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Cecilia Smith
CSUSB

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In Memoriam

John Lewis

By Cecelia Smith



John Lewis (February 21, 1940–July 17, 2020)
Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.²³

Of all the people connected to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Congressman John Lewis (1940–2020) belongs squarely at the forefront. His speech at the March on Washington in 1963, was in front of hundreds of thousands; he stood shoulder to shoulder with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968) and displayed a measure of wisdom and grace well beyond his twenty-three years. He took a leadership role in the march across the Edmund Pettus

²³ Wikimedia Commons, “John Lewis.” Made public domain by the United States Congress. Accessed April 28, 2021, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_Lewis-2006.jpg.

Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on “Bloody Sunday” on March 7, 1965, for which he was brutally beaten by the authorities. He was elected to the United States House of Representatives in 1986 and served Georgia’s 5th Congressional District until his death in 2020. John Lewis’s foray into good trouble, necessary trouble, should be an inspirational mantra to every human being who seeks justice in a world full of injustice.

Oftentimes famous public figures are measured only by the specific events that they participate in and are frequently pigeonholed into one-note caricatures of themselves. When many people think of John Lewis today, they most often recollect an icon in the black civil rights movement. Considering only his moment of greatness solidifies his iconic status, but it molds him into a somewhat featureless cardboard cutout. When examining his life in retrospect, a more complete picture of John Lewis, the family man, the legislator, and yes, a driving force in the civil rights movement, emerges.

A Life of Chickens and Bibles

John Lewis was born in 1940 to sharecroppers, Willie Mae (1914–2003) and Eddie Lewis (1909–1977). He was the third of ten children. Interviews with family members recall a young John “preaching to the chickens” on the family’s farm in Alabama, and traveling to school with a Bible in hand. He himself recalled this story, laughing when he remembered that “the chickens nodded or shook their heads, but never quite said amen.”²⁴ It seemed that even as a young child he knew the direction that he wished to take in life. He carried his Bible into seminary school as a young adult and graduated from the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, Tennessee in 1961. Lewis noted that his parents were disapproving of people trying to push things, no matter the cause, no matter if right or wrong. But Lewis was strongly influenced by

²⁴ *John Lewis: Good Trouble*, directed by Dawn Porter (2002; AGC Studios, CNN Films, Color Farm Media, 2020), Documentary.

the style and teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil rights and non-violence movement from around 1955 until his assassination in 1968, and the horrific murder of the teenager, Emmett Till, also in 1955.²⁵

Lewis acknowledged that he had difficulty with the church. His faith was strong, but he could not understand why people treated each other with such cruelty, and often in the name of the Bible. He used these conflicting feelings as he gathered his courage and preached his first sermon at sixteen years old.²⁶ Those feelings carried on with him throughout the remainder of his life. He got his first taste of politics when he became president of the student body at the American Baptist Theological Seminary in 1961.²⁷ With this direction, thus began the journey that led him to be beaten, stomped on, and maligned, but never broken. He once remarked, "Human dignity is the most important thing in my life."²⁸

The Route of Non-Violence

Lewis was a firm believer in non-violent resistance. Upon hearing a discussion of the philosophy of non-violence, he remarked that it felt like it was something for which he had been searching for his whole life.²⁹ Arrested at least forty times in the 1960s, he put himself in the midst of violence, acquiescing to the mobs of segregationists that often surrounded and assaulted protestors. He withstood their beatings and fought back with only his civil disobedience.

²⁵ John Lewis and Michael D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ "Freedom Riders | American Experience | PBS," PBS, May 26, 2011, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/freedomriders/>.

²⁹ "John Lewis," *SNCC Digital Gateway* (blog), accessed March 31, 2021, <https://snccdigital.org/people/john-lewis/>.

As a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), he belonged to one of the more revered civil rights organizations of the time.³⁰ Created in 1960 with the guidance of civil rights leader Ella Baker (1903–1986), SNCC emerged as a vehicle for the youth. Its students, including Lewis, had been involved in lunch counter sit-ins, and now moved on to challenge politics and the registration of African American voters in the South. Lewis spoke of himself in the leadership role in the organization when he wrote:

I had no dream, no ambitions, certainly no designs for such a position. I never really saw myself as a leader in the traditional sense of the word. I saw myself as a participator, an activist, a *doer*. My talent, if I had one, was in mobilizing—organizing and inspiring people to come together and act to create that sense of community that would bring us all together, both ourselves and those who stood against us.³¹

Whether participating in lunch counter sit-ins, Freedom Rides, or marches, Lewis stood up for what he believed in: equality. He wrote in his autobiography,

That path involves nothing less than the pursuit of the most precious and pure concept I have ever known, an ideal I discovered as a young man and that has guided me like a beacon ever since, a concept called the Beloved Community.³²

³⁰ Peter Ling, “SNCCs: Not One Committee, but Several,” in *From Sit-Ins to SNCC: The Student Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s*, ed. Iwan Morgan and Philip Davies (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 81–96, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvx0721t.8>.

