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**Is The Civil Rights Movement Really Dead:
The Social Philosophy of Congressman John Lewis**

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Part I: The Movement

A Bumpy Dirt Road

The path from rural Pike County, Alabama to the floor of the nation's Capitol was one littered with hatred, bigotry, and injustice for John Lewis; however, it was this true American hero who helped pave-over this scarred road with tolerance, truth, and compassion in the hopes of building "The Beloved Community." Born the son of two sharecroppers in 1940, John Lewis entered a world which subjected him to the harshest times of segregation and southern racism. Over the next sixty-six years of his life, Lewis would dedicate himself to not just the cause of black Americans, but moreover, to the cause of the America which he believed would one day be possible--an America that saw no skin color and practiced its very own creed of treating all men as equals.

Lewis does not describe himself as someone who was immediately drawn to the cause of advancing blacks in America, but rather, as someone who grew up with the belief that "most people, regardless of race or any other distinction, were kind and had a conscience--or were capable of being kind and having a conscience." Therefore, the young John Lewis never harbored hatred towards whites--even those who denied him from using the public library, eating at certain restaurants, and subjected him to sitting in the back of the bus. Rather, Lewis says, he developed a feeling of pity for those who hated blacks--believing that they were victims almost as

much as the blacks they oppressed--victims of the "forces that nurtured that type of hatred" (Lewis, 52). The development of this thought and its incorporation into a non-violent theory would come later down the road; but already in high school the seeds of tolerance were planted for John Lewis.

The beginning of John Lewis' senior year in high school marked his first step in the direction of the Civil Rights Movement. Lewis had read in the newspapers about a young man named Martin Luther King Jr. and how he had taken up the cause of blacks and the poor--especially through the Montgomery Bus Boycott. After tuning into some of King's speeches on the AM radio, Lewis immediately knew that Dr. King would be his idol--little did he know that in the not-too distant future he would also be one of his closest friends as well. Unfortunately for Lewis, he did not have nearly enough money to attend Morehouse College: the very institution that Dr. King had graduated from. However, in 1957 John Lewis would find himself, the first in his families' history, on his way to obtain a college education from American Baptist Theological Seminary in Tennessee. His parents were extremely proud and excited that he would reach for new opportunities other than family farming and he was excited to escape from rural Alabama and to learn more about the country.

It wouldn't take long for Lewis' restless soul to breakthrough. After unsuccessfully attempting to start a chapter of the NAACP at ABT (a school funded by the White Southern Baptist Convention) and being accused of "preaching the Gospel according to Martin Luther King rather than according to Jesus Christ," John Lewis was ready to transfer to Troy State after one semester. However, Lewis did not want to transfer because he didn't like American Baptist; to the contrary, he actually loved the school. Rather, Lewis wanted to transfer to Troy State to break the color line and to become the first African American to integrate the school. After receiving no-reply to his application, Lewis wrote a letter to Dr. King and received a response nearly immediately from Fred Gray--Rosa Parks' attorney. Finally, after a series of exchanges with Reverend Ralph David Abernathy and Gray, the two parties set-up a meeting with Lewis and Dr. King in the summer when school was out and he could travel to Montgomery, Alabama.

In a meeting Lewis still recalls so fresh in his mind, he walked down a narrow staircase into the basement of First Baptist Church in Montgomery to find two men awaiting him: "one large and dark--the Reverend Abernathy--the other younger, very relaxed, very congenial--Dr. King" (Lewis, 68). In the brief meeting, Dr. King repeatedly warned John Lewis of the danger that taking-up the cause of desegregating Troy State would present to him, his friends, and his family. Lewis repeatedly insisted

his confidence in going through with his intentions and his awareness of the possible consequences "it was something I knew that I had to do," he said. With this brief but very poignant meeting, Lewis had met his hero, utterly impressed two American leaders with his confidence, intelligence, and charisma, and truly joined the Civil Rights Movement--all only one year out of high school.

