

The Honorable John R. Lewis
U.S. Representative of Georgia (1987–2020)

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript
December 11, 2014

Office of the Historian
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC

“We’re not tourists. We’re not—in a sense we’re seekers, seeking inspiration, seeking to learn, to know, but to be inspired, in a sense to be renewed. When you go to Selma or go to Montgomery and go to Birmingham, where some people gave a little blood to make our country and make our system of government stronger—it’s reflection.”

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Abstract

On Sunday, March 7, 1965, John Lewis led hundreds of marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, to oppose voting restrictions against African Americans in the South. When the peaceful protestors refused to disperse, state troopers advanced on foot and on horse, brutally assaulting the crowd using tear gas and batons. Lewis suffered violent blows to the head from a trooper. Congress' swift but overdue legislative response to what became known as "Bloody Sunday" produced the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965.

For years afterwards, Lewis returned to Selma on his own to reflect on the protest march. He formalized these visits while serving as a Representative from Georgia by leading an annual congressional pilgrimage to the Edmund Pettus Bridge and other civil rights landmarks in Alabama. In this oral history—conducted months before the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday—Lewis recalls the violence inflicted on him and others that day and the event's historic role in changing American democracy. He describes the partnership with the Faith and Politics Institute, which has organized the annual trip since 1998, and the reason he considers the visit a pilgrimage. He discusses the personal importance of returning year after year.

Lewis recounts other experiences of the 1960s civil rights movement as well, including the march from Selma to Montgomery following his assault in 1965, the signing ceremony for the Voting Rights Act, and the day Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. He details his involvement in Senator Robert F. Kennedy's presidential campaign and how it ultimately led to his own run for Congress. In this interview, Lewis explains the effect his time in the movement has had on his approach to legislating. He asserts that civil disobedience—what he called "good trouble" throughout his congressional career—has a critical place in the political process and expresses hope that his fellow lawmakers understand the importance of protest when they visit Selma.

Biography

LEWIS, JOHN R., A Representative from Georgia; born in Troy, Pike County, Ala., February 21, 1940; attended Pike County Training School, Brundidge, Ala.; B.A., American Baptist Theological Seminary, Nashville, Tenn., 1961; B.A., Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn., 1967; chairman, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1963–1966; director of ACTION, 1977–1980; community affairs director, National Consumer Co-op Bank, Atlanta, 1980-1986; member of the Atlanta, Ga., city council, 1982–1986; elected as a Democrat to the One Hundredth and to the sixteen succeeding Congresses, and served until his death (January 3, 1987–July 17, 2020); died on July 17, 2020, in Atlanta, Georgia; lay in state in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda, July 27-28, 2020.

[Read full biography](#)

Editing Practices

In preparing interview transcripts for publication, the editors sought to balance several priorities:

- As a primary rule, the editors aimed for fidelity to the spoken word and the conversational style in accord with generally accepted oral history practices.
- The editors made minor editorial changes to the transcripts in instances where they believed such changes would make interviews more accessible to readers. For instance, excessive false starts and filler words were removed when they did not materially affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.
- In accord with standard oral history practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts, although they were encouraged to avoid making substantial editorial revisions and deletions that would change the conversational style of the transcripts or the ideas expressed therein.
- The editors welcomed additional notes, comments, or written observations that the interviewees wished to insert into the record and noted any substantial changes or redactions to the transcript.
- Copy-editing of the transcripts was based on the standards set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

The first reference to a Member of Congress (House or Senate) is underlined in the oral history transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer to the online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov> and the “People Search” section of the History, Art & Archives website, <http://history.house.gov>.

For more information about the U.S. House of Representatives oral history program contact the Office of House Historian at (202) 226-1300, or via email at history@mail.house.gov.

Citation Information

When citing this oral history interview, please use the format below:

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Interviewer Biographies

Matt Wasniewski is the Historian of the U.S. House of Representatives, a position he has held since 2010. He has worked in the House as a historical editor and manager since 2002. Matt served as the editor-in-chief of *Women in Congress, 1917–2006* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2006), *Black Americans in Congress, 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008), and the *Hispanic Americans in Congress, 1822–2012* (GPO, forthcoming 2013). He helped to create the House’s first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of current and former Members, longtime staff, and support personnel. He earned his Ph.D. in U.S. history from the University of Maryland, College Park, in 2004. His prior work experience includes several years as the associate historian and communications director at the U.S. Capitol Historical Society, and, in the early 1990s, as the sports editor for a northern Virginia newspaper.

Jackie Burns is a Historical Publications Specialist with the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned her B.A. in history and in international affairs at The George Washington University. Jackie received oral history training at Ohio Humanities’ Oral History Institute at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. In 2013 she became the project manager for the Office of the Historian’s Civil Rights Oral History Program. She co-authored *Hispanic Americans in Congress: 1822–2012* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2013).

—JOHN R. LEWIS—
INTERVIEW

WASNIEWSKI: This is Matt Wasniewski from the House Historian’s Office. Today is December 11, 2014. I’m here with Jackie Burns, and we are collecting an oral history from Mr. [John R.] Lewis, about his memories of the Selma pilgrimage and the original march [on March 7, 1965].

We’re recording. Congressman Lewis, thanks for hosting us in your office today.