³¹ Lewis and D’Orso.

³² Ibid.

Historian Raymond Arsenault's assessment of Lewis sums him up succinctly: "For more than half a century, despite numerous beatings and arrests, he has been a rock of strength, a singular moral force prodding Americans of all colors, classes, and faiths to live up to the professed national ideal of liberty and justice for all."³³

A Politician's Life

Following his participation in the fight for civil rights, he became engaged in politics. As a religious man, an organizer, a believer in Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s non-violence convictions, he segued into a profession not always known for its principled tactics. Initially, he was unsuccessful in his bid for the 5th congressional district covering Atlanta, Georgia. Lewis accepted a position in then-President Jimmy Carter's administration (1977–1981), as an associate director of ACTION for domestic operations.³⁴ He made a second attempt at public office and was ultimately elected to the city council in Atlanta. Years later he ran again for the 5th congressional district seat in the United States House of Representatives. After a bitterly fought battle against another icon of the civil rights movement, Julian Bond (1940–2015), he won the seat in 1986.³⁵ Lewis remained in his congressional seat until his death.

³³ Raymond Arsenault, "The John Lewis I Knew | American Experience | PBS," PBS, September 8, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/freedom-riders-civil-rights-john-lewis/>.

³⁴ ACTION was the federal agency for volunteer service, which directed both the Peace Corps abroad and several other agencies domestically. Lewis would be responsible for the VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) operation, often referred to as the domestic Peace Corps, and two national programs for elderly volunteers: RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program) and FGP (Foster Grandparent Program).

³⁵ Lewis and D'Orso; "NAACP Civil Rights Leaders, Julian Bond," NAACP, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history->

Congressman Lewis was often called the “Conscience of Congress.”³⁶ He was influential, and as a senior member, was always an inspiration to those seeking their turn in politics. He was liberal, in his thoughts and ideas, but fiercely independent as well, authoring controversial acts such as the Confederate Monument Removal Act (H.R. 7217), the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2020 (H.R. 7120), the Haitian Deportation Relief Act (H.R. 6798), and the Black History is American History Act (H.R. 6902).³⁷ Congressman Lewis merged his personal beliefs with the democratic process and fought relentlessly for his constituents, as well as the nation.

The Woman in the Driver’s Seat

Congressman Lewis always joked among his family and friends about how he had traveled all across the country but did not drive. In his autobiography, he spoke of not receiving his driver’s license until the age of forty-two and related the anger and embarrassment he felt at failing in his first attempt as a teenager.³⁸ The driving was left to the Congressman’s wife, Lillian Miles Lewis (d. 2012), his confidant, companion, and soul-mate of forty-four years.

Lewis discussed meeting Lillian Miles at the behest of a friend, Xernona Clayton (b. 1930). He offered his initial

[explained/civil-rights-leaders/julian-bond](#). Horace Julian Bond was a leader of the American Civil Rights Movement, and helped found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He also helped found the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). Bond was elected to the Georgia House of Representatives in 1965 and served six terms. He ran for the United States House of Representatives, but lost to John Lewis after a contentious campaign.

³⁶ Bill Barrow and Andrew Taylor, “John Lewis Hailed as the ‘Conscience’ of Congress,” *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, July 27, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/freedom-riders-civil-rights-john-lewis/>.

³⁷ *Legislation Sponsored or Cosponsored by John Lewis*, Congress.gov, accessed March 31, 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/member/john-lewis/L000287?searchResultViewType=expanded>.

³⁸ Lewis and D’Orso.

impressions of her when he wrote that, “Lillian hadn’t said much at all up to that point, but when Dr. King was attacked, she rose to his defense, speaking strongly and very surely. I was extremely impressed. She not only had feelings about this, but she knew her facts as well.”³⁹

According to the biography page of the John and Lillian Miles Lewis Foundation website, Mrs. Lewis was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. She was a cum laude graduate from California State College at Los Angeles and received her master’s degree in library science from the University of Southern California. Mrs. Lewis held leadership roles in such committees as the auxiliary organization for spouses of Congressional Black Caucus members which was established in 1971.⁴⁰ Congressman Lewis credits his wife as the “proverbial power” behind his political career. The couple had one adopted son, John-Miles. Mrs. Lillian Miles Lewis passed away on December 31, 2012.⁴¹

His Legacy

Lewis’s influence was not only felt in his politics but pop culture as well, as he is the only member of Congress who has published graphic novels. Book One of his trilogy entitled *March* was released in 2013 and is a treatise on the Civil Rights Movement and Lewis’s life. The trilogy became *New York Times* bestsellers and garnered numerous awards. In their article, “John Lewis’ *March*, Book Two: Assessing the Impact of a Graphic Novel on Teaching the Civil Rights Movement,” authors Meghan Hawkins, Katie Lopez, and Richard L. Hughes note that in 1957, a comic book was successful in teaching the youth about the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–1956). It was an important document for

³⁹ Lewis and D’Orso.

