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JOHN LEWIS INTERVIEW
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

John Lewis
US Representative, Georgia
October 04, 2018
Interviewed by Teddy Kunhardt
Total Running Time: 22 minutes and 19 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

CREW:

John Lewis interview take one, marker.

ON-SCREEN TEXT:

John Lewis

US Representative, Georgia

The first Black US president

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JOHN LEWIS:

I never thought that I would live to see a black man or a black woman as President of the United States of America. Growing up the way I grew up in rural Alabama, 50 miles from Montgomery, was very hard and very difficult for people of color to even register to vote. My own mother, my own father, my own grandparents didn't become registered voters until after the Voting Rights Act was passed and signed into law on August 6th, 1965. People had to stand in unmovable lines, people were asked to count the number of bubbles

in a bar of soap, the number of jelly beans in a jar; and to live to see Barack Obama become President of the United States of America was almost too much. As a matter of fact, when he was declared the winner of the election, I was speaking in Ebenezer Baptist church, Dr. King's old church, not the same building, and I jumped up so high I didn't think my feet were gonna touch the floor, and I started crying. Someone asked me, "Why are you crying so much?" I said, "It's more than tears of happy and joy, I'm crying for those people who didn't live to see a person of color elected president."

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And I remember some reporters asking me over and over again "why, why, what are you going to do during inauguration?" I said, "if I have any tears left, I'm gonna cry some more." And that's exactly what I did. The election of Barack Obama gave us all hope, a greater sense of hope that said Barack Obama can do it, maybe other men and women of color can follow.

The lasting effect of Obama's presidency

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JOHN LEWIS:

Barack Obama injected something very meaningful into the very veins of America. It inspired Americans to be willing to go all the way to change things. Not to be shy but to be brave, courageous, and just go for it.

Meeting Obama

01:03:00:12

JOHN LEWIS:

President Obama said to me on more than one occasion that he met me and I don't quite remember. He was a law student at Harvard, that I came to speak and talk about the civil rights movement, and he recalled meeting me there. But I got to know him fairly well when I came to congress. I invited him to come to Atlanta and he was a Senator, Obama. We walked downtown Atlanta from my office for lunch, and along the way, people kept saying, "Mr. Obama, are you gonna run? Are you gonna run?" And he just sort of, "Well maybe, I don't know." And we took a seat in a little restaurant and the waiters and waitresses and other people just kept coming up to him, said, "Run Mr. Obama. Run. Run." And I think he was in a process, it was going through his mind, and he made the decision to run.

Obama vs. Bobby Rush

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JOHN LEWIS:

I—I knew of it. I've heard of Bobby Rush over the years. And when Bobby got elected to Congress, Bobby would tell the story of what happened. Then he became State Senator and then I kept up with him, this young man from Chicago.

Endorsing Obama

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JOHN LEWIS

I had made a commitment to Hillary, 'cause I'd known Hillary through her husband, and I endorsed her, and then I switched to Obama. It was tough, it

was very—it was tough. ‘Cause I supported President Clinton and I got to know Hillary and I switched. I called President Clinton and told him. It was one of the tough decisions of my political life. But it’s all—it all worked out. I see them from time to time, I talk to them and we’re still friends.

Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” speech

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JOHN LEWIS:

I remember the speech very, very well. He spoke from the depths of his soul out of his heart. He put it all on the table. He knew what to say, he knew how to say it, and he won the hearts and souls of many, many, many, many people because of that speech.

Obama for the Civil Rights Movement

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JOHN LEWIS:

Oh, I think the great majority of people who had been involved in the American civil rights movement were very, very pleased with his leadership, his commitment, his sense of dedication. He came across as a very brave and courageous guy to get out there and just go, “I’m running.” And he ran. And he succeeded.

Obama and Brown Chapel

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JOHN LEWIS:

I wanted him to come and walk across the bridge. I thought it was important. Other people had gone and walked across that bridge. And he was there, Hillary was there, and I think President Clinton came. But it was—it was a coming together in a very strange way. I wanted President Obama, before he became President, to see and walk that path that other people have walked, to come and sit in that church and feel the spirit of what happened in Selma. To be there with the local indigenous people, and I think they have changed him and inspired him. When the President even before he became President, but as a candidate, he represented something new. He represented a great sense of hope and optimism. He was young, articulate, and daring, just daring. He said I'm gonna do it, and he did it. He succeeded. He was able to build a mighty interracial, bi-racial coalition.

2008 presidential election

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JOHN LEWIS:

The night that President Barack Obama won, I was standing in the pulpit of Ebenezer Baptist Church speaking in downtown Atlanta, the church that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his father had been the co-pastor. And when he was declared the winner, I just started crying. I jumped up like I had been touched by the spirit, maybe the Holy Spirit or maybe the spirit of Dr. King, and I just cried. The day—the day when he was inaugurated, I walked up to him and asked him to sign something. He wrote on this piece of paper, “It’s all because of you John.” I said, “Why thank you, Mr. President.” He gave me a hug. I hugged him and we both teared up. Then the second inauguration, he

walked up to me and said, “It’s still because of you, John.” That touched me deeply. So he remembered exactly what he had said four years earlier. That’s very kind of him. Bryan is like Obama; they’re both one of a kind, true brilliant young men, young lawyers that are still making a contribution.

