

Interview with **John Lewis**
November 5, 1985
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Interviewer: James A. DeVinney

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in *bold italics* was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize*.

00:00:02:00

[camera roll 525]

[sound roll 1512]

[slate]

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: [unintelligible]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I'm all set.

00:00:14:00

INTERVIEWER: MEANT TO BRING ALONG A STANDARD RELEASE FOR YOU TO SIGN ALLOWING US TO USE YOUR GRAVEN IMAGE AND ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS. WE FORGOT TO BRING IT BUT WE'LL DROP IT OFF A LITTLE LATER—

Lewis: That's fine.

INTERVIEWER: —SINCE WE'RE IN YOUR OFFICE I ASSUME THAT IT'S ALL RIGHT IF WE TALK TO YOU—

Lewis: That's fine.

INTERVIEWER: OK, WHAT I WOULD LIKE TO DO JOHN LEWIS, WHEN YOU, I'D LIKE TO ASK YOU, WHEN WAS THE FIRST TIME YOU FELT LIKE YOU WERE PART OF A MOVEMENT RATHER THAN JUST AN INDIVIDUAL, BUT PART OF SOMETHING A LITTLE BIT LARGER?

Lewis: During the early part of 1960 I felt that I was involved in, in a real movement in a real crusade to bring about change. I had been involved in a series of nonviolent workshops in the city of Nashville, back in the fall and winter of 1959, but it was not until we start sitting in at lunch counters, at restaurants on a regular basis in downtown Nashville and I guess it was the latter part of February when I was arrested and went to jail for the first time. I knew then that I was involved in more than just a protest action but it was a movement, it was a crusade to bring about changes in American society.

00:01:31:00

INTERVIEWER: ALL RIGHT I'D LIKE TO MOVE FORWARD NOW JUST A COUPLE OF YEARS FROM 1960 TO '63. THERE WAS A DAY IN SELMA CALLED "FREEDOM DAY" AND I'D LIKE TO ASK YOU WHAT BROUGHT THAT ABOUT AND WHAT WAS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF IT?

Lewis: Freedom Day in Selma, Alabama on October 8th, 1963, I believe was a turning point in the civil rights movement. We had witnessed at the March on Washington earlier, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee call for "one man, one vote." We went to Selma to test that idea. We had witnessed the bombing of a church in Birmingham, a, a few weeks earlier where four little girls were killed, and we had made a commitment, we felt we had an obligation, and really a mandate to go to Selma where only about 2.1 percent of the black people of voting age were registered to vote. And on this particular day, hundreds of blacks lined up and stood at the county courthouse for most of the day and at the end of the day only about 5 people had made it in to take the so-called literacy tests. I can never forget that day. We met hostile law enforcement officials, Sheriff Clark and others stood there and later, some of us were arrested. But mostly elderly black men and women stood there all day in line and as several people from the outside observed, James Baldwin, Professor Howard Zinn, a historian, and others, but it was, it was the turning point for the right to vote.

00:03:25:00

INTERVIEWER: LET'S GO FORWARD A COUPLE MORE YEARS THEN TO JANUARY 18TH, 1965 AND I BELIEVE YOU ENCOUNTERED JIM CLARK AGAIN THAT DAY.

Lewis: On January the 18th, 1965 it was my, responsibility to lead a orderly, peacefully, march to the Dallas County courthouse in the heart of Selma, Alabama, for a group of people wanting to register to vote. And Sheriff Clark met us there, he said to me, "John Lewis, you're an outside agitator, and an agitator is the lowest form of humanity." And I said

“Sheriff, I may be an agitator, but I'm not an outsider. I grew up only 90 miles from here. These people invited us to come and we're going to stay here until they are registered to vote.” At that time he began to push and shove some of us and we were arrested and jailed.

00:04:28:00

INTERVIEWER: OK NOW YOU WERE CHAIRMAN OF SNCC I BELIEVE AT THAT TIME, BUT YOU WERE ALSO VERY CLOSE TO THE SCLC. TALK A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOUR DUAL ROLE BETWEEN SNCC AND SCLC.

Lewis: As early as 1962, Martin Luther King, Jr. had invited me to become a board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. As a liaison person between SCLC and the student, the young people in the student movement, particularly in SNCC. I was part of the Nashville Student Movement and the Nashville Student Movement was a part of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. So I served a dual role, I served on the board of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and at the same time I was part of the executive committee of the decision making committee of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And I kept a, I thought, a, a healthy, dialogue, or contact between SCLC and my colleagues within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. I thought it was important, because we saw the Movement as being one movement. SCLC with Dr. King and those of us within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the other organization made up the Movement. We had our differences from time to time, we had our conflicts from time to time. But it was one movement.

