

John R. Lewis Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 03/19/2004
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Biographical Note

Lewis was the cofounder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee [SNCC] in 1960; the Chairman of SNCC from 1963 until 1966; and he has served in the U.S. House of Representatives as the Congressman from Georgia's 5th District since 1987. In this interview Lewis discusses President John F. Kennedy on civil rights; Robert F. Kennedy [RFK] as Attorney General and civil rights; working on RFK's 1968 presidential campaign; RFK's assassination, 1968; J. Edgar Hoover and FBI investigations of the civil rights movement; discrimination, hatred, and violence; and the march from Selma to Montgomery and "Bloody Sunday," 1965, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

JOHN R. LEWIS

March 19, 2004
Washington, D.C.

by Vicki Daitch

For the John F. Kennedy Library

DAITCH: I'm just going to set up the tape recorders by saying that I'm Vicki Daitch, and I'll be talking with Congressman John Lewis today. We're in his office in Washington. I like to usually be a little more relaxed and set up things and talk about a little bit more about your personal history. But since time is of the essence today and we have your wonderful book....

LEWIS: Thank you.

DAITCH: I'd like to ask you some questions that would be of interest to the Library particularly, and maybe on another occasion we can do something a little more extensive. But with regards to your relationship with John Kennedy, I know you only met him a couple of times, and in the book you described those meetings a little bit, but I wondered if you could tell us a little more detail about what you remember about those meetings and what your impressions were.

LEWIS: I remember very well in the White House in the summer of 1963. The summer of 1963 was a very difficult summer. It came on the heel of George Wallace [George C. Wallace] standing in the schoolhouse door, on the heel of Bull Connor [Theophilus Eugene "Bull" Connor] using dogs and fire hoses in Birmingham.

Medgar Evers [Medgar W. Evers] had been assassinated in Mississippi. President Kennedy had made this unbelievable speech saying that the question of civil rights was a moral issue. People were looking to the White House, looking to the Congress to act.

I had just been elected chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee a few days earlier when I was invited, along with Martin Luther King, Jr., A. Philip Randolph, James Farmer [James L. Farmer, Jr.] of CORE [Congress of Racial Equality], Whitney Young [Whitney M. Young, Jr.] of the Urban League, and Roy Wilkins [Roy Ottoway Wilkins] of the NAACP. President Kennedy was just what I thought he would be. I'd followed the campaign of 1960. He got elected. His election for me just created so much hope, so much optimism. It ushered in what I call a period of Great Expectation.

So when I was invited to this meeting, I was so happy. I was so pleased that I was going to meet someone that I had grown to admire. Not just a president of the United States. That's important. But this was a man that I admired. There was something about him that really, that was so inspiring, so uplifting. His whole demeanor and personality sort of gave you a sense of hope and optimism, the sense that you could do almost anything, you could go almost anyplace you wanted to go.

I was not disappointed when we met with him. It was in this meeting--and I remember very well in the discussion about civil rights and what was happening--and somehow out of the blue A. Philip Randolph says something like, "Mr. President, the black masses are restless," in his baritone voice. "The black masses are restless, and we're going to march on Washington." I hadn't heard anything about the possibility of a march on Washington before. Maybe some of the other participants and leaders had heard it.

And you could tell by the body language of President Kennedy, he just sort of moved and twisted and turned in his chair, he didn't necessarily like what he heard. And he said, "Mr. Randolph, if you bring a lot of people to Washington, won't there be a crisis, disorder, chaos? And we would never be able to get a civil rights bill through the Congress." And Mr. Randolph responded and said, "Mr. President, this will be an orderly, peaceful, nonviolent protest." And President Kennedy sort of said, "Well, I think we're going to have problems. But we all have problems, and we can solve those problems."

And there were a few other words. I don't recall exactly what was said. But we continued to talk for a while. Then President Kennedy had to leave the meeting, and I believe Vice President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] and Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] and a few others remained.

And we came out on the lawn of the White House, and we announced to the media that we had a wonderful, meaningful, productive meeting with President Kennedy. And we told him we were going to have a march on Washington. And that as a group we'd be meeting in a few days to issue the call for the March on Washington. We'll meet on July 2, 1963, New York City. The group did, the six of us met, and we issued the call for the March on Washington, and invited four major white religious and labor leaders to join us in issuing the call for the March on Washington.

DAITCH: At the meeting at the White House, President Kennedy was, um, supportive might be too strong a word, but he agreed that it would be okay to have this March on Washington?

LEWIS: I think he preferred us not to bring a large crowd to Washington. But when he saw that we were probably going to have it, he sort of let it be known that he wanted to do everything possible for it to be orderly, peaceful, and successful.

DAITCH: In your book.... I mean clearly your personality is just not such that you would have had the same sort of resentment maybe of the Kennedys that some of the other people in SNCC did. But certainly you must have had some resentment. All the things you had been through already by that point. And, yes, you admired him, but did you not just want to sort of--I know you were young--but still just jump up in his face and say, Where are you when we need you?

