

This is an interview with John Lewis by Jack Bass and Walter De Vries on November 20, 1973.

: John Lewis played a very essential role in all of this, and I really just wanted to talk about this whole change and what are some of your experiences and what you have seen, what you feel is significant in what has come about. How did you actually begin, what was your first involvement in what is referred to as the Movement?

John Lewis: I grew up in rural Alabama on a farm in Pike County about forty or fifty miles from Montgomery in a strictly segregated world. You had the white world and the black world. Segregated school bus

. In '57 I went to Nashville to attend the American Baptist Theological Seminary to study, with my great desire to come to Atlanta to study at Morehouse but my parents couldn't afford it. I could go to the Seminary and work and so I enrolled in it. The first year I tried to organize a local chapter of N.A.A.C.P.. But the American Baptist Seminary is jointly owned and supported by the Southern Baptist Convention and they didn't

like Nashville Baptist and the faculty particularly. The president of the school had some real questions about trying to organize a local chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. on the campus. During the school year of '58 and '59 I started attending some non-violent workshops conducted by James Lawson who was then a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School. That went on during the second year, through '59 and '60, and these workshops dealt with the question of philosophy, the discipline of non-violent, the whole history of the struggle in India led by Ghandi and his attempt to organize in South Africa--building it on the whole idea of Christian faith and that type of thing. Late November 1959, we had what we considered test sit-ins in large department stores in downtown Nashville. We had a group of black and white exchange students, African students, students from India who went down and tested the restaurants and lunch counters. When they denied us service we left.

: Was this before Greensboro?

Lewis: It was before the Greensboro sit-in of 1960. We came back after the Christmas holidays and continued to have the workshops. Right after February first, second or third we received a telephone call from

students in North Carolina saying what can you do to support the students in Greensboro. It was not until February seventh that we had the first mass sit-in in Nashville. That was really the beginning of my involvement.

: What happened when you sat in?

Lewis: Well, the first time we took a seat at a lunch counter and we were denied service, they said we don't serve you; you can't be served. It was a great feeling; it was my first real act of protesting against this system of segregation. I sort of had this feeling for some time that you just wanted to strike a blow for freedom and this was a great sense of pride to be able to sit down and at the same time become part of an organized effort. We continued the sit-in efforts. We had what we called Tuesdays and Thursdays. We didn't have any classes on those days and we continued to go down to the lunch counters and restaurants to sit-in.

: What would happen when you were denied?

Lewis: We would continue to sit and some days we would stay all day and take turns. A shift of students would stay there until they were forced to close the lunch counters completely. Or we would occupy all of the

seats. In some instances, stores like Woolworth's and Kress', McClelland's would just close the stores. And that continued for a period of time. We had mass meetings going on in the larger communities.

: Were there any arrests?

Lewis: No. The first arrest in Nashville didn't occur until February 27. This was a day when we had been warned by a local white minister, Will Campbell, who had told us he had word from a reliable source that we would be arrested and that there would be some form of violence. A small group of us, on that day--it was a cold day in Nashville, we even had snow--on that particular day, went down and started sitting in at Woolworth's and later during the day there was some violence on the part of a young white teen-ager who pulled students off the seats or put lighted cigarettes down their backs, that type of thing. We continued to sit.

: Was any of that done to you?

Lewis: I was hit, but never a lighted cigarette or anything like that.

: Was it painful?

Lewis: Oh yes. We refused to strike back. The night before we had prepared some leaflets and I had written the leaflets myself. A series of do's and don't's that we

prepared for the students. We got paper from the American Baptist Seminary and one of the secretary's there ran them off on the mimeograph machine. Each of the students had a leaflet saying what to do and what not to do. As a matter of fact, Senator Javis has a little book and he used these do's and don t's in his book that we had prepared for that particular demonstration. Most of the people that went to jail that day had those leaflets on them. In Nashville, Tennessee on that following Sunday--I guess, that was the twenty-eighth--they reprinted the leaflet. But that was my first arrest, after the violence occurred on February 27th.

: Was that the first violent episode?

Lewis: Yes, that was the first violence.

: Do you remember how you felt then, both about the violence and the arrest?

Lewis: Well, I think studying and attending the non-violence workshops we had been disciplined to understand, to be willing to adjust to the violence, the pain and the hurt. At the same time we didn't concentrate on what happened to us. But we were there for a purpose and the arrest. It just sort of inspired us. I didn't have any bad feelings about it. I didn't necessarily want to go to jail. But we knew, in a sense, using that

particular method really as a tactic at that point that it would help solidify the student community and the black community as a whole. The student community did rally. The people heard that we had been arrested and before the end of the day, five hundred students made it into the downtown area to occupy other stores and restaurants. At the end of the day ninety-eight of us were in jail. There were mass meetings all over the city that Sunday. We refused to come out of jail. We didn't want anyone to go our bond. But early Sunday morning, the colleges and universities there had put up the necessary bail money and we were let go.

: How do you see it now, thirteen years later? Do you feel the same way about it.

Lewis: I feel that what we did was necessary. It helped to start something. And if I had to do it all over again, I would. To me, it gave the feeling of being part of a crusade, sort of a movement. It was just not another angle. It was part of a process and after that particular demonstration, there was a series of other demonstrations in Nashville. There were other arrests, other acts of violence, particularly during the month of March and April. We had a bombing. One of the attor-

nies that had been defending us, I think it was April 19th, 1960, about six o'clock in the morning, the home of Z. Alexander Loby that was one of the attorneys for the Legal Defense Fund, who taught part-time at Fisk, his home was bombed. He lived across the street from Meharry Medical College and the bomb impact broke the windows of the school. About seven o'clock we had a meeting with this group of students called the Central Committee of the Nashville Student Movement, which represented students from Fisk, American Baptist, Tennessee State, Peabody, Vanderbilt,. We all met and decided that we would have a mass march on City Hall in response the the bombing of attorney home. We sent the Mayor a telegram saying to him to meet us on the steps of the City Hall by noon. By noon we had more than five thousand students and community people marching on City Hall and the mayor came and spoke. It was at that point that the mayor of Nashville made that he thought that the merchants should agree to desegregate downtown Nashville. That was the turning point. In early May, the lunch counters and restaurants in question did desegregate. It was period of negotiation and we had a period where we didn't demonstrate at these particular restaurants.

: if you understood racial qualities in the South, you understood southern politics. There are basically two periods--the fifties and the sixties. If you look at it in terms of Civil Rights, were much more gains made in one period than another?

Lewis: Oh yes, there is no question in my mind.

: How would you describe the period from 1948 to 1960?

Lewis: In terms of progress, real progress. Of black people in the political arena in terms of civil rights, there is very little progress. You had very few organizations, very few groups. You had on the national level the N.A.A.C.P fighting, for the most part involving a small segment of the black community. You had a few professionals here and there but it was not until the first real effort to involve the masses in the struggle came with the Montgomery boycott bus boycott in 1955. In my estimation, not until 1960, when the whole sit-in started, did you see a total community, every segment of the black community, get involved. I think today what is happening since 1955 and particularly since 1960, black people see their involvements an extension--see their involvement in the political movement as an extension of their involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.

: During the period of the sixties?

Lewis: Yes.

: So that the gains made between 1960 and 1973 are not more than any other period?

Lewis: I would think so.

: Could you personally visualize that 1960 when you were involved during your student days?

Lewis: No.

: Could you see what the gains might have been?

