



JOHN LEWIS INTERVIEW
INTERVIEW ARCHIVE
LIFE STORIES

John Lewis, Politician & Civil Rights Activist
Interviewed by: Michael Weingrad
August 7, 2003
Total Running Time: 24 minutes and 56 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00

00:00:01

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories Presents

00:00:06

MICHAEL WEINGRAD:
Let's move from the Montgomery situation, talk a little bit about James
Meredith...

00:00:11

ON SCREEN TEXT:
John Lewis
Former United States Representative

00:00:13

MICHAEL WEINGRAD:
...and trying to get into the University of Mississippi at Oxford. Do you recall
Kennedy's role in that? Speak to that a bit.

00:00:23

JOHN LEWIS:

President Kennedy, with his brother, didn't have any option. They had to enforce a decision of the court. They couldn't let the governor of Mississippi, the state officials of Mississippi, or the University of Mississippi defy a court order. They had seen that James Meredith be admitted to Ole Miss. And they showed that they would call out the military as they did. That sent a strong message, not just to the South, but to America, that you couldn't have people going around defying court orders simply because you didn't like a decision of a local court or the Supreme Court.

00:01:23

MICHAEL WEINGRAD:

Going back a bit... Wait, you got the truck back up, okay. There's two speeches I'd like to talk about. The first speech, which we've talked about quite a bit, but I just want to get your personal feelings. On the June 11th speech, where were you? Were you watching it on television? When you heard it, I mean, it was... The significance of that moment, can you talk to that, a bit, of hearing the speech of President Kennedy on June 11th?

00:01:57

JOHN LEWIS:

I was in Atlanta waiting to become the chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinated Committee. To me, it was like the gospel. To hear the President of the United States, to hear John F. Kennedy, say that the question of civil



rights, the question of race, is a moral issue. In that speech, he said, in so many words, what American... Who would like to be discriminated against? Who would take the place of a Negro? I think that speech helped educate, helped move America a little closer toward the idea of an open and just society.

00:02:56

MICHAEL WEINGRAD:

I think you're right. The other speech I'd like to talk about, and sort of use that to get us back to talking about Dr. King, is time and time again in these interviews, the speech of our case that everybody remembers is when Dr. King was assassinated. Can you speak a bit about that speech when he got up on the back of a flatbed truck, right? Can you speak about that?

00:03:33

JOHN LEWIS:

I was in Indianapolis campaigning for Robert Kennedy when we heard that Martin Luther King Jr. had been shot. We didn't know the condition of Dr. King. Only thing we knew, he had been shot. We were in the process of organizing a rally for Robert Kennedy to come and speak. And Robert Kennedy came in from another city in Indiana and got up on the truck and started talking. And it was Robert Kennedy who announced to this crowd that Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated. That evening, he spoke from his heart, he spoke from his gut, not as a politician, but as a human being. He saw the feeling that was moving and growing, not just in Indianapolis, but all over



America. What he said, I think, probably did more to give those of us in the movement hope in a time of hopelessness.

00:04:54

MICHAEL WEINGRAD:

Cause he spoke about his own, losing his own brother, right?

00:04:58

JOHN LEWIS:

You know, he said and I, and I often think about what he said, he said, you know, violence is not the way, he said my brother was killed. I think he said my brother was killed by a White man. He appealed to the African American community and especially to young people to follow the path of Dr. King, the way of love, the nonviolence, the way of peace. He was deeply, deeply disturbed by the assassination of Dr. King. I remember him going back with a group of us to a hotel and we all broke down and cried. The night before the funeral of Martin Luther King Jr., it was my responsibility to escort Robert Kennedy and members of the Kennedy family through the church to view Dr. King's body. In the day of the funeral, he didn't ride in a limousine. He got out and he walked several miles with hundreds and thousands of people through the streets of Atlanta into the heart of the African American community. He was one of the few. Robert Kennedy was one of the few White politicians that could do that in 1968.

00:06:33

MICHAEL WEINGRAD:



What was it about him that made him so appealing in that way and so powerful in that way?

00:06:38

JOHN LEWIS:

Robert Kennedy was not just the brother of a president. He emerged as a leader and symbol in his own right. He had the ability, he had the capacity to reach out to people, to grab people. He said during that brief campaign over and over again, we need a revolution, not in the streets, but in the minds and soul of our fellow citizens. People felt like this man cared, in spite of his power and wealth, that somehow, he cared, that he cared for the average person, that he would stand up, that would fight. They saw him as a fighter. They believed that. And after his assassination, you would travel all across the American South, you'd go into these little churches, you'd go in these homes, shotgun shacks, and people would have a picture. There will be a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr., a picture of John F. Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy. You'd go to a church, and people have these fans, and only fans would be a picture of Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John F Kennedy. These three men had such a hold on Black America.