Learning to Sit

Though the actual lawsuit against Troy State's segregation would never be filed and Lewis' first great cause would not be carried out due to concerns for his own family--he had nonetheless jumped aboard the movement and garnered the respect of the movement's most prominent leader. In 1958, Lewis returned to ABT and a city that suddenly had a sense of urgency and change overtaking it. Desegregation of schools and libraries was the talk of local politics and Lewis attended lectures by Daddy King, Thurgood Marshall, W.E.B. Du Bois, and many others on the campus of Fisk University. Reflecting upon a speech given by Coretta Scott King Lewis remarked: "That day, I felt even more certain that this thing that was swelling around me, this movement, was not going to be stopped. Not by a madwoman wielding a letter opener. Not by men throwing bombs in the night. Not by a government committed to keeping an entire people apart from the country to which they belonged" (Lewis, 73).

John Lewis spent the better part of the next year attending meetings, first weekly then daily, learning from Jim Lawson the ways of the nonviolent approach to change and passive resistance to segregation. He attended small classes in the basement of the a church on the campus of Fisk University--and there was something about Jim Lawson, something deeply spiritual, that struck a chord within Lewis that told him he was finding his calling. They studied Gandhi, Thoreau, King, and others--all with the central focus on attaining the Beloved Community. The Beloved Community would there forth become the central focus of John Lewis: the attainment of a community of humanity through the principles of Christian love.

As the word spread of the impending sit-ins planned to desegregate the downtown lunch counters of Nashville, students from across the city and state began attending crash-course seminars in non-violence and organizational meetings hosted by Lawson and students like Lewis. Lewis describes the excitement leading up to the actual demonstrations as almost uncontrollable, recounting sleepless nights and meetings that lasted into the wee hours of the morning. This groundswell of support for such radical change was a clear sign that the young black population was ambitious in its goals and its willingness to sacrifice for equality.

Finally the day came on February 13, 1960: the beginning of sit-ins that were aimed at desegregating Nashville. The movement started out with just over a hundred protestors--growing week by week closer to three hundred. Finally, as the city of Nashville clearly had no idea of how to handle these demonstrations--the Nashville police began arresting Lewis and his counterparts for disturbing the peace. This only sent shock waves across the nation and gained more media attention to the cause of the young black students. As Ella Baker and Dr. King praised the movement for its progress and urged the students to stay steadfast in their ways--Lewis and many of the other leaders of the Nashville sit-ins formalized themselves into a group called the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Finally in May of 1960 after countless sit-ins, arrests, and beatings the city of Nashville finally caved to the nonviolent resistance. After a march nearly five thousand strong to City Hall, Mayor West agreed to encourage the integration of the lunch counters in downtown Nashville. It would take another four years of beatings, arrests, and protests throughout the city of Nashville to integrate the libraries, movie theatres, hotels, and other parts of the town. John Lewis would participate in many of those demonstrations as well, but he felt his calling to something far beyond Nashville and even more important to the movement: a bus.

Walking the Walk

Following the Nashville movement, John Lewis set-out on a larger stage. Having heard talk of a "Freedom Ride" to test the decision handed down in the Supreme Court Case of *Boydton v Virginia*, banning segregation in interstate travel, Lewis immediately applied and received an invitation to be part of the ride. His participation on the very first Freedom Ride of the Civil Rights Movement would result in his head being split open in Rock Hill, SC at the beginning of the journey and being imprisoned for three weeks at the notorious Parchman Prison Farm to conclude his ride. However, his heroics and leadership during the first Freedom Ride helped turn the movement into one that attracted hundreds of young students to join in the movement promoted by both SNCC and CORE. Eventually, this was just another step in the radical move towards forcing the Federal government to actually enforce the laws that it had passed.