Lewis: I think we had some idea. A great many of us thought that maybe just being able to go into a lunch counter and get a hamberger and a Coke, that would end certain forms of segregation, racial discrimination--being able to take a seat on a bus or in a waiting room. There were certain barriers physical barriers that we wanted to remove. I think that a great many of us thought that in a short period of time, maybe within a matter of a few months, certain things would happen in terms of removing some of the barriers, some of the legal barriers. But I don't think for the most part that in 1960 we see some of the changes that we see now.

: There were more political barriers than social barriers?

Lewis: There were physical barriers, removing some

of the social barriers. And I guess in 1960 we had no idea that in many parts of the South people would be registering and voting and being elected to office. It was not really a part

: Could you have foreseen that Governor Wallace would crown, just this past Sunday, the first black queens of the University and address a conference of black mayors?

Lewis: No, I don't think so.

: What do you think now?

Lewis: I think that Wallace recognized that black people are registering and that they are voting. In a state like Alabama, when in the early sixties there was only about sixty-five to seventy thousand registered black voters and today there are over twenty thousand registered black voters in the state. In many counties in Alabama you didn't have any black voters in the sixties and now they have black elected officials.

: Do you think Wallace's action is symbolically important?

Lewis: I think it is in a sense. I think the action of Governor Wallace is saying that the politics have raised. The politics that we knew during the fifties and sixties is gone. If it's not gone completely, it's on

its death bed. I think that's what it symbolizes.

: Do you think that Wallace has changed because he recognized the political power involved in registration of black, or more fundamental changes? Is it a change in his attitudes toward blacks?

Lewis: I'm not so sure that I am prepared to say that the governor has changed his attitude. Wallace is apparently a very smart and clever politician. At one time, when he first ran, he was much more progressive and he sort of inverted to a, I guess you might call, conservative position code after he became a sort of fighting . Apparently he is going through some changes and I'm really not prepared to say that he has changed his attitudes. No question about it there are changes. Changes are occurring in the South on the part of white elected officials, white politicians. But I can recall in 1961 some of the places we visited on the Freedom Ride in Mississippi, in 1962 and '64 some of the white officials that we came in contact with like the sheriff in County down in McComb, Mississippi. Some of the people that harassed some of the S.N.C.C. people are some of the same people today that are out campaigning for the black vote. They come to the voter registration rallies, the mass meetings.

When Julian and I went on tour in Mississippi in '71, the same people came to welcome us to the city and that was only in Mississippi. In June of '71, the mayor of _____ and this is the same place in Humphrey's County when in the late fifties two N.A.A.C.P. people were shot there, came to welcome us to the city. These guys, I think, can count; they know that black people are registering and they are voting and they want to be re-elected.

: _____ public policies and the way in which blacks are treated and the way in which resources are distributed and the way government services are provided, what does it mean in those terms?

Lewis: I think, without question, a growing number of white elected officials recognize that the black vote is a vote to be reckoned with and that they must be able to produce some type of services. They must be responsive to the needs. And on local levels in some communities they are doing just that. It may not be the same time or the same scale that they are doing it to the white community.

:Any specific examples, particular people, are places _____ ?

Lewis: Well, we get reports here, registration

reports. I cannot think of any particular one now but probably looking through the file we could check into this where people have been trying to get simple things like a sewer system or getting streets paved in a particular area, getting low income housing. And people are being able to get that now because they are registered and they are voting.

: I want to go back to sort of recapture your career. After Nashville what did you do?

Lewis: After Nashville?

: Did you graduate?

Lewis: I did in '61. But during '61

: Were you ordained?

Lewis: I was ordained, licensed and ordained. I never pastored a church or anything like that. I guess you may call me a backslider, not really. I saw the Civil Rights movement as an extension of the Church in a sense, I guess as a real attempt to make organized religion relevant. The black church has a strong influence on the black community by using the church. The people in S.N.C.C. that went to organize people in some of the small towns and rural areas many times worked through local church groups, community organizations and the minister. When I left the Seminary in '61, I went on the Freedom

Rides and this was my first time going into the state of Mississippi, late May, June of '61. It was a terrible experience to come through Birmingham and Montgomery. I'll never forget, a group of us seven blacks and three whites from the university, colleges and universities in Nashville. After the C.O.R.E. sponsored Freedom Rides, a group of us left on May 17th, 1961, and took a Greyhound bus, a regular bus, to Birmingham. Before we arrived in the city of Birmingham the bus was stopped outside the city and a member of the Birmingham Police Department got on the bus and said where are the Freedom Riders. No one said anything. This member of the Police Department literally took over the bus by asking for the tickets and he looked at the tickets and saw that we all had tickets from Nashville, making a stop in Birmingham, Montgomery, Jackson then on to New Orleans. He just literally identified us as being the Freedom Riders and he was really correct.

When we arrived at the Birmingham bus station they took us off, placed us in protective custody and other members of the Birmingham Police Department and took us to the Birmingham City Jail. It was on a Wednesday. We stayed there Wednesday. We went on a hunger strike. We refused to eat anything, Thursday and

Friday morning about three o'clock in the morning

Conner and other members of the Birmingham Police Department and a reporter from the Birmingham News came up to the cell and said, we are taking you back to the college campuses in Nashville. But they took us to the Alabama-Tennessee state line, a little town called

Alabama or Tennessee and left us there. Then we made a call back to Nashville and spoke to Diane Nash in the general office and told her what had happened. They would send cars to pick us up, but in the meantime we tried to find a house or someone in the black community. We did find a place where a black family lived and stayed there until the car came to pick us up. We went back to Birmingham and stayed at the bus station from Friday night, all night, and tried to get a bus to go from Birmingham to Montgomery. In the meantime, Attorney General Kennedy was negotiating with the Greyhound authorities, trying to get the bus moving. All of the drivers from the Greyhound Bus Company were refusing to drive the bus. We went out several times Friday night, at 8:30, 12:00 and 8:30 Saturday morning. We finally got a bus through from Birmingham and to Montgomery. And over the bus there was a small plane and every fifteen miles we would see State Troopers from the state of Alabama.

It was only about a hundred miles between Birmingham to Montgomery. And when we arrived about five or ten miles out, all signs of protection, plane, the State Troopers. I have gone this way many, many times before riding the bus between Troy to Montgomery, Montgomery to Birmingham, Birmingham to Nashville to school for four years. When you got near the station you had this eerie feeling. It must have been about ten or ten-thirty on a Saturday and you didn't see anything and all at once when the bus pulled up and we started out of the bus an angry mob of about a thousand people came toward the bus. And they first started reporters and then they started attacking us. Several of us were beaten and just left lying in the street. And there was one guy, that must have been the chief officer for the Alabama State Troopers. This guy, I can't think of his name but Newsweek or Time did a big story on him, and he literally saved the day. He kept people from literally being killed. He fired a gun to disperse the mob. We went from there to different homes in the city of Montgomery. Dr. King and Rev. Abernathy happened to be out of the city, they were speaking some place, and they heard about what had happened and they came back to Montgomery and planned for a big mass meeting in Mont-

gomery on that Sunday. Must have been May 22nd, but several hundred people from throughout the city came and several national Civil Rights types came into the city. We got into the church. The circuit judge, a judge named Walter B. Jones, had issued an order against inter-racial groups traveling in the state of Alabama and they had an order issued for us saying that we had violated the injunction and cited us for contempt of court. At the same time, state officials literally looking for us to serve the injunction. So all of the Freedom Riders went into the choir stand and we were like members of the choir. I had a patch on my head from the injury I received. Several people were left and didn't make it to the church. That night before the mass meeting started at eight o'clock was literally just filled. An angry mob came to the church. This was the First Baptist Church pastored by Rev. Abernathy and in the meantime, Dr. King got on the telephone and called Bobby Kennedy and told him of the atmosphere and the climate. The mob was coming closer to the church and then, I think, President Kennedy federalized the National Guards in Alabama --the only way we got away from the church that night. Hundreds of people, not just Freedom Riders, were literally taken to their homes in different parts of the com-

munity by the National Guards in jeeps. Some of the people wanted to call the riot off. We had a series of meetings Monday, Tuesday and finally on Tuesday we decided to continue the riot. On Wednesday

: Why did they decide to continue the riot?

