

The modest child of a lower-class farmer, a brave defender of civil rights, and a prominent American councilman are a few of the many manners of which we can characterize the deceased John Lewis

His Truth Is Marching On bestows upon us every little element of an exceptional biography that is worthy of a complete recapitulation. The reader, using this run-through, will be given a closer look into the private and political passage of Lewis. The reader will also encounter how a young Alabamian was motivated to seek equality in the civil rights movement, which he further used as fuel to proceed to move to a position of prominence and strength.

This precise and straightforward report of Lewis's journey uses infinite time spent on interviewing and thorough examination and broadcasting. It provides a spine-tingling anecdote of how history was altered by the convictions and persistence of a single person.

While reading these chapters, you will find out:

the close relativity between Gandhi and Alabama activists;

how history can shift by a mere crossing of a bridge; and

why a powerful protest can be drawn from a simple punch-taking.

## Chapter 1 - John Lewis mastered drawing a bridge between faith and justice while being raised in Alabama.

In August of 1955, Emmet Till, a Black boy of 14, allegedly whistles at a woman of white skin in Money, Mississippi. A group of white people physically castigated him until he was dead and this lynching was not evaluated and corrected.

In December of 1955, Rosa Parks, a Black woman, doesn't let go of her seat on a racially separated bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Despite being prosecuted and fined, she proceeds to guide a boycott on the bus system which lasted for several months.

In February of 1956, Autherine Lucy, a Black woman, attempts to participate in classes conducted by the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. She is assaulted by a white mob and thrown stones and overripe fruit.

American South in the mid-1950s can be summarized like this. Extreme racial injustice and discrimination are seen as standard behavior. On the flip side, it abounded with audacious individuals battling with these infringements of equality rights.

John Lewis was born in the suburbs of Troy, Alabama in February of 1940. His mom and dad worked as tenant farmers and they survived through farming chickens, cotton, and corn.

They had a small-scale house with 3 rooms that didn't have electricity or running water, and aside from the parents, the other members of the family had to help with the toil of farming. Although the circumstances were trying inside the house, the life outside of it was even more demanding

As a consequence of the Jim Crow era, Alabama, similar to other southern states, was loaded with segregation. Blacks had no choice but to utilize inferior, secondary services. They were blocked by more severe obstacles for voting and exposed to minimal security against racist brutality. Lewis was no exception against this bitter truth, who experienced this inequality himself when he observed and compared his worn-out school with the school for white children.

Lewis learned how to find a light of hope through his religious belief. His family was regular participants of the Macedonia African Methodist Episcopal church. On top of the society built within the church and the religious ceremonies, his favorite was preaching. His enthusiasm was so great that he would cite inspiring religious lectures to the chickens on their farm.

His faith was renewed and amplified when he listened to one of Martin Luther King Jr's sermons on the radio for the very first time in 1955. According to King, a real Christian believer would be aware of possible improvements on this life on top of working their way towards heaven, which was the social gospel.

Lewis was mesmerized by King's ideas about battling to achieve justice, equality, and dignity. Taking the King's lessons as an example for the right path, the civil rights movement was slowly being internalized in his mind.

## Chapter 2 - As a student, Lewis learned to apply nonviolence as a protest strategy.

The scene has a very casual beginning in downtown Nashville. A couple of Black students walk into a Woolworth's department store on a Sunday, with their best clothes. They settle down on a counter to get some lunch, which is the start of unpleasant events.

Just like every other public service, the counter is racially separated and the waitress asks them to desert the place – but they refuse to do so. Despite a group of white men assembling, threatening, and cursing them very loudly, they stay put.

The throng got even more heated with anger. Once again, even though they physically abuse them and burn their skin with cigarettes, the Black students don't move. After the arrival of the police the disentanglement of the crowd, the students are arrested and charged for "disorderly conduct"

Coming up with a strategy to express their disapproval of segregation, Lewis and other people in the civil rights movement conduct sit-ins similar to what those students did all through 1960 across the South.

Lewis went after his dream of preaching by participating in American Baptist, an academy based in Nashville. Throughout his research and studies on the social gospel, he had the chance to get to know other students who were in the pursuit of extinguishing segregation with the help of their religious beliefs. However, the path on which they wanted to embark upon to attain justice was unclear.