00:08:08

MICHAEL WEINGRAD:

Rightfully so. I'm sorry?

00:08:25

JOHN LEWIS:



No, I probably went too far in [unclear], so let's skip it...

00:08:34

MICHAEL WEINGRAD:

Do you want... How would you like to start? Do you wanna talk, start talking about the meeting the president?

00:08:40

JOHN LEWIS:

In June of 1963, this was after the speech by President Kennedy, after Evers had been assassinated in Mississippi, after Wallace stood in the door at the University of Alabama, President Kennedy invited a group of us to come to the White House. I believe that meeting was held on a Saturday morning, early Saturday morning. It was during that meeting that President Kennedy suggested that if we don't stop the demonstration and cease some of the action, we will never be able to get a civil rights bill through the Congress. We have to take people out of the streets. A. Philip Randolph, one of the Black leaders and the dean of Black leadership, a labor leader, spoke up and said, in his baritone voice, Mr. President, the Negroes are already in the streets, and we're going to march on Washington.

00:09:39

JOHN LEWIS:

You can tell by the very body language of President Kennedy. He started moving in his chair. He didn't like what he heard. He said, if you bring all these people to Washington, won't there be disorder, chaos, and violence. We



will never get a bill through the Congress. Mr. Randolph said, Mr. President, it's going to be an orderly, peaceful, nonviolent protest. We had a few other words with President Kennedy, we came out on the lawn of the White House, announced to the media that we had a frank and candid discussion with the president, and in a few days, we will be making a major announcement for the March on Washington. The six of us met a few days later in New York City, to be exact on July 2nd, 1963, and issued the call for the March on Washington and invited four major White religious and labor leaders to join us and issue the call for the march.

00:10:41

JOHN LEWIS:

President Kennedy and Robert Kennedy were so concerned that if we were going to have a big rally in Washington, that it would be orderly, peaceful. But they was not taking any chances. They had encouraged the liquor stores in the District of Columbia to close. They called in several thousand members of the military to be on standby outside of the city, just in case. We traveled the length and breadth of the country during those weeks leading up to the march. We mobilized the country in such a fashion that more than 250,000 Americans, black and white, young and old, rich and poor, showed up. It was so orderly, so peaceful.

00:11:37

JOHN LEWIS:

And I will never forget that day, August 28, 1963, when I looked out on the Lincoln, the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, from the steps to the Lincoln



memorial, you saw a sea of humanity. Just orderly, peaceful crowd. In my speech, I was the youngest speaker, 23 years old, I said something like, listen, Mr. Kennedy, listen, Mr. President, listen, members of Congress. You're trying to take the revolution out of the streets and put it in the courts. We don't want our freedom gradually. We want our freedom now. You tell us to wait; you tell us to be patient. We cannot wait; we cannot be patient. We want our freedom now. And I suggested that the proposed civil rights bill of President Kennedy was a little late.

00:12:36

JOHN LEWIS:

It was not enough; it was too little. And I changed that part. When the rally was all over, after Dr. King gave this unbelievable speech, after he said, I have a dream, a dream that is deeply rooted in American dream, we left the rally with so much hope, so much optimism. President Kennedy had invited us to the White House, and we all went to the White House. He stood in the door of the Oval Office, greeted each one of us, and he was beaming. He was so happy, he was so pleased, so satisfied that things had gone so well. He said, I watched you, you did a good job. That was my last time seeing President Kennedy alive.

00:13:38

MICHAEL WEINGRAD:

I'm going to just switch gears a bit because I don't want to keep you here too long. Going back to Dr. King, his relationship with the Kennedys was a bit strange. I mean, they were not... I mean, I think most people who, from the



outside, when you hear about these events, like you were saying, you know, like when you think, you see the pictures of three men, but yet they weren't... I mean, they were from different worlds and coming at... They were working on the same problem, but they were on a different one, because like Dr. King also believed that they were a little... Those rights were needed now. Is that a fair statement?

00:14:30

JOHN LEWIS:

Dr. King, like many of the leaders, felt that we needed greater action and support from the administration, from the White House. You know, on one occasion, I think it was Robert Kennedy who said that we should have a cooling-off period during the Freedom Ride, during the spring and summer of 1961. And he kept on saying that maybe we should cease the demonstration. When Dr. King was demonstrating in Birmingham, Robert Kennedy and the president tried to use their influence to seize the demonstration, take time out, and mediate and negotiate. I think it was Martin Luther King Jr. who responded by saying, if we cool off any more, we'll be in a deep defreeze.

00:15:29

MICHAEL WEINGRAD:

When you think about RFK today, just having this interview, when you knew you were going to have this interview, what do you think about? What are some of the memories that come up when you think of him as a man, as a friend, as a political figure?

