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The Axe Files - Ep. 162: Rep. John Lewis

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Axelrod: [00:00:17] The word hero is often overused but not in the case of Congressman John Lewis. He at the early age of 20, 21, 22, 23 put his life on the line again and again along with his student colleagues in the south. Shining a bright light on American apartheid. He was one of the brilliant speakers at the Washington Memorial demanding civil rights. And he led the group across the Edmund Pettus bridge on Bloody Sunday in Selma. I sat down with John Lewis the other day at the Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta for my Axe Files CNN Program. Here is that conversation.

Axelrod: [00:01:06] Congressman John Lewis. So good to be with you and especially here at the Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta--Museum of History. So much of what you were right in the middle of. We look over here and here's a mural a photo of the march from Selma to Montgomery. This happened a few days after you and hundreds of others were savagely beaten and gassed, stomped on by horses trying to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. Tell me how you feel were doing today. How far down the road have we gotten from that bridge and are we still moving forward.

Lewis: [00:01:47] But David. I'm honored to be in your presence to be here with you. I must tell you we have come a distance. We've made progress. But there are forces in America trying to slow us down. Or take us back. And when I think about what happened here in American South. Not just in Selma. But all across the south. In Mississippi. In Georgia. In Tennessee. Where people had to go through. To pass a so-called literacy test. People were asked to count the number of bubbles in a bar soap. The number of jellybeans in a jar. There were African-American lawyers and doctors college professors, high school principals, housewives and farmers were told over and over again that they failed the so-called Desert test. So we had to do. What we did.

Axelrod: [00:02:49] Well what in terms of where we are today. You've--you've been pretty harsh in your criticism of the president of the United States. You at times compared him to George Wallace who was the governor who presided over those state troopers who attacked you on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. That's pretty tough criticism.

Lewis: [00:03:09] Well you know. I think the person we have in Washington today as uncaring, know very very little about this struggle and the history of the civil rights movement. That black and white people died; they gave their lives. I think about Andrew Goodman, Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney. I think about Viola Liuzzo, this white housewife who came from Detroit, who was shot--murdered--on a highway between Selma and Montgomery by the Klan. And countless individuals. Just gave everything they had.

Axelrod: [00:03:56] But George Wallace, I mean that's that's what about the president and his actions suggest to you that he is in that tradition, the tradition of a famed notorious segregationist.

Lewis: [00:04:11] Well I think this president right now is asking, for their records--the voter registration records of people all over America. That is a form of intimidation, that is a form of harassment.

Axelrod: [00:04:30] This is voter integrity integrity commission and vice president [crosstalk.

Lewis: [00:04:34] And and some of the people that make up this commission. They have a history a long history of making it harder and difficult for people to participate in the democratic process. We've come too far. This president should be leading us into the future, not taking us backward.

Axelrod: [00:04:55] You essentially boycotted the inauguration of the president. I was actually critical of

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you not because of him so much as the institution of the presidency and you've heard these arguments. Why did you stay away?

Lewis: [00:05:10] Well I felt like when you see something that is not right, not fair, not just: you have a moral obligation not to be identified with and not to associate yourself with it. It's the keeping with the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence. To not cooperate, not to be a part of it, not to add to it, so than more than 65 of my colleagues voluntarily. [crosstalk]

Axelrod: [00:05:43] Because of the election, the way--way the election unfolded.

Lewis: [00:05:43] We felt--and I deeply felt and I think history will bear me out--that this election was not a clean and fair election. I believe to this day that the Russians played a major role in helping this man get elected and harming the campaign of Hillary Clinton.

Axelrod: [00:06:08] A major role or a decisive role?

Lewis: [00:06:10] I think that played a decisive role. And one day I think one day we would know the truth.

Axelrod: [00:06:17] And you--you've you've hinted at this before, but you consider him a legitimate president.

Lewis: [00:06:23] Well, I said at the time I didn't I consider him a legitimate president. I think the election was tainted.

Axelrod: [00:06:31] Even though so despite the fact that he got the requisite number of electoral votes, he often uses the word rig, you think the election was rigged in his favor.

Lewis: [00:06:40] Oh I am sure to believe to this day that this election was rigged in his favor.

Axelrod: [00:06:47] You know you had a March; every year you commemorate the march on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma that led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act. A couple of years ago on the 50th anniversary, one of the marchers was Jeff Sessions who is now the attorney general of the United States. You were vehemently opposed to his nomination as attorney general. Why and how do you think he's doing now seven months in?

Lewis: [00:07:15] I know his record. I know his history. He has a very long history of being on the other side and not on the right side. I don't think he's doing too well.

Axelrod: [00:07:26] And are the things that the Justice Department relative to civil rights--relative to voting rights, I know they withdrew from a voting rights suit in Texas--Are there things that the Justice Department is doing that concerns you?