This unclarity was wiped away when Reverend James Lawson Jr. decided to pay a visit to the school in 1958. Lawson was a devoted pacifist who was taught by Gandhi. He taught Lewis and others that a change in society was attainable through passive resistance in numerous classes that he held for people in the South. He believed that hatred could be answered with love and political alterations could be forcibly earned by peaceful expressions.

A student that was positively and heavily influenced by this movement, whose name was Ella Baker, established the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC in 1960. The SNCC conducted peaceful and silent sit-ins in segregated fields in means of applying Lawson's doctrine. In February of the same year, shortly after joining the organization, he had already started to conduct his sit-ins at lunch counters and movie theaters near Nashville.

Certainly enough, the protests were difficult. A heavy punishment was awaiting Lewis and his crew. Repetitive physical harm was done by the police in the public eye. But that was not the harshest experience of them being reprimanded. A restaurant owner of white skin trapped Lewis and his companion James Bevel inside his place and poured poisonous gas into the air.

Lewis carried on leading and joining these nonviolent protests notwithstanding the perils and physical agony that he was experiencing endlessly. Primitively, these actions were not given attention to. However, their expressions of their disgust against the injustice started leaving a positive influence on people, slowly working their way up to a national level, and finally, turning into a whole movement.

## Chapter 3 - Lewis carried on practicing nonviolence on the Freedom Rides.

You will encounter people of different races and ethnicities if you enter a Greyhound bus station in waiting areas, lunch counters, and public toilets. One place is designed for everyone and they travel next to each other with no trace of distinction between race, gender, or any other thing for that matter. Although this is perceived as the obvious norm, it was a pipe dream in the 1960s.

The United States Supreme Court ordered nationwide travel services such as bus stations to be available for every race in every area and the segregation to come to an end in December of 1960. However, the parts of the South that were still poisoned by Jim Crow laws remained unchanged.

To put the idea into practicality, the SNCC regulated bus trips in 1961. "Freedom Rides" were essentially Black and white activists who would travel the South together and harmonize the other stations for their cause. John Lewis was also a Freedom Rider.

After hearing about the Freedom Ride project in March of 1961, it was of utmost importance for Lewis to offer his alliance. As a result, he went to Washington, DC to participate in one of the initial trips. He was teamed up with Albert Bigelow, a white Quaker when he got to Washington DC. They would take the trip with many other activists up until New Orleans. The primary goal was to bring nonviolence into life from the realm of ideologies.

It would not be shocking that they met obstacles and the first of them was in Rock Hill, South Carolina, which was a key location for the Ku Klux Klan. Lewis and Bigelow faced severe physical harm that was done to them by a group of white locals for attempting to add the bus station's waiting zone to their project. The two were brutally injured, but refused to sue the attackers and gave them something they lacked greatly: compassion and affection.

The counteractions they faced only increased as they went further into the South. A bus was ambushed and set on fire using a bomb by representatives of the Klan just outside Anniston, Alabama. Following that, the Riders were physically attacked by a gang in Birmingham, Alabama. After that, Bull Connor, the extremely racist Commissioner of Public Safety of Birmingham, took the Riders and abandoned them on a random highway with his car. They remained faithful to the plan and went back to their trip the ensuing day.

Once again, the activists succeeded and the Freedom Ride focused attention on the unacceptable racism in the South. The truth of the movement being a real thing solidified when National Guard was sent to them for security by President John F. Kennedy himself out of obvious necessity. What this movement essentially did was bring civil rights issues to the attention of the whole nation. Stopping his activities after this huge milestone was the last thing on Lewis's list to do.

## Chapter 4 - Lewis's activism reached a climax in an intense public speech during the March on Washington.

A random student, an underdog, finds his way through sitting and discussing matters with the President of the United States in the white house from being attacked at bus stations. As absurd as it may sound, this was the story of Lewis's success.

After being chosen as the spokesman of the SNCC in 1963, he accompanied Martin Luther King Jr. and many other important people on a journey to have a meeting with the President himself. And the main matter of concern in this gathering was the March on Washington that was about to happen very soon.

The President's initial reaction was that the message was too bold and way ahead of the time, concerning the unwillingness of many to comply with racial justice. He was also very concerned about the finalization of the Civil Rights Act that was at the risk of being delayed since it was still being weighed in Congress.