LEWIS: I never had that feeling because in keeping with the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence, it was that you don't just go out and attack someone or try to beat someone down. You try to win them over or to get them to see your point of view. I know in my March on Washington speech, I tried to make it as strong as possible, and at one point I said in the original text, "that the proposed bill that President Kennedy has recommended to the Congress that it was too little and it was too late." And at one point in this speech I said, "Listen, Mr. Kennedy. Listen, Mr. President. You want to take the revolution out of the streets and put it in the courts."

But admired President Kennedy. As chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, from time to time, I used to imitate and mock President Kennedy with his sort of New England accent. I had it down really well years ago. He was a person that I really.... I differed with him on the proposed Civil Rights Act. He was sort of cautious, very cautious. Going back to 1961 a few months after he first took office, we had the crisis of the Freedom Riders, and they really tested him. But what I truly believe, his brother Robert Kennedy, the attorney general, became such an influential decision-maker in that administration, and had such a close relationship with his brother, that he was able to help educate his brother and bring him along.

DAITCH: You say he was cautious, and I know that he was. And there were good reasons to be cautious. I wonder if now, from this perspective, having been in Washington.... I mean political reasons. You can't do anything if you can't stay in office. Do you sort of have more sympathy for him?

LEWIS: Oh, I have a great deal of sympathy for his position. He was thinking about the next election. He was thinking about 1964, and he wanted, he wanted to unify the country. He wanted to unify the Democratic Party. And he wanted to bring some of those Southerners along and Southern voters. He wanted to win the South, win some of those Southern states like he did in 1960.

DAITCH: Do you think if he had lived--I know this is all hypothetical, but do you think that he might have, if he had lived, been able to bring along some of the.... Well, I can't think of a Southern state that he might have been able to bring

along, but can you?

LEWIS: Well, in 1960 when he won, I think he carried Georgia by a very large plurality, larger than most states really. Because of his position and the position of Robert Kennedy in 1961 and '62 with James Meredith [James Howard Meredith], and the Freedom Riders in '61, and then the speech he made on June 11, I believe, of 1963, when he spoke to the country--not just to the country; it was a speech from the White House about civil rights and race. It was nationally televised. I think there was growing resentment of President Kennedy and the attorney general; probably more strongly against the attorney general, probably, than the president. It would have been tough. It would have been difficult.

But I think if he had lived, he would have confronted the issue. And he would have campaigned in the South, in Alabama, in Georgia, in Tennessee, in Louisiana, and probably.... He had such a wonderful personality. There was something magic about the man.

DAITCH: In person did you find that to be true?

LEWIS: Oh, yes. Just to be in his presence. I remember the day of the March on Washington, August 28, 1963. After the march, after all of the speeches, after everything, we were invited to come to the White House. He literally stood in the door of the Oval Office, and he greeted each one of us. And he said, "I saw you. I heard you. You did a good job." And it was just wonderful. And he was so proud, he was so happy. He was almost like a father seeing his children do well. He was so pleased that things had gone so well. And when Dr. King came through, he said something like, "And you had a dream." It was just magic. And that was my last time seeing President Kennedy alive on that August 28th afternoon.

DAITCH: A bad year also. You talked about Bob Kennedy. It almost seems a little odd to talk about Bob Kennedy bringing John Kennedy along with the civil rights thing. Bob Kennedy took so much criticism for being attorney general and not doing anything.

LEWIS: He was the attorney general, and a lot of the heat and a lot of the feeling was directed toward him because he was in charge of the Department of Justice. And you had the FBI. And there was strong feeling on the part of many of the civil rights workers and volunteers that were working in Alabama and Mississippi, Georgia, and other parts of the South. We would send letters and telegrams to the attorney general, to John Doar [John M. Doar] and Burke Marshall in the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice. And they would respond.

We had this feeling that the FBI and the representatives of the Department of Justice should be doing more than taking pictures and writing those.... We wanted them to arrest people right on the spot, right there where they were committing crimes against, when Klansmen and other people were committing crimes against the civil rights workers. Robert Kennedy also said.... We met with him on July 22, 1963, in his office. And during a break in

one of these meetings, he said to me, “John, I now understand. The young people have educated me.”

DAITCH: Did that seem sincere to you?

LEWIS: Oh, he was very sincere. I saw Robert Kennedy grow and change. And if he had lived, I think he would have been president. He would have been president, and he probably would have been one of the great presidents of all times really. Because he came to feel it in his soul, in his gut. He really did. After being elected to the Senate and making those trips to Mississippi, to the Delta, going to the Southwest, and Appalachia, and speaking on college and university campuses, he became a different human being, a different man.