LEWIS: Well, thank you very much for coming. Delighted and very pleased to have you here. You’re welcome any time.

WASNIEWSKI: Thank you. We wanted to start off with a couple general questions about Selma. The story of Selma is well-known. It’s a major turning point, not just in the civil rights movement but in American history. The story of what happened to you and the other individuals on the march is well-documented. It’s been nearly 50 years—this coming March—since you crossed that bridge, and in the intervening time you’ve crossed it time and time again in the pilgrimages and the commemorations. That being said, we’d like to know, what’s the one thing that you think every student should know about what happened at Selma in 1965?

LEWIS: I think every student should know that Selma changed America and America forever. Selma, this little town on the banks of the Alabama River, made it possible for all of our citizens to become participants in a democratic process. On that Sunday, March 7th, innocent men, women, and children went out to exercise their constitutional right to march in an orderly, peaceful, nonviolent fashion, almost 50 miles, from Selma to Montgomery, to

dramatize to the state of Alabama and to the nation, that they wanted to be counted as registered voters.

Selma had a long history of not allowing people to register to vote, simply because of the color of their skin. They made it hard, they made it difficult—that you could only attempt to register the first and third Mondays of each month. You had to pass a so-called literacy test. You had to go to the courthouse and attempt to get up through a set of double doors, up some steps, and sometimes you had to stand in line, not just for a few minutes but for hours, before they would even open the door. It was hard, it was difficult, for the average person to become a registered voter. Sometimes they would ask you to recite a certain section of the constitution of Alabama or the United States Constitution. On one occasion, a man was asked to count the number of bubbles in a bar of soap, the number of jellybeans in a jar.

People must understand that we were committed to peace, to the way of nonviolence, and we were so orderly, so quiet, no one saying a word. It was the most disciplined march that I've ever been a part of, walking in twos, not interfering with traffic, not talking loud, not any singing.

We got to the highest point on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, down below we saw a sea of blue—Alabama State Troopers. We continued to walk until we came within hearing distance of the state troopers. A man spoke up and said, “I'm Major John Cloud of the Alabama State Troopers. This is an unlawful march. It will not be allowed to continue. I'll give you three minutes to disperse, return to your homes or to your church.”

And a young man from Dr. King's organization walking with me, beside me, one of the leaders by the name of Hosea Williams, said, “Major, give us a moment to kneel and pray,” and the Major said, “Troopers, advance.” You

saw these men putting on their gas masks and behind the state troopers are a group of men, part of the sheriff's posse, on horses. They came toward us, beating us with nightsticks, tramping us with horses, and releasing their tear gas.

I was hit in the head by a state trooper with a nightstick. My legs went from under me. I don't know how I made it back across the bridge, but apparently a group just literally took me back. I remember being back at Brown Chapel AME Church—that we had left from—and they asked me to say something to the audience and I said something like, "I don't understand it, how President [Lyndon Baines] Johnson can send troops to Vietnam but cannot send troops to Selma, Alabama, to protect people who only desire to register to vote." And the next thing I knew or realized, that I was being taken to the local hospital with 16 other people. I think 17 of us were hurt that day, and a group of nuns took care of us.

But Selma changed America. During the next two or three days, there was demonstrations in more than 80 cities, at the White House, the Department of Justice, on college campuses all over, at American embassies abroad, people protested. Dr. King issued a call on that Monday. He came to the hospital to see me. He told me that he had issued a call for religious leaders to come to Selma. On Tuesday, March 9th, more than a thousand ministers, priests, rabbis and nuns came and marched to the point where we had turned back two days earlier.

President Johnson, eight days after "Bloody Sunday," made one of the most meaningful speeches I think any American President had made in modern time, on the whole questions of voting rights are civil rights. I'll never forget the speech. It was one of the most moving ones. I don't need to recite the speech, but I'll tell you, when he got to that point where he was at the end,

he said, "And we shall overcome," Dr. King cried, and I cried too. He was the first American President to use the theme song of the civil rights movement, and we knew we would make it from Selma to Montgomery.

BURNS: Mr. Lewis, could you please describe the city of Selma in the 1960s, and how did that compare to other cities across the South in the 1960s?

LEWIS: Selma, a small town, about 50/50 Black/white population, maybe. The county was majority African American. There were nine counties in the black belt. Dallas County, where Selma is located, it's typical of one of the black belt counties in Alabama. It was the center of trade and commerce for the surrounding counties. Everybody came to town on a Friday evening or on a Saturday. They came from the farms and from the countryside. It was a very quiet place before the event, the voting rights movement. They had a few shopping stores, little department stores. They had clubs.

There was an old hotel named the St. James. There was a beautiful, much older hotel, and I believe slaves had built the hotel. It was the Albert, the old Albert Hotel, and it's shameful, just a disgrace. The city tore it down and put up a modern city hall and public safety building. It was right off of highway 80, so if you were going through Alabama to Mississippi, you had to pass right through the heart of Selma. I had traveled through there once before, in 1961, during the Freedom Ride, and I hadn't been back since that time.

My first entrance into Selma to spend any time was after the March on Washington in September 1963. It had been a sleepy little town, the river nearby. You could see the cotton fields. It was quiet and people accused us of being outside agitators, troublemakers, we were disturbing the peace in Selma.