King, on the other hand, had a much wider view of the March. He deemed it as essential. Despite him having to sacrifice some small aspects of his plan, he wanted to carry on with the March. He wanted to give Lewis the main speeches since he was mentoring him.

The civil rights movement reached its peak in the summer of 1963. Silent protesting and expressions were still being performed in the US by the SNCC and other groups. Despite all this effort, the South, especially Birmingham, was an exception. Activists were met with pure savagery by the police with trained attack dogs and spraying fire.

Amid all this turbulence, the Kennedy administration was still in the pursuit of passing the 1964 civil rights act, which aimed to nullify segregation and make available equal voting rights to all races, but Congress was too slow to finalize it. The primary goal of March on Washington was to put a strain on legislators for them to work faster and was led by King, Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, and other leaders.

With hundreds of thousands of people participating in it, the March was initiated in August of 1963. The head of SNCC, Lewis, was summoned to give a public speech and it sure was given to the people in the way it was supposed to! He was only 23 years old when he delivered it but his speech was directed towards the people in charge to actualize their pledges to ensure economic and social equality and invited them to cease the prolongation of their operations.

To this day, the March on Washington is known to be the defining event of the civil rights movement. It was not supported by everyone nonetheless. The shocking numbers show that only 25 percent of people supported the march; the ones who didn't approve believed that it would only worsen the situation. In current times, tens of years after that event, truly comprehend and appreciate the valor of Lewis and the other preachers who stepped on that platform to defend their rights.

## Chapter 5 - The turbulent things that happened in 1964 put the civil rights movement under trial.

Lewis, empowered by the March on Washington and full of enthusiasm, decides to go back to Alabama for some time off on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September in 1963. Having rested for a very brief time, he hears the dreadful news: an explosion has occurred in Birmingham.

It was a sickeningly detailed disaster in a Black church in downtown Birmingham. It was a casual Sunday morning and the Ku Klux Klan planted and set off a bomb at the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church which was crowded because of Youth Day. The casualties were everything but light; four little girls were killed and many others were physically hurt.

Even though the movement had come across brutal backlash before, this was the heaviest catastrophe of them all up until then, but the extremity of the attacks did not maximize there. 1964 was one more year of difficulties for Lewis and the other activists.

The civil rights movement experienced a brutal and difficult because of the shockwaves of the March on Washington. The ensuing months comprised of both wins and losses. President Kennedy's assassination in November was waiting in line of tragedies after the bombing of Birmingham in September. 1964 Civil Rights Act was written into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson, or LBJ, in the first July after the previous incidents.

The summer of 1964 for Lewis was indeed a busy one because he was supporting the SNCC Freedom Summer plan to integrate Black voters into the system. It was in Mississippi, which unfortunately was not exempt from another disaster. Three SNCC members were captured and killed in June. The incessant murders enabled the nonviolence ideology to go under reconsideration by the members who were strictly honest to it. Despite some forerunners such as Malcolm X being against nonviolence, Lewis stayed put in his mindset.

Meanwhile, LBJ's allegiance became unreliable. At the same time as supporting and passing the Civil Rights Act, he was very concerned for potential political responses from right-wingers. He was also fearful of Barry Goldwater surpassing him in the next presidential election. The fear came into action when he was urged by activists on the issue of integrated delegations in the 1964 Democratic Convention, and did not back he did not back the initiative. Lewis viewed this as nothing but a sellout.

This situation between Lewis and LBJ worsened when it came to foreign policy. The SNCC publicly condemned the war between the US and Vietnam, which LBJ had started. Pacifists also had a strong feeling about the case because they didn't deem it moral to advocate for civil rights in the US while murdering others outside of the country. Lewis played his part by signing up to oppose this decision diligently.

Nonetheless, Lewis and LBJ kept their unity up to a certain level, since they were both perfectly aware of the importance of their cooperation in the future years.

## Chapter 6 - The voting rights act was greatly and positively influenced by Lewis's march that took place in Selma.

The distance between Selma, a small town in Alabama, and Montgomery, which is the capital of the state, is 45 miles on Highway 80. On a normal day, it's an exhausting path on foot. But on March 7<sup>th</sup> of 1965, it was anything but a mundane day.

On this very day, Lewis and around 600 others made a unanimous decision to pace the whole way to declare their dissatisfaction with the unjust voting obstacles at the expense of Blacks. Alabama's segregationist chief was ready to do anything in his power to halt their activity.