00:05:54:00

INTERVIEWER: WELL, NOT EVERYBODY SHARED THAT FEELING THAT IT WAS ALL ONE MOVEMENT AND THERE WERE TENSIONS BETWEEN THE ORGANIZATIONS. THAT MUST HAVE PLACED YOU IN AN AWKWARD SITUATION FROM TIME TO TIME.

Lewis: From time to time, I, I did feel like I was pulled in different directions. I saw Martin Luther King, Jr. really, from the time that I was fifteen years old in the tenth grade in, in 1955 growing up in rural, Alabama, I saw him as a hero, as a symbol, as a leader, and early, long before the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, two years before the sit in, I had developed a, a friendship with Dr. King going back into 1958. And he was like a, a big brother, a good friend. And I never openly or publicly disagreed with him. We did discuss and debate different things from time to time but in a sense he was my friend, he was my symbol, my leader, my hero and at the same time some of my colleagues and friends in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee has different feelings about the action or the position of Dr. King.

00:07:09:00

INTERVIEWER: WE'LL PROBABLY COME BACK AND TALK ABOUT THAT AGAIN A LITTLE BIT MORE, I WOULD LIKE TO KIND OF GO FORWARD TO THE

DECISION THAT SNCC MADE NOT TO TAKE PART IN THAT CAMPAIGN OR THAT MARCH FROM SELMA TO MONTGOMERY. THERE WAS THIS PERIOD OF MEETINGS ABOUT THAT I BELIEVE.

Lewis: Well, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had been involved in Selma long before 1965. I believe SNCC first went into Selma in 1962. Selma is part of a, as many of us came to know, a symbol of resistance. It's in the heart of the black belt. People live there with a great deal of fear—had a mean vicious sheriff in the person of, of Sheriff Clark. And people had worked very hard to organize people. We had had sit-ins at restaurants and lunch counters. People had organized efforts to, to register to vote. And early part of 1965 after the Selma campaign got under way, the campaign spread out in other parts of the black belt of Alabama. Jimmie Lee Jackson, a young black man was shot and killed for participating in a peaceful, nonviolent protest in a bedroom county, Perry county in the town of Marion, Alabama, only about thirty or thirty-five miles from Selma. And he was shot as he was leading this demonstration and he later died in a local hospital in Selma. And we made the decision, at least some people in SCLC and others made the decision that we should have a march. That there should be some type of protest from Selma to Montgomery. The first idea was that we should take the body of Jimmie Lee Jackson, to Montgomery and later it was decided that we should have a peaceful, nonviolent march, from Selma to Montgomery fifty miles away. On a Saturday night, March 6, SNCC Executive Committee, the decision makers in SNCC along with myself met in an all night meeting in Atlanta at a local restaurant in the basement of this restaurant debating whether we should participate in, in the march. And it was the decision of the Coordinating Committee, the decision makers that made up the Executive Committee of the Coordinating Committee that we shouldn't, participate in this march. Some people felt that a lot of people would get hurt. Some people started saying the SCLC would go there and have this march and they would leave town, and the people would be left, holding the bag. I took the position that the young people and people not so young that we had been working with, the elderly black men and women in the heart of the black belt, that we have been working with for many years now, for more than three years, wanted to march and we should be there with them. And the decision was made that if I wanted to go I could go as an individual but not as a representative of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. So I made the decision with three other members of that committee to leave Atlanta, early Sunday morning and we drove to Selma and slept on the floor of the, the Freedom House in Selma and got up later that morning and met with Andrew Young, Hosea Williams of SCLC and James Bevel of SCLC. At the Brown Chapel AME church and decided to participate. I felt I had an obligation, I had—

00:11:01:00

[wild audio]

Lewis: —gone to jail in Selma on several occasions—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WE'RE ABOUT TO RUN OUT.

[cut]

00:11:08:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 526]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED AND MARK.

[sync]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK JIM IT'S ALL YOURS.

00:11:19:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, I'D LIKE TO MOVE FORWARD JUST A LITTLE BIT MORE ON THAT SUNDAY UNTIL YOU ARE ACTUALLY OUT THERE ON THE MARCH YOU'VE MADE A STATEMENT WHICH WILL PROBABLY BE ON FILM OR WE, WE HAVE ANOTHER OPTION. BUT WE HAVE GOTTEN YOU UP TO PETTUS BRIDGE. I WOULD LIKE YOU TO DESCRIBE FROM THE MOMENT WHEN YOU ARRIVED AT PETTUS BRIDGE AND STARTED TO CROSS, WHAT, WHAT YOU SAW, WHAT YOU FELT.

Lewis: When we arrived at the apex of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, we saw a, a sea of blue, Alabama state troopers. About six hundred of us walking in twos. It was a very peaceful, orderly protest. And the moment we got in I guess, hearing distance or shouting distance of the state troopers, we heard one state trooper identify himself as Major John Cloud, and he said, "I'm Major John Cloud, this is an unlawful march, it will not be allowed to continue. I'll give you three minutes to disperse and go back to your church." And I would say in about a minute and, and a half he said, "Troopers, advance." And we saw the state troopers, members of Sheriff Clark, pars—posse on horseback from the Sheriff Department with bull whips coming toward us and they began to—

[chimes playing in background]

Lewis: trample us with bull whips and beat us down.

