

ESSAY ROUNDTABLE

## Moral Faith and the Legacy of John Lewis’s Political Vision of “Good Trouble”

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### Abstract

The late congressman John Lewis spent most of his political life engaging Black Power’s commitment to economic and political freedom through a political vocabulary that aligned with his deeply held beliefs in nonviolence, human rights activism, and moral faith. The tension between the Black radical left and establishment Black politics dates back to Lewis’s clash with elite Black leaders over the content of his prepared address for the 1963 March on Washington. The address provides a glimpse into Lewis’s complicated political legacy. The youngest speaker at the March, Lewis faced the daunting task of both representing the political philosophy of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and meeting the expectations of established civil rights leaders. Negotiating the political interests of the organizers of the March alongside the demands of SNCC foreshadowed the congressman’s political vocation: a lifetime of civil rights advocacy through a politics of respectability and Black Power’s political philosophy of freedom and economic transformation. Lewis’s political legacy is complicated; and yet, it was fueled by an unabashed commitment to Black freedom struggles, human rights activism, and racial reconciliation.

**Keywords:** moral faith; Black radicalism; civil rights movement; Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); March on Washington

### John Lewis’s Legacy: Setting up the Sermon

Former US president Bill Clinton is widely recognized for his shrewd oratory. His mastery of public speaking is especially noteworthy when he speaks from behind a church pulpit, as in his 1993 address at the Mason Temple Church of God in Christ, where Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his last public address the night before his assassination. Modeling himself after mainline African American preaching traditions, Clinton delivers each word or phrase in rhythm with his audience’s applause or laughter—a “folksy” twang punctuates each sentence<sup>1</sup>—and he pulls in the audience with a delayed cadence alongside a hand gesture or twinkling of an eye. Clinton’s talent has been remarkably evident when he eulogizes a prominent and esteemed African American leader or artist. What has shielded Clinton from attacks of cultural appropriation is his uncanny ability to share vivid anecdotes about the deceased and himself, an oratorical move that solidifies his legitimacy within the often-insulated inner enclaves of black elite leadership and culture. By establishing

<sup>1</sup> In a *Washington Post* column, Hasan Kwame Jeffries called Clinton’s remarks part “warm, folksy tribute.” Hasan Kwame Jeffries, “Stokely Carmichael Didn’t Deserve Bill Clinton’s Swipe during John Lewis’s Funeral,” *Washington Post*, August 1, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/08/01/stokely-carmichael-didnt-deserve-bill-clintons-swipe-during-john-lewiss-funeral/?request-id=bb0d3485-014c-4ca2-a4d8-6e02ccb046cb&pml=1&pml=1>.

his role within African American history at the beginning of his remarks, Clinton emulates mainline African American preaching traditions. It is what homiletics scholar Kenyatta Gilbert calls the “sermon set-up,” an “embodied speech” act that links the preacher to the congregation through scripture, narrative, or historical context.<sup>2</sup>

When Clinton eulogized Representative John R. Lewis on July 30, 2020, at the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, he again followed the preacher’s protocol by acknowledging the distinguished guests in the sanctuary—all by name and at times with a special acknowledgment. He recognized from the audience Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms with an affectionate quip, “Madam Mayor, thank you. You have faced more than a fair share of challenges in these past few months, and you have faced them with candor and dignity and honor and I thank you for your leadership.”<sup>3</sup> The astute move earned him immediate admiration from women of all races and particularly Black church congregants, many of whom measure the preacher’s heart, sincerity, and humility by her or his ability to acknowledge the underdog and ordinary churchgoer in a public address. By noting Mayor Bottoms’s tug of war over voting rights with former president Donald Trump and Republican Georgia officials, Clinton exemplified the best of African American preaching by illuminating and affirming the courage and steadfastness of Black political struggles in the midst of ardent national resistance and turmoil.