Lewis: [00:07:40] I think this Department of Justice has a deaf ear and has withdrawn from participation in the process of looking after people. Not moving people forward and standing still. During the administration of President Barack Obama, we had a caring and an active Department of Justice.

Axelrod: [00:08:07] You mentioned Barack Obama. He was another marcher at that 50th anniversary, you locked arms with him, the first African-American president. First of all what did that mean to you? What did his election mean to you?

Lewis: [00:08:20] Well. The day of the evening when he was elected, I cried. And some reporters asked

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me why I was crying so much. I said it was tears--tears of happiness tears of joy. And I said people are crying all over America. People crying in other parts of the world. And those dead are not with us today are crying. And they said what are you going to do when is inaugurated? I said if I have any tears left, I'm gonna cry some more. This is likely what I did. I cried for Dr. King, for Robert Kennedy and President Kennedy, for the three civil rights workers, for those hundreds and thousands of people that went to jail who never, ever, lived to cast a vote. I cried for them. I cried for my great grandparents and for my own mother and my own father.

Axelrod: [00:09:16] Yet at the end of those eight years, you know polls were taken and people said they thought race relations were getting worse in the country. Why is that?

Lewis: [00:09:26] I don't understand why people would say that or feel that. I think the election and presidency of President Barack Obama injected something very meaningful into the very vein of our country. Gay people hope. Someone just said to me a few days ago, said all I wish he could have been elected for a third term.

Axelrod: [00:09:51] Do you think the opposition to him was racially motivated to some degree?

Lewis: [00:09:57] I think there were individuals, organizations that fanned the flames of racism because of the color of this man.

Axelrod: [00:10:08] Was the president's campaign around the legitimacy of Barack Obama's citizenship a part of that?

Lewis: [00:10:17] Well I think that helped create it that atmosphere, that climate, that he was not one of us. That he came from someplace else.

Axelrod: [00:10:28] You know you speak so movingly of your of your affection for him and for the meaning of his election. I know you struggled during the primary campaign in 2007 at first endorsing Hillary Clinton and then ultimately, Barack Obama. Did you not believe that an African-American could get elected president of the United States?

Lewis: [00:10:50] I thought it was possible. And I became convinced that this one man could get elected and become president of the United States. And I was very proud to join his team and campaign on his behalf.

Axelrod: [00:11:07] You're a loyal guy. Was that a difficult thing to switch from one candidate to another?

Lewis: [00:11:11] It's hard. It's very difficult. It was hard. I had known the Clintons for many many years. And, but I had to make a decision. I have what I call an executive session with myself. And I said self, listen.

Axelrod: [00:11:30] And well that's a expeditious way to get to a conclusion, having an executive session with yourself. Another guy who walked with you arm in arm, in Selma, a couple of years ago was President George W. Bush. You actually--actually boycotted his inauguration, as well. And yet you came to work with him on a project that you'd been involved in from the beginning which is to create an African-American Museum of History in Washington and in the Smithsonian Institute, which is now a reality. How did that relationship develop and could you see that happening with this president?

Lewis: [00:12:09] Well, I got to know President George W. Bush and he, I think he [unclear] what we did or tried to do during the height of the civil rights movement. I got to know his father. Matter of fact, I gave

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him a book to read about the movement. And he sent me a note. And the son, George W. Bush, we will see him from time to time. We invite us down to the White House and we will talk. He embraced the building of the African-American Museum on the Mall and his wife did. And they became partners in helping us get it there. So when the legislation was passed, took me more than 15 years to get to the Congress, but it was passed. He signed it into law. And during the open, he came and spoke. And Mrs. Bush came and spoke also. And it was . . . something becoming real for him and for his family.

Axelrod: [00:13:20] Could you in today's environment have passed that legislation through Congress, could you have gotten that?

Lewis: [00:13:27] Oh, I think today would have been almost impossible.

Axelrod: [00:13:32] So how do we reclaim that? You're--you're, you're someone who's constantly spoken about reconciliation it's been a big part of your of your commitment from the very very beginning. How do you break that?

Lewis: [00:13:45] Well we can never give up. We can never give, give up on the possibility of being reconciled. Bringing people together, creating what Dr. King and many others called a beloved community. So we must do what we can to redeem people, redeem the soul of America. To understand it, we're one people, we're one family. We all live in the same house. Not just American house, but the world house.

Axelrod: [00:14:10] So if the next time you have one of your commemorations in summer would you invite the president? You said he doesn't have an understanding of the history of civil rights, would you invite him to come to Selma?

Lewis: [00:14:22] I would suggest to him to come and walk in our shoes. Come in and learn something before talking about the 5th Congressional District of Georgia and the city of Atlanta. Come. And let me show you around.