DAITCH: I’ve heard that about both Kennedy brothers, actually, that the hallmark of those two was--and maybe Ted [Edward M. Kennedy] as well, I don’t know--but those two in particular, their capacity for growth. I mean what they were in the fifties and even early sixties. And then, you know, just in a few short years the ability to see things and absorb them and assimilate them into a new world view.

LEWIS: They had the capacity and the ability to make the great leap. I think with President Kennedy and Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and even with Teddy today, it’s this sense that they want to be on the right side, on the right side of history. They have to sort of go with the flow. But they became convinced. It was not just done for political reasons. They became convinced. And I think Robert Kennedy probably more than the other two, maybe, just maybe. Maybe because of the way he felt, the way he expressed it. He felt very strongly.

During the Freedom Rides back in May of 1961, and this is a few short months after taking office, but Robert Kennedy at one time said that we should stop the rides and there should be a cooling-off period. But after we decided not to stop and we kept going, he felt that he had an obligation to see that we were protected. He became so desperate one time when we couldn’t get from Birmingham to Montgomery, he was heard to say something like he wanted to know whether the Greyhound officials had black bus drivers. I think he said, “Do they have any colored bus drivers down there in Birmingham, Alabama?” At one point he was so desperate he said, “Well, let me speak to Mr. Greyhound.”

DAITCH: I can’t help but feel that it was the things that you were doing, the visibly frightening things that you were doing, you personally and the people who were working with you, that sort of took people like Kennedy and others as well. You know, they could literally see that you were putting your bodies on the line to do these things. And yet it just.... I suppose it was only in the space of a few short years, but for you it must have seemed like an eternity that they weren’t just coming in and doing something. And you were young. I’m sure your other colleagues who were equally as young and maybe not very well versed in how slowly the wheels of government can move....

LEWIS: I think we were naive. You're right. We were so young, and we had not had the, I guess, the value of dealing with government leaders, political leaders, dealing with trying to get a piece of legislation passed. So we thought there can be an executive order, that the president could just use a pen and just do away with it. We thought some FBI agent, some official of the Department of Justice could just show his badge and place people under arrest right then and there. But I think that process, going through it, educated us.

At the same time, the two brothers were being educated. And they became convinced in the process, I think. Because I don't think they knew, understood the depth of feeling about race in the South. And when Bull Connor used those dogs and fire hoses on people.... And even before then, back in '61 when an aide of President Kennedy, a representative of his, John Seigenthaler [John Lawrence Seigenthaler], was beaten at the Greyhound bus station in Montgomery, May of 1961, all of this helped to shape their feelings and attitude toward the civil rights movement. At one point I think it was President Kennedy who said something like, "If we get the Civil Rights Act passed, we should consider giving Bull Connor a medal for the contribution that he made."

DAITCH: Yes, for bringing it to people's attention. Did you, after John Kennedy was killed, did you have much contact with Bob Kennedy in between the time that he was no longer attorney general and the time that you went to work for his campaign?

LEWIS: I didn't have that much. I saw him maybe once or twice. But I didn't have that much contact with him. It was maybe just I would see him here and there. But I didn't see that much of him until I got involved in the campaign really.

DAITCH: Did you see him often enough that you felt like you knew him a little bit? Or was it more or less just acquaintances?

LEWIS: Just acquaintance. But during that brief campaign, I think I really got to know him really. It was such a short time. And sometimes you look back on it, and it seems like it was.... When he was in the Senate, I would see him here and there. But during the brief campaign, I got to know him.

DAITCH: You would be practically living with someone during the campaign.

LEWIS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I was in Indianapolis campaigning with him when he heard that Dr. King had been shot. If it hadn't been for him, I don't know what would have happened. He had the ability, he had the capacity, perhaps more than any other white politician in America, to sort of vent the feelings and at the same the hopes and the dreams and aspirations of African-Americans. As a matter of fact, when Dr. King was shot, I sort of had what I call an executive session with myself. It was very sad. It was a very dark and lonely few days. But I said something like, well, we still have Bobby Kennedy.

And so I dropped out of the campaign for a few days. Went to Atlanta and helped the preparations for the funeral. Then I got back in the campaign. Went to Portland, Oregon. And to this day I don't know why, whether it was the local folks there or someone in the campaign, they invited me to introduce Robert Kennedy. I think it was at Portland State College. And I'm going to Portland this June to deliver the commencement address. But I introduced him there, and, you know, he lost Oregon. That was like the first defeat for a Kennedy. And I remember one evening, late afternoon to early evening, there was a group of people: Peter Edelman [Peter B. Edelman], the young man who's on ABC now.... What is his name? The commentator. Not ABC, CNN.

DAITCH: [Inaudible].

LEWIS: No, the speech writer. He was one of the speech writers. It was Adam Walinsky, Peter Edelman, and I can't think of this young man's name.

DAITCH: I don't get cable, so I don't know.