Lewis: Well, we felt that it was important that the riot be continued and we decided that it was important to travel through Alabam, through Selma, Highway 80, on into Mississippi. The Freedom Ride served not only the purpose of desegregating or dramatizing the fact that segregation still existed in the area of public transportation, but also to arouse the black community in the South. It was like taking the gospel of the Civil Rights movement into different parts of the South and it was important that it go into a state like Mississippi. Could have been very little activity there, in terms of mass action in some around Jackson State and

during the sit-in. At that time in Mississippi you had a situation we really didn't have in mind but the Freedom Ride played a role in it. You had four hundred and fifty thousand black folks of voting age and only about twenty-two thousand registered to vote. As a result of the Freedom Rides efforts into Mississippi in '61, later S.N.C.C. people and C.O.R.E.

people went into the Delta area, particularly in the south-west and the McColm area and tried to organize people around the right to vote.

: So then you went on?

Lewis: We arrived in Jackson at the Trailway Bus Station there and we were arrested for refusing to move on and disorderly conduct and disturbing the peace.

When the city jail got too full, they transferred us to the jail and from jail we were transferred to . I will never forget the experience going from County jail in Jackson to Parchman, the State Penitentiary. The jailers came to the cell and they did all of this late at night

. They had a large van truck and they took all of the male prisoners, black and white, into this van truck. We had been segregated in the city jail, the Hines County jail. Putting us together in this large van truck was the first integration, I guess. After we got off the bus, they thought of putting black and white people together to transport them to the State 'Pen. We arrived there and one of the guards said sing your Freedom songs now, we have niggers here who will eat you up; sing your Freedom songs. The moment we all started stepping off the van truck, walking to the gate through

the gate that leads to maximum security, that's where we were being placed. We had to walk right in and you had to take off all of your clothes. So all of us-- seventy-five guys black and white because during that period you had students, professors, ministers coming in from all parts of the country to continue the Freedom Ride. And we stood there for at least two hours without and clothes and I just felt that it was an attempt to belittle and de-humanize you. Then they would take us in two's, two blacks and two whites-- the segregation started all over again after we got inside the jail-- to take a shower. While we were taking a shower, there was a guard standing there with a gun pointed on you while you showered. If you had a beard or a mustache, any hair, you had to shave your beard off, you had to shave your mustache off. After taking the showers in two's, you were placed in a cell and given a Mississippi undershirt and a pair of shorts. During our stay in Mississippi Penitentiary we didn't have any visitors. We were able to write on person a letter. The second day Governor came by with some state officials. We all got out within a forty day period in order to appeal the charges.

: You were there for how long?

Lewis: I was there for thirty-seven days.

: And what was the charge?

Lewis: Di sorderly conduct. We were fined and sentenced. You had the choice you could pay your fine, and I think the fine was something like two hundred dollars and the number of days must have been something like sixty-six days, but if you got out within forty days you had a right to appeal the case. And most of the people got out within the forty days. I left Mississippi after I got out and came back to Jackson and took a train to Jackson back to Nashville. That was during the late summer of '61; got involved in some demonstrations in Nashville to desegregate some of the restaurants that were still segregated. Thw whole question of employment and some of the chain food stores. That's when I first met Stokley for the first time during the Freedom Ride of '61 because he came down and joined the Freedom Ride. A large group of students from Howard University came down. In September of '61 I enrolled at Fisk to study philosophy and religion. I studied at Fisk from '61 to '63 and became chairman during the school year '61 of the local student movement in Nashville. Dealing primarily with some of the restaurants that were still segregated and during the period we were able to desegregate several

of the major restaurants in Nashville between '61 and '63. The YMCA was still segregated at that time. June of '63 I was elected chairman of SNCC and I moved to Atlanta. Between '63 and '66, I was arrested forty times for being involved in demonstrations.

: How many times have you been arrested all together?

Lewis: Forty times. I haven't been arrested since 1966. The last time I was arrested was part of a little demonstration we had at the South African Council, in New York. That was March of '66. The summer of '62 I spent my entire summer as a SNCC organizer in southern Illinois, Charlestown, Missouri, that area. And it was very much like parts of Mississippi and Alabama.

: What did you do after 1966?

Lewis: After 1966 I left SNCC. Stokely was elected chairman of SNCC in May, 1966. I left SNCC in July 1966 and went to the Field Foundation. I worked at the Field Foundation from August, 1966 to October, 1967. From October, '67 to March, '70 I served as a community organizer, head of the Community Organization Project, really for the Southern Regional Council. That was primarily working with co-operatives, self-help groups of

the South.

: How would you describe the major activities of SNCC, especially when you were present?

Lewis: The major effort of SNCC during the period of 1963 to the early part of 1966 are probably the most significant effort, I think, was probably the Mississippi summer project of 1964, and the Selma effort. You see, SNCC first went into Selma, for example, in 1962. The first SNCC organizer went into Selma with just trying to make some contacts based on a limited amount of research. In 1962, only 2.1% of the black people in Selma were registered to vote. And it was at this point in the history of SNCC, an attempt to organize the people around the right to vote. SNCC was one of the organizations which received some support from the first VEP. So, SNCC people working in Selma in 1962 and in Mississippi and also in Albany and southwest Georgia, did receive some sort of funding from Voter Education to try to help organize local voter registration. I think the effort of SNCC to dramatize SNCC interest and involvement in politics came with the March on Washington in 1963 in the speech that I gave. We emphasized the whole question of the vote. Tried to make the point that Kennedy opposed Civil Rights legislation, would not make it possible

for people without a sixth grade education . . . would make it almost impossible for them to register and to be considered literate. His bill said, in effect, that someone with a sixth grade education should be considered literate, but it didn't go as far as we wanted it to go. That's when we started this whole idea of one man, one vote is the African cry; it should be ours too. It must be ours. And that became a slogan of SNCC. It was on our literature on our letter-head, on posters, on everything. And in late September of '63, after the bombing in Birmingham of the church--September 16th was the day of the bombing--some of us went straight from the funeral of the four girls in Birmingham to Selma where we started organizing the whole push around the right to vote. On October 18th, 1963 we had one of the first, what we call "Freedom Day", in Selma. For more than eight hundred black people stood in line all day at the County Court House to register to vote. By the end of the day only five people had passed through that line. That effort sort of got side-tracked because at the same time we were planning for the big effort in Mississippi--the Mississippi Summer Project of '64. And at the same time with all of the concentration in Mississippi during the early part of '64 we did have some limited work going

on in Selma. But I would say that the Sema effort and the Mississippi summer

: When was the confrontation in Selma?

Lewis: March 7th, 1965. We had what had been a series of

: You said that the voting rights act resulted directly from this?

Lewis: If there is any single event that gave birth to the Voter Rights Act, it was the Selma effort. March 7th was just sort of a combination of things. We had had a series of protests, organizing efforts in Selma in late '63 and some in '64 and '65. I will never forget when there was some attempt on the part of SNCC as an organization not to bring SCLC in. But the local people--Mrs. Boynton head of Dallas County Voters' League, Rev. Frederick Reid, who is now a member of the Selma City Council--these two emerging local leaders of Selma wanted to bring Dr. King in. Some of the people in SNCC felt that Martin King shouldn't come into Sema and some of us felt that he should. I was one of the ones that felt that he should, that he would bring some attention to the problem and help dramatize the problem.