Axelrod: [00:14:39] You mentioned that you that you're referring to a tweet that he issued after you didn't attend his inauguration. Actually it was when you announced that you weren't going to attend and he said Congressman John Lewis should spend more time on fixing and helping his district which is in horrible shape and falling apart, not to mention crime infested rather than falsely complaining about the election results. And then he added all "talk talk no action or results. Sad." Your district contains Emory University, Georgia Tech, the CDC--the Centers for Disease Control . . . corporate headquarters.

Lewis: [00:15:17] And several other colleges and universities. You know Coca-Cola is here. CNN is here.

Axelrod: [00:15:28] Why do you think you he assumed that your district was crime ridden?

Lewis: [00:15:32] I don't know. I don't think he really know much about Atlanta and the history here for many many years. Long before the advent of the civil rights movement. There were black people and white people working together in this city to make the city what it is and what people used to call the city "The Little New York."

Axelrod: [00:15:57] As you walk around this, as you walk around this center and you look at these photographs and you see some of the film clips. What's very very clear is the role the news media played in bringing your stories to the American public and really shocking the conscience of the American people. That was your intent I think in some of the actions that you staged. Could the civil rights movement have succeeded without that coverage--without, without journalism and without television.

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Lewis: [00:16:32] Without journalism, without television and without the brave and courageous cameraman/reporters. It was very very dangerous David. It was very dangerous to be a reporter, to have a pencil and a pad, or to be a photographer. When members of the Klan and people, they just didn't beat on us. They tried to destroy the record. Whether it was in Atlanta or in Mississippi or in Alabama during the Freedom Rides. And we got off that bus in Montgomery in May of 1961 these fresh beat the reporters and you saw all these men--mostly men, very few women--reporters back then, just bloody. And then they turn on us.

Axelrod: [00:17:33] I think one of the most momentous events in the civil rights movement was when ABC cut into their screening of Judgment in Nuremberg, which was a major new film at the time ironically about Nazi war crimes, to do 15 minutes of film from Bloody Sunday, chronicling the attack on you and the people you were marching with. That as much as anything probably led to the expediting of the Voting Rights Act.

Lewis: [00:18:06] Well when the American people saw that film footage, they didn't like it. They start speaking up. They start marching all across America. And in matter of a few days, there was a demonstration in more than 80 cities; almost on every major college and university campus; at the White House, at the Department of Justice. They were demanding that President Johnson act, that the Congress act. And because of the press! And I said over and over again: without the media, without the press, the civil rights movement would have been like a bird without wings.

Axelrod: [00:18:48] This is a hot topic right now. You know the media is not trending very high. The news media in, in the public estimation, the president obviously has a lot of criticism. You must have been irritated by the media from time to time, unless--but you sound committed to the, to the role of an aggressive news media.

Lewis: [00:19:10] I've always believe in--in a--in a free press. An open press. Maybe didn't like some of the things that some of the Southern papers printed in Alabama and Mississippi or some parts of Georgia, but we had in communities like Atlanta and Nashville, Tennessee, in Little Rock Arkansas, and even places in Mississippi where there were brave and courageous reporter, And some time that places were bombed. Also, they just didn't bomb the synagogues and the churches, but they bombed and burned the office of reporters. It was not easy; it was not simple.

Axelrod: [00:19:53] You sit here today as a senior member of Congress, the leader of Congress. You're a major historic figure in this country. But you started off just wanting to be a preacher. You were the son of sharecroppers in Pike County, Alabama. What was it that attracted you to preaching and I understand your audience was right there in the, in the, in the coop.

Lewis: [00:20:22] Well when I was growing up, I grew up on a farm 50 miles from Montgomery, outside of a little town called Troy. My father had been a sharecropper, as you stated--a tenant farmer. But in 1944 when I was four years old--and I do remember when I was four--he had saved \$300 and a man sold him a hundred and ten acres of land. My family still own that land today. You know it's my responsibility to care for the chickens. And as a little child I did want to be a minister. So we got all of our chickens together in a chicken yard. And my brothers and sisters and cousins were lined outside of the chicken yard and I will start speaking of preaching to the chickens. And I said to young people today, some of those chickens that I preach to them in the 40s and 50s tended to listen to me much better than some of my colleagues listen to me today in the Congress. Some of those chicken would bow their heads, shake their heads. They never quite say it amen, but they tended to produce they produce eggs.

Axelrod: [00:21:28] You--you came to have a consciousness about what was going on--on about race in

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the country and that started seeping into your aspirations. What is it about your childhood? When can you pinpoint the exact moment when you were struck by the inequities that you would end up spending your life fighting?

