

# JOHN LEWIS

---

One of the most courageous people the civil rights movement ever produced, U.S. Congressman John Lewis has dedicated his life to protecting human rights, securing civil liberties, and building what he described as “The Beloved Community” in America.

The “conscience of the U.S. Congress” grew up as the son of sharecroppers. He was inspired by the activism surrounding the Montgomery bus boycott, a protest campaign against racial segregation on public transit that started in 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama; and by the words of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., to become a part of the civil rights movement, a mass protest against racial segregation and discrimination in the U.S. that peaked between 1955 and 1965.

As a student at American Baptist College, Lewis organized sit-in demonstrations, was one of the Freedom Riders, civil rights activists who rode interstate buses into the segregated southern United States, and was named Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which he helped form.

By 1963, Lewis was dubbed one of the Big Six leaders of the civil rights movement. At twenty-three, he was an architect of, and a keynote speaker at, the historic March on Washington in August 1963. Attended by some 250,000 people, it was the largest demonstration ever seen in the nation’s capital. The event is remembered for Lewis’ keynote address and Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

In 1964, he coordinated voter registration drives and community action programs during the Mississippi Freedom Summer, a campaign in June 1964 that attempted to register as many African-American voters as possible. The following year, Lewis helped lead more than 600 peaceful, orderly protestors across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on March 7, 1965, with intentions to march to Montgomery to demonstrate the need for voting rights in the state. The marchers were attacked by Alabama state troopers in a brutal confrontation that became known as “Bloody Sunday” and hastened the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Despite more than forty arrests, physical attacks, and serious injuries, John Lewis remained a devoted advocate of the philosophy of non-violence. After leaving SNCC in 1966, he continued his commitment to the civil rights movement as associate director of the Field Foundation and his participation in the Southern Regional Council’s voter registration programs. Lewis went on to become director of the Voter Education Project (VEP). Under his leadership, the VEP transformed the nation’s political climate by adding nearly four million minorities to the voter rolls.

He was elected to Congress in November 1986 and has served as U.S. Representative of Georgia’s Fifth Congressional District since then.

John Lewis holds a B.A. in religion and philosophy from Fisk University, and is a graduate of the American Baptist Theological Seminary. He has been awarded more than fifty honorary degrees and has received numerous awards from eminent national and international institutions, including the only John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award for Lifetime Achievement ever granted.



THE REVOLUTION IS AT HAND, AND WE MUST FREE OURSELVES OF THE CHAINS OF POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SLAVERY. THE NON-VIOLENT REVOLUTION IS SAYING, “WE WILL NOT WAIT FOR THE COURTS TO ACT, FOR WE HAVE BEEN WAITING HUNDREDS OF YEARS. WE WILL NOT WAIT FOR THE PRESIDENT, NOR THE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT, NOR CONGRESS, BUT WE WILL TAKE MATTERS INTO OUR OWN HANDS, AND CREATE A GREAT SOURCE OF POWER, OUTSIDE OF ANY NATIONAL STRUCTURE THAT COULD AND WOULD ASSURE US VICTORY.” FOR THOSE WHO HAVE SAID, “BE PATIENT AND WAIT!” WE MUST SAY, “PATIENCE IS A DIRTY AND NASTY WORD.” WE CANNOT BE PATIENT, WE DO NOT WANT TO BE FREE GRADUALLY, WE WANT OUR FREEDOM, AND WE WANT IT NOW. WE CANNOT DEPEND ON ANY POLITICAL PARTY, FOR THE DEMOCRATS AND THE REPUBLICANS HAVE BETRAYED THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE.

---

---

*REMARKS BY JOHN LEWIS: 2001 JFK PROFILE IN COURAGE AWARD CEREMONY*

I did what I thought was right when I went on the Freedom Rides in 1961.

We wanted to test a Supreme Court ruling that banned segregation in an interstate travel facility. When the bus arrived in Rock Hill, South Carolina, I deboarded the bus and approached the white waiting room. We were being watched and someone pointed to the "colored sign." I said: "I have a right to be here on the grounds of the Supreme Court decision in the Boynton case." Seconds later, I was attacked and the blood of another battle in the struggle for civil rights was drawn. I will never, ever forget that moment. I was 21. I was a sharecropper's son from a farm near Troy, Alabama. Yet, somehow, I learned that where there is injustice, you cannot ignore the call of conscience.

On May 21, 1961, the Freedom Riders were trapped in the sanctuary of the First Baptist Church in Montgomery. The day before, we had been surrounded by a sea of people at the Montgomery Greyhound bus station—a mob shouting and screaming, men swinging fists, baseball bats, lead pipes—and others throwing stones—women swinging heavy purses—little children clawing with their fingernails at the faces of anyone they could reach.

It was madness. It was unbelievable. We thought we were going to die.

Somewhere in my youth I remember hearing: "Sorrow may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."

That night at First Baptist was a long, long night. If we continued the Freedom Ride, we would face arrest or worse. And if we stopped the Rides, freedom would be denied.