WASNIEWSKI: How had Selma changed in the time since the march, since the 1960s, and does that speak to any larger changes in this time?

LEWIS: Well, I think Selma has changed to some degree. The signs that we saw in the '60s, they're gone. People can go to the same little restaurants. There were lunch counters in several drugstores in downtown Selma, right on the main street, on Broad Street, and people got arrested and went to jail for just sitting at a lunch counter. Long after the first lunch counters were desegregated in other parts of the South, you see Black and white citizens sitting on benches and talking together, or just walking down the streets together. So there's a different climate, it's a different environment there today. You have Blacks and whites living together, on the city council, board of education, in other ways in other parts of the county and city government.

BURNS: You've been going back to Selma annually for decades. What brings you back year after year to Selma?

LEWIS: Well, I've been going back to Selma for many, many years. Long before I came to Congress, I would go back. A few years ago, at least 15, 16 years ago, Faith and Politics was having a retreat, I told them I couldn't stay and was leaving, had to go back to Selma. And they said, "Why do you go to Selma?" so I told them, and they made a decision to start going to Selma with me. So, we've been doing it now, I believe, for more than 15 years.

Selma, for me, is a place where we injected something very meaningful into our democracy. We opened up the political process and made it possible for hundreds and thousands and millions of people to come in and be participants. I think some people in Congress and some people who became President, have said in recent days, in recent years, if it hadn't been for Selma, they wouldn't be in Congress. Hadn't been for Selma, they wouldn't

be in the White House. President [Barack] Obama has said it to me, President Clinton has said it. I think even President Carter probably would say the same thing.

We used to have a poster in the office. I think one of the Members sort of liberated and put it in his own little space, saying that, “Hands that pick cotton can pick elected officials.” That is true. All across the South, these same hands that had been picking cotton, for the first time, helped pick presidents and governors and mayors and Members of Congress.

WASNIEWSKI: How do you explain the pilgrimage to someone who’s never been on it and if you’re trying to approach one of your colleagues and say you ought to come?

LEWIS: I spend a great deal of time, even on the floor today, several Members asked me about it, said they were going. They’re going to bring their children, going to bring their wives or husband or someone from their church, bring a neighbor or some other Member. I’ve said to them, “You should go and travel with us.” We’re not only going to Selma, but we’re going to go to Birmingham and we’re going to visit the park where Bull Connor, the police commissioner, used dogs and fire hoses on people, in 1963. We’re going to go to the church, 16th Street Baptist Church, and visit the church where the four little girls were killed. You’re going to meet some of the people that were in church that Sunday morning. We’re going to visit the Civil Rights Institute, a museum there in Birmingham, and we will meet many local officials, local citizens, Black and white, that lived in Birmingham, growing up in Birmingham.

I tell them we would go to Montgomery and we would meet with the governor, elected officials. We would visit Dr. King’s church, [which] is less than a block from the capitol. That was so amazing to me. I grew up only 50

miles from Montgomery, but the first time I visited the capitol was not until 1965, when we marched from Selma to Montgomery. Visit Dr. King's church—we're going to visit the First Baptist Church, which is a short distance away, on Ripley Street, in downtown Montgomery, where I first met Dr. King and his colleague, the Reverend Ralph Abernathy—who was pastor of the church in 1958—when I was 18 years old. So we will visit these two churches. We will go to the site where Rosa Parks was arrested and jailed. We will visit the Rosa Parks Museum.

We will visit the Civil Rights Memorial. The same young lady [Maya Lin] that designed the Vietnam Memorial designed the Civil Rights Memorial, and it's very moving to go there. So I tell Members that. We go there, we say a prayer, and we hold hands, and we sing, "We Shall Overcome." It's a time of reflection, to understand the distance we've come, the progress that we've made, and we did it in a bipartisan way, without striking a blow. It was very much in keeping with what our country is all about.

And we go to Selma, we end up going to Selma, and people look forward to going to Selma, and walking across the bridge together, and going to the same church that we left from on March 7, 1965, the same little red church building, where we came back to after we had been beaten, tear gassed, chased and trampled by horses.

BURNS: You mentioned that you were at a Faith and Politics retreat with Reverend Doug Tanner. I'd like to know how it came to be that Amo [Amory] Houghton [Jr] got involved, and Doug Tanner. How did you get involved with these individuals in particular to decide to do this pilgrimage?

LEWIS: Well, they thought it was a good idea. I think we had what I would call a meeting of minds, and maybe we all had what I called an executive session

with ourselves, and we thought it was a good thing to get other people involved. There was a Member, there was a wonderful Republican Member, I wish he was still here, named Amo Houghton, from Upstate New York. We were in the same class and we became friends, we became buddies. He said he was going with us and he made about—I don't know how many trips during the time that he was there—but he went on almost every single trip. I think Steny [Hamilton] Hoyer has been on at least 13 times, and we have both Members of the House and the Senate, both Democrats and Republicans, going, at least on part of the trip, if not the complete trip.

WASNIEWSKI: Do any memories of that first inaugural pilgrimage stand out in particular?

LEWIS: Other Members?

WASNIEWSKI: With Members, yes.

LEWIS: Oh, yes. Some of the Members, I may not remember. One person, who was also in my class, was Connie [Constance A.] Morella from Maryland, the late Donald [Milford] Payne from New Jersey. They could have been the first two really. I think they maybe went on the trip before it became an official Faith and Politics [trip].