⁴⁰ “John and Lillian Miles Lewis Foundation, Inc. – My WordPress Blog,” accessed February 15, 2021, <https://johnandlillianmileslewisfoundation.org/>.

⁴¹ Lewis and D’Orso.

“black college students across the South.”⁴² Lewis himself acknowledged the importance of that comic book. His graphic novel opens up a new and important page in a move to educate the youth about history. Former President Bill Clinton praised Lewis’ efforts stating:

Congressman John Lewis has been a resounding moral voice in the quest for equality for more than 50 years, and I’m so pleased that he is sharing his memories of the Civil Rights Movement with America’s young leaders. In *March*, he brings a whole new generation with him across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, from a past of clenched fists into a future of outstretched hands.⁴³

Watching documentaries and interviews with the Congressman, as well as his speeches on the floor of Congress, one gets a feeling of calm. Soft-spoken but determined, he always appeared eager to help, available to listen, and forever on the move. Lewis continued to push forward an agenda that argued for inclusivity. He was the sponsor of 21 bills that became law ranging from resolutions on taxes to healthcare, to civil rights. Considering the difficulty in getting a piece of legislation passed, this was a remarkable feat. In an interview with Lewis in 2006, Kevin N. Hoover of Fordham University raised the topic of the “War on Terror,” and Congress’ responsibilities. Lewis’ responses still evoked his fighting spirit from the 50s and 60s when he answered:

I think a lot of people, black and white, feel that it doesn’t even matter anymore, if we speak out and we make some noise it doesn’t matter. Those in the

⁴² Meghan Hawkins, Katie Lopez, and Richard L. Hughes, “John Lewis’s *March*, Book Two: Assessing the Impact of a Graphic Novel on Teaching the Civil Rights Movement,” *Social Education* 80, no. 3 (May 5, 2016): 151–56.

⁴³ “*March* / Top Shelf Productions,” Top shelf Productions, accessed March 24, 2021, <https://www.topshelfcomix.com/march>.

media, the White House, and the Congress will continue to do what they are going to do. My generation would not take this; there is something missing in this generation's attitude and we must change that.⁴⁴

This quote is a vivid reminder of the importance of the work that Lewis completed in his lifetime, but it also shows that his work was not finished. The necessity to shed light on the struggle for equal rights in the 1960s is relevant to the continued fight for voting rights and equality in the United States today. A concerted effort to silence people and alter history should compel everyone to, in the Congressman's words, "Get into good trouble, necessary trouble."⁴⁵

Congressman John Lewis's tenacity and perseverance are always on display and we are reminded that efforts continue in the spirit of his name. It has been proposed that the pending "For the People Act," a House of Representatives voting rights bill be renamed the "John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act," in his honor.⁴⁶ It is a consistent and fitting tribute that will ensure that the achievements of Congressman John Lewis are not forgotten.

⁴⁴ Kevin Hoover, "Is The Civil Rights Movement Really Dead: The Social Philosophy of Congressman John Lewis," *African & African American Studies Senior Theses* (2006): 42, https://fordham.bepress.com/aaas_senior/45.

⁴⁵ Lewis and D'Orso.

⁴⁶ "John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act One Pager.Pdf," accessed February 15, 2021, <https://www.leahy.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/John%20Lewis%20Voting%20Rights%20Advancement%20Act%20one%20pager.pdf>.

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Author Bio

Cecelia M. Smith was born and raised in Los Angeles County and attended Howard University after high school. She relocated to San Bernardino County as an adult and resumed her pursuit of higher education at Chaffey College. She eventually obtained a Bachelor of Arts in History at California State University, San Bernardino in 2013. After a hiatus, she returned to CSUSB and enrolled in the inaugural class of the Master of Arts in History program. Her focus is on African-American women's history. She plans on graduating in 2022, and engaging in further research and writing. She retired from the City of Los Angeles as a dispatcher for the police department after 35 ½ years of service. Cecelia is a breast cancer survivor, the mother of two children, Alycia and Cameron, and currently resides in Fontana with her husband, Lydell, and dog, Ruckus.