For the remainder of the 1960's, Lewis would play an extremely prominent role in the protests, marches, and accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement. He quickly became the Chairman of SNCC and was one of the primary organizers of the March on Washington--giving his own dynamic and moving speech that day in 1963. He also helped contribute to the campaigns of the SCLC and other groups in Albany, Birmingham, and Selma in order to desegregate the South. One of the most hidden aspects of John Lewis' legacy during the Civil Rights Movement was his intense work

in voter registration. He, along with many of the other members of SNCC, truly believed in the power of mobilizing the black vote and the importance of blacks to take advantage of this right. Throughout all his heroic work during the 1960s, perhaps nothing better captures his true courage and dedication to the nonviolent movement against racism than his fate on Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama.

In 1965 during the heat of his work for voting rights, John Lewis along with Hosea Williams led a group of over 600 protestors in a peaceful march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. The intention of the protest was to demonstrate the severe need for improvement of voting rights for blacks in the state. However, as the marchers reached the bridge they were met by Alabama State Troopers who brutally assaulted them with weapons in plain view of the national media. Lewis, himself, had his skull fractured by the State Troopers on this day but in the end this march, among other protests, was one of the largest contributors to President Johnson's signing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The legacy of John Lewis as a Civil Rights leader and hero is undeniable and his contributions to the movement helped propel great change. A man still deeply committed to the philosophies of Martin Luther King Jr., Lewis recalls his days during the Civil Rights Movement with a great deal of passion and respect for those who lived through hell with him. It is nearly impossible, without encompassing hundreds of pages, to detail

all of Lewis' heroics and accomplishments during the Movement. His own autobiography spans over five-hundred pages and is in and of itself an extremely compelling and encompassing account of the Civil Rights Movement.

John Lewis could have easily taken the next few decades on vacation back-down home and still have been considered one of the greatest American heroes to ever live. However, the movement and great progress made through the 1960's was not nearly enough for him. Countless injuries, attempts on his life, and over forty arrests were just the tip of the iceberg in a life devoted to helping build the Beloved Community. Working in different public service ventures until 1981 when he was elected to the Atlanta City Council, John Lewis has now served the Fifth Congressional District of Georgia since his election to Congress in 1986. His devotion to the country, heroics throughout the movement, and his vast wisdom have earned him standing as one of the most respected men who walk the halls of the US Capitol building and to this day he stands at the forefront of black leadership as he attempts to continue to affect positive change for not just black America but all of the country.

Part II. Moving Forward; The System Can Work!

The Loss of Fear & A Sense of Hope

“I believe that across the American South, more than anything else, people have lost their sense of fear. People were very afraid; as I was growing up during the 1940’s, 50’s, and 60’s black people were told to be very careful. Now that the sense of fear is gone, blacks are able to step outside their shelter and challenge the system.” Lewis now points to an ability to hope and dream that was spawned with the loss of fearing for ones life each and every day. Since a much greater commitment to justice and enforcing the law fairly has been made, blacks no longer feel that they have to fear the white man each day in the tangible ways that they used to. This sense of hope in building and joining a community has now flowed from ending segregation to more proactive programs such as Affirmative Action and urban development policies--all primarily focused on increasing the social mobility of African Americans.

“Since the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the black leadership and that of civil rights in the country has been extremely diversified.” Congressman Lewis goes on to explain that having a diversity of black leadership, whether it be in a city council of Atlanta or within the US Congress, would have been unheard of during and before the 1960s. While Lewis admits this has sometimes complicated the attainment of progress for blacks--since various leaders have different goals, objectives,

and visions, he asserts that it also a clear sign of a great amount of progress and that the diversity of leadership, in the long run, will only serve to benefit the African American community and the country as a whole.

It is precisely Lewis' thinking about the diversity of black leadership that shapes many of his views about modern politics--especially as it relates to the African American community and the continuing struggle for civil rights. John Lewis is old-school, he is tough, and he is not shy of sharing his honest opinion. However, at the same time, Lewis still has some of the radicalism of the 1960's left in his heart and in his messages and it shines through passionately through much of his social philosophy about current issues.

Pull Your Pants Up & Get Rid of the Big White Tee-Shirts!