BURNS: What was the program of the trip that first year? Did you go to Birmingham and then Selma?

LEWIS: Yes. The first time, I believe we did go to Birmingham, and we stayed. We were based on Birmingham. Birmingham was a sizeable city. We would fly into Birmingham and then we would travel by bus to Montgomery, to Selma, but we would go to Montgomery and Birmingham on a Friday, Montgomery a Saturday and on Sunday in Selma. The plane would go

someplace else but then fly to Montgomery, where we would end up, and then we would go back, come back here.

WASNIEWSKI: The trip is called a congressional pilgrimage, not a congressional delegation. And we're curious, why is it referred to as a pilgrimage and is that word distinction important?

LEWIS: The word, it's very important. We're not tourists. In a sense we're seekers, seeking inspiration, seeking to learn, to know, but to be inspired, in a sense to be renewed. When you go to Selma or go to Montgomery and go to Birmingham, where some people gave a little blood to make our country and make our system of government stronger. It's reflection and, after an evening when people traveled and going different places during the day, after having a meal in the evening, you can come and sort of talk about how you feel and just reflect. It had been wonderful.

I remember on one of the first trips, that we were leaving Birmingham. We were just standing around, or sitting, in one part of the airport, and a white gentleman from Birmingham or someplace in Alabama, came up and said, "I want to speak to John Lewis." Someone said, "Congressman Lewis is right there," and he said, "Mr. Lewis, I want to thank you for all you've done. More than anything else, I want to apologize to you on behalf of all of the white citizens of Alabama for what we did." I said, "Thank you, sir," and we hugged.

Two years ago, we went on a trip and we were going to Birmingham, we were in Montgomery. We were at the First Baptist Church, downstairs, a few people in the balcony, and the police chief came to speak. He was a young man, who was not even—I doubt he was even 50 years old. His deputy was a

young African American. He came on behalf of the city, the mayor, and he started speaking, and the essence of what he said to the group, his name . . .

JONES: Is it Murphy?¹

LEWIS: Yeah, Murphy, Kevin Murphy, a good Irish name. He said, “Congressman, when you came here years ago, our police department was not kind to you.” He said, “Today we have a better police department. Before anyone can become a member of this police department, they must know what happened in Birmingham, know something about what happened here in Montgomery, what happened in Selma.” He said, “They must know something about the philosophy of nonviolence, about Rosa Parks, about Dr. King.”

He went on to say, “To show my gratitude and appreciation for what you did, and your colleagues did, I’m going to take off my badge. I’m going to give it to you.” I said, “Chief, you can’t do that, you’re the chief of police, you need your badge.” And his young deputy lost it and started crying. I started crying, and I think most of the Members of Congress and Capitol Hill police officers teared up. It was one of those unbelievable moments. He’s been here to see me more than once. I took him down to the White House on Saint Patrick’s Day to meet the President, the Vice President, the First Lady, and Mrs. [Jill] Biden. Faith and Politics went on a trip to Ireland and we took him to Ireland with us, and he was a real hit.

END OF PART ONE - BEGINNING OF PART TWO

BURNS: We're back on tape. To continue on with the pilgrimage, do you consider this trip an important congressional tradition?

LEWIS: Oh, I think this trip is important. I look at some of the Members, especially new Members, that have gone over the years, and some of the Members that are coming in, they're so young. They come from different parts of the country, different backgrounds—African American, yes, white, yes, Latinos, Asian American. I see people walking together, down the same path that we took across the bridge. Back in 1965, 50 years ago almost, there was not a single Member of Congress walking with us. During some of the early attempts to register people, some Members came to visit as observers.

On the day of the march across the bridge, there was one white participant out of 600 people—not any Latinos, Asian Americans or Native Americans. There was not one minority state trooper. You go now, the head of the Alabama state troopers is an African American. There are women and Latinos. There's Asian Americans.

We have—in a strange way, maybe in a good way—to make the state police in the state of Alabama look like America. We go there now and the governor of the state welcomes us. And the state troopers that beat us and left us bloody and lame, now they protect us. There's been a transformation there, so it's good and necessary for people to be able to bear witness to these truths.

BURNS: Why is it important for Members of Congress to be able to go down as legislators, as Representatives?

LEWIS: Well, I think it's important for Members of Congress to see, to observe what people did by exercising their constitutional right. You have a right to protest, a right to dissent. You have a right to petition your government and

we shouldn't be trying to limit that. We should be trying to do whatever we can to strengthen that.

WASNIEWSKI: During all the pilgrimages you've attended, has there been any Member whose participation surprised you or moved you in particular?

LEWIS: Well, we had many different Members to come. I think the Members—sometimes I feel like they feel like it's a conversion, that they are changed, and they'll say to their fellow Members that didn't go, "You need to go." I heard Members today, this morning, say, "You must go on this trip." I've heard Members say that over time, "If you don't do anything else during your congressional career, go to Selma, Alabama, with John Lewis." I hear it over and over again. "You'll be changed."

BURNS: Is it important for, or what is the reaction of the people of Selma, to Members of Congress coming down every year and this delegation of Members coming to their town and bearing witness to what happened in Selma?

