

50 Years After the March on Washington, John Lewis Is Still Marching for Justice

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Georgia Congressman John Lewis emphasizes a point while discussing his experiences in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement during his Auditorium Speaker Series Presentation. (Photo: [ALA The American Library Association](#))

Congressman John Lewis is the only survivor among the ten speakers at the March on Washington, a turning point in the civil rights movement that occurred 50 years ago, on August 28, 1963. The march is most famous as the setting of Martin Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" oration, but [Lewis' speech](#) that day, representing the movement's radical youth wing, provided a different kind of call to arms. It is a message that Lewis has continued to voice as a movement activist and an elected official.

Only a handful of the 250,000 people at event – officially called the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom to reflect the link between economic justice and civil rights - knew anything about the drama taking place behind the Lincoln Memorial. Under the leadership of A. Philip Randolph, the longtime civil rights and trade union leader, the march had brought together the major civil rights organizations as well as labor unions and religious denominations and women's groups. The planning group agreed that a representative of each group would address the huge crowd. Bayard Rustin, the veteran organizer who was in charge of the event's logistics, required all speakers, even King, to hand in the texts of their

speeches the night before. The [speech submitted by Lewis](#), the 23-year-old chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), criticized President John F. Kennedy for moving too cautiously on civil rights legislation. Rustin, Randolph and others considered Lewis' text inflammatory, threatening the unity they had so carefully built for the event. It included these lines:

"The revolution is a serious one. Mr. Kennedy is trying to take the revolution out of the street and put it into the courts. Listen, Mr. Kennedy. Listen, Mr. Congressman. Listen, fellow citizens. The black masses are on the march for jobs and freedom, and we must say to the politicians that there won't be a 'cooling-off' period. We won't stop now. The time will come when we will not confine our marching to Washington. We will march through the South, through the Heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did. We shall pursue our own 'scorched earth' policy and burn Jim Crow to the ground - nonviolently."

The evening before the march, Patrick O'Boyle - the archbishop of Washington, who was scheduled to give the rally's invocation - saw a copy of Lewis' speech. A staunch Kennedy supporter, he alerted the White House and told Rustin that he would pull out of the event if Lewis was allowed to give those remarks.

The next day, as the marchers assembled in front of the Lincoln Memorial, the controversy over Lewis' speech continued behind the stage. An intense argument, with raised voices and fingers shaking, broke out between Lewis and Roy Wilkins, the director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Rustin persuaded O'Boyle to start the program with his invocation while an ad hoc committee battled with Lewis over the language of his speech. Finally, Randolph, the civil rights movement's beloved elder statesman, appealed to Lewis. "I've waited all my life for this opportunity," he said. "Please don't ruin it, John. We've come this far together. Let us stay together."

Lewis [toned down the speech](#), but only slightly. His closing paragraphs no longer had the incendiary reference to William Tecumseh Sherman's march, but the address remained a powerful indictment of politicians' failure to deal boldly with discrimination. He criticized Kennedy's pending civil rights bill, filed two months earlier, for not going far enough in protecting blacks from police brutality and economic exploitation and for not including provisions to overturn Jim Crow laws that denied blacks their right to vote.

"We need a bill," Lewis said, "that will provide for the homeless and starving people of this nation. We need a bill that will ensure the equality of a maid who earns \$5 a week in the home of a family whose total income is \$100,000 a year."

"To those who have said, 'Be patient and wait,' we have long said that we cannot be patient. We do not want our freedom gradually, but we want to be free now. We are tired. We are tired of being beaten by policemen. We are tired of seeing our people locked up in jail over and over again. And then you holler, 'Be patient!' How long can we be patient? We want our freedom, and we want it now!"

Lewis removed his criticism of Kennedy for "trying to take the revolution out of the streets and put it into the courts," but he left in his attack on politicians in general. "By and large, American politics is dominated by politicians who build their careers on immoral compromise and ally themselves with open forms of political, economic and social exploitation. There are exceptions, of course. We salute those."