00:12:57:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: EXCUSE ME, EXCUSE ME. I'M GETTING CHIMES.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: CHIMES.

[cut]

00:13:02:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED. MARK.

[sync tone]

00:13:11:00

INTERVIEWER: OK PICK IT UP WITH WHERE THEY WERE ADVANCING ON YOU.

Lewis: The troopers came toward us with clubs—

[church chimes playing in background]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: [LAUGHING] EXCUSE ME, MORE CHIMES AGAIN.

[cut]

00:13:23:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND MARK IT.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK JIM IT'S ALL YOURS.

00:13:30:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, WE PICK IT UP WITH THE TROOPERS ADVANCING ONE MORE TIME.

Lewis: The troopers came toward us with billy clubs, tear gas, bull whips trampling us with, with horses. I felt like it was the last demonstration, it was the last—protest on my part, like I was going to take my last breath from the, from the tear gas. I saw people rolling, heard people screaming and hollering, we couldn't go forward, if we tried to go forward we would have gone into the heat of battle, we couldn't go to the side, to the left or to the right, we would have been going over into the Alabama river, so we were beaten back down the streets of Selma, back downtown to the Brown Chapel, AME church. I don't know to this day, how I made it back to the church. I do remember being in the church and, and making a statement to the crowd that assembled there and I said something to the effect that I don't understand how President Johnson can send troops to Vietnam and can send troops to the Congo or to San Domingo and cannot send troops to Selma, Alabama to protect black people who want the right to register to vote, to participate in the democratic process.

00:15:04:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW YOU WERE ALSO INJURED THAT DAY YOU WERE BEATEN. DO YOU REMEMBER BEING HIT?

Lewis: I was hit by a club and later after going back to the church I was trans, transported to the Good Samaritan Hospital in downtown Selma. I had a concussion and I stayed in a hospital there for three days.

INTERVIEWER: OK LET'S STOP NOW I THINK—

00:15:33:00

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK JIM IT'S ALL YOURS.

00:15:42:00

INTERVIEWER: OK I'D LIKE TO ASK YOU STILL A LITTLE BIT MORE ABOUT PETTUS BRIDGE. ON EVERY DEMONSTRATION THERE WAS ALWAYS MUSIC, THERE WAS ALWAYS PRAYER. BUT THE THING THAT'S OUTSTANDING ABOUT PETTUS BRIDGE IS THAT EVERYONE STOOD THERE ABSOLUTELY SILENTLY. WHY WAS THAT TIME SO DIFFERENT?

Lewis: Well, we, we felt and we, we sort of passed the word that it would be a, a silent protest. When the major gave the order that we turn back and go to the church, that it was an unlawful march, I communicated with Hosea Williams that we just stand here and we stood in a very orderly, very peaceful fashion. It was the best way to bear witness to what we felt so strongly about.

00:16:32:00

INTERVIEWER: LET'S JUST QUICKLY OPEN THE DOOR AND ASK THEM IF THEY'LL HOLD THEIR CONVERSATION DOWN.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WE HEAR YOU.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK. THEY'RE STILL TALKING.

00:16:48:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, WOULD YOU LIKE TO JUST PICK UP WHERE YOU WERE

THERE?

Lewis: This was a [sic] orderly, peaceful nonviolent protest. After Major Cloud gave the order, that the march should go back to the church, that it was an unlawful march, we felt the strongest way, the most effective way, to bear witness to the truth was to stand there in a prayerful silent manner and we stood until we were beaten, tear gassed and, and knocked down.

00:17:26:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT, WHAT WAS GOING THROUGH YOUR MIND AS YOU STOOD THERE DURING THAT TIME WHEN MAJOR CLOUD IS CALLING THE MINUTES OFF, WHAT, WHAT WENT THROUGH YOUR MIND?

Lewis: Well, I had no idea that, that, that we would be beaten, that we would be trampled or tear gassed. I thought we all would be arrested and jailed. But you come to that point, and I think it's very much in keeping with the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence, that in spite of the fears or the misgiving or the reservations you may have, you tend to lose that sense of fear, and you keep your eyes on the prize, and you keep moving, toward the goal. We saw Major Cloud, I did at least, and I think others of us did as, as being victims, really, of the system. We wanted to make it to Montgomery, to dramatize the right to vote.

00:18:24:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, NOW YOU WERE IN THE HOSPITAL AFTER YOUR INJURY AND I THINK PROBABLY THE SAME DAY THAT YOU CAME OUT WAS THE DAY OF TURN-AROUND TUESDAY. EVEN THOUGH YOU WEREN'T PART OF THAT ACTUAL MARCH YOU HEARD A LOT OF THE REACTION TO IT AND I KNOW THAT SNCC WAS VERY UPSET WITH DOCTOR KING. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THAT?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: LET ME JUST SHIFT A LITTLE BIT HERE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK.