LEWIS: Well, I think the people in Selma, I think they appreciate it. They're gratified to know that people are coming from Washington and other parts of the country. They welcome us. They love the idea for many different reasons. The town is poor and when Members of Congress come, you have to eat, so people spend money on food and something to drink. We make donations, we pay for the meals. So they're not just giving us something but we're leaving something there. We go to a church, I think the churches welcome us. We go to a church on Sunday morning and the Members are digging deep in their pockets to leave something there and when we fail to go to one church and go to another church, I don't think they like it too well.

WASNIEWSKI: The annual pilgrimage has been going on since 1998. Have there been any major changes to the program that you recall?

LEWIS: Yes, there have been some major changes, because when we first went to Montgomery, we had an opportunity, maybe not the very first time, to meet with Governor Wallace. People said, we want to see Governor Wallace, we want to meet with him, we want to see him. Governor Wallace was living in his home, he was laying in his bed. He was watching a television story called *George Wallace*. I think it was on TNT, Turner Network, and he was up there smoking a cigar in bed.

And the white Members of the delegation from the Midwest and the Northeast, they were somewhat reluctant to walk up to the governor, but the African-American Members, especially those from the South, and there was one person from Alabama, from Birmingham, who held the same seat that Terri Sewell is holding now, walked up and said, "Hello, Governor, how are you?" And then I walked up and said, "Hello, Governor Wallace, this is John Lewis," and he said, "You're from Troy." I said, "Yes, that's right, Governor." I had met him before and talked with him before. We started taking pictures with him and then the white Members from the Northeast, the Midwest, or California, they saw what was happening, then I think they felt it was all right.

But I think they were reluctant to be seen with Governor Wallace. I don't know for what reason, but it worked out. He tried to talk to us and we tried to communicate with him. So we don't have Governor Wallace, but we have other governors, state officials, and local officials. We go to there and it becomes sometimes very emotional to go back. To go back to the site of the Greyhound bus station, where we were beaten and left bloody, on May 21,

1961. So it's not just going to Selma, but we do the different places along the way.

WASNIEWSKI: Ms. Sewell told us a story this morning about being invited to the governor's mansion for a meal, and walking up the steps to the, I guess maybe it was in the capitol, and she said that at one point you turned to her and said, "This is the first time I've been invited in this building."

LEWIS: Well, when I went there, it was my first time. And I grew up only 50 miles from there. It was my very first time. I left there, left Alabama, when I was 17, to go to school in Nashville, and I would go back to Alabama from time to time, to see my folks, but never been in the capitol before.

BURNS: We've touched on it a little and a lot when reading about the pilgrimage. One of the things that's overwhelmingly said is the bipartisan nature of the trip, Members from both sides of the aisle. What do you attribute the fact to, the fact that there's such a bipartisan showing at the pilgrimage, and does that bipartisanship extend to when Members get back to Capitol Hill? Does that remain after the trip?

LEWIS: Members that you travel with, you get to know, you ride on a bus with, you ride on a plane with, you eat a meal together, you talk about family and friends. You talk about what happened in Alabama, what happened in Selma. As one Member that is retiring this year, from Birmingham, he gets up and tells this story every time, his family story. He was in Birmingham with his family during so much of the unrest there. And I think all of us who've been on these journeys over a period of time, we're going to miss that. We're going to miss that fellowship, because we've become like a circle of trust, like a band of brothers and sisters.

The young lady from Montgomery that represented my family in the Congress, and Troy, she's always there to greet us, to welcome us, along with Terri Sewell and the Member from Birmingham. There's two Republicans. But when we get back here we continue that friendship. Too many people are not staying long enough, they come, and then they decide to leave or go.

END OF PART TWO ~ BEGINNING OF PART THREE

BURNS: Back to the pilgrimage. If you had to pick one, what do you think your proudest moment over the years, from the congressional pilgrimage is?

LEWIS: I don't recall the year now, and I'm pretty good in terms of years and dates and time and places. I believe it was the anniversary that President Clinton came down as President. We had to—just, there was so many people, like bordering 20,000 people, and we had to get all the Members together in the right spot, the right place. He was there, he walked with us across the bridge. Coretta Scott King was there and several other civil rights types. And he [President Clinton] spoke, and he gave this unbelievable speech. It was so moving. He spoke about the house I wrote about in *Walking with the Wind*, and the little tribute to the house, he said, "John Lewis, as long as you walk together to create an America at peace with itself, holding hands with your brothers and sisters, holding their trembling house together," it was just too much, really. To be there with all of the Members, my friends and my colleagues, to walk with the Members of Congress across that bridge, it's very moving for me.

There are certain Members, and I won't call their names, but there's one Member I call Brother Paul. I see him on the floor, he calls me Brother John, I call him Brother Paul. There's another Member from upstate New York, I call her my sister. We came in the same class. You get to know these people, they become like an extension of your family. If you stay around here long enough, they know your ups, your downs. One Member who had been on a trip said to me, "You've been so quiet during the past few days. Why are you so quiet?" I said, "I'm just thinking, contemplating, but I'm fine." She says, "How is your health?" I said, "My health is fine." But they're concerned.