00:15:56

JOHN LEWIS:

Robert Kennedy was a master. If he believed in something, he would tell you. You... He was a straight shooter. He felt something. You can feel it. When he spoke, he spoke from his heart, from his soul, and from his gut. He was passionate about saying things. You know, he made a trip to Mississippi when it was not popular to go into the Delta of Mississippi, go into the heart of rural, poor, Black Mississippi, and pick up poor, Black children. A White politician from New York. That was not a popular thing to do.

00:16:55

JOHN LEWIS:

To go into the Southwest, or to go to a Native American reservation, or go into Appalachia and spend time with low-income Whites. He didn't do it because it was the popular thing to do. He did it because he was motivated to do it; it was the right thing to do. And we don't have many politicians today that would go with their gut, go for the heart. Too many politicians today tend to put their fingers in the air to see which way the wind is blowing. Robert Kennedy was not one of these. I truly believe that when Robert Kennedy was assassinated, something died in America. And something died within all of us. The same way when Dr. King and President Kennedy. We were very lucky, but more than lucky, we were blessed to have the likeness of these three men.

00:17:58

JOHN LEWIS:



I don't think we'd be so lucky, not so blessed, to see that likeness again, not in our lifetime. I do not think history would be so kind to us. I often think if President Kennedy had lived and served out his first term and been able to serve another term, and Martin Luther King Jr. had lived, and Robert Kennedy had lived, where would our nation be? Where would the world community be? We will never know.

00:18:40

MICHAEL WEINGRAD:

There's a question here. One other person said, have we as a nation ever recovered from their loss? And we haven't.

00:18:51

JOHN LEWIS:

We as a people, as a nation, have not recovered. So much, especially those of us that were alive in America, that were involved, that can remember those unbelievable days, we can never, we can never forget that. It is something that we lost. We lost part of ourselves; there is a void there. I think the presidency of John F. Kennedy, the leadership and vision of Martin Luther King Jr., the commitment and bravery and courage of Robert Kennedy still inspire people today to get out there to push and to pull. You know, I often think, as an elected official and as a human being, that these three men that I knew, that they are not here, and I think others think, who had an opportunity to work with them, that somehow, we have an obligation to pick up where they left off.



00:20:21

MICHAEL WEINGRAD:

I'm pretty much through with my questions. I have one other question about the two brothers. I guess one question I have to ask out of ignorance. RFK, did he, in Selma in 65 on Bloody Sunday, did he have any role in correcting the problem from Bloody Sunday, so that, I mean, now he really did, or...?

00:20:56

JOHN LEWIS:

Robert Kennedy, at that time, was in the Senate, and he was a new member of the United States Senate, only served just a few months. I don't recall Robert Kennedy playing any role. But if I knew the man at all, he was bitterly disturbed about what happened in Selma. Some of the people who had worked with him in the Department of Justice, John Doar was still there and Bert Marshall and others. Robert Kennedy and the Department of Justice created the climate, the environment, helped prepare briefs to make it possible for us to get the Voting Rights Act through the Congress.

00:21:54

MICHAEL WEINGRAD:

Is there anything that we haven't covered that you...?

00:21:56

JOHN LEWIS:

I don't think so.



00:21:59

MICHAEL WEINGRAD:

There's one question that was given here; how did the brothers seem different to you? Is that something you could comment on? Like just on how the two men differed in the way they approached the world, and they approached... Is that something you're in a place to comment on or...?

00:22:16

JOHN LEWIS:

For meeting President Kennedy and being around Robert Kennedy in meetings, on several occasions with Robert Kennedy, I truly believe that Robert Kennedy was not only a person that would act because it was maybe anything to do, but he acted out of a deep sense of what was right and fair, out of conviction. And he went with his gut, went with this heart. I think President Kennedy was a little more reluctant to act, to move toward the pushing and pulling of his brother, Robert Kennedy.

00:23:20

MICHAEL WEINGRAD:

So, the country's lucky in a way that John F. Kennedy had his brother there to push him. We're all lucky. Do you believe it was the prodding of a brother that really opened up John F Kennedy's eyes? Is that a fair statement to make or...?

00:23:36

JOHN LEWIS:



I'm convinced that Robert Kennedy played a major role in helping to educate, to sensitize his brother, the president, to the question of race and civil rights, and probably on a lot of other issues. They worked so well together, they trusted each other, and they loved each other. You can see it. You can feel it.

00:24:11

MICHAEL WEINGRAD:

Yeah, I keep hearing that they wouldn't even finish sentences. That they would... Did you ever experience that, that they would like, one... they would start, they didn't need to finish the sentence, because they just knew what, they knew they were on, like, the same wavelength. Did you ever witness that?

00:24:29

JOHN LEWIS:

I was never in a situation that I can recall where I saw this happening. But when they spoke to the public, or in a meeting, you could tell they were together. They were on the same wavelength.

END TC: 00:24:56