LEWIS: We were sort of just playing around or something like that. And Robert Kennedy came out. I think he had just taken a shower, and he had a towel or something around him. He said, "You young guys making all this noise! Why don't you go out and knock on some doors and get me some votes?" or something like that. So we dashed out. I'm talking, we went. Because he was really serious about this, going out and doing some work. And we went out and did some work.

Then we went to California. I teamed up with Cesar Chavez [Cesar Estrada Chavez], and it was incredible, the most incredible effort. And each evening.... We'd knock on doors during the day. But then in the evening, we would go to these coffees, little receptions in upscale homes all over Hollywood and Beverly Hills types. Because there was a real race there between Kennedy, Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], and Eugene McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy]. And so the two of us were trying to convince people, these two liberals, an Hispanic and an African-American, trying to convince these white liberals not to go for Gene McCarthy, not to go for Hubert Humphrey, but to go for Robert Kennedy.

And it was fun. Then we did motorcade parades, and really that's what it amounted to. The crowd just, it was.... I haven't seen anything like it since. People turned out in the streets by the hundreds and by the thousands, pulling for Robert Kennedy, especially in the African-American community and the Hispanic community.

Then the night of the--when the votes started coming in and it appeared that Robert Kennedy was going to win California, he invited a group of us to his room, to the fifth floor of the Ambassador Hotel. He said.... His sister Jean Kennedy Smith was in the room. Jack Newfield of *The Village Voice* was there. Teddy White [Theodore H. White] who wrote *The Making of a President*, Charles Evers [James Charles Evers], the brother of Medgar [Medgar W. Evers]; they were all in the room. He said to me, he said something like: "John, you let me down today. More Mexican-Americans turned out to vote than Negroes." So he was just, you know, kidding. And he suggested that we should remain in the room, in his suite. And he was going to go down and make his victory speech.

And he went down, and we watched him on television. And a few minutes later, after he said, "On to Chicago!" And he came back on, and the announcement was that Senator Robert Kennedy had been shot. That was flashed on. And those of us in that room just started crying really. It was devastating. It was so devastating. It was one of the saddest times in my life. I just wanted to leave California. I just wanted to get out of L.A. And later that night, when we were allowed to leave the hotel, staff people and volunteers, we went back to the hotel where we were staying, not too far away.

Next morning I got on a flight and flew from Los Angeles to Atlanta. And I think I cried almost all the way. I would stop a little and cry again. Now this is June. And you're coming, I guess, over Colorado or someplace. You look down and see the snow on the mountains, the hills. And I go to Atlanta. And a day or so later, I guess Robert Kennedy had passed, had died. I got a telegram from the family inviting me to come to St. Patrick's Cathedral and stand as an honor guard the night before the funeral. So I stood one night with the Reverend Abernathy [Ralph D. Abernathy] for forty-five minutes or an hour or so.

The next morning attended the funeral. And Teddy Kennedy, Senator Kennedy, delivered a magnificent eulogy. I don't see how he did it, but he did it. After the funeral I boarded the funeral train and traveled from New York. And it seemed like everybody was on that train. It seemed like it was Little America on that train. I remember very well Joe Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, II], I think he was sixteen years old at the time, he walked the length of the train, thanking everybody for being there. You saw signs all along the way saying, "We love you, Bobby!" "Goodbye, Bobby!" "We love you, Bobby."

And somehow I didn't want the train to stop. I didn't want it to stop in Washington, but I knew we had to stop. I wanted just somehow to keep going. It didn't make sense. But I guess when you're in grief, you're not being rational. But I knew we had to stop and take Bobby's body to be buried at Arlington Cemetery.

But it was a terrible period. And I think with President Kennedy's assassination, with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the assassination of Robert Kennedy, I think something died in America, and something died in all of us that knew these three young men. There was so much hope. And I often wonder and think if President Kennedy had lived, if Martin Luther King, Jr. had lived, if Robert Kennedy had lived, if these three young men had lived to become old, they had so much to offer, so much to give. And we will never, ever know what the American society or the world would have been like.

DAITCH: Do you see any other people, sort of young people that are reminiscent of that, coming up. This is something I ask people just for my own interest.

LEWIS: Well, I think that many young men and women today that are involved in public service, maybe not all as elected officials, that have been deeply inspired by these three men. And I think that people that I talk to from time to time say that the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert Kennedy, President Kennedy, some of these people, they never met them. Some of them have seen a video. Some of them they've read something about these three. And some people say, I watch, I listen to Kennedy's inaugural address and watch a press conference. He was very good with the media. Savvy. He was almost tailor-made for television.

