



Photo by John Harrington Photography

# WALKING INTO HISTORY

From his march from Selma to Montgomery, to the steps of the Capitol Building, John Lewis has played a vital role in the history of the Civil Rights Movement. Today, he continues to be a voice for people of all races and backgrounds

By Mary Welch

As the 110th Congress took its seat last month, John Lewis (D-Ga., fifth district) couldn't help but think back to his beginnings. "If my fellow Freedom Riders were told I would end up in Congress, they'd say you were crazy," he says, sneaking a laugh. "They would never have believed it. The first time I went to Washington D.C. was in 1963 and I was 23 and traveled with Martin Luther King for the March on Washington. And today I had a reserved seat on the floor of the House for the State of the Union address. It's amazing the changes and distances we have seen and traveled."

But today, Lewis not only is a 10-term member of the House, he's also the Senior Chief Deputy Whip of the Democratic Party, second in command under Whip Jim Clyburn.

Even more powerful – and important – is his new position as chairman of

seen anyone possess more of it, and use it for any better purpose and to any greater effect than John Lewis."

"He has been a great leader throughout his years in Congress, and he continues to provide tireless efforts in fighting for the Civil Rights of all races of people and ethnic backgrounds," says Charles Steele, Jr., national president and CEO, Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

### Man with a conscience

Called the "conscience of the U.S. Congress" by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, Lewis is now an integral part of the Democratic leadership. He is just settling into his position as well as becoming comfortable with the new power that comes from being the dominant party. "I will continue to be quite involved on big issues," he says, "but we must resolve the conflict in Iraq. We must move to a

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- **– John Lewis**

the House Ways & Means Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation. He is a member of the full committee of the House Ways & Means Committee and a member of the Subcommittee on Human Resources and the Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support.

So what's his secret?

Alexis Scott, publisher of the *Atlanta Daily World*, says it's that "he has so much humility and he is so dedicated to serving his 'beloved community.' He just has staying power. He'll speak up when he needs to but he'll be the first to call everyone to the table and say we can work it out. He's had a remarkable journey from being a poor kid preaching to the chickens to the steps of the House of Congress. He's a great spokesman for the people."

Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.) also is a fan. "I've seen courage in action on many occasions," McCain says. "I can't say I've

political solution because I don't think a military solution is possible. But we are so pre-occupied – and rightly so – with this crisis. Every city, town and hamlet in this country is feeling the impact of the way. It's sapping our energy – this loss of life."

Lewis visits the returning soldiers, including those in the hospitals. "It's painful seeing the maimed and injured," he says. "We've got to get this war behind us. We are spending billions of dollars and that money could do so much in our cities and around the world. It's Vietnam all over again."

As chairman of the Subcommittee of Oversight Committee, Lewis knows there will be challenges. "We're going to look at every tax, every organization and every foundation to see how much money is awarded to the causes and how much was spent elsewhere," he says. "There is an unbelievable tax gap. There is \$350

## The John Lewis Files

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100 Peachtree Street, Northwest  
Suite 1920  
Atlanta, GA 30303  
Phone: 404-659-0116  
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### Personal Bio

Wife: Lillian Miles; Son, John Miles.  
Birth Date: 02/21/1940  
Birthplace: Troy, AL  
Home: Atlanta, GA  
Religion: Baptist

### Education

BA, Religion, Philosophy, Fisk University, 1963  
BA, Theology, American Baptist Theological Seminary, 1961

### Professional Experience

Community Affairs Director,  
National Consumer Cooperative Bank, 1980-1982  
Director, ACTION Federal Volunteer Agency, 1977

### Political Experience

- Representative, United States House of Representatives, 1987-present
- Councilman, Atlanta City Council, 1982-1986
- Sought Democratic Nomination, United States House of Representatives for Special Election, 1977
- Senior Chief Deputy Minority Whip, United States House of Representatives.

### Organizations

- Chair, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1963-1966
- Coordinator, Mississippi

billion that is not being collected in taxes because of the underground economy.”

Another challenge is that his increasing House duties are making it hard to stay in touch with his constituents. “I’m concerned about that,” he says. “My entire staff, both in Washington and Georgia, will have to step up. I may not be in Georgia during all the breaks so that means the staff must pick up the load. And technology helps. But we’re going to be engaged in a great outreach effort so that we will be just as responsive as ever – if not more.”

### From humble beginnings

The son of sharecroppers growing up in segregated Troy, Ala., Lewis never considered politics as a career. But then, few young black men from the South did. “I wanted to be a minister,” he says. “I was a boy preacher and I preached to the chickens on the farm.”

He went to Fisk University in Nash-

onstrations at segregated lunch counters in Nashville. In 1961, he volunteered to participate in the Freedom Rides, which challenged segregation at interstate bus terminals across the South. More than once he was severely beaten for challenging Jim Crow laws.

From 1963 to 1966, Lewis helped found and was named chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC was largely responsible for organizing student activism.

Even though he was younger than many of the other leaders (King was born in 1929; Lewis in 1940), he was recognized as a young man of talent. In 1963 he was dubbed one of the Big Six leaders of the Civil Rights movement. The others were Whitney Young, A. Phillip Randolph, Martin Luther King, Jr., James Farmer and Roy Wilkins.

At the age of 23, he was an architect of a keynote speaker at the historic March on Washington, D.C., in August 1963.

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ville, Tenn., where he became involved in the Civil Rights movement. “I got caught up in it,” he says. “I was deeply inspired by hearing Dr. [Martin Luther] King on the radio. I started identifying with the ideas of the movement and the philosophy of nonviolence. It was a time of ideas and of learning. We read Ralph McGill.”