Lewis: [00:21:50] As a young child about seven/eight years old, we would go downtown Troy to the theater to see a movie. And all of us, [unclear] little children had to go upstairs to the balcony. And all of the little white children went downstairs to the first floor. I kept asking my mother, my father, my uncles and aunts, my grandparents: why? And they would say, "That's the way it is. Don't get in the way. Don't get in trouble." But in 1955, 15 years old, I heard a Rosa Parks. I heard Martin Luther King Jr., heard them on the radio. And '57, I met Rosa Parks. The next year, '58, I met Martin Luther King Jr. and I was inspired.

Axelrod: [00:22:40] Yeah, I want to talk about that because you went off to Nashville to study for the ministry and you became more and more involved in the social gospel and social ministry and you decide you going to come back to Troy State in Alabama and you're going to integrate that--that college. And you wrote to Martin Luther King and he wrote back. How did that happen and what did you--he sent you a ticket to come and see him, a bus ticket in Montgomery?

Lewis: [00:23:10] Well, you're right. He sent me a roundtrip Greyhound bus ticket and invited me to come to Montgomery to meet with them. One of his close friend who has studied at the same college he has study, in Atlanta, Morehouse college, told him that I was in Nashville. So he got back in touch with me and suggested when I was home for spring break to come and see him. So in March of 1958, at this time I'm 18 years old, I boarded a bus to travel from Troy to Montgomery. And a young lawyer by the name of Freddie Gray who was the lawyer for Rosa Parks, for Dr. King and the Montgomery movement met me at the Greyhound bus station and drove me to the First Baptist Church in downtown Montgomery passing by the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, a colleague of Dr. King and a bus worker. And ushered me into the pastor study. I saw Dr. King and Reverend Ralph Abernathy standing behind a desk. And Dr. King said to me, "Are you the Boy from Troy? Are you John Lewis?" And I said, "Dr. King, I'm John Robert Lewis." But he still call me the "Boy from Troy." And he, we had a wonderful discussion. He said if you wanted to integrate Troy State, non-cultural University, we will help you. We may have to file a suit against the state of Alabama, against Troy State, but you need to have a discussion with your mother and father. The home could be bombed or burned. They could lose the land. And I went back and had a discussion with my mother and father. They were so afraid that something could happen. So I continued to study in Nashville.

Axelrod: [00:24:57] What about you? Weren't you at all worried about what it would mean for you to try and integrate that--that college. I mean there was, the history of that was--was--was pretty intimidating.

Lewis: [00:25:10] I felt strongly that somebody had to do something. I had been also inspired by the young people in Little Rock: the Little Rock Nine. And it just said to me: if people in Little Rock Arkansas can stand up, then I can do something. If people in Montgomery, Montgomery is only 50 miles from where I grew up, I was deeply influenced by that. So, I went back to Nashville.

Axelrod: [00:25:38] And you did do something.

Lewis: [00:25:40] And I got involved. Started studying the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence. Studied the way of peace, the way of love. And then we started this test sit ins, in the fall of 1959.

Axelrod: [00:25:54] Sitting in at lunch counters that were--were segregated.

Lewis: [00:25:57] Just sitting there black and white college students and some high school students,

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sitting there in an orderly peaceful nonviolent fashion. Waiting to be served. Someone would come up and spit on us. Pour hot water, hot coffee. Pull us off the stools. And we were told over and over again: You know if you continue to sit in, you're going to get arrested, you're going to go to jail the next time.

Axelrod: [00:26:23] And you did.

Lewis: [00:26:23] We did. I tell you David: I wanted to look, what people back then called "clean." I wanted to look fresh of what people call "sharp." Had very little money, so I went to a used men's store in downtown Nashville and I bought a suit, a vest came with it. So I pay \$5 for this suit. My first arrest on February 27 1960, 89 student--black and white--went to jail. Became the first mass arrest in a [unclear].

Axelrod: [00:27:01] This didn't sit well with your folks, right?

Lewis: [00:27:03] Oh no no. They thought I lost my mind. They thought I was out of it.

Axelrod: [00:27:07] But, you have written that you found it a liberating moment. That this was a transitional moment, a transformational moment in your life. Why?

Lewis: [00:27:17] Just being arrested and taken off to jail. I hadn't committed any crime. I violated customs and tradition. I felt liberated. I felt free.

Axelrod: [00:27:32] You also sort found a new family in your student colleagues--comrades in this--in this [unclear]. You formed a group, the student nonviolent coordinating committee, and you got involved then in a bigger and more dangerous mission which was the Freedom Ride.

Lewis: [00:27:53] Well, the young people that became my family, a wonderful family. To see people come together the same year that President Obama was born, 1961, black people and white people couldn't be seated together on a Greyhound bus leaving the nation's capital to travel through Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi. We were on our way to New Orleans to test a decision of the United States Supreme Court.