An angry mob surrounded the church—throwing stones and firebombs, overturning cars, even pounding on the walls of the sanctuary. While we prayed and sang freedom songs, President Kennedy and the Attorney General desperately negotiated with the Governor of Alabama—fighting for our safety.

It was our sorrow and the nation's sorrow for that night. And for many more nights to come, the American people—indeed the world—would witness many more beatings, jailing and even the killing of non-violent protesters daring a better America.

By that morning, joy had come to us: President Kennedy made a bold and courageous decision to federalize the Alabama National Guard. He also sent in federal marshals to protect us. We would make it to Jackson, Mississippi.

Until joy came in the morning after the long dark sorrow of her soul, America could not be America. The joy of morning comes not by our will but by what I call the Spirit of History—It sweeps us up and commands us to answer hate and fear with love and courage.

Courage is a reflection of the heart—It is a reflection of something deep within the man or woman or even a child who must resist and must defy an authority that is morally wrong. Courage

makes us march on despite fear and doubt on the road toward justice. Courage is not heroic but as necessary as birds need wings to fly. Courage is not rooted in reason but rather Courage comes from a divine purpose to make things right.

Marching across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, we weren't supposed to make it to Montgomery in 1965.

But we did.

Arriving in Montgomery on a Greyhound bus, we met angry mobs. We were left for dead on the cold pavement.

But we continued our journey.

Seeking to register blacks during Freedom Summer in Mississippi, three young civil rights workers were taken from their jail cell, left on a dark country road and murdered in the darkness of night.

But we could not be stopped. Hundreds more students joined us that summer.

In building a new America, we saw a vision then as we do now of the Beloved Community. Consider those two words. "Beloved" means not hateful, not violent, not uncaring, not unkind. And "Community" means not separated, not polarized, not locked in struggle. Beaten and tired but not defeated, our hopes could not be dimmed.

When you stand up to injustice. When you refuse to let brute force crush you. When you love the man who spits on you or calls you names or puts a lighted cigarette in your hair. You come to believe that righteousness will always prevail. Just hold on.

We—and I mean countless thousands and even millions of Americans—changed old wine into new. We tore down the walls of racial division. We inspired a generation of creative non-violent protest. And we are still building a new America—a Beloved America, a community at peace with itself in Beloved Boston, Beloved Cincinnati, Beloved Washington, Beloved Atlanta and in every Beloved city, town, village and hamlet in our nation and in the world. Yes, our world can become a Beloved World. A world not divided but united.

We cannot forget the unsung heroes who cared deeply, sacrificed much and fought hard for a better America. For the brave men and women who stood in unmovable lines because they were determined to vote. For those who expressed themselves by sitting down in Montgomery, in Nashville, in Birmingham and throughout the south, they were fighting for a just and open society. For the black and white freedom riders who rode a bus, faced angry mobs, survived a burning bus and slept for days on the cold floor of a jail cell, they too must be looked upon as the founding mothers and fathers of a new America.

We must move our feet, our hands, our hearts, our resources to build and not to tear down, to reconcile and not to divide, to love and not to hate, to heal and not to kill. I hope and pray that we continue our daring drive to work toward the Beloved Community.

It is still within our reach.

Keep your eyes on the prize.

# A LEGACY OF LEADERSHIP IN NON-VIOLENT ACTIVISM AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

## JOHN LEWIS

LESSON GRADE LEVEL: 6–8  
HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES: POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, AND EQUALITY

**TIME REQUIREMENT:** 80 minutes

### GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- What are the benefits to non-violent activism?
- Does non-violent activism work in achieving long-term sustainable change?
- What tactics did non-violent activists use during the civil rights movement?

### OBJECTIVES:

After this lesson, students will be able to:

- Describe a non-violent campaign for social, political, or cultural change.
- Compare and contrast the elements of a campaign that advocates non-violence versus violence.
- Analyze the tactics of non-violent protests.
- What are the arguments for and against non-violent protest? Compare the approach of the Irish Republican Army to the U.S. civil rights movement.
- Reflect on the legacy of John Lewis as a leader and advocate for non-violent social change.

### COMMON CORE LEARNING STANDARDS:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.9

### MATERIALS:

- John Lewis's March on Washington speech: <http://www.crmvet.org/info/mowjl.htm>
- March on Washington video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDpZtxMcFwc>
- Biography of John Lewis with video: <http://www.achievement.org/achiever/congressman-john-r-lewis/>
- John Lewis home page: <https://johnlewis.house.gov/>
- Interview with John Lewis by Scholastic Magazine: <http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=4798>

### VOCABULARY:

- Non-violence
- Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee
- Civil rights
- Participation

### CONCEPTS:

- Justice
- Non-violence
- Change
- Social movements
- Compromise

### TECHNOLOGY REQUIRED:

- Computer access
- Internet access

## STUDENT ACTIVITIES

---

### ANTICIPATORY SET:

- Write the following on the board and have students write their first thoughts:
  - Social movement
  - Political movement
  - Cultural movement
- As a class, discuss how the term “social movement” includes elements of political change, social change, and in many cases cultural change. Have the class respond to the question: “How do we bring such change to society?” Record answers on the board.