Lewis: On Tuesday following Bloody Sunday, Martin Luther King Jr. along with hundreds of ministers, priests, rabbis and other religious leaders, civil rights leaders marched from Brown Chapel Church to the Edmund Pettus Bridge and they were met also, by several state troopers. They made the decision, Martin Luther King Jr. made the decision to turn back. I think it's in keeping with the philosophy of the movement. There's nothing wrong with retreating for a moment or retreating for a day. Some people in my old organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and others felt that Dr. King should have tried to continue the march across the bridge on from Selma to Montgomery. But I felt in a real sense the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, as an organization lost the right to criticize that particular action. Because as an organization we never supported the march in the first place.

00:19:59:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, ALL RIGHT NOW, FOLLOWING THAT TIME, OF COURSE SNCC WENT OFF AND DID THE MARCH IN MONTGOMERY, BUT YOU CONTINUED TO WORK WITH SCLC, I BELIEVE TRYING TO OVERCOME THIS INJUNCTION THAT JUDGE JOHNSON HAD PLACED ON THE, ON THE MARCH. CAN YOU TALK A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOUR WORK IN THE DEALING WITH JUDGE JOHNSON?

Lewis: Well, I felt it was very important really, for us to have a, a orderly, peaceful protest from Selma to Montgomery and if necessary we had to go to federal court in Montgomery to the U.S. District Court before Judge Johnson to get the necessary order to lift the injunction, to prohibit the officials from the state of Alabama—people like Governor Wallace, Sheriff Clark, Public Safety Director, Al Lingo from interfering with that effort. Because what happened on Sunday, March 7th, 1965 there had been such a reaction on the part of the American people there was a sense of righteous indignation and I felt it was just a matter of time that we would be able to march all the way from Selma, to Montgomery and so I stayed in Selma and commuted almost daily, between Selma and Montgomery to testify, or to be a witness in the federal district court there. And I'll never forget one day during the hearing when Judge Johnson saw the film footage of what happened on Bloody Sunday, and he shook it, pulled up his robe, and shook his robe and asked for a recess. I knew then that we had the order that we would be able to march from Selma to Montgomery. And we literally wrote the conditions, Hosea Williams, Andrew Young, Jack Greenberg and others of us met in a hotel room in, in Montgomery and laid down the procedure, how many people will be marching, what side of the road we would use. And it was accepted by the court.

00:22:12:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET'S STEP DOWN FOR JUST A MOMENT, JOHN.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK CAMERA ROLL WAS JUST ABOUT TO RUN OUT.

[cut]

00:22:18:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 527]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: HAVE SPEED AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK JIM IT'S ALL YOURS.

00:22:30:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. I THINK SOME, ANOTHER MEMBER OF SNCC WHO WAS CRITICAL THROUGH MUCH OF THIS WAS JAMES FOREMAN. I WONDER IF YOU CAN KIND OF TALK TO ME ABOUT YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO HIM, JIM FOREMAN, PLEASE.

Lewis: Well, Jim was the Executive Secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during that period, I was serving as the chairperson of SNCC. We had a very good working relationship, without any doubt, but during that period we did have our differences. I really think and this is somewhat maybe hindsight, but I think I had a better understanding of the philosophy and the discipline of, of nonviolence. Jim was very protective of the organization, of SNCC. He wanted to be sure that SNCC got its rightful place. He didn't want to see us overshadowed by another organization or any of the leaders overshadowed by others.

00:23:34:00

INTERVIEWER: OF COURSE PART OF THIS IS BASED ON THE NEED TO RAISE MONEY AND I THINK THAT YOU DID END UP BEING PART OF A FUNDRAISING CAMPAIGN THAT WASN'T FOR SNCC.

Lewis: Well, there was a, a great deal of it and people became very concerned about that, the fact that a few days after, maybe two or three days after Bloody Sunday my picture appeared in an ad in the *New York Times* with a coupon for another organization. And some people in SNCC was very incensed about that and very troubled by it.

00:24:06:00

INTERVIEWER: OF COURSE AFTER THIS PARTICULAR YEAR, SNCC SORT OF WENT OFF IN A WHOLE NEW DIRECTION AND THE, THE ORGANIZATION REALLY STARTED TO CHANGE FOREVER. DID YOU HAVE ANY SENSE AT THAT TIME IN SELMA THAT MAYBE SNCC WAS GOING THROUGH A CHANGE THAT WOULD FOREVER AFFECT ITS COURSE AND MAYBE FOREVER AFFECT THE MOVEMENT?

