

**JOHN LEWIS: A CONVERSATION – MARCHING FOR FREEDOM  
CLOSED CAPTIONING SCRIPT**

**Hoffman: Congressman John Lewis, I am so glad you're here for this conversation. I've looked so forward to meeting you and --again I appreciate your time.**

Lewis: Well, I'm delighted and very pleased to be here. Susan, thank you for having me here.

**Hoffman: Over the next half hour my goal is to cover your pivotal role in the Civil Right Movement. I'd like you to begin with me here. In 1963, when you were 23, you were listed as one of the six primary leaders in the Civil Rights Movement. And I wonder, did you feel at 23 that you were ready for that awesome responsibility.**

Lewis: Well, at the age of 23, I had grown up a little. You must understand that I grew up in rural Alabama, fifty miles from Montgomery, and I came under the influence of Martin Luther King, Jr. I heard Dr. King's voice. I heard his words on an old radio. I'd heard about Rosa Parks and T Montgomery Bus Boycott. I'd seen segregation. I'd seen racial discrimination.

**Hoffman: Describe those early signs that you remember as a young boy.**

Lewis: Well I saw the signs that said "White Men," "Colored Men," "White Women," "Colored Women," "White Waiting," "Colored Waiting." I didn't like it. As a child, I would ask my mother, my father, my grandparents, my great-grandparents, "Why segregation? Why racial discrimination?" And they would say, "That's the way it is. Don't get in the way, don't get in trouble." But, I was so moved and so inspired that I wanted to do something.

**Hoffman: When you were 10, you went to the library to check out a book. And you were told "No, you need to have a card, and in order to have a card you have to be white."**

Lewis: Well, that really made me realize, that it was really, as a young child, it was a real struggle. You know I never went back to that library. I never went back.

**Hoffman: But when you went to New York you also saw integration. You went to see extended family in Buffalo, New York. Sometime around that same period as a young boy. What did you witness in New York that made you realize?**

Lewis: Well, in the city of Buffalo I saw blacks and white living together in the same block. I didn't see the signs that said "White Waiting," or "Colored Waiting," I didn't see the signs that said "White Men," or "Colored Men," "White Women," or "Colored Women." But I, I remember my mother preparing for us to travel by car, all the way from rural Alabama to Buffalo, New York. We have to travel through Alabama, through Tennessee, through Kentucky, into Ohio. And she would cook cakes and pies

and fried chicken and we would wrap it in brown paper, in bags and put it in shoeboxes 'cause we couldn't stop along the way to get anything to eat. And I resented that. And when Dr. King came along, and Rosa Parks came along it gave me away out. I wanted to find a way to strike out against segregation and racial discrimination.

**Hoffman: I'm going to let you talk at length about Dr. King. But let me ask you this, your parents were sharecroppers and you had a very distinct feeling about being a sharecropper. You said "This is gambling; we're never going to get ahead this way." And your mother actually criticized you and jumped on you for being critical of her very hard work but you saw early on that this was not the type of life that you wanted to lead.**

Lewis: Well, during my early childhood, my father, my mother, my grandfather, my great-grandfather all had been sharecroppers. Working on another person's land, working very, very hard. And some years they didn't make that much. If you had a bad year, you just went deeper, and deeper in debt. And I would say to my mother, say to my father "This is not the way to do it." And they would work very, very hard from sun up to sun down, and at the end of the year they didn't have much to show for it. And I never wanted to do that and my mother would say, "Robert," my middle name is Robert, "What are we going to do, this is all we can do." And she would tell me over and over again "Go to school, get an education, so you won't have to work so hard." Then, she would turn around and say, "Hard work never killed anybody."

**Hoffman: (Laughter) That's right and if you were—**

Lewis: And I said, "Well, it's about to kill me." Right. I said "It's about to kill me."

**Hoffman: And she also said that God will take care of his children if you work.**

Lewis: She did, she said that over and over again that God would take care of us.