Bill Cosby, during the 2004 NAACP awards, delivered one of the most controversial and provocative speeches in modern history as he accepted an award. In a speech that drew massive applause and gaping mouths, Cosby lambasted the black community as the main cause for so many of the problems "in the neighborhood" today--from single parent families to \$500 pairs of shoes.

Brown versus the Board of Education is no longer the white person's problem. We've got to take the neighborhood back. We've got to go in there. Just forget telling your child to go to the Peace Corps. It's right around the corner. It's standing on the corner. It can't speak English. It doesn't want to speak English. Everybody knows it's important to speak English except these knuckleheads. You can't land a plane with, "Why you ain't" You can't be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth (Cosby, NAACP Speech).

Cosby's introspective approach that night during the NAACP awards struck an extremely strong chord with many black Americans--especially with the older generations in particular. Bill Cosby's analysis hinged around the concept of strong parenting. He critiqued the single-parent families, the sexual promiscuity, the obsessive consumer culture, and the drop-out rate in inner city high schools.

Further, Cosby went on to question whether or not all the work done during the Civil Rights Movement will be in vain if this type of culture in the black community is kept up. "Brown v. Board of Education, where are we today? It's there. They paved the way. What did we do with it? The White Man, he's laughing -- got to be laughing. 50 percent drop out -- rest of them in prison" (Cosby, NAACP Speech). Cosby's tone was extremely serious; even angry, as he pleaded for those in the audience to be angry

with him--to no longer accept what he considers the degradation of the previous generation's toils and sacrifices.

Of course, Cosby's remarks also garnered an immense amount of criticism--especially from the more leftist and younger generation of African American scholars and thinkers. Michael Eric Dyson, a prominent African American scholar wrote a book entitled *Is Bill Cosby Right? Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost its Mind?*, in which he systematically attacks Cosby's arguments as far too simplistic and typical of generational warfare. Dyson explained that Cosby's remarks were "ill-informed on the critical and complex issues that shape people's lives," and that his words only "reinforce suspicions about black humanity" (Dyson, *Is Bill Cosby Right?*).

Dyson's views on Cosby and his remarks during and since the NAACP awards are extremely reflective of much of the black community that opposes the opinions of Cosby and feels that he is airing black Americas "dirty laundry." Despite his differences and critiques of Cosby, Dyson does not consider him a race-traitor and acknowledges that as a black thinker, Cosby has a place in sharing his views. Michael Eric Dyson's critique of Bill Cosby is best surmised by the following excerpt from his book:

Cosby's overemphasis on personal responsibility, not structural features, wrongly locates the source of poor black suffering and by implication its remedy in the lives of the poor. When you think the problems are personal, you think the solutions are the same. If only the poor were willing to work harder, act better, get educated, stay out of jail and parent more effectively, their problems would go away. It's hard to argue against any of these things in the abstract; in principle such suggestions sound just fine. But one could do all of these things and still be in bad shape at home, work or school. (Dyson, *Is Bill Cosby Right?*)

Dyson, like many others, emphasizes the fact that Cosby's remarks are principally based on the personal lives and responsibilities of poorer blacks--an argument that is especially popular among older African Americans. Many African Americans from older generations explain the importance of personal values and personal responsibility as being central to their upbringing. As many of these men and woman had very little control over much of their lives due to a racist white America, personal issues as small as the way they dressed, were central to their daily lives--and sometimes even survival. Still, Dyson and others argue that this position overlooks the failure on the part of government and other structural aspects of our society to properly uplift and support the black community.

Enter into the argument John McWhorter and the picture because even more complicated and controversial. McWhorter's central thesis is that much of the younger black culture is centered on a "cult of victimology." Similar to Cosby, McWhorter assesses that many African Americans see intellectualism and education as a purely white endeavor. However, he moves even more conservative and out of Cosby's realm as he argues for a pure "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" philosophy evident through his anti-Affirmative Action and Welfare attitude that even Cosby seems timid about endorsing. When the large picture of this debate over African American values and modern culture is examined, one finds a great deal of controversy, strong feelings, and widely ranging opinions (McWhorter, *Losing the Race*).