Axelrod: [00:28:27] You--and you became the first Freedom Riders, the first group organized, and to try to break these barriers and you had a dinner that you wrote about in your splendid biography in which you talked about that the night before you left for the ride and you said, "As we passed around the bright silver containers of food, someone joked that we should eat well and enjoy because this might be our last supper." Several in the group had actually written out wills in case they didn't come back from this trip. It was that serious. It was that real. As for me, just about all I owned and was packed in my suitcase, there was no need for me to make out a will. I had nothing to leave anyone." You were 21 years old and you were contemplating death. As were obviously the other young people around you. Did you know what that meant? Did you--could you absorb what you were about to go through?

Lewis: [00:29:29] I had studied the way of peace, the way of love, the philosophy of nonviolence. I thought that we could die. There was a possibility that we wouldn't return. But somebody, some group, had to be willing to give it all.

Axelrod: [00:29:51] You did--you studied nonviolence and peace and love, but you weren't greeted with nonviolence peace and love. When you reached South Carolina, you had a confrontation. What happened there?

Lewis: [00:30:06] When we arrived in a little town called Rock Hills, South Carolina--about 30 or 35 miles from Charlotte North Carolina. My seat-mate was a young white gentleman. The two of us tried to enter a

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so-called white waiting room. We were attacked by members of the Klan.

Axelrod: [00:30:24] This is what you would do, right? You would--you would go and test the facilities in every stop.

Lewis: [00:30:26] We would test the facilities. We would go to the waiting room or go to the restroom. Go to the lunch counter, go to the cafeteria. And people would from time to time attack you, beat you. We were left lying in a pool of blood. The local police officials came up. They wanted to know whether we wanted to press charges. We said no. We believe in peace, we believe in a way of love. No. And many years later David, many years later, to be exact . . . A few days after President Obama was inaugurated. One of the guys that beat us, came to my office in Washington. He was in his 70s with his son in his 40s. He said, "Mr. Lewis. I have been a member and I beat you and your seat mate." He said, "I want to apologize. Will you forgive me?" His son started crying. He started crying. I said, "I forgive you accept apology. I accept your apology." They hugged me, I hugged him back. I saw this gentleman four other times. He went out. He was moved by the election. And I think, in a sense, he got religion. And a lot of people did.

Axelrod: [00:32:16] So hearts can change.

Lewis: [00:32:18] Hearts can change. And we shouldn't ever give up on anyone.

Axelrod: [00:32:25] I want to ask you about persistence in the face of threat and violence. You went on a trip--you left the freedom ride and you went on a trip because you were pursuing a kind of missionary slot to go to Africa or go to India and you were called to Philadelphia for an interview and while you were in Philadelphia, your Greyhound bus continued on the Freedom Ride and what happened?

Lewis: [00:32:54] There was an attempt to burn the bus. The bus was burned between Atlanta and Birmingham with freedom riders on it. It was the Greyhound bus and in a Trailway bus, people were beaten and left bloody in Birmingham. I was supposed to meet the writers in Montgomery. They never made it to Montgomery. So I went back to Nashville and with others we start organizing a effort to continue to ride. So I dropped the whole idea of going to Africa or to India. Instead, I got to stay here and finish this job.

Axelrod: [00:33:36] And you continue-- in Birmingham, you met with violence and ultimately, you ended up in Montgomery met with violence and you ended up in Jackson, Mississippi which was sort of the heart of the resistance, the heart of the segregation frenzy in the south--and what happened there?

Lewis: [00:33:59] Well, in Jackson. Riders started coming from all across America, more than 400 people over a period of two or three months. You get to Jackson, you get arrested. We filled the city jail, people continue to come. We filled the county jail. Then one day, they made a decision to take us to the state penitentiary at Parchman. Parchman, at that time, was one of the worst prison in America. And I will never forget it when they segregated us. White men from the black men. White women from the black women. But when they decided to take us to Parchman, they put us all together. And when we got to Parchman. They segregated us again. And they said sing your damn songs, your freedom sings now. We have niggers here. They will eat you. They will beat you. And they led us into a hallway. And they had guns and shoot the guns on us. And ordered us to take off all of our clothes and then they let us into--to take a shower. And while we were taking a shower, they had guns drawn. And if you had a beard, a mustache, any facial hair, you had to cut it off. And in an hour or so, they brought us a undershirt, a T-shirt--I guess you call it--and a pair of Mississippi State Penitentiary shorts. And we all stayed in 40-44 days to get out to appeal cases.

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Axelrod: [00:35:48] Never coming out of the cell?

Lewis: [00:35:49] Never coming out of the cell, for exercise or anything.

Axelrod: [00:35:53] Did you ever wonder whether you're going to get out of those cells anytime soon?

Lewis: [00:35:58] Well, we--in a movement, you have to be hopeful. You have to be optimistic, that it's all going to work out. It's going to be OK. But the Freedom Rides, just drew people from all across America in support of this effort. And President Kennedy and his brother, the attorney general, intervened and got the Interstate Commerce Commission to issue an order.