Lewis' skepticism toward the Kennedy administration was understandable. Lewis had risked his life as a Freedom Rider, but the White House had been reluctant to use federal troops to protect the protesters. Kennedy had referred to the SNCC

activists as "sons of bitches" who "had an investment in violence." His brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, told a reporter that the violence surrounding the Freedom Rides provided "good propaganda for America's enemies."

Lewis was lucky to survive the Freedom Rides without permanent injury. Indeed, that Lewis was speaking at the March on Washington at all reflected a remarkable personal transformation and self-discipline. Born in 1940 into a large family of sharecroppers in rural Alabama, Lewis was shy and suffered from a speech impediment. At 15, he heard King's speeches and sermons on the family radio during the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott and decided to become a minister. He practiced preaching to chickens in his parents' barnyard and preached at local Baptist churches.

At 17, after becoming the first member of his family to graduate from high school, he attended the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, which allowed students to work in lieu of tuition. He worked as a janitor and simultaneously attended the all-black Fisk University, graduating with degrees from the seminary and the university.

The Rev. Kelly Miller Smith, a local black minister and activist, introduced Lewis to [James Lawson](#), a divinity student at nearby Vanderbilt University, who was conducting workshops on nonviolent social action through the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Lawson prepared his students intellectually, psychologically and spiritually, assigning the works of Mohandas Gandhi, Henry David Thoreau and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. The students debated whether they could learn to forgive, even love, white segregationists who might beat them. They wondered if they had the self-discipline not to strike back, especially if they were called "nigger" or other epithets while being hit.

Lewis attended a weekend retreat at the Highlander Folk School, an inter-racial training center for activists in rural Tennessee. There he met Myles Horton, Septima Clark and other veteran organizers who helped him visualize what could happen if thousands of poor working people - folks like Lewis' parents - were galvanized into direct action.

"I left Highlander on fire," Lewis recalled. The fire got even hotter in the summer of 1959, when Lewis attended a workshop at Spelman College in Atlanta and heard veteran organizers Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, Glenn Smiley, and Lawson discuss what it would take to dismantle Jim Crow.

When Lewis returned to college in the fall, the number of students attending Lawson's workshops had grown and included some white students from Vanderbilt. As Lewis wrote in his memoir, *Walking with the Wind*, "We were itching to get started." They planned to launch a full-scale nonviolent protest campaign targeting the major downtown department stores that refused to serve black people.

But to their surprise, on February 1, 1960, four students from the Agricultural and Technical College in Greensboro, North Carolina, beat them to it, organizing a sit-in at the local Woolworth's. The news generated excitement on Nashville's campuses. Hundreds of students emulated their Greensboro counterparts and were threatened with arrest. Lewis wrote up a list of do's and don'ts to help the students:

"Do Not: Strike back nor curse if abused. Laugh out. Hold conversations with a floor walker. Leave your seat until your leader has given you permission to do so. Block entrances to stores outside nor the aisles inside."

"Do: Show yourself friendly and courteous at all times. Sit straight: always face the counter. Report all serious incidents to your leader. Refer information seekers to your leader in a polite manner. Remember the teachings of Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King."

Lewis was arrested at Woolworth's for the first of many times in his life. So too were hundreds of other protesters at other stores. Day after day, Lewis and the other students sat silently at lunch counters, where they were harassed, spat upon, beaten and finally arrested and held in jail, but the students insisted that they continue. The protests continued, with Lewis playing a key leadership role, and eventually Nashville's mayor and business leaders agreed to desegregate the downtown stores.

Lewis' physical and spiritual courage would be tested many times during the next few years. Each time, he revealed a remarkable, calm discipline, galvanizing others to follow his lead. The success of the sit-in movement led Lewis and his counterparts across the South to start SNCC in April 1960.

In May 1961, the 21-year-old Lewis participated in Freedom Rides, organized by the Congress of Racial Equality to protest the segregation of interstate bus terminals. Lewis was on the first Freedom Ride, which left the District of Columbia on March 4 destined for New Orleans. When they reached Rock Hill, South Carolina, and got off the bus, Lewis tried to enter a whites-only waiting room. Two white men attacked him, injuring his face and kicking him in the ribs.