**Hoffman: I need to point this out, you're one of ten children. You're the third oldest but you're the only one that went to college.**

Lewis: I wanted to get an education. I wanted to better the condition but also better my own condition. And forget about my own circumstances really and get involve in the circumstance of others. I wanted to get out of Alabama. As a young child, I was very, very young, as I returned Buffalo with some of my brothers and sisters and first cousins we did something that was not probably environmentally correct. We tried to saw down a very large pine tree. And somehow we were gonna--we had this vision, this dream that out of this large pine tree we were going to make a bus. And the big part of the pine tree were gonna be the wheels. And we were going to roll out of Alabama. We just wanted get out.

**Hoffman: (Laughter) But you did go to college, and you did it with the help of Martin Luther King. You're fifteen years old and you hear Martin Luther King on**

**the radio. And you correspond with him, you wrote to him. And then when you were eighteen you actually met him. What happened in your first meeting with him?**

Lewis: Well, it was an unbelievable meeting. I wanted to attend a little college called Troy State College, it's now known as Troy University, about ten miles from my home. I submitted my application, my high school transcript. I never heard a word from that school. So I wrote a letter to Dr. King, told him I needed his help. He wrote me back, sent me a round trip Greyhound bus ticket, and invited me to come to Montgomery. In the meantime, I was accepted at a little school in Nashville, Tennessee and I went off to school there, and after being there for about two weeks, I told one of my teachers that I had been in contact with Dr. King. And this teacher had been a schoolmate of Dr. King, informed Dr. King that I was in Nashville. Dr. King got back in touch and suggested when I was home for spring break to come and see him. So in March of 1958, on a Saturday morning, by this time I'm 18 years old, my father drove me to the Greyhound bus station. I boarded the bus, traveled the 50 miles from Troy to Montgomery. I was so scared. I didn't know what to do. I arrived in Montgomery and a young African American lawyer met me. I'd never seen a lawyer before, black or white. A young man by the name of Fred Grey, who was the lawyer for Rosa Parks and for Dr. King and the Montgomery Movement, met me and drove me to First Baptist Church in downtown Montgomery pastored by the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, a colleague of Dr. King, and ushered me into the church. And I saw Dr. King and Ralph Abernathy standing behind a desk and Dr. King said, "Are you the boy from Troy? Are you John Lewis?" And I spoke up and said, "Dr. King, I am John Robert Lewis." I gave my whole name.

**Hoffman: (laughter) Very proud—**

Lewis: And so that was the beginning of my relationship with the man. He was a wonderful man. He listened, he encouraged me. And he told me that if I pursued my interest in going to Troy State what could happen. By this time, my father and mother had bought their own land. And he said they could lose the farm, the home could be bombed or burned down. And so, when I went back and had a conversation with my mother and father, they didn't want to be part of any effort to sue the state of Alabama or Troy State University so I continued to study in Nashville.

**Hoffman: In Nashville, you started organizing sit-ins, while as a student.**

Lewis: Well, while a student in Nashville, I started attending nonviolent workshops.

**Hoffman: And I should point out that you also did an awful lot of study. You studied Gandhi, and you studied Thoreau, and you studied nonviolence, and you...believed it, you embraced it.**

Lewis: We really did. We just didn't wake up one morning and say we're going to sit-in.

**Hoffman: You really prepared for your first sit in.**

Lewis: We prepared ourselves, for an entire school year. Every Tuesday night at 6:30pm, a group of students, near Fisk University, in downtown Nashville, students from Fisk University, Tennessee State, American Baptist College, Vanderbilt, Peabody, Meharry College, we would all come together and we would go and study the philosophy of nonviolence. We studied what Gandhi attempted to do in South Africa, what he accomplished in India, we studied Thoreau and civil disobedience. We studied the great religions of the world; we were prepared.

