

**JOHN LEWIS: A CONVERSATION – MAKING A BETTER AMERICA
CLOSED CAPTIONING SCRIPT**

Hoffman: Congressman John Lewis, thank you again for joining me on this program, *A Conversation*. It's a thrill to have you and a thrill to really get to know you. I had a lot of research to do and it's been just wonderful.

Lewis: Well thank you very much. I'm delighted and very pleased that you would take the time to have a guy who grew up in rural Alabama and now a congressperson from Georgia on your show.

Hoffman: Well it is a thrill for me and you spent a good portion of your younger years in the Civil Rights movement. And during that time you really came to envision what you call the "beloved community." Can you define what you call the "beloved community" for me?

Lewis: I believe in that idea. I believe in the concept of the "beloved community." I met a young leader, a young friend, a Methodist minister, who studied the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence. He traveled to India, studied Gandhi. This young man, born in Ohio, came south to work in Tennessee, by the name of Jim Lawson. And Dr. Martin Luther King used to say that Jim Lawson had a better understanding of the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence than anyone that he knew. This guy, this man, who's now a retired minister in Los Angeles, imbues many of us with the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence. He imbues us with the concept of the "beloved community." The beloved community, an all-inclusive community. A community at peace with itself. A community that is not polarized, that is not divided by race or class.

Hoffman: When you developed this vision and spent again many years in the civil rights movement you contemplated or I should say when someone suggested that idea of congress, that the idea "when I was a young man ever serving congress" was completely unthinkable. And I'm not so sure that you maybe even wanted to because you rallied against that establishment for so very long yet, you changed your mind, and you did run in the late seventies, 1977. Why did you change your mind and decide to run for congress?

Lewis: I had worked so long trying to get other people to participate in the democratic process. Trying to get others to become registered voters, encouraging people to run for office, campaigning for individuals.

Hoffman: And you were very successful.

Lewis: Well we were able to get hundreds and thousands of people registered and we tried to assist some of the newly elected officials but then friends of mine started saying, "John you should run for something." "Run for what?" "Run for something." And I was finally convinced and especially after the assassination of Dr. King and Robert Kennedy

and I saw that rode that elected officials played in the lives of people and said, "Maybe, just maybe, I could have an impact." And I decided to run.

Hoffman: You didn't win in 1977 and then you ended up running for city council in Atlanta and you served there for four years. And then in 1986, the opportunity presented itself again and you ran against Julian Bond, who was a friend of yours from your years as a student and chairman of the SNCC, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, Describe that race.

Lewis: In 1986, that was a very difficult race. It was an open seat. My friend Julian had served in the state legislature in Georgia for almost 20 years, the State House, and later the State Senate and you're right I served on the city council and we both wanted to go to Congress. I remember meeting with him in October of 85 we had lunch together.

Hoffman: Wasn't it difficult though, because you been through the trenches with him, he was a friend.

Lewis: It was very difficult, we had been friends I would call him Senator, Mr. Representative and he would call me Mr. Chairman we had a wonderful friendship. We were like brothers and we both decided to run. But I remember at this brief lunch, this was the shortest lunch I think I ever had in my life. We were having lunch together in a downtown restaurant and he said: "Mr. Chairman what are you going to do?" I said: "I'm thinking about running for Congress". I said: " Senator what are you going to do?" He said: "I'm running for Congress". And so we quickly ended that meal and I said I'll see you on the campaign trail and we got out there and we ran. It was a very difficult race; I never ever want to go through one like that.

Hoffman: Some said that when you were elected you were a one term Congressman. That you would not be reelected. Did you believe them?

Lewis: No I didn't believe them then. I think some people think they know me better then I know myself. And I felt from the very beginning that if I could just win, get elected, serve the people, be good to the people, they would be good to me.

Hoffman: What did you do early on that secured that seat for you? I should point out that you now hold it for twenty years.

Lewis: Well, I try to do the right thing. You know for several years I never missed a vote. For several years I answered every roll call vote and a good friend of mine who had served in the Congress for about fifty years - he was on the Appropriations Committee, a very powerful member from Kentucky. He said to me one day, " You've got to miss a vote ". He said: "Don't be a slave to vote in on every vote." And said: "That's a mistake". And this guy never missed a vote for almost fifty years.

Hoffman: You got pretty proficient early on though at bring money home to the

fifth district.