Axelrod: [00:36:29] But you didn't start off as a--as a believer in the Kennedys, particularly. Do you think they'd changed or did you change?

Lewis: [00:36:40] I--I believe President Kennedy and Robert Kennedy and people within the administration changed. There was individuals there. There was one guy, one man I will never forget. He had been in Eisenhower's administration. His name was John Doerr. He was a Republican from Wisconsin. He was tall, but he was committed and dedicated that he even when we were beaten in Montgomery, he wanted to interview us and told us not to talk to the local authority, to the FBI, and to the lawyer from the Department of Justice. He was there every inch of the way and he had changed and moved President Kennedy and Robert Kennedy and Bert Martia along the way.

Axelrod: [00:37:25] And their reaction was a validation of what you were doing. You helped educate them by submitting yourself to beatings, to arrests. To this--this constant--constant siege.

Lewis: [00:37:38] Well on one occasion, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who I admired a great deal, said in effect, he said John, I understand, the young people have taught me.

Axelrod: [00:37:50] You went to Washington and you ultimately met with President Kennedy but you are the youngest person included in that famous march on Washington--the event at the Lincoln Memorial which Martin Luther King made his dramatic speech, but your speech was quite controversial. In fact, while the program was beginning, you as a 23 year old, were standing behind the Lincoln statue with the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement telling you that you had to change change your speech.

Lewis: [00:38:24] Well I didn't like the idea of a speech that we had prepared. To be forced to change in speech or be encouraged to change the speech. And I remember, A. Randolph, the dean of black leadership, said, "John, we've come this far. Can we stay together? Can you change this, change that?" And I remember Dr. King saying to me on one occasion, "John, that didn't sound like you." And I couldn't say no to A. Randolph, I couldn't say no to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. And we made the changes.

Axelrod: [00:38:56] What's interesting, you were this young guy, the 23 year old and in a group of elders, and you were really representing students who had a different orientation, less patience than some of the others. Here's the speech as I think this is the unedited speech, this is a piece of it: "We're now involved in a social revolution. This nation is still a place of cheap political leaders who build their careers on immoral compromises and ally themselves with open forms of political, economic, and social exploitation. What political leader here can stand up and say my party is the party of principles the party of Kennedy is also the party of Esalen, the party of Javitz? It's also the party of Goldwater. So, moderates and racial conservatives. Where is our party?" This strikes me as a speech that black lives matter leader could give today and maybe looking toward you and other--other members of the political establishment.

Lewis: [00:39:58] Well, I think we were a little ahead of our time, really. But we were [unclear] some of the

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frustration and a sense of discontent on the part of so many people. To see so many people arrested and jailed and beaten and seem like Washington were looking the other way; but on the day of the march, on the day of the march, when the march was all over, President Kennedy invited us down to the White House and he stood in the door to the Oval Office beaming like a proud father. And he kept saying, "You did a good job. You did a good job." And when he got to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. he said, "You did a good job and you had a dream."

Axelrod: [00:40:40] He he wasn't crazy about the idea of the rally in the first place.

Lewis: [00:40:44] Not at all. Not at all.

Axelrod: [00:40:46] Why?

Lewis: [00:40:46] Well, he thought it would be unbelievable violence and disorder. He said we would never get the civil rights bill through the Congress. if we have a lot of violence and they were prepared, you know, to call out whatever it took.

Axelrod: [00:41:08] That was one of the one of the objections that some of the others had to your speech was that you called Kennedy out specifically to peer cheap politicians and so on. Looking back, are you happy you excise that from from your draft?

Lewis: [00:41:25] Well am I. I admired President Kennedy. I admired the attorney general.

Axelrod: [00:41:33] It's unbelievable to me, by the way, that 23 years old and you're in the Oval Office as a leader of a movement with the president of the United States; 15 years after you were preaching to chickens! Did it ever occur to you how extraordinary that was?

Lewis: [00:41:50] No, and really I never really thought about it that you can preach to chickens at one period in your life, and just a few years later, you preach to more than 250,000 people and to the whole nation. I never really thought about it, but it's something to think about.

Axelrod: [00:42:13] The Mississippi Freedom Summer, you write in your book that you were inviting college students down from the north--mostly white students--not exclusively and one of the reasons was that you felt--and the leaders of the movement felt--that if, if young white people were threatened in the way that you would have been threatened and others have been threatened that it would, it would shock the nation, it would get more attention. And even before the Mississippi Freedom Summer started, which was an organizing campaign in Mississippi, you lost three young men, two of them were from the north, white. At what impact did that have on history?

Lewis: [00:42:58] Well that was an unbelievable, dark moment in the history of the struggle for civil rights. We wanted, we wanted somehow in some way for the nation to see Mississippi. To see the south. So by bringing these young people to Mississippi, to the heart of the Deep South, we have to educate and sensitize people. I think it had a turning point. Helped move the movement a step forward.