Lewis: Well, I think we saw it Selma, we saw the beginning of something, we saw the beginning and maybe it didn't really start there, but it, we saw an increase of the, the desire on the part of some people to move SNCC in a different direction. I remember very early during the Selma crisis at a speech I made to the SNCC staff saying in effect that we are the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, that we are not the American Friends Service Committee, that we are not SDS, or NSA or these other organizations, but we are the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and we had a mission. Even then the whole question of black consciousness, was growing within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Many of the young people, in SNCC, many of the young men in particular were facing the

draft. The whole question of who make [sic] decision, we went through a period of what I called, and some other people called during those days, a “freedom high period.” Everybody got high on freedom. No one wanted to be told what to do or how to do it, we had a group of SNCC field secretaries. People didn't want to be told you go to southwest Georgia or you go to the delta Mississippi or you to to eastern Arkansas or the eastern port in North Carolina. There was a rebellion against the leadership. People wanted group leadership that we have—SNCC went through this whole thing of, of consensus, that you just sort of talk it out, and we had these long, drawn out meetings that went on for hours trying to arrive at a decision. And Foreman from time to time would lead a song “Will the circle be broken, [sic]” and, and he would use a phrase that, “We are a band of brothers, and sisters.” And I think within SNCC there was a great sense of family without a doubt, because we, those of us, the young people, black and white, we really became a family. And from—during that period, to a certain degree I felt that the only real integration, the only true integration, the true community that existed in a sense in America existed in the Movement. And I felt during that period that SNCC was the essence of that family, it was the essence of, of moving toward the beloved community. But that so-called beloved community and that so-called family began to shatter more and more during late '65 and early 1966.

00:27:18:00

INTERVIEWER: LET ME, MENTION A FEW NAMES, I'D JUST LIKE TO GET YOUR REACTIONS TO THESE PEOPLE. YOU'VE COMMENTED ON JIM CLARK ALREADY, CAN YOU TELL ME JUST A LITTLE BIT MORE ABOUT JIM CLARK?

Lewis: Jim Clark was an unusual man, I think he was frightened, troubled man. Big, a great deal of insecurity because he would come and stand with a gun on, on his hip, a, a nightstick in, in one hand, and electric cattle prodder in another hand. And we were unarmed. Only armed with a dream, and he would be standing there, trembling, shaking, and saying all type of evil things about us and doing those type of things and commanding his troopers to do different things, but he was a very troubled person I think. He was vicious; some of the things that he did I, I don't know how any human being could do it really. I will never forget the day he sent several young children, elementary school age children, on a forced march outside of Selma, saying, “If you want to march now, march!” And he just got behind these young people and forced them to run down a highway.

00:28:43:00

INTERVIEWER: A LITTLE PLEASANTER PERSON TO TALK ABOUT, MRS. BOYNTON.

Lewis: Mrs. Boynton is a beautiful, charming woman, unsung person really because she, she was the, the bedrock, the foundation really for the Selma Movement. She had emerged as a leader in her own right. An indigenous businesswoman, with tremendous amount of respect, for, for the people of Selma. She was the one that was responsible for us being there, SNCC people and later for the SCLC people and Dr. King for being there.

00:29:27:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. GEORGE WALLACE.

Lewis: George Wallace, he was governor, a person in my estimation who used the question of race to further his own political stock. I think George Wallace did so much during that period, to fan the flame of racism, the flames of division. He didn't pull the trigger in Alabama, he didn't bomb a church or school or home, but what he said, what he did, I think, inspired people. He created the climate, he created the atmosphere for the bombing, for the shootings, for the killings, for the jailing.

00:30:25:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: I'M GETTING READY TO ROLL OUT, SORRY.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

[cut]

00:30:29:00

[change to sound roll 1518]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED AND—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

00:30:38:00

INTERVIEWER: OK A COUPLE MORE NAMES HERE, SHEYANN WEBB.

Lewis: Sheyann Webb. I remember Sheyann Webb-attractive young lady who got involved early and stayed involved, beautiful young lady.

INTERVIEWER: JOHN DOAR.

Lewis: John Doar. I remember John Doar many years, for many years I've-he's an unusual public servant really.

00:31:14:00

INTERVIEWER: HOW SO?

Lewis: John Doar I would never forget. This man in 1961 during the Freedom Ride in

Montgomery, Alabama, John Doar was a, was a, I guess a hangover or a leftover from the Eisenhower administration I believe. He was there, tall, lanky, he was just there. He was on the scene. You can call him at his home, at the Department of Justice, any time of day any time of night. Maybe he didn't give you the answer that you wanted, but at least he would listen. I would never forget on one occasion during the Freedom Ride he said after we had been beaten at the Greyhound bus station in Montgomery. He said, "Don't talk to anybody; don't talk to any law enforcement agency. Don't talk to the FBI. Just state people until you talk with me."

00:32:14:00

INTERVIEWER: OK NOW I THINK WE'RE CLOSE TO THE END THE FILM ROLL HERE, JOHN.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: YOU'VE GOT ROOM FOR ONE MORE.