Another time we walked across the bridge was 2007, when both Senator Obama and Senator [Hillary Rodham] Clinton went with us on the trip. President Clinton also went as former President. But at one point, walking across the bridge, Mrs. Clinton, Senator Clinton, was on my left side, and Mr. Obama was on my right side, and I think it became just a little too much. I said we cannot do this again, this is what I said to myself. It was too much drama. I think it probably took something away from the essence of our trip. So, we have not invited any candidates, a presidential candidate, a would-be candidate, but if they show up, that's fine, it's okay, but we're not asking for it.

WASNIEWSKI: You talked about how Members who have been on the trip, there was this bond afterwards and there was this bipartisan spirit that carried over. Can you point to any examples legislatively, where that bond or that common experience on the trip had a legislative impact?

LEWIS: Well, I can tell you this, we were not necessarily successful, but I think if the Member had remained here, we probably would have had some success. One Member lost the election and one Member is still around, and we still may have some success. Congressman [Frank James] Sensenbrenner [Jr.] has gone

on the trip. He walked with us, walked across the bridge. He's committed to fixing the Voting Rights Act. Leader [Eric] Cantor came down, spoke and stayed with us, talked about what happened with the Voting Rights Act. If he hadn't been defeated, I think we would have had some success. I think he would have worked with us, both Democrats and Republicans, to get it done.

BURNS: Have you learned anything about yourself doing this pilgrimage?

LEWIS: Oh, yes.

BURNS: What stands out to you?

LEWIS: Well, I've grown up. I continue to grow. I continue to learn. When I first started going on the trip with Members of Congress, I think I tried to do a little of everything because they called on me and I was sort of responsible. The Members were like my flock. They were much better than those chickens that I used to preach to, and I felt responsible for them. I tried to look out for them but, more and more, I tried to let someone else take care of them and look out for them. When they call on me and need something or want something, I try to respond, but I feel like even now, as we prepare for the trip next year, that I have to look out for them. If you need anything, call the office, call Faith and Politics, let me know, if you have any questions.

WASNIEWSKI: This anniversary that is coming up is a big one, it's the 50th. Do you have any expectations in particular for this coming pilgrimage?

LEWIS: Oh, I think just in terms of the size. I think it's probably the largest group of Members ever because this is the 50th. We have a lot of new Members, younger Members, I think who would like to go. They would like to bring their children. Ron Kind from Wisconsin, has been on the trip more than once. He brought his two sons when they were pretty young. He said to me a

few days ago, he would like to bring his boys back. It's good to see how people who have been a few times and then new people, Members going for the first time, how they just going to sort of come together, share stories and tell stories. I encourage the Members to look out for this or that, ask questions. We're going to go to Marion, Alabama, for the first time, on our way from Birmingham to Selma, and that's going to be a little different.

BURNS:

Moving away from the pilgrimage and just moving on to Congress in general. Many civil rights leaders have transitioned from the movement to politics. What was your reasoning to enter the political realm and to run for Congress?

LEWIS:

Well, during the late '60s there were individuals in Atlanta saying that I should run for something, who kept encouraging me. I was deeply inspired by the presidency of President [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy and the campaign of Robert [Francis] Kennedy. I admired, I loved President Kennedy, and I really loved his brother, Bobby, really. I remember Bobby Kennedy saying to me on one occasion, he said, "John, I now understand"—I think this was in June or July of 1963—"I now understand. The young people have taught me a lesson." After President Kennedy was assassinated, I felt like something had died in us, died in America.

During my civil rights days, we used to have talent shows during some of the retreats and meetings, and I used to mock, I used to imitate President Kennedy and Robert Kennedy. I would get the accent down pretty well and say, "Call Brother Bobby and tell Brother Bobby to get the white people and the negroes in Albany, Georgia, to sit down together. I don't understand it, how we can meet with the Russians in Geneva and cannot meet with the negroes in Albany, Georgia," something like that.

So, when Robert Kennedy announced that he would seek the Democratic nomination for President, it was in Jackson, Mississippi, it was around March 15th [1968], I sent him a telegram and said I would like to help, I'd like to be helpful. So, he had his staff contact me and suggested that I go to, I believe Lake County, Indiana—Indianapolis. And I went there to do voter registration, to organize a rally where he was coming to speak, and I was there the evening or night, April 4, 1968, when we heard that Dr. King had been shot. We had just heard that he had been shot, we didn't know his condition or anything like that. We continued to work, and Bobby Kennedy came in, some people didn't want him to speak and I insisted that he had to speak, and we had this rally out in this open space. He made a decision to come and he spoke, and he announced that Dr. King had been assassinated. That was a very sad time for me. We went back to his hotel room.

He talked with a group of [us] and suggested that we go to Atlanta, to help in preparation for the funeral. And he came and it was my responsibility, the evening before the funeral, to escort him, Mrs. Kennedy, and other members of their family, late at night, down to view Dr. King's body.

After the funeral was all over, I went to Portland, Oregon, to campaign for him, and I don't know to this day, why the students at Portland State University invited me to be the one to introduce him, and I did it. And then I went on to California. He launched the primary in Oregon, the first time a Kennedy was defeated in an election. I went there and I teamed up with César Chavez. The two of us went into these unbelievable neighborhoods, all white neighborhoods, knocking on doors, campaigning for Robert Kennedy. He was in the primary with Eugene [Joseph] McCarthy and Hubert [Horatio] Humphrey [Jr.] and we were supporting Bobby Kennedy.