**Hoffman: And when you started do this, was it what you expected? People poured hot coffee down your back, put cigarettes out on your head. I mean it was ..**

Lewis: As students we had role-playing, we had what we called ‘social drama.’ A group of black and white students, an interracial group would play the role of blacks or maybe the interracial group would play the role of the white opposition, and people would come. What we studied, and what we went through in the sort of social drama and those nonviolent workshops in the spring of 1960, it became real. People would pour hot coffee on us, pour hot water on us, or light a cigarette out in our hair or down our backs. Spit on us, then we would be pulled off the lunch counter stool, beaten, arrested, and jailed. The first time I got—

**Hoffman: For disobedience.**

Lewis: We engaged in civil disobedience. The first time I got arrested was February 1960. I felt so free. I felt liberated. I felt like I crossed over, because I had been told by my parents and others, “Don’t get in trouble.” But, it was good trouble. It was necessary trouble. To change the south, to change America.

**Hoffman: You also at age 21, in 1961, joined fellow students on the freedom ride. You went to DC, there were seven whites, six blacks, you went in May, and you had what you, what one referred to as a last supper. What was it like on the eve of the beginning of the freedom rides, which again was to fight the segregation that was still existing within all the interstate bus terminals.**

Lewis: Well, segregation was real in public transportation. When you left Washington, DC., and traveled through Virginia, through North Carolina, or any place in the heart deep south. It was two different worlds. Blacks had to sit in the back and whites in the front.

**Hoffman: What were you thinking that night?**

Lewis: Well that night, ah we had gone thru a period of training and orientation. Blacks and whites at a little place in Washington called the fellowship house and that evening we went to a Chinese restaurant. I never had Chinese food before. Growing up in rural Alabama, I had never been to a Chinese restaurant. It was a wonderful meal delightful meal.

**Hoffman: Were you nervous?**

Lewis: I was not nervous, it was wonderful. All the food was in these silver containers with the top and it had a Lazy Susan that you turn around and you get your food. But I remember it so well. And someone said that night; you should eat well, very well. This may be like the last supper. And little did we know as we partook of that meal.

**Hoffman: Not long after you had your first brush with death, you were beaten. Terribly, in a Greyhound bus terminal in Montgomery Alabama. You thought you were going to die didn't you?**

Lewis: Well in Montgomery in May of 1961, when we arrived from Birmingham at the Greyhound bus station there in Montgomery, we had been told that we would be protected. Robert Kennedy who was the Attorney General had negotiated with the official of Greyhound and the officials of the State of Alabama.

**Hoffman: But the officials were racist. I mean to think that you were going to be safe with them guarding you is--**

Lewis: Well you know this was the early part of the Kennedy Administration. President Kennedy took office in January of 61, Robert Kennedy became the Attorney General. They hadn't had much dealing with the problems in the south. And they, they really thought that the Governor of Alabama, the local official in Birmingham and Montgomery were going to see that we were protected. And they said we had a right. Bobby Kennedy became so desperate on one occasion, he was trying to get us out of Birmingham to Montgomery and he was heard to say. "Well let me speak to Mr. Greyhound, don't you have some colored bus drivers in Alabama." Because none of the white bus drivers would drive the Greyhound bus. But they did get one person to drive. And when we made it to Montgomery, started down those steps, an angry mob came out of nowhere. And they didn't turn on us first. They turned on members of the press. If you were a reporter and had a pencil and a pad. A photographer with a camera you were in real trouble. So they beat the reporters, the photographers and then they turned on us. I was hit in the head, with a wooden crate and knocked down left bloody, and unconscious at the Greyhound bus station there, and left lying in a pool of blood, and one of my seatmates on the bus with me, a young white gentleman, who was a student, an exchange student at Fisk University, was severely beaten.

**Hoffman: Why was it so important that students were so energized and what did it do for the movement. Because you were head of SNCC. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.**

Lewis: Well, well during those days the NAACP had a slogan "free by sixty three" and being in school in Nashville we had quite a few students from Africa, and they would tease us from time to time, in the student union at Fisk or the lunch room, they would say the whole of Africa would be free and liberated and we wouldn't be able to get a soft drink and a hamburger at the lunch counter. So we, we had to, we had stand up, we had to

act. And we saw the winds of change blowing all over the world. We saw what was happening in Africa and other places and we had been deeply inspired by Dr King and we saw these young African leaders coming to the U.N. coming to Washington and I think the election of President Kennedy in 1960 created a great sense of hope, and a greater sense of expectation.