Nevertheless, only two weeks later, Lewis was one of 22 Freedom Riders - 18 blacks, four whites - on another Freedom Ride bus from Nashville to Montgomery, accompanied by a protective escort of state highway patrol cars. As they reached the Montgomery city limits, the state highway patrol cars turned away, but no Montgomery police appeared to replace them. When the bus arrived at the Greyhound terminal, several reporters approached Lewis to interview him. But they were quickly overwhelmed by a mob of angry whites carrying baseball bats, bricks, chains, wooden boards, tire irons and pipes - screaming, "Git them niggers."

As Lewis wrote in his memoir: "I felt a thud against my head. I could feel my knees collapse and then nothing. Everything turned white for an instant, then black. I was unconscious on that asphalt. I learned later that someone had swung a wooden Coca-Cola crate against my skull. There was a lot I didn't learn about until later."

When he regained consciousness, he was bleeding badly from the back of his head and his coat, shirt and tie were covered with blood. Jim Zwerg, a white Freedom Rider, was in much worse shape. Lewis asked a police officer to help him get an ambulance, but the cop simply said, "He's free to go."

Two days later, the battered Lewis was back on another Freedom Ride bus, heading to Jackson, Mississippi, but this time with National Guard escorts. When they arrived at the terminal, a police officer pointed them toward the "colored" bathroom, but Lewis and the others headed toward the "white" men's room and were promptly arrested. Twenty-seven Freedom Riders were jailed. Lewis and others were later moved to the notorious Parchman Penitentiary state prison, where they were held for more than three weeks.

By the time he was elected SNCC chairman in 1963, Lewis had been arrested 24 times. SNCC was the most militant of the major civil rights groups, led by black college students, but involving white students as well. As its chairman, Lewis was invited to help plan the March on Washington and be one of the major speakers, alongside King, Randolph, Wilkins, labor leader Walter Reuther and others. (Another controversy that erupted in the weeks leading up to the march was the absence of any women - who were the backbone of the movement's grass-roots leadership - among the speakers).

The march was designed to put pressure on the Kennedy administration and Congress to enact a civil rights bill and an anti-poverty bill, including a public works plan to generate jobs and an increase in the minimum wage. In drafting his

speech, Lewis got input from many SNCC activists, including Julian Bond, Eleanor Holmes (now a Congresswoman representing Washington, D.C.), James Forman and others. They viewed it as a collective SNCC statement, not simply Lewis' own views, which is why Lewis was careful not to water down the talk's powerful condemnation of racism and politicians' complicity.

The march brought sharecroppers and college students, housewives and clergy, factory workers and school teachers from every part of the country. It attracted big-name celebrities, including actors Burt Lancaster, Paul Newman, Sidney Poitier, Marlon Brando, Ossie Davis, Dihann Carroll and Charlton Heston, singers Harry Belafonte, Bobby Darin, Josephine Baker, Lena Horne and Sammy Davis Jr., athletes Jackie Robinson and Bill Russell and writer James Baldwin. Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, opera star Marian Anderson and folk singers Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Odetta, and Peter, Paul and Mary performed for the vast crowd.

It was the first time that the entire national media - including satellite television, which sent the broadcast around the world - converged on a major civil rights event. The major TV networks pre-empted other programming to broadcast the events. Although King was already a well-known public figure, his televised address was the first time that many Americans saw him speak.

In the 86 years since the end of Reconstruction, not one substantial civil rights bill had been signed into laws. The hundreds of local protests that preceded the march, the drama and visibility of the national march and the many local protests that followed it, pressured Congress members from outside the South to support meaningful legislation. When Kennedy was assassinated three months after the march, President Lyndon Johnson, a Texan, drew on his political skills and the civil rights movement's momentum to get Congress to pass two pieces of civil rights legislation, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, as well as the anti-poverty programs often called the Great Society.

Lewis played a key role in those struggles. After the 1963 march, he worked with SNCC to register voters, including in the Freedom Summer campaign in Mississippi in 1964. The following year, he and Hosea Williams led 600 protesters on the first march from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery. Police attacked the marchers, and Lewis was beaten so severely that his skull was fractured. Before he could be taken to the hospital, he appeared before the television cameras calling on President Johnson to intervene in Alabama. The day, March 7, 1965, came to be known as "Bloody Sunday."