But I don't think there will ever again be the likeness of a John F. Kennedy, a Robert Kennedy, a Martin Luther King, Jr. I don't think history will be so kind to us, and maybe the gods won't be so kind to us. But I think that there are people that are coming up that maybe, just maybe, will be so deeply inspired that they will act in the mold of these. I think there may be a few in the Congress, there may be a few elected. But we have a lot of wonderful people doing all types of good things for this.... In the Peace Corps; in the city here, people are just out there doing good work without a great deal of drama, without a great deal of fanfare. Just sort of very quietly.

And I think, when you trace it back, some of them will say, you know, Kennedy said such-and-such a thing. Robert Kennedy said such-and-such a thing. Martin Luther King, Jr. said such-and-such a thing. I know in my own life I often think, from time to time, if President Kennedy was here, if Robert Kennedy was here, if Martin Luther King was here, what would they be doing? What would they be saying? So since they are not here, we have an obligation, a mission, and a mandate to do what we can.

DAITCH: I think that's a good note. I know you're trying to get us to stop. So I'll turn these off.

LEWIS: And then I can come back.

[BREAK]

DAITCH: So we talked a little bit specifically about the Kennedys. But tell me.... I've read in your book, and I've heard in other places that the FBI was there when all these things were happening. You've said they were taking notes. They were taking pictures. But I also read in your book that there was this thought that they were collecting data to support their theory, or Hoover's [J. Edgar Hoover] theory, that there were communists afoot in the civil rights movement. What did you know about that at that time? Or what was going on with that?

LEWIS: What we knew, at least we felt, was an attempt on the part of Mr. Hoover to paint the movement as being subversive. That he truly felt--we felt that he truly felt and believed--that the movement was being controlled by some outside force, some outside influence. And he believed that Dr. King was if not a communist was being used by the Communist Party.

In some of the speeches, even I would say from time to time, we don't need anyone from Moscow. We don't need anyone from New York or Washington to tell us that we're being discriminated against. We don't need anyone to tell us that we're being beaten and being denied certain basic Constitutional rights simply because of the color of our skin. We don't need anyone from Moscow to tell us that we cannot get a hamburger and a Coca-cola at a lunch counter in downtown Nashville. We don't need anyone to tell us that our people cannot register to vote.

But we felt that J. Edgar Hoover was using the FBI not just to collect data and not just to photograph. And they did take a lot of photographs. They were trying to infiltrate the

movement on the one hand. Much later, after the 1964 murder of the three civil rights workers forty years ago, when Lyndon Johnson ordered J. Edgar Hoover to open the FBI office in Jackson, Mississippi, they started infiltrating the Klan. But within the movement, no doubt, they had agents within the movement.

DAITCH: Doesn't that seem bizarre to you? You're the victims here, and they're investigating you.

LEWIS: Oh, but years later, several years later, many of us went back and got our FBI files under the Freedom of Information Act. And there would be pages about you met with such-and-such a person, and attended such-and-such a meeting with Hosea Williams [Hosea Lorenzo Williams], with Martin Luther King, with Ralph Abernathy. And sometimes they would just be, they would put a.... I guess some of this stuff they didn't want you to know. They just put a blank marker through it; there'd just be an empty space really.

But they had to notice. They eavesdropped. They eavesdropped. They listened to all types of.... And we would make fun of it. Ralph Abernathy was very good. He would say, "Mr. Hoover, if you're listening...." There would be a microphone or something, he would say: Tell this doohickey, doohickey, you tell J. Edgar Hoover such-and-such a thing. And people would come to him, and they would speak. They would say: Go back and tell J. Edgar Hoover.

We were so concerned in 1961 during the Freedom Ride that the FBI was cooperating with the local authorities that we used codes. We used a different way.... To give you an example: In May of 1961, after we stopped the Freedom Ride, after CORE dropped the Freedom Rides, a group of us from Nashville wanted to start the Freedom Rides again. And after we had been arrested and put in jail in Birmingham, Alabama, and later, two days later, Bull Connor took us out of jail and put us in protective custody, dropped us off on the Alabama-Tennessee state line, we made a call back to Nashville to a young lady named Diane Nash [Diane Bevel Nash], who was coordinating the Freedom Rides.

And she said to us, and was speaking in code, she said, "Eleven of the packages have been shipped by other means." What she was telling us, that eleven of the students had left Nashville traveling by train, trying to make it to Birmingham in order to get on a bus and join us to go back to Montgomery. Because I don't think it was any secret then that the FBI had very close ties with some of the local police officials. Because they even said when you would meet with some of the regional head offices, they said they had to stay in close contact with the police chief or with the sheriff because they just didn't work on civil rights cases. But they had to deal with bank robberies and stuff like that also.

DAITCH: So they were friendly and....

LEWIS: Oh, yes.

DAITCH: I can't imagine.... I mean this sort of makes me quake just sitting here. Could you not just feel that the whole world was against you? I mean you have the

FBI, the federal authorities, who should be in your side, who might be the ones to protect you, but they're not only standing there and ignoring things and maybe taking pictures, they're actively investigating you. And they're colluding with the local authorities.