Obama’s presidency and race

01:09:51:19

JOHN LEWIS:

I think the election of President Barack Obama forced all of us, but maybe the majority of Americans, to come to terms with the issue of race. That it’s something that we cannot sweep under the rug or in some dark corner and forget about it. Even before the election, when he spoke in Boston, he talked about there’s not a black America, a white America, there’s America. He was picking up where Dr. King left off: that we’re one people, we’re one family, and we must learn to live together as brothers and sisters, if not we will perish as fools. Obama believed in that. He believed in the goodness of humankind. He had been reading and studying the civil rights movement, reading the literature of Dr. King and others. I believe he became deeply infused with the philosophy and the teachings of Gandhi and others.

Obama’s administration

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JOHN LEWIS:

President Obama being a person of color had to walk a very fine line. He could not shake things up too much, he couldn’t rock the boat. But he played

his role and I think he played it well. He surrounded himself by some very smart, capable individuals. Had Eric Holder as attorney general, but many other people, Black and white, Asian American in his administration. But if he had been maybe someone else, a person of another color, maybe it wouldn't have been so hard and so difficult. You know, a decision was made even before the inauguration by some members of the Republican Party. They met at the evening and said, we will not allow him to succeed. It was a systematic, deliberate effort to do whatever they thought they could do and get away with, not to allow the President of the United States to succeed.

Resistance against Obama

01:12:41:20

JOHN LEWIS:

There were certain forces working against President Barack Obama and people took advantage of it. If he got out of line or tried to be daring and bold on certain issues, there was members of congress, there were some very powerful individuals who said we would not let him succeed. But in spite of all of that, in spite of everything that people tried to do, it was the leadership of President Obama and a few other good men and women, when we were facing the worst economic crisis problem in modern—the history of modern America. They solved it, rescued—they saved America.

Obama's success during the recession

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JOHN LEWIS:

He was able to prevail. It was his deep commitment and his sense of determination, his belief in himself, working with people. The goodwill that he could succeed. You're right, he saved the automobile industry, saved the banks, financial institutions, and got healthcare passed. And people fought it. That was a big, big victory to get healthcare for all Americans.

Voting for Obama

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JOHN LEWIS:

Well, it reminded me of what happened as we left the capitol building, the democratic members, I will never forget it. It was on the anniversary—one of the anniversaries of the march across the bridge, and it reminded me—and we just started walking, holding hands. And there were people yelling, using the n-word, cursing people, spitting on members, throwing things at members, but we were determined. We walked on the floor, we cast our votes, and we passed the bill. It was a significant breakthrough. Dr. King, like President Obama, believed that healthcare is a right and that all people should have quality healthcare.

Remaining hopeful

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JOHN LEWIS:

You have to be hopeful. You have to be optimistic. To lose hope is like you don't exist. It's like being dead. Hope keeps you alive. You have to—I said to young people during the 60's and I say to my colleagues today, continue to

pick 'em up and put 'em down and to never give up, never give in, never lose that sense of hope. You have to believe somehow and somehow you continue to work every single day, every hour. It's all gonna work out. You have to take a long hard look. There may be some setbacks, some disappointments, but in the final analysis, we will get there; and I believe that today, we will get there.

Charleston Church shooting

01:16:29:03

JOHN LEWIS:

I remember that day very well. As a matter of fact, several of us members of congress were asked to ride on the plane with him. It was an unbelievable feeling, you could see it on the face of President Barack Obama that he knew that he was on a mission: Get all Americans to believe that we have to do our best to create a sense of community and a sense of family, and the church was packed. There was an unbelievable, unbelievable sea of humanity. Black people, white people, young, old, elected officials, non-elected officials, just people. And he delivered a very moving speech and at the end of his speech—it was a mini sermon really, he started singing Amazing Grace. And something just came over me, and I think it came over all of the people in that church. And maybe over people listening on the radio or watching on television. It was one of these unbelievable moments probably in the life of so many of us. But for the President of the United States of America just sort of take charge and started singing Amazing Grace. Only Barack Obama could do it.

Obama's movement surviving

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JOHN LEWIS:

He cannot undo the sense of being able to forgive and to move on that Obama instilled in the American people. He cannot undo that. In spite of everything that Mr. Trump said about President Obama and is still talking about the last President, the last administration, President Obama had been so cool and so calm and so much of a man, who has taken it with a great deal of dignity and pride in his accomplishments.

Charlottesville

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JOHN LEWIS:

Charlottesville made me very sad. When I saw what was happening on television, I cried. I thought we had come so far and was much farther along than what we witnessed. I think the present person in the White House today, through his action and words, helped create the climate and environment of what happened. And then when he had the gall to say there's some good people on both sides. President Kennedy, President Clinton, President Johnson, President Obama would never ever say anything like that. It made people feel comfortable and feel at home with racism. When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, something that is evil, you have to speak to it.

Martin Luther King Jr. was an inspiration to Obama

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JOHN LEWIS:

It was good to see, it was good to hear President Obama using not just the words of Martin Luther King Jr., but to talk about, to quote Dr. King and in a sense become the embodiment of Martin Luther King Jr.. It's good to be with him on the King celebration day. This past King celebration, he invited me and about six young African Americans in middle school just to talk with him, and it was like a father talking to his young sons, and we did it for two hours. I think the teaching and the life of Dr. King influenced him a great deal.

Younger generations for equality

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JOHN LEWIS:

Well, I feel good to see young people all over America and around the world are studying and learning of what we tried to do during the 60's. Hopefully we will be leaving America and the world community better off. Each generation must play a role, must do what we can to inspire another generation to stand out, to speak up, to speak out and try to save this little piece of real estate we call earth. Leave it a little cleaner, a little greener, and a little more peaceful.

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