In the evening that he won the Democratic primary, he invited me to come up to his suite, with Charles Evers, Medgar Evers' brother, Jack Newfield of the *Village Voice*, Teddy White, who wrote *Making of the President*, and a few other people—his sister, Jean Kennedy Smith—and he said he was going downstairs to make his victory statement and for us to remain there.

Somehow, during the campaign in California, you just knew he was going to win that primary because hundreds and thousands of people turning out for the motorcade, all along the way. The people reacted so well. We were sitting there watching and waiting for him to speak, and, after he spoke, we saw it all on television. We all cried when we heard that he had been shot. I just got down on the floor and cried.

After Dr. King was shot, I said to myself and to others, “We still have Bobby.” So I threw everything, my whole everything, body, soul, mind, into that campaign, because I thought he would be elected and he would be the next president. He would have been a great president.

So, I felt at the time, that I really should run for something. I became head of the voter education project. I went all across the South, getting people to register to vote. I teamed up with Julian Bond and others, and Mrs. King and Reverend Abernathy, we traveled. We did 11 southern states, from Virginia to Texas, getting people registered.

Finally, I guess it was my time to run, and my first campaign, I lost. Wyche Fowler [Jr.] was in the race, who later became a Senator. So when he gave up his seat, he told me he was leaving and I should run. I remember having lunch with my good friend, Julian Bond [a Georgia state senator] and his son, and a discussion that Senator Fowler was leaving his seat. Julian said, “What are you going to do, Mr. Chairman?” He always called me Mr.

Chairman, because I was the chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. I said, "I'm running for Congress." I said, "What are you going to do, Senator?" He said, "I'm running for Congress." I said, "Well, I guess I'll see you on the campaign trail." That was the shortest lunch ever, between the two of us. In that race, he received 47 percent of the vote. I was, I think 17 points behind. We had a runoff, he went up two points, I went up 17 points, and I won. I have not had a tough race since. So, I love the political arena, I love campaigning, not just for myself but for others.

WASNIEWSKI: How did your time in the movement impact your role as a Representative? Were there any skills or lessons that you brought to the House experience?

LEWIS: My role and participation in the movement made me better prepared to serve as an elected official, because if you see something that you believe in, you have to show that you believe in it with passion, show some signs and be consistent and be persistent, and never give up. I introduced legislation after the death of Mickey [George Thomas] Leland, to pass the historic bill, to build the memorial, the National Museum of [African American] History and Culture, on the Mall. It took me 15 years to get it through, but I had wonderful people to help. The late Bruce [Frank] Vento from Minnesota, a wonderful man. I served on his subcommittee of old Interior [Committee]. I guess we call it Natural Resources these days. He encouraged me to find something that I wanted to do and pursue it. There were some Members of the Senate, the late Member from North Carolina. Do you know who I'm talking about?

WASNIEWSKI: [Jesse] Helms?

LEWIS: Jesse Helms, bless his soul, opposed it, but it all worked out and I got the legislation. I was talking to Terri Sewell just two or three days ago, to name

the highway between Selma and Montgomery as part of the national trail. When people travel that highway, they will understand that that highway helped—not just the bridge, but the highway between Selma and Montgomery—helped give us the vote. And there’s markers all along the way, and eventually, there will be interpretive centers not just in Montgomery, at Alabama State College. Not just between Montgomery, but there will be a beautiful structure, probably convert an old structure, right there at the bridge in Selma.

BURNS: Wonderful. What do you believe the role of Congress is in regard to civil rights, and how has that role changed in your time since you’ve been here?

LEWIS: Well, the role of Congress is a very meaningful and mighty role, is to see that the civil rights of all our citizens are protected and guaranteed. It was the Congress—I remember coming here in 1963, 23 years old, with Dr. King, and others, the 10 leaders of the march, and we met with the leadership—the Democratic Leadership, the Republican Leadership. I remember meeting Emanuel Celler, who was the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, and the Ranking Member was from Ohio.

BURNS: Bill [William Moore] McCulloch?

LEWIS: Bill McCulloch. I remember meeting Everett [McKinley] Dirksen—there’s a picture in here with him—and meeting [Michael Joseph (Mike)] Mansfield and others, meeting Jacob [Koppel] Javits, Republicans from the Northeast, from California, Democrats. There were very few African-American Members, very few, just a handful. Talking with them, and if it hadn’t been for both Democrats and Republicans working together, the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 would not have passed the Congress. It was a bipartisan effort. So there’s a role for Congress to continue to play by coming back here, for the

Voting Rights Act, and to see it passed, signed into law, and be there when President Johnson signed it, and reaching over and giving me one of the pens that he used to sign it.

When it comes to full employment, housing or whatever, healthcare, education, the Congress had the power to do great and good things. We need to use that power. Protect the environment, to protect the water we drink, to keep the food safe, and keep the air we breathe clean.

WASNIEWSKI: There's a dialectic that goes on there too. It's Congress, but there's also social movements.

LEWIS: Yes.

WASNIEWSKI: Can you speak to that?

LEWIS: Without social movement, without people speaking out, making their voices heard, without moving their feet, sometimes Congress is reluctant to move or to act. Now one thing about elected officials, and I think the Voting Rights Act proved that, they can count, they're good on counting. They can change their minds, their attitudes. They can get religion pretty quick.