To hear Lewis describe it, he was almost overwhelmed by the events. “I was very aware of the sea of ideas that was happening and also the idea of the unbelievable flow of history. If they [Civil Rights marchers] could do it in Greensboro, N.C., and Birmingham [Ala.], then we can do it here [Nashville]. It spread like wildfire. It was a people’s movement that all came together inspired by ideas and a belief.”

At Fisk, Lewis organized sit-in dem-

In 1964, Lewis coordinated SNCC efforts to organize voter registration drives and community action programs during the Mississippi Freedom Summer. The following year he helped spearhead one of the most seminal movements of the movement, the march from Selma, Ala., to Montgomery, Ala., which included the infamous “Bloody Sunday,” where the peaceful marchers were attacked by Alabama state troopers.

Since the beatings were aired on national news and flashed across newspapers across the county, the “problems” in the South captured the attention and horror of the nation.

While millions followed Lewis into the Movement, there was one person in particular who was less than thrilled about his activities – his mother. “She

### The John Lewis Files *continued*

#### Freedom Summer, 1964

- Associate Director, Field Foundation
- Martin Luther King Center for Social Change, African American Institute
- Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Director, Voter Education Project

#### Caucuses/Non-Legislative Committees

- Army Caucus
- Congressional Arts Caucus
- Congressional Black Caucus
- Congressional Committee to Support Writers and Journalists
- Congressional Fire Services Caucus
- Associate Member, Congressional Hispanic Caucus
- Congressional Human Rights Caucus
- Co-Chair, Congressional Task Force Against Anti-Semitism
- Congressional Travel and Tourism Caucus
- Congressional Urban Caucus
- Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee
- Co-Chair, Faith and Politics Institute
- Friends of Ireland
- Co-Chair, House Trails Caucus
- Older Americans Caucus
- Steering Committee

#### Awards

- Golden Plate Award, Academy of Excellence
- Preservation
- Capital Award, National Council of La Raza
- Hero Award, National Trust for Historic Preservation
- John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award
- The Martin Luther King, Jr. Non-Violent Peace Prize
- Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Award, National Education Association
- The Spingarn Medal, NAACP
- President’s Medal of Georgetown University

## Lending a hand

Federal Expenditures or obligations in the Fulton County area during Fiscal Years 1986-2004 under John Lewis (D-Ga., fifth district) that were received in the form of block grants, formula or project driven grants as well as cooperative agreements.

Department of Health and Human Services \$14.8 Billion  
Department of Education \$3.8 Billion  
Department of Transportation \$3.7 Billion  
Housing and Urban Development \$3.6 Billion  
Department of Labor \$1.8 Billion

Source: Office of Congressman John Lewis

would write letters to discourage me,” he says. “She would say that they sent me to college to get educated, not to get involved in this (Civil Rights) mess. She was afraid that I would be arrested, beaten and get in real trouble. And, she was right, I did.” [Lewis has been arrested more than 40 times.]

But Mom came around when she could vote. “My parents, along with the rest of my family, couldn’t vote because they couldn’t pass the literacy test,” he says. “President [Lyndon] Johnson signed the Voting Rights bill on Aug. 6, 1965 and

ship nearly four million minorities were added to the voter rolls.

In 1977, President Jimmy Carter appointed Lewis to direct more than 250,000 volunteers of ACTION, the federal volunteer agency. In 1982, he was elected to the Atlanta City Council and became an advocate for ethics in government and neighborhood preservation. In 1986, he was elected to Congress. He has been there ever since. His district includes the entire City of Atlanta, and parts of Fulton, DeKalb and Clayton counties.

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they were so proud and happy to finally be able to vote.”

### Moving into the spotlight

Lewis left SNCC in 1966 and he continued his commitment to the Civil Rights Movement as associate director of the Field Foundation and his participation in the Southern Regional Council’s voter registration programs. Under his leader-

He now not only serves Georgia, but the entire country as well. Still, his youth is fresh in his memory. Along with his good friend Ernie Green, Lewis recently went back to Central High School in Little Rock, Ark., to speak to the students. Green was one of the nine black students who integrated Central High School in 1957.

“We went there to visit and the Afri-

can-American student body president escorted me to the school,” Lewis says. “It was like I’d never seen the building. It’s a one-of-a-kind best of the old schools that they don’t make any more. But it was like walking on hallowed ground.”

Visits such as this and a recent one to Nashville are where Lewis helps educate the children of those who benefited from the movement. “I try to talk to young people,” Lewis says. “So many fail to read about the Civil Rights Movement. They don’t know what happened and how it happened. They don’t teach it in schools. It is up to my generation to help educate those who came after us. It is my hope that more and more young people will come to understand the Movement and learn from it. I hope they learn to have the courage to speak up when others are being put down. We need to build on the Movement.”

In fact, he believes the Civil Rights Movement helped pave the way for women’s rights as well. “The Movement was helpful in that it helped open up the process of elevating women to their rightful place in society,” he says. “It helped open another door, and today we have a Speaker of the House who is a woman.”

### Reflections of ...

While Lewis has had a long and honorable career, two achievements stand out in his mind. The first is the march from Selma to Montgomery, which included being beaten in “Bloody Sunday,” and his involvement in helping pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

“I was honored to walk across that bridge with Hosea Williams and to march with the others,” Lewis says. “We felt like we were walking into history. We didn’t know how it would turn out but we knew we had to march across that bridge (the Edmund Pettus Bridge) and make it to Montgomery.”

But perhaps thinking of his mother registering for the first time, he saves his rewarding memory for the Voting Rights Act. Lewis says he is pleased about his involvement in helping pass the Voting Rights Act.

Says Lewis, “It changed America forever.” **BTB**