The brutal outcome of his action was "Bloody Sunday", which was a barbaric physical confrontation. The whole country experienced terrible awe and LBJ took matters into his own hands.

Although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had some attempts in putting an end to racism, it wasn't as effective as the activists demanded it to be. Blacks were still outed from voting rights in numerous states in the South by executing unnecessary literacy tests, shutting down registration places in irregular hours, and encouraging voter intimidation. Activists demanded new rights to fortify the system and eradicate minor details that states used to their advantage to evade the law.

The people in charge devised a plan of marching from Selma to Montgomery to intimidate the government into taking action. It's not surprising that although the whole nature of this march was tranquil, it was still met with extreme backlash. Several State Troopers barricaded their route as the marchers wanted to get to the other side of the Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge. The police, using nightsticks, tear gas, and various other ways of physical torture attacked the crowd of men, women, and children without hesitation. Lewis's skull was fractured and he had a concussion, as he was one of the people who were brutally injured.

While the whole US was in a terrible shock, LBJ took positive advantage of this situation to create a more formidable law that would fill the loopholes that segregationists would benefit from to alter the reality of votes. Before the Congress was about to start in the next week of that event, he called out for legislators to take the correct side and fight for just law. The compound of the tension put on the government by the protesters and political manipulation was finally victorious: The Voting Rights Act finally became a part of the law on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August in 1965.

Even though LBJ was the one who finalized the act, he gave all the credit to the brave protestors, who he believed, did the most important part of it. He asked Lewis and others to join him at the White House on the day that the Act was written into the law. First, he praised them for their success. Later on, he wanted John to do something for him. "I'm going to sign this act," he said directly to Lewis. "Now, John, you've got to go back and get all those folks registered."

## Chapter 7 - Lewis integrated the values of hard work and positivism into a lengthy political career.

Throngs of young people are in the streets. They're marching, chanting, and demanding their rights. This isn't Nashville in 1957 or Selma in 1965. This is Washington, DC in 2020.

A few weeks earlier, police in Minneapolis, Minnesota killed a Black man named George Floyd. Now, a new generation of activists is fighting for justice.

Lewis, now in his 80s, is too old to join them. But, early the next morning, he's out on 16th Street NW to survey their work: a huge mural spelling out their message – Black Lives Matter. To Lewis, the sight is heartening. He dedicated his life to striving for justice, and while the work isn't complete, he knows the fight will continue.

After Lewis's success in Selma, the civil rights movement entered a new phase. With basic constitutional rights in place, a new group of activists were eager to fight against the more

subtle and structural forms of racism in society. New leaders, like Stokely Carmichael, took control of the SNCC and pushed beyond quiet nonviolence practices. Instead, they advocated for Black Power and more direct economic reform.

Lewis also adjusted his approach and got more involved with electoral politics. In 1968, he worked on Black voter outreach for Robert Kennedy's presidential campaign. In 1977, he ran for Congress himself and lost. Not one to give up, he won a seat on Atlanta's City Council in 1981. Then, in 1986, he defeated his old friend Julian Bonds to secure a spot in the US House, representing Georgia's 5th Congressional District.

As a congressman, Lewis kept his focus on civil rights and never lost his flare for direct action. As a national politician, he still made time for peaceful demonstrations and was arrested multiple times at protests and sit-ins throughout his career. He was arrested twice at the South African embassy in Washington, DC for protesting apartheid and two more times at the embassy of Sudan for protesting the genocide in Darfur. He even held an extended sit-in at Capitol Hill in favor of immigration reform.

Lewis died on July 17, 2020. Even before he passed, he was recognized as a pivotal figure in American history. At a commemoration of the Selma marches in 2015, President Obama thanked Lewis, saying, "Our job is easier because somebody already got us through that first mile. Somebody already got us over that bridge."

## His Truth Is Marching on: John Lewis and the Power of Hope by Jon Meacham, John Lewis Book Review

John Lewis was an unlikely hero in American history. Born to poor sharecroppers in rural Alabama, he became determined to overturn the injustices of the Jim Crow South. Throughout the 1960s, he and other activists in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee staged a series of nonviolent protests, marches, and sit-ins to push for equal rights. His efforts helped secure the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. He continued his work throughout his long career as a US Representative, fighting for justice until the very end.

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