BURNS: You attended the Voting Rights Act ceremony in the Rotunda, on August 6, 1965. Could you describe that event and being able to be in the Rotunda that afternoon?

LEWIS: Well, to be there, to be there on that day, in the presence of President Johnson, to be there with the leaders of the movement, to be there with Joe Rauh and Clarence Mitchell from Baltimore—he was the 101st Senator, some people refer to him. These two guys were great lobbyists for the civil rights movement. They said they worked for ADA or the NAACP, but they

were lobbyists really for the movement, and they knew how to count better than a lot of our people know today. To be there with them, to be there. Early that morning, before—and I still don't know why President Johnson did what he did. He invited a group of us, a small group, only two of the leaders, to meet with him before he signed the act, early that morning. Each one of us took a staff . . .

JONES: I believe you were looking for this.

LEWIS: Oh, that's—you got it! I was looking around.

WASNIEWSKI: Is that it?

LEWIS: That's the picture. And I would ask some of his aides that are still around, why did he do it, why did he do it? I asked his daughter, because his youngest daughter, I have a picture with her someplace here. His youngest daughter rode up to the Hill with him, from the White House—Lucy, Lucy did.

WASNIEWSKI: Can you describe the picture, who is in it, and what room that's in?

LEWIS: This is a little anteroom off the Oval Office, and I don't know whether this room still exists today or not. In this photograph, you see James Farmer, who was head of CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality, you see John Lewis, and I believe sitting here is a young man named Cortland Cox, who was on the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and came there with me. This is Major Robertson, he was the military attaché, and I always wanted to know, why did they have him here? I got to know him a little. I never had the opportunity to ask him, I think I was afraid to. I really believe in my guts, that they thought that we were going to do something to the President, and they wanted to protect the President.

Years ago, well, he moved back to Texas, and I think he's deceased now, but in this meeting, Lyndon Johnson, bless his soul, I can't repeat what he said, but he said, "I'm going to sign this bill in a few minutes. You've got to go back . . ." And ladies, excuse me, he said, "You've got to go back and get them by the balls," that's what he said. He used some other words. "You've got to get them registered and get them to vote."

WASNIEWSKI: It's a great photograph.

LEWIS: In the movie . . . I'm not going to talk the movie, it's okay.

BURNS: You can talk about the movie. We'd love to hear.

LEWIS: It's almost like Lincoln trying to get the amendment passed, how Dr. King was talking with him, the need to get the voting rights [bill] passed. He's saying, "I just signed a civil rights thing, we don't have the votes in the Congress to get a Voting Rights Act." He sort of said, "Make me do it," and we went to Selma and we made him do it. This is just a picture with Lucy here.

BURNS: That's great.

LEWIS: Both daughters have been on the trip to Selma. Forty members of the Kennedy family went, I guess about three years ago. There was enough of them to carry on the bus alone.

WASNIEWSKI: I had a chance to meet her [Lucy Baines Johnson Turpin] at a Library of Congress event, it was very nice. We just have two wrap-up questions.

LEWIS: Okay, take your time.

WASNIEWSKI: As we approach the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act, which will be in August of 2015, what's the single most important legacy of that act as you see it?

LEWIS: The Voting Rights Act of 1965 freed all of America, freed America. It liberated America and especially the southern parts of our country. It said in effect it doesn't matter your race, your religion, your party identification. If you're old enough, a citizen, you can participate in the political process, you have one vote and you can cast that vote. It freed politicians to be human.

BURNS: We've touched on this a little, but do you think the Voting Rights Act would have been possible without what happened in Selma?

LEWIS: I think it was possible for the Voting Rights Act to come along, [but] without Selma, it could have taken many, many more years. The Voting Rights Act passed because of the urgency that Selma brought about. Dr. King used to say from time to time, "There's not anything more powerful than the marching feet of a determined people." The American people couldn't stand, they didn't like, what they saw in Selma. Innocent citizens marching in a peaceful, nonviolent fashion, not disturbing anybody, not interfering with traffic, was beaten, teargassed, left bloody and hurt.

And they demanded of the Congress and the President to act and to order a federal jurist named Frank M. Johnson. Young jurist Johnson, a native north Alabaman, use his pen, use his training as a lawyer and as a jury, to issue an order saying, in effect, these people have a right to march, and I'm going to guarantee that right and sign the order. And he said, in effect, if you're to march, if you decide to march again, you can occupy one side of a full lane highway, and only 300 of you should walk on that side of Montgomery.

More of you can walk all the way to Montgomery, and we did it, and Governor Wallace didn't like it.

President Johnson invited Governor Wallace to come to Washington to meet with him, and he did. Governor Wallace could not guarantee that he could protect us or provide protection, so President Johnson called out the military. He used his power, part of the military, part of the United States Army, to protect us on that five-day walk from Selma to Montgomery. To walk into Montgomery on that day, it was like manna from heaven. Because people said we would never make it there and we made it there. And then, when President Johnson signed the act after Congress had passed it, it was a beautiful moment in American history, and that's why we have to go back and pause and remember on the 50th anniversary.

WASNIEWSKI: Thank you so much.

LEWIS: Thank you.

BURNS: Yes, thank you so much, Congressman.

NOTES

¹ Brenda Jones is the Communications Director for Congressman John Lewis, and was present for the interview.