: What was the opposition's feeling?

Lewis: Well, some people felt that, you know, SNCC had been there since 1962 working and organizing and we have a vital local movement going and why, at this , should an organization like SCLC come in. Some people felt that SCLC operated on one level and sort of a crisis oriented and a mass effort for a particular day or a particular week to dramatize and then they were gone. People in SNCC felt that you stay there and you work and you organize and you bring the community along. That you don't go in and do for the community but you bring the community to a point where it can do for itself. The people did make a decision to invite SCLC in and they came and joined in. And they started a series of dramatic demonstrations which culminated in the March 7th. But even in the early part of January, we had one of the first mass demonstrations. Jim Clark, on that particular day in January said to me, I was leading that particular march, "John Lewis, you are an outside agitator." I didn't consider myself an outside agitator because I am a native of Alabama. Did grow up truthfully all the way from Selma about ninety miles. "You are an outside agitator and an agitator is the lowest form of humanity," and just sort of walked away and we kept walking toward the County Court House and got arrested.

That type of action kept going.

In the meantime, it was not just a demonstration going on in the city of Selma. There were many SNCC people and SCLC people working out in the rural part of the country organizing a community group trying to get people to come down to the Court House to register. After the violence in Selma, and the violence in Perry County and Merrian, Alabama where Jackson was shot, some people felt that we had to march on Montgomery. Made a decision to march. Some people opposed the march and some people supported it. We decided to march on March 7th, '65, but when I look back I'm really not sure on that particular day when a group of us about six hundred of us decided to march, whether we were literally prepared to march from Selma to Montgomery that day. Because we hadn't really made any plans as to where to stop along the way. We did have bags and knapsacks and that type of thing, but we hadn't made any plans to have food and necessary supplies along the way. We gathered together at Brown Chapel A. M. E. Church that Sunday afternoon about two o'clock. Dr. King for some reason didn't come to Selma that day.

Andy Young, Hosea Williams, James Bevel from SCLC--they had to draw to find out what person from their organization

would lead the march. I was leading the march from SNCC and Hosea represented SCLC, and we started marching. After we crossed the bridge, Governor Wallace in the meantime warned us that the march would not be allowed. But we insisted that we had to the right to march. We crossed the bridge and we met a sea of State Troopers. One of the State Troopers identified himself as Major Cloud and ^{he} sid on the bullhorn, "This is an unlawful march and it will not be allowed to continue. I give you three minutes to disperse." We waited the three minutes and just stood and when the three minutes were up he told the Troopers to advance and they had the helmets and the gas masks on and the bull whips and clubs. And they came in.

: How did you feel at that moment when you saw them coming?

Lewis: I felt frightened. I felt that we had to stay there. I felt that we had to stand there. There was something that was said and you couldn't turn back. We had to stay there and I didn't believe that the Troopers would do what they did, for some strange reason, but I felt that we had to stay there. And we stayed there. I remember, we were beaten.

: You got a fractured skull in that?

Lewis: Yes, I did.

: Was that a single blow from a Trooper?

Lewis: A single blow apparently from a club, I guess, of a Trooper, but I felt like when that whole thing from the gas that this is really the end. I guess the greatest concern was also for the people. Most of the march was made of young teen-agers and women. A lot of the people had just left the church and came straight to Brown Chapel A. M. E. Church. It was a frightening moment, really terrifying.

:Was that the most frightening moment you have ever had?

Lewis: Yes, without question. I think we were literally lucky, all of us, for no one to be seriously hurt or killed. You know, Sherrif Clark had a posse that he had organized. He had people with bull whips, with ropes running through the marchers on horses beating people. But people got together and I think that helped to electrify the black community in Selma and the whole area of Alabama. It had a tremendous impact on the country. People couldn't believe that that could happen. And the response of people, particularly people who had supported SNCC and SCLC all across the country . . . A

series of demonstrations took place, I think, by that

Tuesday by friends of SNCC in different cities. There were about eighty sympathy marchers. Protests had been organized; some people slipped into the Justice Department in Washington. The year that President Johnson served, his daughter couldn't sleep because people had been singing, "We shall overcome" all around the White House.

: That was eight years ago. Does it seem that long ago?

Lewis: No it doesn't. On one hand it doesn't; on the other, it seems like it has been a long, long time.

: Can you imagine anything like that occurring now?

Lewis: Today? No. It's out of the question. I think it's out of the question. I think it would be hard for anything like that to occur in the South. People don't want to go back to that period.

: Both black and whites?

Lewis: Both blacks and whites.

: I really thought the Civil Rights movement was an extension of the church and I think you can see that in the leadership up through '68 with the leadership of Martin Luther King. Basically you were attending a more physical barrier than social barrier. Do you see

the leadership of the movement changing from religious leaders, the type like yourself, to political leaders? As you look at it today, the people who are leaders of the black community tend to cite politicians like the conference of black mayors you went to. Is there a real change in the movement from the sense of religious orientation to a sense of political kind of orientation in terms of block voting and electing blacks? Is there a basic change here?

: I think so. In the speech I made at the conference of black mayors on Friday night I tried to make the point that new leaders of the movement are the politicians, the elected officials, without question. On the other hand a great many of the people that you see being elected are people that came through the Civil Rights movement. Look at Andrew Young; he was a minister. Andy sort of stands out because he was assistant to Martin Luther King and was known. But on local levels, in many many communities where you had a sheriff, a County Commissioner or a constable, some of these young mayors are some of the people who came through the Civil Rights movement. In a real sense, the new leaders in the black community are the elected officials and that's where people are giving their support.

: Did this result in a lessening role of the Church?

Lewis: I don't think so because the Church is still one of the base areas; something that is organized. It is visible. And the Church does have a strong hold on the black community, particularly in the South.

: But the rhetoric of the movement has changed. It used to be oriented in moralist and religious terms?

Lewis: Yes.

: Today I was thinking of the election of _____, a black mayor, which was done through coalition politics. But he articulated it in terms of no-growth policy for the city and it had nothing to do with the races, religion or anything else.

Lewis: But even there, I think that black politicians and I think church people--not necessary as a church people but some of the old Civil Rights people, including myself in the number--we would insist that the new black politician, new leaders, be able to inject some of the ethics, some of the morality, maybe that existed in the old Civil Rights movement into the political arena, but not necessarily carry on the rhetoric of the movement. I think some of these guys are trying to do that; rather than just to talk about building buildings and new

stadiums, talk about some of the human conditions.'

: I want to get back to the point of removing physical barriers than removing social barriers and try to think of where you might go in terms of the future. Your effort in this organization to register people and get them to vote, assuming you have reached the point where you have registered all of the blacks you can and urged them to vote--then what happens? Do you think of using the black community as a block vote to achieve power or to use it in a bargaining position? Or do you see it as coalition politics?

Lewis: I see more and more black people being able to coalesce with other segments of the society. I think the recent elections here in this city, in Raleigh, in other communities, point to the fact that the black community is prepared to move in this direction. I think it must move in this direction.

: Yet retaining its solidarity?

Lewis: It must retain.

: Based on color?

Lewis: Not necessarily based on color, based on certain interests that are peculiar to the black community that may not be peculiar to the larger community. But, hopefully we are moving beyond the politics of race.

: Beyond the politics of race to what?