However, Clinton’s adoration from Black listeners and audience members would quickly sour. As he lauded the work of esteemed civil rights advocates such as Diane Nash, a cofounder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and member of the Freedom Riders, and Andrew Young, former US Congressman, United States ambassador to the United Nations, and mayor of Atlanta, and took pride in his own role in commemorating the thirty-fifth anniversary of the Selma March known as Bloody Sunday, Clinton stepped into the middle of the contentious history of the congressman’s legacy within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, known widely as SNCC. Clinton pitted traditional civil rights leadership against SNCC’s leftist Black Power advocates. He suggested that Congressman Lewis was pushed out of SNCC’s leadership by the “adversaries” of the civil rights movement because of Lewis’s nonviolent and moderate political views: “And I say there were two or three years there, where the movement went a little too far towards Stokely, but in the end, John Lewis prevailed. We are here today because he had the kind of character he showed when he lost an election.”<sup>4</sup> But even in an attempt to use Congressman Lewis’s legacy to indict then president Trump’s efforts to sabotage the legitimate election of Joe Biden to the presidency, Clinton failed to offer a nuanced and compelling narrative of Lewis’s moral radicalism and his indebtedness to Black Power ideology.

### Negotiating Black Power and Black Politics

For reasons that have as much to do with securing and solidifying Lewis’s place within American political history as with sanitizing the civil rights movement and placing it in direct opposition to the Black Power movement and Black radicalism, Clinton’s narration of the civil rights movement ignores the complicated history between voting rights and power within twentieth-century African American politics and Congressman Lewis’s vital role in linking together traditional political liberal principles of individual rights and equality and Black Power’s desire for economic, political, and cultural freedom during and after the civil rights movement.

<sup>2</sup> Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Joshua Bote, “Former President Bill Clinton at John Lewis’ funeral: ‘He Was Here on a Mission,’” *USA Today*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/07/30/bill-clinton-speaks-john-lewis-funeral-full-transcript/5544050002/>.

<sup>4</sup> Bote, “Former President Bill Clinton at John Lewis’ Funeral.” See also Jeffries, “Stokely Carmichael Didn’t Deserve Bill Clinton’s Swipe during John Lewis’s Funeral.”

Throughout Lewis's more than six decades of political advocacy and access to the inner circles of the nation's most important political struggle to end public segregation, he invoked Black Power's commitment to economic and political freedom through a political vocabulary that aligned with his unabashed beliefs in nonviolence, human rights activism, and moral faith. This, perhaps, best characterizes Lewis's famed axiom "good trouble."<sup>5</sup> It can be seen in Lewis's clash with elite Black leaders over the content of his prepared address for the 1963 March on Washington. The address, which blasted the Kennedy administration's snail-pace approach to civil rights and condemned Southern political leaders for impeding Black freedom, offers a glimpse into Lewis's complicated political legacy. As the youngest speaker at the March, Lewis faced the daunting task of both representing SNCC's political philosophy and meeting the expectations of established civil rights leaders such as King, who played a vital role in placing the then twenty-three-year-old Lewis in key leadership positions.

Negotiating between the overlapping and sometimes competing factions of the March on Washington foreshadowed the congressman's political vocation. It was a lifetime of engaging the formative politics of his generation: civil rights advocacy through a politics of respectability and Black Power's political philosophy of freedom through social, political, and economic transformation. Lewis routinely found himself at the center of public clashes between the political establishment and political actors sitting on the margins but seeking to secure a more central role in party politics and national debates on justice and freedom.<sup>6</sup>

This was the case when Lewis took the controversial decision to support Barack Obama's 2008 presidential candidacy rather than support longtime political ally and friend Hillary Clinton. As one of the last remaining activists from the March on Washington and the Civil Rights moment, Lewis's endorsement was highly coveted—especially in a campaign battle between a politically established white woman and a younger and less experienced Black man. Hillary Clinton had long enjoyed Lewis's support. However, vocal cries from his mostly Black constituency in Atlanta, many of whom were young and marginal to the Democratic Party's establishment, demanded he support Obama. Once again, Lewis found himself caught between a rock and a hard place. The voice of the marginal voters won. In a statement, Lewis said that his endorsement reflected the "express the will of the people."<sup>7</sup> This was another example of "good trouble, necessary trouble" the congressman was compelled to embody and execute. The tensions, and perhaps contradictions, of his political imagination symbolize the arduous task facing Black leaders whose primary constituencies often stand in opposition to the financial and political establishments that Black leaders find themselves engaging to secure resources for their political base.