Lewis: Well when I first got there I served under the old Public works and Transportation Committee which was a very good committee to bring the bacon home.

Hoffman: And you did very successfully.

Lewis: Well we got a lot of money for MARTA for highway, transportation, for the airport and leading up to the Olympics we got a lot of money.

Hoffman: You became the go-to guy really because the city wasn't going to take State moneys but they were happy to take Federal money and you became the go-to guy for Olympic money.

Lewis: Well I did my part, I played my roll. We didn't do it with a great deal of fanfare. I had a wonderful subcommittee chair, a wonderful man who was born in Selma, Alabama, who moved to Florida and became the chair of the subcommittee of Appropriation on Transportation and he would say: "John, what do you need, what do you want?" and I would tell him. He would invite me to testify before his committee and we got almost everything we wanted for the transportation issues. But then I got off the Transportation Committee several years later when we didn't have member on the Ways and Means Committee and I went to the Ways and Means Committee where I now serve.

Hoffman: You also were instrumental in bringing money in for federal buildings - the Sam Nunn Federal Building, the Martin Luther King. You continue to bring sizeable dollars. Research dollars to the area. You worked heavily on the historic site of Martin Luther King.

Lewis: We did get money for the historic site, the renaming of a Federal building, now 46 million dollars are going to be spent to renovate to restore that building. To help built a Sam Nunn building from scratch. That is a major effort really, and around the country I introduced the legislation during the first Bush to name the highway between Selma to Montgomery a part of the National Historic Trail. The study was completed and under President Clinton it became law and now from Selma to Montgomery there will be sites all along the way to tell the story of what happened on that highway, that 50 miles and a few month ago I was able to get a national museum legislation passed to create a National African American Museum of History and Culture that would be located on the Mall right in the shadow of the Washington Monument and that's going to cost more than 5 hundred million dollars.

Hoffman: You dropped that legislation submitted that legislation every year for 15 years. Why did you feel so strongly?

Lewis: I feel very strongly that the history of America will not be complete until you tell the full story; the whole story and the story of African Americans from the days of slavery to the present must be told and must be told in Washington. It is good to have a

museum in Atlanta, or in Birmingham, in Selma, in Memphis, in Little Rock, in New York, in Detroit but hundreds and thousands and millions of people come to Washington from all over the world and we need to have a National Museum of African American of History and Culture. So that's why I did it, I didn't give up.

Hoffman: Never.

Lewis: Never gave up and that's a part of my philosophy. I say to young people all the time: "Never give up, never give in. You have to keep the faith and keep pushing and pulling."

Hoffman: Go back to the pilgrimage. Every year you take a group of Republicans and Democrats alike back to Alabama to visit that march from Selma to Montgomery. It is the hottest ticket in town. People enjoy going and you are changing minds every time you go.

Lewis: Well I enjoy, I enjoy taking some of my colleagues. They're Democrats, they're Republicans, some are very conservative, some are moderates, some happen to be progressive. But I had a very prominent member of the other party on the other side of the dial in the other body he said to me on one occasion, he said: "John, if you had brought me here earlier, my voting record would probably be different." I said: "Well, you could make up now."

Hoffman: But you, it really has spurred a lot of people - conservatives, a conservative out of Virginia who used to have a Confederate battle emblem and a noose in his office and now he's writing apologies on behalf of the Senate for not passing anti-lynching legislation, wants to apologize on behalf of the U. S. Senate, to the entire Country for slavery. You're changing minds - you're still changing lives and changing minds.

Lewis: Well it's very encouraging really to see the changes that occur not just on the part of the members but sometimes their staff, sometimes they bring members of their family, and it's a different world.

Hoffman: But it's earned you an enormous amount -and I don't mean to - Your history clearly, your willingness to risk life and limb during the Civil Rights movement earns you an enormous amount of respect to start with, but when you to this day continue to bring people into the fold that have resisted maybe even into this century. You are still a huge part of what is a continuing movement.

Lewis: Well I think it's important. I think you continue to reach out. That was what the movement was all about. That you never ever give up on anyone. You try to do your best to help educate, to help sensitize and to move people along. And many of these members that came on these trips, they were great supporters of the renewal of the Voting Rights Act because they saw for themselves

Hoffman: Touch on the Voting Rights Act. There were many members of Georgia's Congressional delegation in this year 2006 who thought we did not need to renew the Voting Rights Act for the state of Georgia and you adamantly disagreed. And clearly the Voting Rights Act passed. When you stood on that floor of that House and you talked to your colleagues, you're like, you know, I took a beating. I've got a scar on my head today in an effort to get that Voting Rights Act passed in 1965. We're not far enough along. Why are we not far enough along that we don't need the Voting Rights Act anymore?