### ACTIVITY 1:

Working in small groups, divide the class, assigning each group one of the following tasks:

- 1 Have students research the two non-violent social movements described in the handout and answer the following questions:
    - What segment of the population took a leadership role in the movement?
    - What tactics did they use to try and achieve change?
    - What type of change was desired: social, political, and/or cultural?
    - Were they successful? Why? Why not?
  - 2 Have students research the two social movements that advocated or used violence as a means to create change described in the handout and answer the following questions:
    - What segment of the population took a leadership role in the movement?
    - What tactics did they use to try and achieve change?
    - What type of change was desired: social, political, and/or cultural?
    - Were they successful? Why? Why not?
- Groups will share their findings with the large group, and the class will complete a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the outcomes of the social movements that advocated non-violence and those that advocated violence.
  - Ask the class to respond to the following: “Which protests were more successful in bringing about social, political, and cultural change? Why do you think so?”

### ACTIVITY 2:

- Opening question: Can non-violence be strong?
  - Show the class a short video on John Lewis and his work and influence in the civil rights movement.
  - Have students read John Lewis’s originally prepared March on Washington speech and answer the following questions:
    - Do you think Lewis should have given his speech as originally written? <http://www.crmvet.org/info/mowjl.htm>
    - Did the compromise language take away from the power of his speech? Why? Why not?
    - In making the requested changes to his speech, how was Lewis demonstrating his commitment to the civil rights movement?
    - What were the social, political, and/or cultural changes he wanted?
    - Can non-violence be powerful?
  - Show students the short video on the March on Washington and the civil rights movement.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDpZtxMcFwc>
- As a class, respond to the following questions:
- What were some of the non-violent tactics used during the civil rights movement? Were these tactics successful? Why? Why not?
  - Did the March on Washington help achieve Lewis’s goals?
  - What social, political, and/or cultural changes occurred as a result?

### CULMINATING ACTIVITY:

Have each group select a current social justice movement. In writing, students should identify the social, political, and/or cultural changes the movement seeks to make, the leader(s) of the movement, and the tactics being used to achieve the desired change(s). Are the individuals involved like John Lewis? Is John Lewis’s legacy seen in this event?

## BECOME A DEFENDER

- Review the non-violent tactics used during the civil rights movement. Create a T-shirt, poster, lawn sign, song, or movie to bring publicity to a social justice cause important to you.
- Organize a “Non-violence Day” at school. Make a collection of social activist songs to download as a playlist to be played during the lunch periods.
- Design a public education campaign for your school on non-violent responses to pressing social issues.
- Select a current social justice issue that impacts your community. Develop a non-violent campaign to create change on the issue.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### U.S. Commission on Civil Rights:

<http://www.usccr.gov/>

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights was created to ensure that no one in the U.S. is being denied their civil rights. It attempts to achieve this goal by investigating citizen complaints, collecting information about discrimination, and appraising federal laws and policies with respect to discrimination. Its website provides a space to both learn more about current civil rights issues and file complaints about civil rights violations.

### National Civil Rights Museum:

<http://www.civilrightsmuseum.org/>

The National Civil Rights Museum, housed in the Lorraine Motel, where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, is dedicated to chronicling the key moments of the American civil rights movement to inspire participation in civil and human rights efforts globally through their collections, exhibitions, and educational programs. Their website houses information about the museum as well as teacher and student resources.

### American Civil Liberties Union:

<http://www.aclu.org/>

The ACLU is a group of more than 500,000 members and supporters with nearly 200 ACLU staff attorneys working every day on current civil rights cases and issues including First Amendment rights, equal protection under the law, due process and right to privacy. They maintain staffed offices in all fifty states, Puerto Rico, and Washington, D.C.

### African American Odyssey: A Quest for Full Citizenship:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aaohtml/exhibit/aointro.html> This nine-part exhibition from the Library of Congress uses a mix of primary source documents and in-depth scholarship to explore black America's quest for equality from the early national period through the twentieth century. Culled from the more than two hundred years of the Library's materials, it examines the drama and achievement of this remarkable story.

### Voting Rights Act (1965):

<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=old&doc=100> The Voting Rights Act of 1965, which was passed to enforce the Fifteenth Amendment from ninety-five years prior, was a historic piece of legislation and a huge success for the civil rights movement. On this site you can view scans of the original document and a brief historical background.

### Shy U.S. Intellectual Created Playbook Used in a Revolution:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/17/world/middleeast/17sharp.html>  
By Sheryl Gay Stolberg; Published: February 16, 2011

### Eyes on the Prize:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesonthaprize/>

*Eyes on the Prize* is an award-winning 14-hour television series produced by Blackside and narrated by Julian Bond. Through contemporary interviews and historical footage, the series covers all of the major events of the civil rights movement from 1954-1985.