LEWIS: Well, when Mrs. Viola Liuzzo [Viola Gregg Liuzzo] was shot and killed when she was taking some of the marchers back between Selma and Montgomery, back from Montgomery to Selma, after the march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, people believed that it was an informer for the FBI that actually pulled the trigger.

DAITCH: Oh, my gosh!

LEWIS: I think the FBI probably could have prevented the killing of the three civil rights workers in Mississippi in 1964. They knew the three young men were being watched. They knew everything that was happening in Mississippi. They knew what the sheriff was doing in Philadelphia, in Neshoba County, in June of 1964. But we complained. We sent letters. We sent telegrams. We made telephone calls. And we were saying there was some civil rights statute going back to the mid-1800's, saying use that. But they said they could only make reports.

One thing we did in Selma in the fall of 1963 and the spring of '64. There was the courthouse, the county courthouse on one side of the street. And directly across the street was the federal courthouse. Many of us, including myself, had been arrested and jailed for trying to literally get people on the steps of the courthouse to get up the steps, inside the door, to get a copy of the so-called literacy test. And we would get arrested by the sheriff and the county officials.

So what we did, we thought maybe, just maybe, if we would go and stand and walk around the federal courthouse, saying, "One man, one vote," maybe the county officials wouldn't arrest us, and it would be the federal people that would do something. Or maybe they would just let us protest, to try to involve the federal government. But it was the county-- the same people that arrested us for picketing, for marching to the county courthouse that arrested us for walking around the federal courthouse. So we were trying to involve the federal government.

It's really sort of sad. That's why there had been this movement on the part of very liberal members of the Congress and very conservative Democrats and Republicans in the Congress to remove J. Edgar Hoover's name from the FBI building. It's been an ongoing effort really.

DAITCH: That's interesting. How did you feel about.... I mean again, I know that you admired the Kennedy brothers. But Hoover worked for Bob Kennedy.

LEWIS: Right, right. Well, you know, it was Hoover that convinced Robert Kennedy to put the tap on Dr. King. Hoover came and said, in effect, that he has evidence that Dr. King is under the influence of the Communists, and that's the Communists in the hierarchy of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and he wanted to prove it. And so it was Bobby Kennedy who gave the okay. And I think if Robert

Kennedy could speak today, I think he would have said that was the worst thing he ever did in his life.

DAITCH: Well, it's sort of a silly thing. No doubt there were people who had probably been members of the Communist Party.

LEWIS: Oh, yes. There's no question about that. At one time, especially during the late twenties and, I guess, the thirties, people thought the only sort of progressive movement in America was people in the Young Communists Party. Bayard Rustin [Bayard Taylor Rustin], for example, when we were planning the March on Washington. People didn't want him to be the spokesperson, didn't want him to be the head because he had been associated with the Young Communists Party.

DAITCH: And he was gay, too, right?

LEWIS: He was gay, too.

DAITCH: And that was one of the things.

LEWIS: That was one thing, also. People didn't want.... They thought people like Herman Talmadge [Herman Eugene Talmadge], Strom Thurmond [James Strom Thurmond] and especially Southern senators would stand up on the floor and say they have this black gay Communist leading the march.

DAITCH: It's funny how we're fighting some of the same battles today.

LEWIS: I feel that way sometimes. I feel like I've been down this road before. It seems like it's a rerun. That's why I take the position when people ask me about, oh, you have all this gay bashing going on and same-sex marriage, I take a very strong position in saying: That I fought too long and too hard against discrimination based on race and color not to sit by and be silent while people are being discriminated against because of sexual orientation.

DAITCH: Absolutely. It's a similar type of thing in the violence, just the emotion that some people have about things that are really none of their concern.

LEWIS: Really.

DAITCH: But I know. I have a brother who lives in the Deep South, and he's diametrically opposed to me in a lot of political and ethical stances that we take, but I see it. And it's just astonishing to me the ugliness in people's hearts about it.

LEWIS: Yes.

DAITCH: And you've seen this firsthand.

LEWIS: I was thinking the other day, I was flying someplace, maybe from Nashville, on Tuesday. I was sitting on the plane, and you're reading something or you've been someplace, and the whole thing about Emmett Till [Emmett Louis Till] and the young man that was killed in Alabama named Jimmie Lee Jackson and the three civil rights workers in 1964, forty years ago this summer, and I said, "Why? What is it? What is it in the human spirit?"

[END SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

[BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

LEWIS: These three young men in 1964 were just going about their own business, standing up for what they believed in, trying to do good, and they get stopped, detained by the sheriff and his deputy. They take them to jail simply because two of them are white and one is black. And one is wearing a beard. And I think they knew that the two white happened to be Jewish and this local black person. These are law enforcement people. They have on the badge. They take them to jail. They take them out of jail and turn them over to the Klan. And they knew what the Klan was going to do with them, where they were beaten and shot and killed. How could that happen?