**Hoffman: Moving along, the March on Washington. You were again, you were the chairman of SNCC at the time, The Students Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and you were in a meeting at the White House when the idea for the march came along. You were a keynote speaker in the March on Washington in 1963 right along side of Dr King. Did you have any idea at the time the impact of that march, and what it would do for the movement?**

Lewis: At the time of the March on Washington, we thought maybe, just maybe we'd get 70, or 75 thousand people there. It was just unbelievable, unreal. Dr. King, Whitney Young of the urban league. Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, James Farmer of CORE, A. Philip Randolph the dean of Black Leadership, and all of us there it was a great sense of solidarity. I remember the first discussion when it came up in the meeting with President Kennedy and Mr. Randolph spoke up, he was the dean of black leadership highly-respected, spoke up in his baritone voice and said "Mr. President the black masses are restless and we're going to march on Washington." And you could tell by the very body language of President Kennedy he didn't like what he heard. He started moving and twisting in his chair...

**Hoffman: Made him nervous.**

Lewis: He was very nervous. He said "Mr. Randolph if you bring all these people to Washington won't there be violence, chaos, and disorder," Mr. Randolph responded and said "Mr. President this will be a peaceful, nonviolent protest." So we left the meeting with President Kennedy came out to lawn of the White House and announced that we had a productive meeting with the President of the United States. And we told him that we were going to march on Washington. A few days later we met in New York City - to be exact on July 2, 1963 - and the six of us issued the call for the march on Washington and invited four major white religious and labor leaders to join us in that call and between July 2, 1963 we mobilized the country in such a fashion more than 250,000 people showed up according to the police reports, but I think it was a great under count. I think it was many more. It was a sea of humanity there.

**Hoffman: Did you know how important Dr King's speech would be then?**

Lewis: Oh, I'd heard Dr King speak on so many occasions before then but that day he spoke from the depth of his soul. He had the ability; he had the ability to transform those marble steps into a modern day pulpit. When I go there today, I go there from time to time, and I stand right there. If you go there today and just stand there, there's a little inscription on the steps where we stood, where Dr King stood and it says simply, "I Have a Dream, Martin Luther King Jr. August 28, 1963." When I went there for the unveiling

of it, I cried. Because who would of thought that when Dr King said I have a dream that those simple words would be inscribed for generations yet to come.

**Hoffman: Look at bloody Sunday with me. 1965 you and Hosea Williams lead hundreds of people from Selma across the Edmund Pettus Bridge and you're met by angry Alabama State Troopers on the other side. This is your second brush with death. Once again you risk life and limb for what you believe in. And you're actually beaten and you have a scar on you head to this day. You escape, but you do a quick interview, and it's seen all over the world. You did not expect violence that day. But you almost lost your life again. But you still didn't give up and you said I still believe in nonviolence. Why did you not ever give up?**

Lewis: You cannot give up, I cannot give up.

**Hoffman: Most people would have, run for their lives.**

Lewis: You just cannot. You believe in something that is so dear. Something that is so necessary, something that is so right, you're prepared to die for it. I think we loved America, we loved freedom and we wanted to create what Dr King called the beloved community. A truly interracial democracy. Something was really wrong, something was really vicious about a system that denied a citizen; people the right to participate in the democratic process. You had in Alabama, like you had in Mississippi hundreds and thousands of people that could not register to vote. They were taxpayers, landowners in the state of Mississippi.. 1965 there was a black voting age population of more then 450,000 but only about 16,000 registered to vote. In one county between Selma and Montgomery the county was more than 80 percent African American but there was not a single registered African American voter in the county.

**Hoffman: Well let's jump ahead quickly. Two days later another huge march and then about a week later, the President takes the podium in front of Congress in joint session and he calls for the Voting Rights Act. And you were with Dr King watching that speech and Dr King cried. What did he say?**

Lewis: As Dr King watched and listened to Lyndon Johnson he said. We'll make it from Selma to Montgomery and the Voting Rights Act will be passed. Tears came down his face. We all cried a little when we heard Lyndon Johnson say and "we shall overcome." That was the first time hearing the President of the United States using the theme song of the civil rights movement. That was a powerful speech. ...