Lewis: Well, we've made progress. No-one can deny that. We've made progress. We've come a distance. But when you have in our state people redistricting during mid-census like they did in Texas, when we had an id photo, Photo ID Bill, that's a step backwards. That's a modern version of a literacy test and we cannot afford to go back. We have to continue to make progress. I was very disappointed really for some of my colleagues, not just from Georgia, but from Texas and a few other places, to stand up and argue against the renewal of the Voting Rights Act or to make it nationwide - that would gut it, that would destroy the Voting Rights Act. But the great majority of the members - I think it was three hundred and ninety three, three hundred and ninety to thirty three, and in the Senate it was ninety eight to zero. There were two members absent but it was the will of the Congress. That was the members from the heart of the Deep South, from Alabama, from Mississippi, from North and South Carolina, from Louisiana that stood up and voted for the act

Hoffman: You are considered the conscience of the Congress by many, which again enables you to speak out, to speak the truth to power which is again something you done for decades. Yet you are not criticized for it. Others are seen as... and you are liberal. Let's face it, your record and your leaning in Congress are extremely liberal but you get to do it. John Lewis gets to do it. When others do it they're criticized.

Lewis: Well I just try to do what is right, say what I feel and believe and I think people just say: "You know he's so independent and just votes his conscience". And I had one of my colleagues - he's a good friend of mine, we work out together from time to time in the gym - it may not look like it but I work out from time to time - and he said: "John, please don't come and campaign against me". He said: "Don't campaign against me. We're friends, we're brothers. You're nonpartisan, you're bipartisan. You're bigger then partisan politics." I said: "But you're on the other side, my friend, you're on the other side and we've got to take the majority back." So it sort of puts you in a peculiar predicament.

Hoffman: But you still have their ear, where others do not.

Lewis: Well I have to continue to work with my colleagues whether you're a conservative or a moderate, whether you're a Democrat or a Republican, whether you come from the heart of the Deep South or from the north east or from the far mid west.

Hoffman: You've served twenty years now under several different Presidents. In

your mind who's one of our better leaders of the day?

Lewis: You know, I served under President Reagan

Hoffman: Started in 86 when he was in the middle.

Lewis: That's right and I remember he was signing a bill one day and to this day I don't know the reason why but he invited me to come down to the White House for the signing of some bill dealing with housing and he said: "There's a young man here today and a member of Congress, John Lewis from Georgia. He was here a few years ago in this White House for the signing of another bill". To this day I don't know why he did it. But he was always very kind and Bush One was a wonderful man.

Hoffman: So who stand out as a really strong, a good solid leader in your mind - doesn't have to be a U. S. President.

Lewis: Martin Luther King Jr. He was a wonderful leader he was the embodiment he was the personification of leadership.

Hoffman: Do you think his death was more powerful then his life may have been because I've interviewed Andrew Young and his sense is that his death actually did more for this country and the movement then maybe his life would have had he'd lived?

Lewis: Well I truly believe that Dr King's greatness, his true greatness was yet to come. He was known all over the world, had received the Nobel Peace Prize. He had spoken out against the war in Vietnam. I was there at the Riverside Church in New York City on April 4th 1967 when he spoke out against the war. I truly believe that if he had lived, and if Robert Kennedy had lived - I believe that Robert Kennedy would had been elected President - then these two young leaders, one the President of the United States and the other the moral leader of a nation who was becoming in my estimation a true leader of humanity, our world - not just the American community but our world community - would have been much further down the road towards a society at peace with its self.

Hoffman: As you look down the road and advise young African Americans and not even African Americans but young people today, what advice would you give them about the Beloved Community and what you still envision?

Lewis: Well I spend a great deal of time talking to young people, elementary school students, high school, college. I see hundreds and thousand of young people on the hill in Washington. Many come to my office from all over the country and from around the world. And I say to young people: "Find something that is so dear. Find something that is so right and go with your heart, go with your soul, go with your gut". And I often quote Horace Mann the Father of modern education in America, who said: "Be ashamed, be ashamed to leave this world, be ashamed to die until you've made some contribution towards humanity". I say to young people: "Stay in school, get a good education and use

that education for good."