Lewis: To a type of coalition politics where promising black candidates can run against white candidates and have the support of a total community, of both black and white supporting them. Promising white candidates running and the black community not feel obligated to support that man simply because he is black. We had a situation here, where a black incumbent, civic alderman, running against a white woman incumbent also, who was appointed but the black community gave her the margin of victory because she happened to be the best candidate, the best member of the old board of aldermen.

: Did she get a majority of the black vote?

Lewis: She did not get a majority of the black vote.

: But she got enough to be elected?

Lewis: Right.

: This situation is somewhat analgous of ethnic groups. In other words, when they first came to America--Dutch, Irish and so on--in order to have some kind of power base in the community as an ethnic group and then after they were once assimilated in the political offices then that tie disappeared. Do you see this happening with blacks?

Lewis: Well, I think black people go into because of our history. I think we go in for the most part . . .

we are very visible because of color. We are very visible in the American society. For some time to come you are going to have that black community, that black section of the city, of a particular county. I really believe that less and less we're going to see people voting less and less in terms of race in the black community. I think that's part of the growing sophistication among the black elected. I think that's particularly true in the South.

: In terms of what you said before about coalition politics, how significant do you see the election in Raleigh, the mayor's election in Raleigh and what is the significance of that?

Lewis: I haven't been able to analyze the returns and I don't know very much about Raleigh. But just looking at the few numbers, to me I think that there's probably a lesson there that black politicians and white politicians, the black community need to look at and the white community need to take a look. In my estimation, it's probably much more significant than what happened here in this city. Raleigh is over seventy-seven percent white. The registration of blacks are about fifteen percent or so. Apparently Clarence Lightner conducted an issue oriented campaign and the people laid race aside. They wanted to see apparently a strong

mayor not necessarily tied to the business community. But it also pointed out the fact I think, more and more, that in the South apparently--and I'm not saying that this is the case--but growing numbers of white southerners at this particular point are casting their lot with black elected officials or with black candidates. I think this may have something to do with what they have seen and have been part of in the South. I don't think it's our sense of any sense of guilt or past sin, but maybe they think that black elected officials, because of their past history, will be able to govern with a greater sense of sensitivity and a greater sense of compassion. I think some people are looking at government as being more responsive to human needs and not to just building buildings. People want industry; they want jobs. But even in a city like Atlanta I think that these are some of the same feelings that people have in Raleigh--they don't just want highways.

(Interruption.)

Lewis: I think so. I'm hopeful and optimistic that we will. There's going to be more and greater registration. People are going to be voting. Some people are becoming very cynical about the political process but in the South, I just don't think that black people are going

to be turned off. They may get turned off from the whole national because of Watergate and the scandal. They have second thoughts. But people are going to be more and more concerned about the sheriff and the constable, the county commissioner, the local judges. I do not see black people in the South dropping out of politics.

: As white registration and participation is going down can you see black registration and participation going up?

Lewis: I think it will go up. It must go up because on the other hand if you have dramatic voter registration in the black community, highly publicized registration effort that will also inspire, sure to inspire white registration.

: When do you think that you have reached of participation and registration levels?

Lewis: We would like to see all of the people of voting age registered. In the South there's still more than two and a half million blacks of voting age that are unregistered. That may be probably impossible. Maybe it will be almost impossible for an organization like VEP to get all of those people registered. I think we can only do so much in terms of registration. We get to a point and you have to have a sort of cut off in terms

of the registration effort. Even the people that you get registered, there must be a continued on-going process of political education. We have a situation in the South with black voters and I think it's the same problem with white voters, particularly low income white voters to a certain point. Primarily with black voters who have been kept out of the political process, they have been excluded. And some people are registering and voting for the first time and they have got to get into the

habit of voting and the habit of participating. So I think we have sort of an obligation or responsibility to follow through, not to just any process of registration. To carry on some form of voter education, citizenship education or citizen participation.

: By that you mean identifying the potential black leaders and getting them to run for office?

Lewis: I don't think VEP can necessarily encourage people to run for office, as an organization under our present tax status. But I do think that we can create a climate, the situation where people feel that they should run. I think we have an obligation to educate people to that point where they will go out and vote and not vote on the basis of race, but there are issues involved and educate people to the duties and responsibilities of a

particular position.

: Are there national organizations or state-wide organizations or local groups of blacks that tend to identify other blacks to run and encourage them to run for office?

Lewis: There is one group based in Atlanta, the Southern Election Fund, on a small scale it's trying to do some of that--to identify communities where the potential for blacks being elected and trying to identify some potential candidates.

: Jack gave me a name of someone there

Lewis: But you don't have anything like that on any type of significant level.

: There's some concern about that. Suppose if by encouraging a lot of blacks to run for office or creating a climate for which they can do so, you encourage people who are incompetent and then you have that judgement to look at. My point is, when I came down South from

Michigan and worked in Louisiana and North Carolina and some other places, the white politicians were sections of the black community--was just that. it was a modelitic structure and the top two or three leaders were generally ministers or pastors. Then you had the key to

that voting block. In most stages where I have done studies of the blacks I find there is no modelitic structure. I mean, since there is no national leader, in many cases there are no state leaders and what you have is a fragmented structure. But you got a group of white politicians who perceive it otherwise.

Lewis: I agree with that. That's why I think it's dangerous. It is a danger for any organization, for any group and hopefully VEP will never get in a position of trying to suggest who should run and who should not run. In the final analysis that candidate or that person become elected must be responsive to the people that elected him. In the state of Alabama we have various black political factions there. We've been trying to do some things there to bring people together, the black leader in a particular city, state, or on a national level. Even here in this city, the last election I think destroyed the whole idea of a group of black people putting together a ticket. And I think too long in the South, white politicians have placed some their political future in the hands of a few ministers of a few name leaders. They give them five hundred dollars, two thousand dollars to put their names on a ticket and some of these guys--even in a city like Atlanta--live from one election, to theso-called

black leaders and church people live from one election to the next election by getting a piece of money here and there. They are literally throwing their money away.

: Isn't this a reflection of what happens nationally since Dr. King? There really isn't anybody identified in any national black organization as the black leader. This fragmentation of power which really started in '68 is now continuing and I guess you suggest it's going to continue and instead of going back to just one or two national prominent or state-wide prominent leaders you are going to continue to have more and more leaders of the local level.

Lewis: I think we are going to see a continuation of indigenous leaders, whether on a local level, country-wide, city-wide . Local organizations will not be necessarily a national plan or national strategy. It will not be any type of national group coming together. In the state of Alabama for example, you have the conference of black mayors under the leadership of . You have the Alabama Democratic Conference based in Montgomery with Joe Reed. Then you have the National Democratic Party of Alabama. John Cashin and some of those guys would not sit down in the same room together. John Cashin saying black people shouldn't runas Democrats.

they should run in the general election on an independent ticket. Joe Reed and some of the other people saying that they should run in the Democratic primary

: Doesn't that seem to suggest that instead of solidifying the black movement by electing more and more black leaders

Lewis: I think more and more black people must be and will be elected in spite of and divisions. And in my estimation, it might be a helpful thing to have no one leader no spokesman speaking out of Atlanta or New York. To have people dealing with their problems in their own communities, in their own neighborhoods, in their own counties, in their own congressional districts in all the states. I think black people too often in the South during the days of the Civil Rights movement, got the feeling that some Messiah is going to liberate them, going to free them. Some communities in the South literally were left untouched by the the Civil Rights movement and they must start from scratch.

: Didn't the death of Martin Luther King sort of frighten-up that illusion

Lewis: I think it destroyed it to a certain degree. The leadership and the symbolic leadership of Dr. King, no question about it, played a very important role. It

gave many many people a great sense of hope that change is possible but I still think too many people in the South are waiting for somebody to come into their communities. . . .