When asked about how he would place himself amongst this hot debate in the African American community, John Lewis is quick to point out that it is a blessing that such a debate is even taking place. Further, he makes sense of the matter quite nicely and seems to find a middle ground that most could probably agree upon. "I definitely understand where Bill Cosby is coming from and think there is a place for him in such a debate. When I often run into young men these days, it is difficult for them to even shake my hand because they are too busy holding their pants up." Lewis points out that this might go over well in the hip-hop culture and amongst friends; however, he continues, "if a young man aspires to have a job other

than flipping burgers, this type of behavior and personal appearance won't [help] much."

Despite jumping to agree with Cosby's notion that oftentimes young blacks do not appear the way he sees proper, Congressman Lewis is quick to point out that Dyson does carry some valid points about structural inequalities that still exist in American today. Lewis points to the curtailment of Affirmative Action programs, prison systems, and educational structures that, indeed, need a great deal of change. However, Lewis argues, if one wishes to create change, he must first look at himself and prepare himself properly. When speaking about taking care of one's own personal responsibility Lewis referred back to what Dr. King would talk about. "We have to uphold a different standard for the race" Lewis said "we still cannot afford to reflect badly upon our race." The Congressman emphasizes the importance that Dr. King placed on personal hygiene and presenting oneself respectfully--which he learned from Dr. Mayes, the President of Morehouse College. By wearing gigantic white-tee shirts and du-rags, young people do not present themselves as well as they would in a suit and tie--ready to obtain a job. Further, as this type of behavior is perpetuated, stereotypes arise and give way to new critiques of black culture by whites. Before addressing structural changes and governmental policies, Lewis argues, one must first be introspective and present

themselves in a professional and dignified manner--one must take care of his own business before taking on the business of an entire race.

The Three E's & Healthcare

Education, the economy, and the environment--all atop the list of priorities for Congressman John Lewis. He is very quick to identify these three as all staples that he believes Dr. King would also have been fighting strongly for if he were still alive today. Education and focusing on the youth is what John Lewis has made his "personal mission" for his duration of time within Congress. Lewis sees the opportunity to share stories of the past with those growing up in today's world as a way to challenge the younger generation to show similar courage and ambition that those during the Civil Rights Movement did. Further, Lewis sees funding of education and after-school programs as the most important factor in maintaining a system that produces youth of competence and his frustration is clear with the amount of money that has been cut to such programs from the lowest levels all the way to college financial aid funding.

Moreover, Lewis also takes strongly to the values of compensating teachers and administrators in such a fashion that helps to create a desire among college students to pursue a career in education. With high-school drop out rates at near epidemic levels in the black community, Lewis knows that change must occur within the school environment to cater

towards students needs better. Further, Congressman Lewis is insistent on the importance of Affirmative Action programs both in hiring practices and educational institutions. "Affirmative action only a means a tool or an instrument to compensate, amend, make up, and correct the wrongs of the past. Over the long term, we want to achieve a society where affirmative action is not necessary, but we have not reached that point yet. We are not yet a color-blind society. We are still in the process of becoming one."

Educational policy is such a vast and complex realm of politics and one, in Lewis' opinion, that deserves a great deal more time and dedication from America's law makers than it currently receives.

Economically speaking, poverty is on the forefront of the Congressman's mind. About one in every eight American children go to bed hungry every night. Of those children going to bed hungry, minorities make up an overwhelming percentage (www.ecla.org). "These are types of things that you associate with other countries; third world countries even" Lewis said in speaking towards the economic predicament of the poor in America. "We spend more money on bombs, missiles, and guns than we do on the health and education of our youth something is deeply wrong with that." On the floor of the House, one of Congressman Lewis' top-button issues is the ever increasing national debt--another extremely heavy weight of economic blunder that this generation's children are going to incur unless strong action is taken soon. Only compounding on top of this are the

gigantic tax-cuts that the conservatives in Congress have past for the richest in the nation.