The Freedom Rides forced the federal government to implement laws and court rulings desegregating interstate travel. The voter registration drives, as well as public outrage against the violence directed at nonviolent protesters, helped secure passage of the Voting Rights Act.

The slow pace of change and the unrelenting attacks by Southern whites led some SNCC activists to question the nonviolent and integrationist tenets preached by King, Lawson, Lewis and others. Friction grew between various camps within SNCC. In 1966, Lewis lost his post as SNCC chairman to the more nationalist Stokely Carmichael.

For the next seven years, Lewis directed the Voter Education Project (VEP), which registered and educated about 4 million black voters. President Jimmy Carter then appointed Lewis director of ACTION, the federal agency that oversaw domestic volunteer programs.

In 1981, Lewis was elected to the Atlanta City Council. Five years later, he was elected to Congress from an Atlanta district, and he has been re-elected every two years since. He has consistently ranked as one of the ["most liberal" members of Congress](#), according to the National Journal.

After becoming an "insider," Lewis continued to advocate for progressive causes regarding poverty, civil rights and foreign affairs. He was an early opponent of the US invasion of Iraq. In 2002, he sponsored the Peace Tax Fund bill, a conscientious objection to military taxation legislation introduced yearly since 1972. In 2009, he was one of several members of Congress arrested outside the embassy of Sudan, where they had gathered to draw attention to the genocide in Darfur.

Throughout his career, Lewis, now 73, has encouraged young people to participate in political action and crusades for social justice. He has been a strong ally of students involved in the immigrant rights movement and a key supporter of the Dream Act. At a 2011 rally, Lewis said: "We all live in the same house. If any one of us is illegal, then we all are illegal. There is no illegal human being."

In 2011, President Barack Obama awarded Lewis the Presidential Medal of Freedom, one of dozens of prestigious awards and honorary degrees bestowed upon the civil rights icon.

In 1989, Lewis returned to Montgomery to help dedicate a civil rights memorial. An elderly white man came up to him and said, "I remember you from the Freedom Rides." Lewis took a moment to recall the man's face. Then he recognized Floyd Mann, who had been Alabama's safety commissioner. A committed segregationist, tough on law and order, Mann had been assured by Montgomery's police chief that no violence would occur. Seeing the white mob attack the Freedom Riders as they got off the bus, Mann realized he had been double-crossed. He charged into the bus station, fired his gun into the air and yelled, "There'll be no killing here today." A white attacker raised his bat for a final blow. Mann put his gun to the man's head. "One more swing," he said, "and you're dead." When they met again, Lewis whispered to Floyd Mann, "You saved my life." The two men hugged, and Lewis began to cry. As they parted, Mann said, "I'm right proud of your career."

We should all be proud of Lewis' career, which is a testament to the success of the civil rights movement and a challenge to America to complete the movement's unfinished business.

There is little dispute that America has made major strides in race relations since the modern civil rights movement began in the 1950s. The [poverty rate](#) for African-Americans - 55 percent in 1959 - has been cut in half. African-Americans have broken barriers in every area of American society. They anchor the evening news, edit major newspapers and serve in the Cabinet, as college presidents and as CEOs of major corporations - achievements that many Americans considered unthinkable before the 1960s.

In 1967, in *Loving v Virginia*, the Supreme Court overturned state laws banning inter-racial marriage. At the time, 16 states still had anti-miscegenation laws on the books and 72 percent of the American public still opposed inter-racial marriages. In 2011, the most [recent poll](#) on the topic, 96 percent of black Americans and 84 percent of white Americans supported inter-racial marriage. It may be shocking to some that 16 percent of white Americans still disapprove of inter-racial marriages, but the shift in public opinion over five decades has been steady, irreversible and overwhelming. Equally important, 97 percent of [Americans under 30 support inter-racial marriage](#).