: On the part of the leadership, isn't their move more pragmatic now?

Lewis: More pragmatic, more realistic. People are more issue oriented: 1,2,3; a, b, c. People looking at Congressional districts, looking at state senatorial districts--it's more planning.

: John, how important, or how do you assess the importance of the Voting Rights Act itself?

Lewis: I think the Voting Rights Act, no question about it, was a turning point and probably one of the most significant points in this whole struggle for black people to become truly free and liberated in the American society, particularly in the South. It made it possible for hundreds and thousands of people to become registered.

: How important is it for it to be renewed in 1975?

Lewis: Only on one occasion in 1971 have we had Federal Registrar Laws sent into any parts of the South and that was in Mississippi in June of 1971.

: John, this paragraph in your speech reminds

me of a question I wanted to ask--where you were talking about demonstrations in the South .

One of the premises of this book as well as other books is that the South somehow a region different from the rest of the country, and the key argument is because of politics of race. How would you argue that the South, at least in terms of the racial aspects of it, is different from the other parts of the country? I'm thinking for an example of the situation around Detroit. I see people handling the situation down here much more rationally recently than up there and I think what you might see down the road in certain part of the country as related to the South. I'm not sure that I'm very articulate about that, but I see two different situations regionally, that the basic reason for the South being different was because the two races were like this whereas in the North now, you've got a bad situation. Inter-racial seems to be better down here. Is that the way you view this?

Lewis: Yes, I think so. We've got a history in spite of all the problems. In spite of all of the difficulties in the South during the past years, there's been a type of "I know you" type that did not exist in the North. Black people said in effect that we know white people in

the South. We may live in a segregated society but we know you. I think white people in the South have been saying, sometimes they say, we know our black people in a type of segregated, they said it, in a bad way. But during that period I think the two communities, the two worlds, in some way come together. During the '60's we had a great period of confrontation which brought many of the real problems to the top and black people and white people started to deal with them. I'm not so sure that I made the statement in this speech but someplace, the Civil Rights movement has served to help in a cleansing effect, the soul and psyche of both black and white that you did not have in the North. We had it in the South. I think the Civil Rights movement in a sense was sort of like a religious phenomenon . It brought out certain things that needed to be brought out. This period of confrontation, on one hand white southerners were shocked at some of the things that occurred in the 60's, that black people would stand up and that they would organize in this fashion. At the same time I think there might have been a sense of well, we knew it would come to this point. Now the attitude is that this will probably be good for all of us. People don't want to go back to that period of confrontation.

: So the difference is that the North is yet to go through period that the South has already covered?

Lewis: I think that's part of it. But in the South, and I may sound a little here as a Southerner, but people have the element of hope and optimism that we have here because of the changes that we have been able to bring about in a short time knowing that we have a short distance to go. And probably a lot of the problems and mistakes that the people in the North have made that we are prepared not to make those mistakes, not to make those blunders or maybe we will make a great leap someplace down the way. That's one of the reasons you have this interest in the South on the part of young blacks. That's why you have this black and this return to the South. And they're not just coming to cities like Atlanta.

: was still right that the differences in the North and South may be based on racial relations.

Lewis: Well, I just think . . .

: Race is still the key, It's just now, it's changed around.

Lewis: Yes.

: Another thesis or another book--and I think what you just said supports this --but the basic structural change is taking place. The laws have been changed. There aren't going to be too many Civil Rights laws; that blacks are participating. And what is happening now after this twenty-five year period is a period of consolidation. Would you basically assess that?

Lewis: Yes I would. I think we have something to build on. And I think in the South you're going to see in days, months, and years to come, a coalition of that within us--black and white in terms of the leadership that's going to emerge. Maybe we won't have any national or regional leader but local leaders are going to emerge. Progressive white elected officials and at the same time progressive black officials will be elected.

: Joh, it's interesting about some people. Even though you have well over a thousand elected black officials now out of seventy-seven thousand officials, it's really only tokenism. The number of blacks vote where compared to what it was ten years ago, it's still not that influential. And blacks still aren't voting in as large percentages as whites. Specifically on the question of the role of apathy verseus the role of fear in why blacks don't register or when they do register don't

vote--I just heard a couple of weeks ago, some thirty-five thousand blacks lost with the registration rolls in South Carolina because they didn't vote in any election over a two year period. Maybe the people moved out of state. I don't know, but the point is how do you assess . . . There is a theory that blacks don't vote five percent partly out of apathy. There is also another theory that the reason for that is not apathy but fear.

Lewis: I think a great many of blacks became registered in the early sixties. It was out of, sort of, the Civil Rights; what you would call it, not necessarily a protest, but someone literally taking people down to a county court house. It was an obligation that you go down and literally put your name on the book. In many parts of the South and particularly in some of these rural communities you do have blacks' names on registration rolls that have never voted. They went out of a sense of obligation, that somebody organized an effort, literally took them down without any understanding of the process. I think you have some of that. You have a situation where people say why should I vote, there's no one to vote for. I'm not going to vote for this man. I don't care what the issue is; I'm not going to vote. And I think that element of fear still exists in some parts of the South.

: apathy out of the feeling, well,
I voted but nothing has changed. It didn't do anygood.

Lewis: I think you have that, particularly in the
lower among younger blacks. Even among some
of the professional blacks, I think you have some of that.
But it's not, I don't think it is as wide-spread in the
South as it is in the North because we are still in the
southern part of the United States. We still have in
my estimation, from all available information, more black
people percentage registered and voting than you have in
some of the larger urban cities in the North.

: What do you think will be the effect in
Atlanta's mayor's race and Raleigh's mayor's race with
blacks throughout the South?

Lewis: I think that the election here and in Raleigh without question is going to inspire more blacks to look toward city elections and they're probably going to signal the interest of a great many blacks--thinking about it, making up their mind to run for office. I think it's going to affect would-be elected officials about the type of campaign they should conduct.

: How do you assess the role of Martin Luther King--both his effect on you and on the South as a whole, not blacks particularly?

Lewis: Martin Luther King had a tremendous impact on my life, without question. Growing up in rural Alabama in Pike County--it was fifty miles from Montgomery--during the bus boycott, you had to listen to the man.

: How old were you at the time of the bus boycott?

Lewis: Fifteen years old, so I heard him. I heard him some Sunday mornings. It was a local radio station in Montgomery; that station was WRMA, a black sort of soul station. 11 o'clock on Sunday mornings they would have different ministers to preach. The church we attended in rural Pike County, you didn't go to until around one-thirty or two but you could hear certain ministers from his church--the Dexter Avenue Church. One sermon that I recall him preaching was Paul's letter to American Christians. He made the whole question of religion very valuable. In most of his sermons he injected the whole element of the struggle and the condition of black people. In the sermon he compared the children of Israel with the struggle of blacks. And all of that had some impact.

I met Dr. King for the first time in 1958. I tried to enter Troy State College in '58, after spending one year in Nashville at the American Baptist Seminary, and I

had a meetin with Dr. King and Fred Grady and it was an attorney in the Alabama State House and he encouraged me. I got the necessary application and I tried to go there but the school officials ignored the application all together and my parents were literally afraid to file any type of action. I was too young to file a suit against the State Board of Education. Later I saw him on many occassions in Nashville while I was in school between 1958 and '61. In a sense, he was my leader. He was a person that I thought was fighting and standing up and just doing those necessary things in the '50's and early '60's. The whole idea of non-violence, to understand the philosophy of and the discipline of non-violence, to use it more than just as a tactic or as a technique but as a philosophy, as a way of life-- that was in keeping with what I had been taught, in keeping with the Christian faith. So it was not something that was strange and foreign to me, so I readily accepted that.