“I do believe that if Dr. King had lived, he would be one of the strongest champions of protecting the environment; not just here at home but throughout the world.” John Lewis describes the environment as an issue which could unite many people throughout the world with the right leadership and the right approach. Lewis embraces the standard viewpoints on the environment as most hardened democrats: a new alternative to a dependence on Middle East oil, opposition to drilling in wildlife refuges, more funding dedicated to solar and alternative energy sources, and more devotion to recycling and other such programs. However, what sets John Lewis apart from others on the issue of the environment is his belief that it is an issue that can unite across party lines and even across the lines of countries if it is embraced and harnessed in the correct way. Perhaps it is rooted in his studies of Gandhi, nonviolence, and other extremely progressive theories, but the environment seems to captivate Lewis and is something he is deeply dedicated to in his work.

The final aspect of the meat-and-potatoes realm of John Lewis' political life lies within Healthcare--an extremely important issue to Lewis. When speaking about this nation's Healthcare (or lack thereof) Lewis appears baffled, almost distraught. He explains that he cannot comprehend

how the richest nation on earth is not able, actually, not willing to provide adequate healthcare for all of its citizens. Congressman Lewis sees this as one of the greatest crimes towards its own people that this nation is committing. Like many other issues, Lewis insists this is something that Dr. King would not tolerate--if he would not tolerate low wages to sanitation workers--he would certainly not tolerate lack of healthcare for citizens of our country. Though Lewis aligns neatly along with many of the issues that standard fall on the liberal side of the aisle, he does so in a unique manner. He is thoughtful and clear on his positions with strong reasons for his convictions. Indeed much of Lewis' thought seems, understandably, shaped by what Martin Luther King Jr. would have thought. A deep friend, role model, and confidant--keeping King's legacy alive and nurturing his ideals is an extremely important aspect of John Lewis' life and service to the country. His political stances are deeply thought-out and thoroughly supported by his very own human conviction to create the Beloved Community and recognize all Americans as dignified human beings.

“Dr King would be SO Against this War”

Aside from his passion for speaking about the Civil Rights Movement and his experiences during that turbulent time, there is nothing that gets Congressman Lewis' juices flowing quiet like talking about war--most specifically the War in Iraq. A student of non-violent resistance and

believer in peaceful resolutions, Lewis is not a supporter of war in general; however, this current war that the United States is waging in the Middle East is one that eerily reminds him of Vietnam and the massive mistakes that the US made during the late 1960's into the 1970's. Lewis is quite sure that if Dr. King were alive, the two of them would be leading, not just nationally, but globally in protest and opposition to the war in Iraq.

Congressman Lewis's opposition to the war follows along four primary tenants that all lead to an understanding of the war as unjust and unhealthy for America. First, Lewis questions who is actually doing the fighting for us. With a vast majority of today's active military being comprised more and more of the underprivileged and minorities in our country, we are fighting a war designed by the elite and wealthy with some of the most disadvantaged of our citizens. Lewis is quick to point-out that this does not take away from their patriotism or of their dedication to our great country; rather, it is a sign that with a broken education system and many difficulties in poor communities--the military becomes one of the only viable choices for people to make a living.

John Lewis does not support a reinstatement of the draft in our country; however, he does agree with and understand the call to social awareness that Congressman Chuck Rangel is attempting to make through calling to reinstate the military draft. Lewis, like many others, questions whether or not the President and many of the other architects of this war,

including those in Congress, would be so swift in approval for the war if it was their son or daughter that would be shipped over seas into danger. On top of all of these considerations--the country is not supporting the troops with the proper armor and supplies.

The second pillar of Lewis' opposition is a financially based argument. There is just no way, argues Lewis, to spend the type of money that we so desperately need on domestic programs while we are fighting a war that is costing hundreds of billions of dollars. "What has this President asked the country to sacrifice during this time of war? Nothing! He has said go on about your daily lives and live normally." This attitude lulls the American people into a false sense of security that the money funneling into the war efforts will not have its effects on our education system, our welfare system, and our social programs.