Axelrod: [00:43:30] Did you ever say to yourself: what have we done? What have we done in jeopardizing these young people or did you just feel like they understood what they were getting into and they were taking the same risks that you were taking?

Lewis: [00:43:42] Well I felt for them for many years and I still feel now that you know is--what happened is--the blood on our hand. To see these young people who lost their lives and so many other people, older people. People gave everything they had. But I think all of the young people understood the risks.

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Axelrod: [00:44:17] This scene across the Edmund Pettus Bridge: this was the impetus for the voting--the Voting Rights Act. But your skull was cracked. You were--you were gassed. You nearly gave your life for--for this. At what point do you and others say--and you said this is where there was a split in the civil rights movement--nonviolence has its limits? That violence invites defensive violence.

Lewis: [00:44:57] Well I never thought through it all. The 40 arrests during that period, the beatings, I never ever gave up on the idea of being committed to the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence. You have to accept as a way of life, as a way of living. If you're going to create a beloved community. If we going to set what A. Randolph stated over and over again: Maybe our foremothers and our forefathers all came to this land in different ships, but we all are in the same boat now. And Dr. King put it another way we've got to learn to live together as brothers and sisters. If not, we're going to perish as fools.

Axelrod: [00:45:43] 1968 is the year that I remember as a young man growing up as one of the most disturbing and momentous [unclear] catastrophic years of our history. When all this violence began to--it felt like it was overwhelming the country. You were right in the middle of a lot of that history. John F. Kennedy had been assassinated in 1963, you were now working for Bobby Kennedy, the attorney general who came to your assistance when you were a young organizer in the south. What drew you to Bobby Kennedy?

Lewis: [00:46:18] Well I really admired him. I admired the energy and his sense of hope that we can do that we can remake America. He inspired me.

Axelrod: [00:46:34] You know it was striking about him, as I recall, and he was a hero of mine. He had an extraordinary ability to reach across class lines, to reach across racial lines that I really have not seen since. What was it about him that allowed him to go into poor white communities, poor black communities, working class, ethnic white communities in the urban areas and come away with people feeling like he was their advocate?

Lewis: [00:47:04] I think we all--we all saw something in him that was real. That he had this the ability, the capacity to identify with people whether we're black or white, Latino, Asian-American, Native American. It was--it was his whole being that he cared.

Axelrod: [00:47:29] I think his brother's assassination had something to do with it.

Lewis: [00:47:32] Oh, I think it changed him, made him a different person. It drove him to set himself and I'm going to use my time to make things better.

Axelrod: [00:47:44] It's interesting you are surrounded by martyrs. And the survivors of martyrs and his brother, in a sense, was as well. So, was that--because I remember very clearly the night on April 4th of 1968 when Martin Luther King was killed in Memphis, you were with Robert Kennedy in Indianapolis. You were organizing for him in the Indiana primary and I know the local authorities didn't want him to speak. They were worried about violence there and they worried about protecting his safety, but you urged him to come.

Lewis: [00:48:26] I just felt that he had an obligation, not just an obligation, but it was the right thing for him to do to come and identify with the people there. I had heard that Dr. King had been shot. But I didn't know that he had died. And it was Robert Kennedy that made the announcement.

Axelrod: [00:48:50] So when he made the announcement on that stage was the first time that you knew that Dr. King had died?

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Lewis: [00:48:57] That's right.

Axelrod: [00:48:57] How did that--how did that strike you as formative as Dr. King was in your life?

Lewis: [00:49:03] Well, it was--it made me very sad. And I cried. But a lot of us, in that audience, black and white, we cried. And it was Bobby Kennedy who suggested that I, along with the one of his staffers, returned to Atlanta to help in the preparation for the funeral. But--

Axelrod: [00:49:28] He cried as well.

Lewis: [00:49:29] He cried, yeah. We went back to his hotel room. And we met and we talked. And I remember when he came to Atlanta for the funeral that it was my responsibility, the night before to escort him and other members of the Kennedy family to the Ebenezer Baptist Church to view Dr. King's body. And Bobby Kennedy, the day of the funeral, was one of the few white politician that walked all the way to the streets of Atlanta from that church to the Morehouse College campus with hundreds of thousands of people--without anyone, just saying any word just, just silence.

Axelrod: [00:50:15] A few months later, you were with him in Los Angeles and you were organizing the African-American community of Los Angeles for the all important California primary with Cesar Chavez who was working the Hispanic precincts.

Lewis: [00:50:30] I remember--I remember [crosstalk] We teamed up from time to time and went into some of the wealthy white neighborhoods in Los Angeles trying to convince people to vote for Bobby rather than for Humphrey or McCarthy. And somehow you knew that he was going to carry the state of California and he did.