### **Between Civil Rights and Black Power**

At his funeral, public officials and Black leadership honored Congressman Lewis's steadfast political efforts to promote racial healing and racial integration, cultivate US Black-Jewish relationships, and embody political humility. Former president Barack Obama's remarks in his eulogy reminded the audience and nation that Lewis's nonviolent stance against racism and segregation embodied the democratic ideals of the nation: "The life of John Lewis was, in so many ways, exceptional. It vindicated the faith in our founding, redeemed that faith; that most American of ideas; that idea that any of us ordinary people without rank or wealth or title or fame can somehow point out the imperfections of this nation, and come together,

<sup>5</sup> Cassandra Cavness, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/opinion/letters/john-lewis-civil-rights.html>.

<sup>6</sup> I discuss this tension in light of the 2008 presidential election below, and other contributors to this roundtable discuss other examples, including Lewis's support of same-sex marriage equality, the Mariel Cubans, and Russian Jews.

<sup>7</sup> "Rep. Lewis Switches to Obama," *Los Angeles Times*, February 28, 2008, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-feb-28-na-endorse28-story.html>.

and challenge the status quo, and decide that it is in our power to remake this country that we love until it more closely aligns with our highest ideals.”<sup>8</sup>

Obama characterized Lewis as a democratic warrior whose moral faith and persistence helped to redeem the nation from its racist past. Clinton portrayed Lewis as a symbol of the best of African American politics, the civil rights movement, and its politics of respectability. Both men narrated aspects of Lewis’s life that best fit within their own political imaginary. For Obama, it was one steeped in American exceptionalism, the birthplace of the new “promised land.” For Bill Clinton, it was imagined through his own coming-of-age narrative, in which the son of a single mother sees his future through the storied memories of John F. Kennedy and Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. In the introduction to *Great American Civil Rights Speeches*, Clinton noted his indebtedness to the politics of Lewis’s making: “As I was growing up in the segregated South, my low-grade fever for public service reached the boiling point under the influence of the speeches of Dr. King and John F. Kennedy. It wasn’t long before I knew that I too wanted to serve my country and its highest ideals, none more important than racial reconciliation.”<sup>9</sup>

In both instances, Congressman Lewis’s astounding moral and political radicalism remain largely untold. By focusing on his individual moral character, re-narrating the times when he was beaten by whites and police officers, and recalling his fragile childhood upbringing near Troy, Alabama, Congressman Lewis becomes yet another footnote in the history of exceptional Black men. The narratives painted by Obama and Clinton should be read alongside and in tension with the Black radicalism found within SNCC, an often-overlooked influence within Lewis’s political life. The organization’s emphasis on non-hierarchical leadership, focus on empowering local leadership, and efforts to build political community in the United States and abroad informed and influenced Lewis’s political ideology and his moral judgment. Ella Baker, the labor rights activist and visionary leader who helped found SNCC in 1960, deserves credit for the group’s student-driven leadership model and the organization’s commitment to empowering ordinary Black southerners with the resources to determine their own political goals and aspirations. The tension in the late congressman’s deep roots in civil rights activism between a strictly voting rights advocacy approach to Black Power and a broader framework of human rights activism cannot be understated.

### John Lewis’s March on Washington

The best evidence for SNCC’s enduring role in Lewis’s political imagination can be found in the struggle between Lewis and the political establishment leading the March on Washington. A deeper dive into the weeds of the controversy over Lewis’s written speech yields a better understanding of the March on Washington. The tension in the speech symbolizes the battles that would shape his lifelong political behavior and moral convictions. Lewis’s initial draft of the speech drew opposition within the civil rights movement, but it sheds light on Black radicalism’s influence on Lewis’s political imagination.

Lewis’s role at the March on Washington was to speak on behalf of SNCC in his role as chairman of the organization. King and others believed the march needed to have representatives from the fledgling but increasingly effective youth movement. However, Lewis’s prepared speech floored march organizer A. Philip Randolph and representatives from the Kennedy administration when they received a copy of it. The written speech, initially entitled “We Must Fight for Ourselves,” was written by Lewis and SNCC leadership. It was designed to expand civil rights beyond its voting rights agenda to advocate for comprehensive political and economic transformation.

<sup>8</sup> “Read the Full Transcript of Obama’s Eulogy for John Lewis,” *New York Times*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/us/obama-eulogy-john-lewis-full-transcript.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Josh Gottheimer, Introduction to *Ripples of Hope: Great American Civil Rights Speeches*, ed. Josh Gottheimer (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003), xvii–xxxviii, at xv.