Congressman Lewis demonstrates his feelings about the economic impact of the war through the example that Hurricane Katrina has served our nation. Lewis praises the response on the part of individuals and corporations that came to the rescue of gulf coast citizens. However, he argues, the federal response should have been much greater and the money that needs to go into the region will be curtailed because we are spending so much in Iraq. "What we need is a type of Marshall Plan for the region--with a Czar in charge of a committee to rebuild. Of course, this will not happen because we are too bogged down fighting a war to care about our

own brothers and sisters in our nation.” Lewis contends that in just a few years, the gulf coast situation could be a black eye on America as we have let one of our own largest cities look like a third world nation.

The third aspect of Lewis’ resistance to the war can be understood as opposition to the position of “global arrogance” that our country’s leadership is giving off to the rest of the world and the resulting apathy that has developed in our nation. From Lewis’s perspective, this arrogance is clear from the very beginnings of the way that we approached the war-- showing a lack of understanding and compassion for an entirely different culture than our own. Indeed, this is also a lack of understanding that can be seen throughout our entire approach to the “War on Terror.” Further, Lewis argues, this arrogance creates a global climate in which virtually nothing can be accomplished with other nations. Since we went to war without the support of many other nations--without even attempting to bring them to the table--we have severed much of our ability to accomplish many other global diplomatic measures with them as well.

Even more damaging than the global arrogance, argues Lewis, is the sense of arrogance that is felt within our very own borders by our own citizens. “I think a lot of people, black and white, feel that it doesn’t even matter anymore. If we speak-out and we make some noise it doesn’t matter. “Those in the media, the White House, and the Congress will continue to do what they are going to do.” This feeling, says Lewis, is all

predicated on a President that takes the attitude of "it's my way or the highway--I have the gospel of truth and God has spoken to me." Lewis then pointed to the fact that, in metro Atlanta, the local country station will no longer play any music by the Dixie Chicks since they have spoken out against the war. "My generation would not take this; there is something missing in this generation's attitude and we must change that."

Congressman Lewis' opposition to the war finally concludes with the argument that such a war distracts so greatly from the immense amount of work that must go on at home. "President Johnson took the position that you could fight two wars at once: one in Vietnam and one on poverty--that clearly didn't work and fighting two wars at once is just not possible."

Lewis argues that we are not a country in the position of worrying so much about other people's business when we have a great deal of our own business that has not been straightened out or taken care of yet.

"If you look back at the speech that Dr. King gave on April 4, 1967 at Riverside Church in New York, a speech that many people do not even know about, you will find his most concise and convincing speech that he has ever given." In that speech, Dr. King argued against the Vietnam War and equated the struggle against the war to the very same struggle that began in Montgomery, Alabama. King said "a time comes when silence is betrayal. That time has come for us in relation to Vietnam" (King, Riverside 1967). John Lewis carries much the same sentiment today--that

the lack of protests, the lack of speaking truth to power, and the lack of duty on the part of many in this country to speak out against the war is actually a betrayal to our nation and to our Constitution.

Right now, Lewis explains, "I have been so uplifted by the mobilization of the immigrant community and maybe we can learn a lesson from all of this." He questions why the anti-war movement cannot take on the forms of protest and enthusiasm that these immigrant communities have manifested in order to assure their own rights. "It reminds me of the 60's really, that in our society we have to have somebody to pick on-- somebody who has created all of our problems; so now it's the immigrants." But Lewis continues to insist that maybe the rest of the country can be inspired by what he calls "the massive activism and passion" on the part of the immigrant community. He hopes that just maybe the anti-war activists, the anti-poverty activists, and those fighting for the very basics of human rights can be energized and encouraged by what is taking place in the immigrant community today.