Lewis: OK, I'D JUST LIKE TO COMMENT ON, PEOPLE SAID THROUGH ALL THESE CAMPAIGNS YOU WERE ALWAYS VERY OPTIMISTIC. WHERE DID THAT OPTIMISM COME FROM, JOHN?

Lewis: I think that sense of optimism, that sense of hope came out of the philosophy of the movement, but Martin Luther King, Jr. really gave us a sense of hope, a sense of optimism. Dr. King in a real sense gave many of us, many young blacks and whites that grew up in the South a way out. You had, in order to be involved, in order not to lose your sense of control, you had to have hope to keep on keeping on, really. There's no way to give up. You know, I took the position during the early 60s that—

[audio cut]
[wild audio]

Lewis: —the struggle that we were involved in was not a struggle that lasts for one day, or one week, or a few months or a few years.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK WE'RE JUST RUNNING OUT.

[cut]

00:33:23:00

[change to camera roll 528]
[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: I HAVE SPEED AND MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: — LET'S LET MICHAEL STEP OUT. GO AHEAD.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: LET'S SEE, WHERE WERE WE?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: YOU BETTER PICK THAT ONE UP AGAIN JOHN, OR—

00:33:35:00

INTERVIEWER: YEAH, PICK IT UP WITH WHERE YOU WERE SAYING YOU TOOK THE PHILOSOPHY IN THE EARLY '60S.

Lewis: I came to understand the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence during the early '60s. That in order to be really involved and not to lose control of yourself, and one on perspective, really, you must take a long hard look, I think Dr. King taught us, that in a real sense, that you must have faith, that you must have a sense of hope. He gave us a way out, he gave us a sense of hope. The Movement instilled in me that sense of hope, that sense of faith, that sense of optimism. It doesn't matter really how many bombings, how many beatings, or how many jailings, and I did go to jail during that period, forty times, but you had to have that sense of faith, that sense of hope that you could overcome, you could make this society something different, something better, and I came to the conclusion that our struggle is not one that lasts for one day, one week or a few months or a few years, but it's a struggle of a lifetime, of many lifetimes, if that's what it takes to build the beloved community, the open society.

00:34:55:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET'S SWING OVER TO WASHINGTON DC, AND YOU WERE INVOLVED IN SOME OF THE EARLY MEETINGS WITH A. PHILIP RANDOLPH AND SOME OF THE OTHERS TO PLAN THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON. CAN YOU DESCRIBE ONE OF THOSE EARLY MEETINGS FOR US?

Lewis: The very first meeting that I attended where the March on Washington was mentioned was in mid-June of 1963, June 21, 1963 at a meeting in the White House with President Kennedy. And A. Philip Randolph, the dean of black leadership, one of the so-called Big Six said in this meeting in his baritone voice, "Mr. President, the masses are restless and we're gonna march on Washington." I think President Kennedy was somewhat taken back and somewhat concerned that we were gonna have a march on Washington. He said, "How you gonna control it, bringing all these people to, to Washington?" Mr. Randolph spoke up and said again, "Mr. President, we're going to march on Washington." And he went on to say it would be a nonviolent, peaceful protest. And we came out of the meeting with President Kennedy out of the White House and made an announcement that we would be calling people together to plan the March on Washington. We didn't meet again until July 2nd, '63, in New York City where the six of us met over lunch, and whether we—where we made the decision that we would issue the call for the March and invited four distinguished, white religious and labor leaders to be a part of, of that effort. Between July 2nd, '63 and August 28th, '63, we were able to mobilize the country in such a fashion to bring more than 250

thousand Americans, black and white, to the Capital, to demand strong civil rights legislation.

00:37:05:00

INTERVIEWER: LET'S MOVE FOWARD TO THAT DAY, YOU GAVE A SPEECH THAT DAY AND BEFORE YOU MADE THE SPEECH SOME EDITING TOOK PLACE IN IT. WHAT WAS EDITED AND WHY?

Lewis: We all, well all ten of us were asked to prepare a short speech. I had prepared a speech with the assistance and support of my colleagues in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a speech that I thought reflected our concerns, our ideas. The night before the march, the Communication Director for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Senator Julian Bond, Julian Bond then.

[car horns in background]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: EXCUSE ME, CAN WE CUT.

[cut]

00:37:53:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: LET'S MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: I HAVE SPEED AND MARK.

