeted on that day, which quickly became known in civil rights lore as “Bloody Sunday.” Pictures from the attack—including one of Lewis on the ground trying to ward off a blow from a baton-wielding trooper—stunned people all across America and produced a surge in sympathy for the voting rights cause.

Lewis later said that the marches “represented America at her best. . . . We had a mission to do what we could to make things better for all humankind. People *believed* that. It was not a show. It was not caught up in the political whim of the day. There was a deep and abiding sense that we *had to put our bodies on the line* for what was right. It was like a holy crusade. People were not trying to score political points. They were just trying to make things better, make things right for all America.”³

Witness to the Passage of the Voting Rights Act

One week after the shocking events of Bloody Sunday, President Lyndon B. Johnson delivered a nationally televised address to Congress. He declared that the nation could no longer withhold voting rights and other civil rights from African Americans. He framed the issue as a basic question of morality and justice. After this speech, Lewis and King organized a march of 25,000 black and white supporters from Selma to Montgomery. Their intention was to show that while they appreciated the speech, they intended to keep marching and demonstrating until meaningful voting rights legislation was actually signed into law.

Their wish came true on August 6. Congress passed the landmark Voting Rights Act that day, and Lewis was invited to the White House signing ceremony along with King and several other prominent activists. “After signing the bill, Johnson gave pens to Dr. King, Rosa Parks and several other civil rights ‘leaders,’ including me,” Lewis wrote in his memoir. “I still have mine today, framed on the wall of my living room in Atlanta, along with a copy of the bill itself. That day was a culmination, a climax, the end of a very long road. In a sense it represented a high point in modern America, probably the nation’s finest hour in terms of civil rights.”⁴

The following year, Lewis’s leadership of SNCC came to an unhappy end. Stokely Carmichael and other black militants within the group became increasingly influential. They wanted to kick whites out of the organization and renounce nonviolent protest. When Lewis objected to these calls, he was ousted from his position after a tense power struggle with Carmichael, James Forman, and their supporters.

Disappointed but unbowed, Lewis returned to Fisk University and earned his bachelor’s degree in 1967. He then went to work for the Field Foundation as a community organizer. In 1970 he was promoted to director of the organization’s Voter Education Project (VEP), which worked to organize and educate southern black voters. In 1977 Lewis left the foundation to take a job with the administration of President Jimmy Carter. He was given the director’s reins for ACTION, a federal agency that provided assistance to economically troubled communities.

A Distinguished Congressman

In 1982 Lewis entered the world of politics as a legislator. He won election to the Atlanta City Council, where he became known as a reliable cham-

pion of the poor and elderly. In 1986 he won a special run-off election for the Democratic nomination for a seat in the U.S. Congress. He defeated Julian Bond, a fellow civil rights veteran from SNCC, in a close and bitter election.

Since first reaching Congress in 1986, Lewis has represented his Georgia district for seven consecutive terms. He is both influential and widely respected in Washington, D.C., and his continued leadership on civil rights issues is well-known. In 1998 he published a memoir called *Walking with the Wind*, which has been praised as one of the finest books about the civil rights movement. Lewis has received numerous awards and honors as well, including the Eleanor Roosevelt Award for Human Rights in 1998 and the John F. Kennedy “Profile in Courage” Award for lifetime achievement. In 2004 a monument honoring Lewis’s civil rights work was unveiled at the foot of Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, the site of the 1965 Bloody Sunday march.

Sources:

Bausum, Anne. *Freedom Riders: John Lewis and Jim Zwerg on the Front Lines of the Civil Rights Movement*. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2006.

Lewis, John, with Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998.

Williams, Juan, and Julian Bond. *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1988.

Notes

¹ Lewis, John, with Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998, p. 75.

² Lewis, p. 182.

³ “Keeping the Faith: Civil Rights and the Baby Boom.” John Lewis Interview with Seth Goddard. Available online at www.life.com/Life/boomers.lewis.html.

⁴ Lewis, p. 347.