Striving for the Beloved Community

To John Lewis, like Dr. King, the Beloved Community did not represent some lofty or idyllic goal; but rather a practical human fellowship that was extremely practical and attainable through a committed group effort of non-violence and love. Beloved Community is a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict (www.kingcenter.org)

When you speak to Lewis, it becomes readily apparent from the beginning of the conversation that everything, everything, is centered on the concept of building the Beloved Community. From the smallest matters within the busy daily schedule of a Congressman down to the toughest decisions that he makes, Congressman Lewis' conscience and philosophy is shaped by the belief that the Beloved Community can be obtained. Informing Lewis' opinions, decisions, and direction in the path towards this community is his spirituality. "I'm always asking somebody, some

force, some power--whether its God Almighty or what I sometimes refer to as the Spirit of History--to take care of me, to help me make the right decision, to see me through something" (Lewis, 502). It is faith, not necessarily religion, which helps to guide John Lewis in the decisions he makes. He is sure to point out the difference between being guided by a faith and spirituality and attempting to harness political victories and coerce a group of people through the polarizing issues of particular religious doctrines. It is a faith, a faith that he learned at a young age from his parents and was reinforced on those most difficult of days in Rock Hill and Selma--a faith that he carries with the knowledge that there is still a great deal of work to be done but there is great force in the world to overcome the obstacles and accomplish the goals.

In the eyes of John Lewis the movement for civil rights in the United States is not dead. Perhaps, a better word for the state of the movement is asleep--but not for long; not if you believe as John Lewis does, that there is a groundswell of momentum in the communities of America. Not if you believe that the Latino immigrant population of this nation--one that will outnumber blacks in only a few years--has the drive and capability to mobilize themselves as so many did in Birmingham and Montgomery. The Civil Rights Movement in America is not asleep for long if you believe in the power of communities coming together to

awaken the conscience of a nation not living up to its creed and promises.

As each day passes, we lost more and more Americans that were a part of the great generation of change and willingness to speak truth to power. John Lewis is a living legend, a living hero, a living experience of what it means to live a life committed to justice. He commands the respect of his friends, colleagues, and even opponents not just through his vast experience of 'walking the walk,' but also through the southern twang that is still highly evident in the tone of his speech. This small subtlety speaks volumes of a man who has walked a thousand miles in the service of others and sits atop one of the most powerful positions in the world as a United States Congressman; however, John Lewis remains deeply authentic in staying true to his roots and his core beliefs.

Lewis begins his autobiography by telling a story from when he was just five years old and growing-up in rural Pike County Alabama. Lewis, some of his cousins, and some of his neighborhood friends were playing outside his aunt's house one afternoon as a vicious thunderstorm rolled in. As his aunt shuffled the children into their small house on their cotton farm Lewis recalls walking hand-in-hand with his cousins in friends to different corners of the house as the wind

began to lift the house—the entire time just small children keeping an entire house from being lifted away by a storm.

It seemed that way in the 1960's as well, at the height of the civil rights movement, when America itself felt as if it might burst at the seams—so much tension, so many storms. But the people of conscience never left the house. They never ran away. They stayed, they came together and they did the best they could, clasp hands, and moving toward the corner of the house that was the weakest (Lewis, xvii).

John Lewis has weathered many a storm in his sixty-six years on this earth—and he will likely weather many more in the service of our country. Perhaps we might all take comfort in having someone of the character, stature, compassion, and integrity of John Lewis as one of the leaders in our country—especially at a time when leadership often seems so feeble. Moreover, perhaps we will commit ourselves to learn the legacy of John Lewis, of Martin Luther King, of the Civil Rights Movement. However, let us not be content with simply learning the legacy in order to point towards great people of history; but rather to build great leaders of the future. Perhaps, sometime in the not too distant future, a new generation will clasp hands together and hold down the weakest part of our house—“the American house, the American family” (Lewis 503).

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**All free-standing quotes from John Lewis are taken from my interview with the Congressman on March 28, 2006 in Washington, DC.