Hoffman: Did you realize at the time you were there, you're bloody, you're doing a television interview after being mercilessly beaten, you barely escape with your life - did you have any idea of the impact of that vision around the world?

Lewis: No, at the time I did not, I thought I was going to die...

**Hoffman: Did it ever dawn on you a week later that he'd actually take the podium and ask for the Voting Rights Act?**

Lewis: I was very pleased and very happy that President Johnson would make such a speech. We called it the "we shall overcome speech" and in my Washington office I have a copy of that speech signed by President Lyndon Johnson on my wall in my Washington office. It's so powerful. I tell school children, I tell young members of Congress to go back and read that speech that he delivered on March 15, 1965. He started that speech off that night by saying "I speak tonight for the dignity of man and for the destiny of democracy." And he talked about coming together, faith and history and that was an unbelievable moment in American history. I thought we gonna be arrested and I thought we were gonna go to jail, I thought I'd be in jail so I was wearing--

**Hoffman: You were arrested some 40 times. I'm sure it got routine for you.**

Lewis: But I thought I was gonna be arrested on that particular Sunday and I thought was going to be in jail. I was wearing what we call a backpack today before it became fashionable to wear backpacks and so in this backpack I wanted to have something to read in jail. I had two books

**Hoffman: (laughter) You were prepared.**

Lewis: I wanted to have something to eat. I had an apple and I had an orange and since I was going to be in jail with my friends, and my colleagues, and neighbors I wanted to be able to brush my teeth. Toothpaste and tooth brush. And so I don't know what happened to the backpack. I don't know what happened to the book, the apple, the orange and the toothpaste and toothbrush

**Hoffman: Not long after obviously Dr King was assassinated and then later Bobby Kennedy. What onus did their deaths put on you to continue the movement?**

Lewis: I must tell you Susan, I admired Dr King. I loved Dr King. He was my leader. He was my hero. He was my friend. He was my inspiration. He was like a big brother. I don't know where I be today if it hadn't been for Martin Luther King Jr. He gave me a way out. I don't know where our nation would be. So when I heard that he had been assassinated, like many Americans I cried. I was involved in Bobby Kennedy's campaign. I was with Bobby Kennedy when I heard that Dr King had been shot- t in Indianapolis Indiana. He cried. And we all cried.

**Hoffman: And you were actually on the phone with Kennedy shortly before he was assonated.**

Lewis: Matter of fact I was talking with him in his room 15 minutes before he went down to make his victory statement and he said John, I was in this room, fifth floor of the Ambassador Hotel with his sister and two or three other people, and he said, Stay here until I return." He never returned. It was a one of the...That period was one of the

saddest and darkest times for me, but today all these years later, I feel like I have an obligation a mission and a mandate to continue to go on. And I often wonder especially when we have these unbelievable debates and decisions to be made on the floor of the House of Representatives what would Dr King say what would Robert Kennedy say.

**Hoffman: Do you ask yourself?**

Lewis: What would Robert Kennedy say. What would be Dr King's position? What would be Robert Kennedy's position? And I think something died in all of us when these two young men were assassinated. Something died in America.

**Hoffman: What needs to happen next?**

Lewis: I think we have a obligation to pick up and try to recreate that sense of hope that sense of optimism and to continue to build the beloved community, to continue to build a truly interracial democracy.

**Hoffman: Are you hopeful?**

Lewis: I'm very hopeful, very optimistic in spite of all of the problems, in spite of the set backs that we face from time to time. I truly believe that as a nation and as a people, that we're going to create the beloved community, that we're going to create a society that's at peace with its self. It's going to happen.

**Hoffman: I wish great luck and with that I have to say thank you so much Congressmen John Lewis for this conversation its been a pleasure.**

Lewis: Well thank you very much

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