Hoffman: If you were going to turn that advice on yourself, what do you think your greatest accomplishment has been?

Lewis: Well I think in one way I find a way to get in the way. I think you just have to get in the way. You have to get in trouble. You don't have to be popular. Just when you see something that is not right, speak up. When you see something that is so wrong and so evil and so vicious, when someone has been put down because of their race, their color, their religion, their nationality or whatever, you have to do something. You can not afford to be silent. You have to do something. You have to make some noise. I say to young people today: "We're too quiet. You have to make some noise. My generation we were not quiet. We made a little noise."

Hoffman: You were arrested back in May yet again because you were protesting in front of the Sudanese Embassy and you actually dressed for it again. You took off your tie and you walked up the aisle because they didn't want to arrest you with your tie on and it was if everything's changed and nothing's changed. It was one more cause that Congressman John Lewis, John Lewis Civil Rights Icon decided that needed to be addressed. There's starvation and disease and you saw a need and yet again you proudly went. I mean to this day you've criticized President Bush. You don't agree with the war in Iraq. You think he should be impeached because he was busy tapping phones when he didn't have a warrant.

Lewis: Well when I got arrested my own younger sister read in the paper or heard on the news down in Alabama that I been arrested and she said she said to herself: "What is Robert getting arrested for now. What is he going to jail for?" and I had to tell her what it was all about, and you use that arrest, those of us that got arrested, to try to educate and sensitize people about what is going on in the Sudan in Darfur. It is unreal, it's unbelievable and we're so quiet and so silent as a nation and as a people and we can do much more. I just think that some place along the way I wish those of us in Congress, Presidents, not just President Bush, but Presidents to come, would take a lesson from the modern-day Civil Rights Movement - the way of peace, the way of love, the way of nonviolence - a much better way, a more excellent way. Gandhi said: "It's nonviolence or nonexistence." Dr King said on one occasion that we must learn to live together as brother and sisters or we'll perish as fools. There's too much violence, too many killings. Some place along the way we got to say, enough is enough and try to use ... we only have ... we don't have unlimited resources, so we have to use what we have to build and not to tear down, to heal and not to kill. And it makes me very sad really. I've gone out to Walter Reed, I've gone to Bethesda hospital in Maryland and visited the young men and the young women with their wives, their husbands, their girlfriends or boyfriends, their mothers and fathers and to see the way these young people are returning and what we're doing to the rest of the world. I think the world is a much more dangerous place now. And I don't think history will be kind to us. We have got to stop the madness.

Hoffman: Will history be kind to John Lewis?

Lewis: It's not for me to say whether history will be kind to me.

Hoffman: Is there somehow you'd like to be remembered?

Lewis: I would like to be remembered as someone who tried to do his best to make things better for all human kind.

Hoffman: At a young 66 is there something you have left to do?

Lewis: Oh yes. I have a great deal to do.

Hoffman: Well do tell us then.

Lewis: I'm not finished yet and I feel very young and I'm prepared to continue to stand up, to push and pull and continue to fight.

Hoffman: There's something I know that's on the brink, something I know that you would like to see pass and that is you want to see a cold case unit within the Justice Department and the F.B. I. to investigate unsolved civil rights deaths, injuries, etc.

Lewis: I think we're going to pass that legislation. There's strong bipartisan support to get it passed in the Senate, also in the House. Both Democrats and Republicans think we should have a section in the Department of Justice giving the FBI and others the authority to investigate these cases and solve these cases. We need to do this for history's sake. We need to do it. It would have a cleansing effect on not just our region but on the very psyche of America.

Hoffman: All right, three words to describe yourself.

Lewis: Friendly, concerned.

Hoffman: Tenacious, diligent, courageous?

Lewis: Tenacious, determined.

Hoffman: Is that how you like to be remembered?

Lewis: As someone who just wouldn't give up, just wouldn't take no for an answer - not even with my colleagues - not even with the President of the United States. I remember having a discussion with President Clinton and I said: "No, Mr. President," I said "You listen to me". Then I caught myself - I'm talking to the President of the United States.

Hoffman: Oops better be careful. With that I have to say thank you once again

Congressman John Lewis. I appreciate your time, I really do.

Lewis: Thank you.

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