Axelrod: [00:50:54] You were with him right before he went out to make his victory speech that night, what did he say to you?

Lewis: [00:50:59] Well he started to joke with me. And he said, "John you let me down today. More Mexican-American turned out to vote than negroes." And he said, "I'm going down to speak and you wait here. And I waited in his suite with his sister Jean Kennedy Smith and Jack Newfield of the Village Voice and Teddy Whites and several others George Evers, Medgar Evers' brother.

Axelrod: [00:51:29] Medgar Evers, the slain NAACP leader from Mississippi.

Lewis: [00:51:34] Right. It was a sad evening.

Axelrod: [00:51:36] What--how do you process this? To--you, you said after Dr. King died that you sort of transferred all of your energy and loyalty to Bobby Kennedy. How do you process that loss? It's one thing--it's extraordinary to take the beating--that beatings that you took over time, but what about the sense of loss of these men who were essentially mentors of yours?

Lewis: [00:52:06] Well, people--these individuals--people that are mine and loved and I felt they would like to hope for the future of America and maybe the planet. And I think something died in all of us. When . . . Bobby Kennedy was shot. We had to stay in the hotel for a while. My hotel was a little distance away. I just wanted to leave, wanted to leave L.A. I just wanted to get back to Georgia and so the next morning I got on a flight to fly back to Atlanta and as we crossed the hills and mountains, you can see the snow. I think I cried all the way.

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Axelrod: [00:52:56] How would history, Congressman, how would history have been different if, if Bobby-- you know assassin's bullets can change the course of history--did the assassin's bullet that killed Robert Kennedy changed the course of his trial?

Lewis: [00:53:09] Well, I truly believe that the assassin bullet did change the course of history. I think something died in all of us, something died in America. It was more than a death of a political leader. When an innocent spirit died and those of us who lived through that period, it's very hard--very difficult. To recover from, from what happened. We would have ended the war in Vietnam much earlier, I think. And I believe, I truly believe, that Robert Kennedy would have been elected president of the United States of America. And the young people in this country and young people around the world would be so different than another unbelievable generation of young leaders emerging.

Axelrod: [00:53:58] Indianapolis was the only city that didn't burn, major City the night that Martin Luther King was assassinated. And Bobby Kennedy and his incredibly moving speech and plea to the crowd was--was given credit for that. But, violence did erupt all over the country and had been sporadically for years. It seemed as if the nonviolent movement that you began with at the beginning of the decade really faded into something else. By the end of the decade, was there a point at which the movement split, diverged? Nonviolence lost its luster?

Lewis: [00:54:47] I think something died. Part of the movement died with Martin Luther King Jr. You have not had a leader that preached the way of peace, the way of love, the doctrine of nonviolence, the way Dr. King was able to do and it inspired people.

Axelrod: [00:55:06] But you've carried on for all these years. You've been in tough political battles. You had all this loss at a very early age and all of these extraordinarily difficult experiences and you're in a very tough political environment right now, and yet and yet you're unshaken in your faith, you're unshaken in your belief in our ability to overcome our differences.

Lewis: [00:55:32] Well, my philosophy is very simple. That if you believe in something, stand up for it, speak up and speak out. And you never give up. You get knocked down, but you don't give up. You keep standing up. You continue to believe that somehow in some way, we will prevail, we will have a great victory. It is not just a victory for individuals, but it's a victory for humanity. You have to believe that. And I truly believe that. I think that's what. Dr. King and Gandhi and many others instill in all human. You know I have not been back to Indiana--Indianapolis--I've been to other parts--since that evening of April 4th. I have not been back to that spot.

Axelrod: [00:56:26] Purposely?

Lewis: [00:56:27] Yeah. But I'm going back there. Next year. It will be the 50th Anniversary. I'm going back there and I'm going to Memphis that same day.

Axelrod: [00:56:40] Why?

Lewis: [00:56:41] Is--you have to go back. You have to go back to remember what happened and how it happened.

Axelrod: [00:56:49] Congressman, thank you for sharing your stories and thank you for all the sacrifices you've made for this country.

Lewis: [00:56:57] Thank you, David.

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Axelrod: [00:56:58] Great to be with you.

Lewis: [00:56:59] Thank you. Thank you for your leadership.

Axelrod: [00:57:01] Thank you.

Lewis: [00:57:01] Thank you for the contribution you have made and you will continue to make.

Unidentified Female: [00:57:09] Thank you for listening to the X Files part of the CNN Podcast Network for more episodes of The X-Files visit [CNN.com slash podcast](http://CNN.com/slash/podcast) and subscribe on iTunes stitcher or your favorite app. And for more programming from the University of Chicago Institute of Politics visit [politics you Chicago. Edu.](http://politics.you.chicago.edu)