I think the average black per son in the South . . . it was not hard for black people in the South to identify with Martin Luther King. The guy was well-trained, well educated, all of that. And in spite of his education black people in the South, the masses of black people whether it was in the large urban centers or small towns or rural

communities, saw Martin Luther King as one of them. He was a black Baptist preacher and they identified with him. The fact that he was a minister was a real asset. I doubt, if Martin Luther King had been a lawyer, a doctor, whether he would have had the same impact but the fact that he could go into a Baptist church in Montgomery and put the struggle of what he would call freedom and liberation in religious terms, when he could say things like I'm not concerned about the streets that are paved with gold and Pearly Gates, I'm concerned about the streets of Montgomery and the gates of City Hall, or something like that--the people could identify with that. He had a way of sort of capturing the imagination of the masses of black people. You know when you travel in the South today, people are affected. They are influenced by what Martin Luther King said and did--not just the old, old blacks but the young blacks that remember Martin Luther King. I make it a habit when I go back to Selma, at least I used to, and see some of the young people, the people that were very young--five, six, seven in 1965--to try to find out whether they remember Dr. King. And some of them do and some of them say they read about him. I just thing that this leadership during the period from 1955 to 1968 had a tremendous influence on this

part of the country, even when the one South as a whole will understand and will come to really appreciate Martin Luther King.

: Joh, it is more important that the South than the rest of the country, this is, because of the role of the organized black church

Lewis: Yes.

: You do agree that the black church remains the major source of institutional strength in the black community?

Lewis: I would say so.

: Even in urban ?

Lewis: Even in a city like Atlanta. The church is a highly visible institution and it's a great source of power. The ministers of those churches may not be able to produce or deliver the vote, and they cannot. It's the leading ministers in the city, whether it's Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr. or people like Rev. William Holmes Borders, pastor of one of the large Baptist churches here. They cannot deliver the black vote; there's no question about that. But the church as a body, the church as an institution, as an organized effort is a source of great power, great strength.

: What is the story of your leaving SNCC. I'm not real student of SNCC literature; what I've read are

basic stories. I understand that Stokley's chronicle which is a cry for black power. Do you perceive this as an end to non-violent left and that over-simplification of what did happen? Also, how did you perceive black power when it was first viewed and how do you perceive it now?

Lewis: Well, before the SNCC election in May of '66 . . . let me go back a few weeks or a few months. SNCC came through some very difficult periods, the Mississippi Summer Project in 1964, and that created a lot of problems. That was a well integrated attempt to literally integrate the movement by bringing in both black and white, young people and students, teachers, lawyers, into Mississippi. It created a lot of problems for SNCC through organization. We had many many staff people become very disturbed. Some of the communities they had been working in, some of the local period became disturbed that all of the attention had been geared toward the white students that were coming from New York and California. They had been working in these low communities for the past three years and they had no attention. You may have a--giving just sort of a simplified example--say, in Greenwood, Mississippi in an office there had been a young local girl who had been typing twenty-five words a

minute in a SNCC office and then some white student or lady came down and she can type sixty to seventy words a minute and this young girl is replaced because you need to get the work out. And if something happens, the attention goes. That created some problems and there was a great deal of frustration after the Mississippi Summer Project for many reasons. One was the whole thing around the Democratic Convention in 1964. After the Summer Project was over we had organized the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and a great many of the people in SNCC felt that and really believed the Democratic Party would seat the Mississippi Freedom Democratic delegation and outstay the regulars. So you had that period of frustration.

Did you expect them to seat them at that time?

Lewis: No, not really. I was hoping, I was literally hoping that it would be done but not really. I didn't think the party was prepared to go that far. I didn't think Lyndon Johnson was prepared to see the regular Democratic Party of Mississippi ousted. And that created a fantastic amount of frustration on the part of SNCC people--saying we played by the rules. We organized this process and later we went into Alabama when some people felt that the period of demonstration, non-violent protest

was over. This was probably one of my first sort of breaks with some of my colleagues in SNCC.

After SCLC came into Selma, there had been a great deal of debate and discussion about the SNCC role, our role, SCLC. I was in a very strange position because I had been serving on SCLC's board since 1962, before I became chairman of SNCC. I had mixed or confused loyalty because I was loyal to SNCC and at the same time Martin Luther King was a friend of mine and somebody that I admired and we had worked together. I didn't have any problems of the whole question of working with SCLC and working with Dr. King. When it came time to march on March 7, 1965, the night before the march we had a meeting here in Atlanta at a restaurant on Hunter Street. The SNCC Executive Committee and several people said that we shouldn't march; we shouldn't march from Selma to Montgomery; we shouldn't be a part. A lot of people would get hurt. I took the position that the people in Selma that we had been working with since 1962 wanted to march and that we should march with them. So the Executive Committee said, in effect, that we could march as individuals and not as representatives of SNCC. I went to Selma late that night, that Saturday night, and marched on that Sunday. Then the other effort of violence, the

people in SNCC including people like Stokley and others, came to Selma and responded to the violence and started supporting efforts there. Some people insisted during that period that we should continue to try to march in spite of what Dr. King had said about getting the court order. Jim Forman and some of the others went on to Montgomery and started organizing and having a series of marches in Montgomery to the State Capital before the march actually got the court order to march from Selma to Montgomery.

These are some things leading up to really what happened in 1966.

I had been appointed in late '65 to this conference that President Johnson held, "to fulfill ^{the} his right." We had this big White House Conference on Civil Rights and people became very critical, some of the people, with my relationship with Dr. King and also my attendance at the White House meeting. So in May of 1966 when it was time for the new election, Stokley had said to me that he would be a candidate for the chairmanship of SNCC. I said that's good. And at the time I had not planned I would not be a candidate because we never really campaigned. It's not like a student government. You never went out and literally campaigned. I had been elected each year since '63 and when it was time for the

election I was re-elected by a wide margin. Stokley and somebody else ran. Then the election was thrown open again and a guy, an ex-SNCC staff person, walked in and challenged the election saying that we had violated the constitution of SNCC on some basis. At that time, SNCC was not even organized, not even operating under a constitution, and went through this long drawn out debate for many many hours--from about seven-thirty p.m. to about four a.m.--just on and on during that night about the whole question of my relationship with Dr. King, relationship with the White House, Lyndon Johnson, and the whole question of blackness. And the election was reheled and Stokley got the majority of the votes. At that time a great many of the people had left the meeting-- many of the strong supporters of my philosophy, I guess, had left, particularly the people from south Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama. These are SNCC staff people. A large number of the white staff people did not participate in the election because at that point they had been really immobilized from participating. That's where the whole question came up--them white students should go workin in a white community. So it was a question of my relationship with Dr. King, the White House, my commitment to the philosophy of non-violence, the whole bit. I

stayed on until July and I just felt that between the time of the election and I left.

The Meredith March occurred only about three weeks later, I think. It must have been like the first week in June or the second week where Stokley chanted "Black Power" in Greenwood, Mississippi on a march. I felt at the time that to advocate a philosophy of black power . . . I think that the words that are used has frightened too many people, scared too many people. And it was just a chant; it was just rhetoric. It was no program and it was doing more to destroy the movement and to destroy the coalition that I thought we had built. Because in 1965 during the Selma march in my estimation, I thought it was the finest hour for the Civil Rights movement to what happened in Selma. From the religious community to organized labor, to academic community, just black and white people from throughout this country responding not just through moral, political support but through financial support. The people gave all across the country to SNCC and SCLC in particular and I felt to espouse a philosophy of black power at that particular time destroyed a great deal or that it would destroy a great deal of that. Shortly thereafter I left.