One of the civil rights movement's signal victories, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, not only increased the number of black voters, but also increased the number of black elected officials, many of whom had been active in the movement. In 1963, there were only five African-Americans in Congress - all from northern states. Today there are 45 black Congress members, many of them from the South. In 1970, there were only 1,469 black elected officials in the entire country. Today, that number has reached over 10,500. In the early 1960s, not a single major American city had a black mayor. In subsequent years, many major cities, including many with relatively few African-Americans, had elected black chief executives, including New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Dallas, San Francisco, Denver, Seattle and Philadelphia. And in 2008, and again in 2012, Americans elected an African-American as president of the United States.

Despite this progress, however, a half-century after the March on Washington, discrimination against African-Americans remains a serious problem in employment, education, bank lending and other sectors of society.

As the killing of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of George Zimmerman illustrate, stereotypes persist and our criminal justice system remains biased. A [report](#) by the Violence Policy Center, found that black males are nine times more likely than white males to be the victims of homicide - 29.50 out of 100,000 black males compared with 3.85 out of 100,000 white males.

A new [Urban Institute study](#) reports that when there is a homicide with one shooter and one victim who are strangers, a little less than 3 percent of black-on-white homicides are ruled to be justified. When the races are reversed, the percentage of cases that are ruled to be justified climbs to more than 36 percent in states with "stand your ground" laws and 29 percent in states without such laws. The insidious police practice of racial profiling has not disappeared. The outrageous fact that more than 2 million Americans (disproportionately black and Hispanic men) are incarcerated is further indictment of persistent racism.

So, too, is the reality that the [poverty rate among African-Americans](#) remains twice that among whites. Nearly half of poor black children live in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty; however, only a little more than one-tenth of poor white children live in similar neighborhoods. The black unemployment rate last year was 14.0 percent, 2.1 times the white unemployment rate (6.6 percent) and higher than the average national unemployment rate of 13.1 percent during the Great Depression, from 1929 to 1939. After adjusting for inflation, the minimum wage today - \$7.25 an hour - is worth \$2 less than in 1968 and is nowhere close to a living wage. In 2011, a full-time year-round worker needed to earn \$11.06 an hour to keep a family of four out of poverty. But more than one-third of black workers (36 percent) do not earn hourly wages high enough to lift a family of four out of poverty, according to a recent [report by the Economic Policy Institute](#).

During the past decade, banks targeted African-American neighborhoods with risky predatory loans. At the peak of Wall Street's reckless lending boom, almost half all loans to African-American families were deemed "subprime." Not surprisingly, blacks (as well as Latinos) have borne the brunt of the financial meltdown. According to a 2011 [report](#), approximately one quarter of all Latino and African-American borrowers have lost their home to foreclosure or are seriously delinquent, compared with just less than 12 percent of white borrowers. Between 2009 and 2012, African-Americans lost just less than \$200 billion of wealth, bringing the gap between white and black wealth to a staggering [20-to-1 ratio](#).

In June, the Supreme Court struck down a key provision of the [Voting Rights Act](#) that Lewis had worked so hard, and endured so many beatings, to bring to life. No longer required to seek federal approval before making changes in their

election practices, some states, including Texas, Alabama, Mississippi and North Carolina, already have introduced or restored policies that make it harder for racial minorities to vote and will weaken their political voice.

"The day of the Supreme Court decision broke my heart," Lewis said during testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee. "It made me want to cry. I felt like saying come, come and walk in the shoes of people who tried to register, tried to vote but did not live to see the passage of the Voting Rights Act."

It is clear that the dream of racial equality remains unfulfilled. Yet John Lewis does not despair. At a recent gathering in Washington, Lewis said: "Our struggle does not last for one day, one week or one year but it is the struggle of a lifetime, and each generation must do its part. There will be progress, but there will also be setbacks."

Recalling the March on Washington, Lewis [recently told Bill Moyers](#):

"You cannot lose hope. You cannot give up. You just cannot give in. You cannot become bitter or hostile. The way of love is a better way. Dr. King said that we must learn to live together as brothers and sisters or we will perish as fools. I think that is still true today. That was the essence of the movement."

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