[sync tone]

00:38:02:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, JULIAN BOND—

Lewis: Julian Bond, the Communication Director of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was asked to make copies of my statement, available to the other march leaders. And somehow and someday, Bayard Rustin, who was the deputy director of the March on Washington, got word from some of the other leaders, religious leaders that they were concerned about my speech and they wanted certain things changed. *In the first part of the speech, I said something like, we cannot support the proposed bill being introduced or being presented by President Kennedy, for it was too little and too late* and it wouldn't protect people involved in peaceful nonviolent demonstration. I went on to talk about one man, one vote, was the African cry, it is ours too, it must be ours, because while I was working on my speech I saw a group of women in what then was Northern Rhodesia and what is now Zambia, carrying signs saying one man, one vote. And I said in the speech, "One man, one vote' is the African cry, it is ours too, it must be ours." President Kennedy took the position and the people in his administration took the position that if you had a sixth

grade education you should be considered literate and then you should be able to register to vote. We disagreed with that, we felt that the southern states had denied people a right to a decent education and now it's wrong for them to come back and say you must be able to pass a literacy test in order to be able to register to vote. There was another part of the speech where I said "We are involved in a serious revolution, the masses are restless." And some people didn't like that. They didn't like to use the word "revolution," the use of the word "masses" or "masses." And another part of the speech said that "The party of Kennedy is the party of Eastland, the party of Rockefeller is the party of Goldwater, where is our party?" And the speech went on to say something like "The day may come when we will not confine our marching on Washington, where we may be forced to march through the South the way Sherman did, nonviolently." And I understand that the Archbishop of Washington, DC wanted that changed, he thought it was inflammatory and people just objected to certain segments of my speech.

00:40:43:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU RESPONDED TO MR. RANDOLPH AT THIS TIME I BELIEVE.

Lewis: Well, we made some changes that evening before the march and we left certain things in the speech and the next day at the beginning of the ceremony, there was still some concern and A. Philip Randolph said, "John, we've come this far together, let's stay together. Will you make these changes for the sake of staying together for the sake of unity?" And, but some people still objected to the use of the word "revolution" or the use of the word "masses." And Mr. Randolph says, "You know, there's nothing wrong with the use of the word 'revolution,' there's nothing wrong with the use of the word 'masses,' I use it myself sometime." And we made the changes, the necessary changes and the march went on.

00:41:35:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN SO MANY CAMPAIGNS DURING YOUR CAREER. IS THERE ANY PARTICULAR MEMORY THAT IS OUTSTANDING, STANDS ABOVE THE OTHERS?

Lewis: I can never forget Selma. Selma in, in a sense was, in my estimation one of the finest hours in the history of the civil rights movement. The March on Washington we, we left the front line, we left the battlefield and went to Washington, we went to the seat of the national government to, to petition. But in Selma, we had a response from the American people. People came there, the days after Bloody Sunday, there was demonstration, nonviolent protests in more than eighty major cities in America. People didn't like what they saw happening there. There was a sense that we had to do something that we had to do it now. We literally, in my estimation, wrote the Voting Rights Act with our blood and with our feet, on the streets of Selma, Alabama and the high—and Highway 80 between Selma and Montgomery. See, we had been told by President Johnson a few months earlier, that it was impossible, it would just be impossible to get another Civil Rights Act, we had just signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Dr. King said, we, we will write it. And he literally brought the moral forces of to Selma and he used it to educate the American community and get a

President and a Congress to say yes when they probably had the desire to say no.

00:43:21:00

INTERVIEWER: HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN YOU FINALLY GOT TO MONTGOMERY THAT DAY AND HEARD DR. KING'S SPEECH?

Lewis: It was a great feeling to, to be in Montgomery, the capital of the confederate. To, to stand there where Jeff Davis stood, more than a hundred years ago, to, to stand where Wallace stood back in 1963 and said, "Segregation now, segregation forever more." And, and to stand there with more than twenty thousand people, who said that we would never make it there, and to listen to Martin Luther King Jr., it was a, it was a moving feeling. I knew the ending was just a matter of time that we would get the Voting Rights Act.

00:44:07:00

INTERVIEWER: I THINK WE NEED TO STEP DOWN HERE, I THINK WE MAY HAVE JUST RUN OUT OF QUESTIONS AND THIS, THIS, SHOULD WE JUST CONFIRM, MAKE SURE WE'VE COVERED ALL THE BASES?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: YEAH WE SHOULD—

[cut]

00:44:15:00

[slate]

[change camera roll to 529]

INTERVIEWER: —THIS GUY, HE'S GONNA GIVE US A HARD TIME HERE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

[sync tone]

00:44:2:00

INTERVIEWER: EVERYBODY SAYS YOU'RE A NICE GUY JOHN BUT I'M NOT SO SURE. WE WOULD LIKE TO ASK YOU ABOUT, NOT THE ARRIVAL AT MONTGOMERY, NOT THE START OF THE MARCH, BUT WE WOULD LIKE TO ASK YOU ABOUT WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO WALK ALONG THAT ROAD, WHAT DID YOU THINK ABOUT IT? I MEAN, YOU WERE OUT ON THE ROAD FOR FIVE DAYS WALKING, WHAT DID YOU THINK ABOUT THOSE—DURING THOSE DAYS?

