



"We got arrested for the first time and I felt good about it. We felt we were involved in a crusade and, in order to do something about it, you had to put your body on the line. We felt we could bring about change in the South."  
—John Lewis, recalling his feelings after joining in his first sit-in, 1973

Lewis was feeling increasing frustration. He was tired of being beaten, and the growing war in Vietnam disturbed him. An advocate of nonviolence, he was a conscientious objector—someone who opposed all war on principle. An opponent of racism, he urged African Americans to resist the draft until they had won equal rights.

During this time, Lewis continued to serve as chairman of SNCC. However, many members now wanted a more radical approach to the struggle for rights. In 1966, one of these radicals was elected chairman, defeating Lewis. A few months later, Lewis resigned from the organization he had helped found and had led for three years.

In the next few years, Lewis continued his civil rights work in various organizations. Most noteworthy was his work in a project that helped register a million new African-American voters. In 1978, President Carter named him to head ACTION. This agency had responsibility for such volunteer programs as the Peace Corps and Vista. Lewis changed policy to put the agencies in closer touch with community groups.

In 1986, Lewis won election to the House of Representatives from Georgia. He has been reelected every two years since then, winning his sixth term in 1996. House colleagues have given him great respect due to the sacrifices he made in the civil rights movement and his principled stands on current issues.

## Questions

1. How was Lewis's commitment to nonviolence tested in his life?
2. Lewis said he left SNCC when radicals took control because "violence . . . might deliver some quick solutions, but in the long run it debases you." What did he mean?
3. In 1991, Lewis opposed the use of force against Iraq. How is this stand—even if it was unpopular—not surprising?

John Lewis (b. 1940) has worked outside the system in the civil rights movement. He has worked inside the system as the head of a federal agency and as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. Wherever he has worked, Lewis has urged the nonviolent pursuit of equal rights.

Lewis was born to an Alabama farm family. He hoped to become a minister one day and listened on the radio to the speeches and sermons of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who became his model. At college in Nashville, Tennessee, he joined work-shops to learn the principles of nonviolent protest. These principles appealed to his deep faith.

In 1960, Lewis and other students heard about successful sit-ins being staged in North Carolina. They decided to stage similar protests. Over the next few weeks, they were arrested many times for breaking the city's segregation laws. That spring, Lewis and other students from across the South organized the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

In 1961, Lewis joined in the freedom rides. In the beatings that took place in Montgomery, Alabama, Lewis was knocked unconscious. Nevertheless, he continued with the freedom rides throughout the summer. That fall the Interstate Commerce Commission ruled that segregation was illegal on interstate buses.

In 1963, Lewis was voted chairman of SNCC. He left school to devote himself full time to the movement. In the 1963 march on Washington, the young Lewis joined veteran civil rights leaders King and Roy Wilkins of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as one of the principal sponsors and speakers. The next year, he organized the voter registration drive called Mississippi Freedom Summer. In 1965, Lewis and King organized the march from Montgomery to Selma, Alabama. In the clubbings that took place on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Lewis's skull was fractured. He recovered enough to help lead the second march two weeks later.