And then you go to Birmingham, and you go to the church where the four little girls were killed. See, earlier I talked about all of the hope, all of the optimism. When we left Washington on August 28, 1963, we were so hopeful, so just feeling hopeful. You had this unbelievable march. The president was smiling and very happy, and we just knew it was a matter of days we were going to get the Civil Rights Bill through the Congress.

Eighteen days later was the bombing of the church where those four girls were killed. And then shortly after that President Kennedy was shot and killed. So what is it? What is it in the human spirit, the human heart? What is it in our makeup? What is it in the psyche for people to do what they did?

DAITCH: Well, even the.... I think the images that are the most horrifying for me are the personal violence and the hatred. I mean nonviolent student protesters sitting and, you did this, you experienced this, sitting down, being quiet, minding your business, and to have somebody, you know, come up and just punch you. Or to put out a cigarette on your back or something like that. That sort of.... There's an image, I think, in some history text that I've taught from before, but that I encouraged my students to really take a good hard look at that picture; I think it's someone pouring, maybe it was a condiment or something, pouring something....

LEWIS: That was in Mississippi. There was a young lady, I can see her right now; her name was Joan Tropper or Trophower, a young white exchange student from Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi. She was sitting at the lunch counter

with a group of black student protesters. They came at her with a bottle of ketchup or something they just poured over. But at the Krystal's--I laugh by myself sometimes or with my family, I don't know why we wanted to go there in the first place. But we wanted to desegregate the place. You can get these little hamburgers. They were like seven cents. Maybe three for twelve cents or something like that. But they were inexpensive, not much more. But we were there sitting, and we came out, and some guy just punched me in the mouth. My lips were sensitive, big, and they just started bleeding.

And then another time, we went in this store, I saw this young man on a Monday night; I was back in Nashville. We went into Kristal's and the owner locked us up here, and started fumigating the place. But what is it?

DAITCH: With a pesticide?

LEWIS: Oh, yes.

DAITCH: Something that could really kill you.

LEWIS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And so the fire department came down there and broke a window to get us out.

DAITCH: Oh, my God! I mean that sort of hatred.... It astounds you, once again, I mean when you read about. I'm just floored by the kind of courage you and hundreds and thousands of other people had to just sit through those things. I mean did you feel that there was no other choice?

LEWIS: We went through the nonviolent training. We were prepared. I tell young people today, we didn't just wake up one day and say we're going to go and sit in or go on a Freedom Ride or we're going to have a march. Or have a stand-in at a theater. We were trained. We went through what we called social drama, role playing. It was whites playing the role of whites and whites playing the role of blacks. And then the day came when young black and white high school and college students, we had to put to the test what we had been trained. And we met the test.

DAITCH: And you expected the violence.

LEWIS: We expected it. On occasion we did. But some occasions we just thought we'd be arrested and be jailed. We didn't think we would be beaten even when we were sitting in in Nashville. Nashville was not Jackson, Mississippi. It was not Birmingham, Alabama, it was not Selma. Nashville was sort of a moderate city called the Athens of the South. A lot of educational institutions, a lot of churches there. But people were beaten there. People just walked in and started beating people. The law enforcement people just stood to the side and just let them have it. Then when they finished beating us, they didn't arrest the people that beat us. They arrested all of us and charged us with disorderly conduct, and we were being orderly. Disturbing the peace, and we were being

orderly and peaceful.

On the march from Selma to Montgomery, on the attempted march, I thought we were only going to be arrested and jailed. Because they didn't allow a mob to gather. So we were facing the state troopers and.... I'm sorry....

[BREAK]

DAITCH: But you weren't expecting.... There was no crowd or anything, so you weren't expecting to get hurt.

LEWIS: No. We just thought we.... When we got to the top of the bridge, down below we saw a sea of Alabama state troopers. We walked on, and we came within hearing distance of the state troopers, and the major identified himself. And he said, "This is an unlawful march and will not be allowed to continue. I give you three minutes to disperse and return to your church." In about a minute and a half, he said, "Troopers advance." And you saw these guys putting on their gas masks. They came toward us, beating us with nightsticks and bullwhips and trampling us with horses, and releasing the tear gas. I was hit in the head by a state trooper with a nightstick. I thought I was going to die.

So this was not a mob of just community people. Some people described it as a police mob, or a police riot, really. They beat us. But that turned the country, I tell you. Because of what happened in Selma on Bloody Sunday, there was a sense of righteous indignation all over America. People took to the streets in more than eighty cities. Almost every color skin was.... People got to the White House, the Department of Justice. President Kennedy was saying that his daughter was unable to sleep--not President Kennedy, President Johnson--because of people outside the windows singing, "We shall overcome" all night. People got all out in Lafayette Park.