Lewis: It was one of the most moving and really exciting moments, really, the drama of it all, to, to literally, to walk and I walked, I was very happy really, honored, to be able to walk with the, the people that participated in that effort, with Martin Luther King Jr. and other, and I think we all walked that day, those days really with a sense of pride and with a sense of dignity. I will never forget, there was a little song that one of the guys would sing. "Pick em up, put 'em down all the way from Selma town." It was like a, a holy crusade, it was like Gandhi's march to the sea really. You felt it was something ab—it, it was something in the air, it was something within all of us that sort of pushed us, that took us along. You didn't get tired, you really didn't get weary. You had to go, it was, it was, more than an ordinary march, ***to me there was never a march like this one before, there hasn't been one since. It was the, it was the, a sense of community moving there and as you walked you saw people coming, waving, bringing you food or bringing you something to drink. You saw the power of the, the most powerful country on the face of the earth***, the United States government. The United States military in a sense providing protection for this nonviolent crusade. It was almost a contradiction really, that these unarmed, few, nonviolent soldiers really, some of us carrying a book, an apple, an orange or something in a bag. Being guarded by men with guns and riding jeeps.

00:46:48:00

INTERVIEWER: THERE WERE ALSO SOME PEOPLE ON THE WAY WHO HECKLED YOU, THERE WERE ALSO PEOPLE WHO WOULD—OBVIOUSLY YOU MET A LOT OF RESISTANCE AND VIOLENCE AND YOU MENTIONED JIM CLARK SEEMED TO BE AFRAID EVEN THOUGH HE WORE HIS GUN. WHAT WERE WHITE PEOPLE AFRAID OF? WHY WAS THERE SO MUCH RESISTANCE TO WHAT WAS YOU WERE AFTER?

Lewis: I think people like Jim Clark, Sheriff Clark and others feared the change, the possibility of change and a fear of the unknown. It was, I think we had the feeling that there must be something very powerful, something very mighty about what we call the vote and people didn't want to turn it loose, they didn't want to share it. I think Sheriff Clark and the other elected officials and many white people in Selma and other parts of Alabama and the South had this tremendous fear that maybe black people would get the vote and we would do the same thing to them that they had been doing all along. I don't know but it was a fear of the unknown. Because you know all along, during that period we continued to preach the whole idea of building what those of us in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee called it at that time an "interracial democracy." That we felt somehow and some way that we could use the vote to transform the South and bring the South together and not further divide the South.

00:48:24:00

INTERVIEWER: THROUGH ALL OF THE MOVEMENT THERE WAS ALWAYS A LOT OF MUSIC THERE WAS A LOT OF PRAYER, A STRONG SENSE OF SPIRITUALITY THAT SEEMED TO PULL EVERYONE TOGETHER, CAN YOU TALK TO THAT A LITTLE BIT?

Lewis: The Movement in a real sense during those early days was almost like a religious phenomenon really. We were greatly influenced by the black church, many of the leaders that emerged came out of the church it was this sense that what we were doing was in keeping with our faith, with our religious beliefs. The philosophy, the discipline of nonviolence, the whole idea of love, the beloved community, an open society. And Martin Luther King Jr. preached and talked a great deal about redeeming the very soul of America. We were not out to, to destroy, but, but to redeem, to save, to preserve the very best in America and to call upon the very best in all of us to respond. Without the songs, without that sense of spirit, I don't think we would have made it. During the, some of those hectic, difficult moments, some of those dark days, of when we were being arrested, or when we were being isolated or when we were being put in, in certain cells, in jail and isolated or what we called being put in the tank, you had to sing a song, you had to pray a prayer. And sometime you used music as a means of communication, the mean to reach out to other people in a particular demonstration or others in a jail cell, that you couldn't see, but you could communicate through a song.

00:50:21:00

INTERVIEWER: AND HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN SOMEONE DIED—JIMMIE LEE JACKSON, REVEREND REEB, VIOLA LIUZZO, HOW DID YOU FEEL?

Lewis: Well, I felt very troubled and, and, and very sad on several occasions. I would never forget the, the murder of the three young men in Mississippi during the summer of 1964. Others that were shot or killed Jimmie Lee Jackson, or Viola Liuzzo, or Reverend Reeb, or the young girls in Birmingham. *I just thought during that period it was just too much, too much, too many, too many funerals and some of us would say, "how many more?"* But in a real sense people with courage and dignity some of them paid the supreme sacrifice really, paid the supreme price. It was troublesome and it was, it was a very low moment for many of us, a very dark and lonely hours, because in a real sense we felt a great sense of responsibility. In the summer of 1964, I had traveled around the country recruiting young people to participate in the Mississippi Summer Project, really starting late '63, and the early '64, the spring of '64, so you felt a sense of responsibility about what happened in Mississippi or what happened in Selma.

INTERVIEWER: OK. LET'S STEP DOWN.

[cut]

[end interview]

00:52:01:00

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