: Do you think that over-espousal of black

power did have that effect

?

Lewis: Well, I think so. Many people in both the black community and the white community did not understand the philosophy for I'm not so sure at that particular time whether there was even a philosophy. It was just words in my estimation, it was rhetoric and there was no program. There was no one, two, three's to be responsive to some of the needs of the people that we were trying to help during the period. I do think it widened the gulf between blacks and whites in this country.

: You think the whole question of black awareness movement grew out of that?

Lewis: Oh yes. That's probably the most positive thing that came out of that period of black consciousness, of black awareness--the sense of pride. Apparently that was a necessary period for black period to vote, hopefully most of the people coming through. Maybe now we are ready to build this type of coalition, this type of community as a country we were seeking in 1965. Also, it was not just that effort. It was not just that black power period, but at the same time we were getting more and more involved in the war in Viet Nam. I think that created, helped to enhance, the frustration that existed in the black community and in the liberal community as a

whole.

: John, when you were growing up you said you grew up on a farm. How many were in your family?

Lewis: Ten.

: Ten children?

Lewis: Ten children and I am the third child. In 1944 my father bought a farm. I was born on a tenant farm that we rented but in 1944 my father bought a bi farm-- a hundred and ten acres of land for three hundred dollars in southeast Alabama. We raised cotton, peanuts, corn and a few hogs, cattle. I go back there a great deal. As a matter of fact I'm going there tomorrow.

: Your father still runs the same farm?

Lewis: Yes.

: Your mother, did she stay at the farm or did she work elsewhere?

Lewis: She stayed at the farm. She did some work, some day work, domestic work, but for the most part stayed at home.

: At the time when you say you first met Dr. King, when you were interested in enrolling in Troy State, of course Alabama was still at that time completely or one hundred percent segregated wasn't it?

Lewis: Yes.

: Why did you want to do that?

Lewis: I had gone over to this school in Nashville and I didn't have any money and my family didn't have any. It would have just been cheaper to remain at home being able to study at Troy State College.

: How far was is Troy State from where you lived?

Lewis: About eight miles.

: What's the distance from Selma to Montgomery?

Lewis: About forty-five, or forty-six miles. I guess the right things to say would be fifty miles because we called it a fifty mile march.

: What did your parents, relatives and friends think ?

Lewis: When I first got involved in the sit-in movement my mother thought I was just literally crazy, frightened, get out of the movement, get out of that mess, what are you doing in that? Because in the South, black people grew up with a fear and they referred to the Sheriff or the policeman as the "law." They had this tremendous fear of the law and I can recall growing up in Alabama if we saw a car with the high ^{tail} arrow in the back we said, "There goes the law." This was a fear that you just don't play around or mess with the law. So they referred to any law enforcement officer as being the "law" and to go to jail well, that's bad. That's just a sin. It's

just bad for the family. It will just give you a bad name. You just don't get arrested. It was a tremendous fear of being arrested and going to jail. So when I first got arrested they just thought that was a disgrace. But they got educated in the process and they supported. After the Voting Rights Act my father and mother became registered and they attended the meetings of local political clubs in the county. My father acted in the local NAACP there in Pike County, so they understand it. But in the beginning they didn't. They had to be brought around.

: John, what has happened to all of the former SNCC workers? One fellow told me that they have all gone back to their former communities and have remained active. They are now active politically, not so much as candidates but doing work in registration, campaign managers and

Lewis: I think that's right. You go to Mississippi and parts of Alabama, south Georgia--people are working in some political campaigns. Some are working with community organizing around economic development co-operatives. Some people are very much involved with the Federation of the Southern Co-operatives, organizing credit unions, self-help groups. Others, like Marion Barry, the first chair-

man of SNCC, for example is the head of the Washington, D. C. voter education. Others have been elected officials, poverty programs, some are of economic development.

: Do you think most of them are still there?

Lewis: I would say the great majority of the people are.

: How many people are you talking about?

Lewis: You know SNCC didn't have a membership. It consisted of field workers, friends of SNCC and that period between 1960 and 1966 or 1967, in '67 when SNCC ceased to exist or went out of business--we are talking about several hundred people. In my estimation, I wouldn't say that the SNCC organization is dead, that it still exists whether its in Greene County or Thomas Gilmore who worked with SNCC or John Huglin who was a SNCC worker or Fanny Lou Hamer for a while was on the SNCC payroll as a field secretary in Mississippi. The movement and the spirit of SNCC still lives in many parts of the South.

: How many people would you say, just rough guess, had some exposure to SNCC and are now active throughout the South?

Lewis: That would be hard.

: Would it be as many as a hundred people?

Lewis: I think it would be more than that because

there are people even in Probably the largest number of people, SNCC people, are in the South, say in an urban center, probably in Atlanta or the Atlanta area. But on the other hand you go to a place like Nashville, many of the communities in Alabama, Mississippi, south Georgia, Arkansas

: We are going to be traveling in all the eleven states of the Old Confederacy, two or three weeks in each state and I would like very much if you could just give us the names of three or four or five people that you think probably know more about black political role in that state than anybody else. Before we get to that did you have anything else that you wanted to add?

Lewis: Not really. During the past ten years certain things happened, getting back to SNCC. The week before President Kennedy was assassinated we had planned to have a conference, a leadership training institute in Washington at Howard University, bringing all of the SNCC people together and community people. We had Bayard Rustin and some people from the New Labor Organization, people from SCLC there. . . . And the whole question after President Kennedy had been assassinated. Some people wanted to have a sort of silent memorial march in memory of President Kennedy and SNCC people objected. A large

number of SNCC people objected. About a week after, maybe less than a week after the funeral. Even then in 1963 SNCC as an organization on one hand was struggling to get people involved in the political process but at the same time it was sort of a position-- didn't want to get too close to the political system ; didn't want to be that closely identified with it when Julian decided to run for the Georgia House in 1965. Some people thought he was a SNCC person. Some of us had tried to encourage him and convince him to run, felt that he should run and that he was not a SNCC candidate but he was running to represent a group of people. Some of the SNCC people bitterly opposed the idea of this communication directed at SNCC of running for office. Some of us, including myself, took the position that we had been fighting for the right to vote in Alabama and Mississippi and other places and it's sort of a natural thing for an organization like SNCC. Some of the people that had been working in this area to encourage people to run. So that was sort of a strange struggle going on within the organization which I have never been able to quite follow and understand. In 1968, during the spring of '68, I took leave from SRC and campaigned with Senator Robert Kennedy for a while. Up until the time of his assassination, if

there was one politician, one person, I thought could hold the community in a sense together and continue to give black people and poor people in this country a sense of hope, that was Robert Kennedy. I didn't have any problem going out and campaigning, urging black people and Chicano's out in Los Angeles to vote for him. I felt that it was important.

: Does anybody you see fill that role today?
That you feel that way about?

Lewis: I really don't. I just don't see that particular person that can do that.

: You don't see that in Ted Kennedy?

Lewis: Senator Kennedy is a different person. He is not Robert Kennedy. There was something about Robert Kennedy that was very very similar to Martin Luther King, I think. I'm not so sure what. It was something. Well, you can tell today, while you are traveling around you can probably see some of it. You can go into a black community; you can go into the homes. It can be a shack in rural Alabama or the delta in Mississippi and you will see a picture of Martin King, of Robert Kennedy or John Kennedy and there's something about that. I don't know how you explain it. I really don't.
(End of Interview.)