DAITCH: I was thinking she couldn't sleep because of those horrible images, but, no, it's people singing.

LEWIS: But it happened at American embassies abroad. It was just.... I think ABC that night, that Sunday night, was showing *Judgment at Nuremburg*. They broke into the movie. I think Howard K. Smith was doing the narration or something, a commentary on Selma, on Birmingham. People thought that what happened in Selma was part of the movie. And it changed the country.

DAITCH: It was shocking! I mean to have authorities, people who are in a position of authority, to be violent.

LEWIS: In contrast, when you tell students, when you tell young people about it today, it's unreal. See, you know, in America with our Bill of Rights, you have certain constitutional rights. You have a right to peaceful assembly. You have a right to peacefully protest. You have a right to dissent. You have a right to petition your government.

That's what we were doing. And that's what the federal judge said then. He said, in effect, "That these people have a right. If they want to march from Selma to Montgomery in an orderly, peaceful, nonviolent fashion," Judge Frank M. Johnson [Frank Minis Johnson, Jr.] said, "they have a constitutional right to do so."

We subpoenaed the film for this, from CBS, for the Department of Justice, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. And we showed it. I testified in his court. And Judge Johnson saw that film. He couldn't take it, he couldn't stand it. He stood up. He shook his robe, recessed the court, came back, and granted us everything that we asked for. We petitioned the court to allow 300 of us to walk all the way from Selma to Montgomery, and that we would camp out on the highway. Everything we asked for.

DAITCH: And no criminal charges against Clark [James G. Clark] and the others?

LEWIS: No, no. The Department of Justice, bless them. John Doar was this wonderful attorney who had been there during the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] Administration and stayed on during the Kennedy years, and he became very, very close to Burke Marshall and to Robert Kennedy. He was from Wisconsin, and he probably, I think, was a moderate Republican. But he loved Robert Kennedy, loved President Kennedy. And he was committed to civil rights. He went into federal court. They went before a federal grand jury, and they identified the man that hit me, the state trooper.

DAITCH: Oh, he did!

LEWIS: Oh, yes. And they identified several others. And they went before federal grand jury and tried to get an indictment. But the grand jury refused to return that indictment.

DAITCH: Why?

LEWIS: This was just the local citizens. They weren't about to indict anybody.

DAITCH: Wow!

LEWIS: They could have been some of their own family members that were in it.

DAITCH: Pretty shocking. I suppose, too, that there was some resistance to bringing any sort of criminal charges against the authorities who were sort of under orders I suppose, in a way.

LEWIS: Well, they were under the orders of Sheriff Clark, and the public safety director was a man by the name of Al Lingo [Albert J. Lingo], Al Lingo. But Governor Wallace gave the order to stop the march. But after the violence occurred and all of that, he said that wasn't what he meant to do. I had a meeting with him back in '69.... No, '79.

DAITCH: With Wallace?

LEWIS: It was '79. He heard that I was going to be in Alabama to visit my parents, and he invited me to come by. He was no longer governor. He was out of the office. And it was a one-on-one meeting. So we got into a discussion. It was almost like someone confessing before his priest. He just went through everything about he didn't hate colored people. Some of his best friends are colored people and they've worked for him. But he came to the point. He was asking me. He said, "I met Daddy King. I never met Martin Luther King, Jr. I never met Jesse Jackson [Jesse L. Jackson]." And E.D. Nixon was the local leader in Montgomery who helped bail Rosa Parks out. He'd met E.D. Nixon [Edgar Daniel Nixon], but he'd never met Rosa Parks [Rosa Louise Lee Parks]. And all these people he would like to meet, I guess, to sort of convey to them his feelings.

So I said, "Governor, why did you give the order for the troopers to stop us on March 7th?" He said, "John, if the troopers hadn't stopped you, there were people waiting on the other side of the bridge to kill you." I said, "Well, Governor, do you have people to kill people in order to keep other people from killing?" Or something like that I said to him. But he said he didn't mean for them to go that far.

DAITCH: Do you believe that?

LEWIS: Not really. See, I don't think Wallace believed any of this stuff that he preached. I think he was just a political opportunist.

DAITCH: Really!

LEWIS: I don't believe he believed in it himself. I think he saw his position, all this stuff he was saying, as a way of getting ahead in Alabama. When he ran for governor four years earlier, the first time, he was defeated. And he said to some of his supporters, he said, "I will never be a nigger again." So when he took the oath of office in January of 1963, he said, "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever." And he used race as a springboard.

DAITCH: How bizarre that he became the symbol for.... [Interruption]

LEWIS: I'm sorry.

DAITCH: That's okay. We'll have to stop now. So I'm sorry to have you running late.

LEWIS: That's all right. That's all right. I kept you waiting.

DAITCH: You're being so nice, and your assistants are telling us that we'd better stop.

LEWIS: If possible, if you will be around.... So are you based in New York?

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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