In the written version of the speech, Lewis first challenged the political efficacy of voting rights legislation negotiated between the civil rights establishment and the Kennedy administration. “The voting [rights] section of this bill will not help thousands of black citizens who want to vote. It will not help the citizens of Mississippi, of Alabama, and Georgia, who are qualified to vote, but lack a sixth-grade education.”<sup>10</sup> Second, Lewis noted the corruption of politicians by big moneyed influencers. “This nation is still a place of cheap political leaders who build their careers on immoral compromise 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?’”<sup>11</sup> Third, he decried the economic enslavement of Black workers, especially those in the South who were grossly underpaid. “The revolution is at hand, and we must free ourselves of the chains of political and economic slavery.”<sup>12</sup>

The remarks that Lewis prepared reflected a divide over the direction of the march. The original title “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” had been shifted to the focus on civil rights by the organizers of the march, Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph, immediately before a meeting with major civil rights leaders and President Kennedy.<sup>13</sup> This move was consistent with SNCC’s initial concerns when talk of the march surfaced in 1963. As Lewis described it, “From the first mention of this march, a good number of SNCC people wanted nothing to do with it. Their feeling was that this would be a lame event, organized by the cautious, conservative traditional power structure of black America, in compliance with and most likely under the control of the federal government.”<sup>14</sup>

The leaders of the march rejected Lewis’s prepared speech, citing its inflammatory language as divisive and counterproductive to the march’s moderate political aspirations. Because the theme had shifted away from economic justice, the architects of the march, including Rustin, a Quaker and longtime leader in the civil right movement and Roy Wilkins, former Executive Director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, focused exclusively on achieving President Kennedy’s support for voting rights legislation through a posture of political moderation and compliance. The narrow voting rights goals of the march were compromised by SNCC and Lewis’s wide-sweeping political and economic agenda. Lewis’s prepared speech was leaked to attorney general Robert Kennedy and his staff, and they immediately contacted the leaders of the march and threatened to block the march if the speech was not modified. “Robert Kennedy and Burke Marshall agreed that Lewis’s comments should not be allowed a place at the March,” writes David Garrow in *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*. “They made certain that a number of sponsors and program participants were aware of the text.”<sup>15</sup> Lewis initially rejected calls to revise the speech. However, when King approached him the night before the march, Lewis took a different stance. “John, I know who you are. I think I know you well. I don’t think this sounds like you,” King is

<sup>10</sup> John Lewis with Michael D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 217.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis and D’Orso, 217.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis and D’Orso, 217.

<sup>13</sup> A. Philip Randolph was a leading labor rights advocate and chief architect of the March on Washington. He founded the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, which is considered to be the first successful Black trade union. “Randolph, A. Phillip,” *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/randolph-philip>. Bayard Rustin was a key advisor to Martin Luther King, Jr., and one of the leading political strategist of the civil rights movement. An African American, Quaker, and gay leader, Rustin is among the many unsung heroes of Black politics largely because of his sexuality. “Rustin, Bayard,” *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/rustin-bayard>.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 203.

<sup>15</sup> David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Quill, 1999), 282.

reported to have said.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Lewis and SNCC colleagues, including James Forman,<sup>17</sup> edited the speech.

Some SNCC members disagreed with the changes to the speech and insisted that Lewis walk away from the march rather than compromise the organization's political principles.<sup>18</sup> The tension between SNCC and the civil rights establishment created what Lewis would later call in his autobiography "one of the most difficult situations I'd had to deal with since becoming chairman of SNCC."<sup>19</sup> "Here I was alone. Personally I might have favored this march, but as chairman of SNCC I had an obligation to represent the sentiments and decisions of my brothers and sisters in the organization."<sup>20</sup> Without the support of many of his friends and colleagues, Lewis proceeded alone. However, the minor changes to the speech minimized neither its fiery tone nor its political substance. Instead, the speech exposed Lewis's moral faith and his unabashed commitment to bring the people's voice to Washington, DC, a world symbol of the seat of empire. In fact, Lewis's clarion call, "Wake up America!" was far more politically piercing than King's prophetic dream. And yet, SNCC's leftist arm overlooked Lewis's bold speech.<sup>21</sup>

Three moves made by Lewis demonstrate his unwavering obligation to many of SNCC's core principles. First, he remained steadfast in his criticism of voting rights legislation and its political limits for African Americans. Without expanding the bill to include federal protection against police violence toward African Americans attempting to exercise their right to vote, the legislation would wholeheartedly fail. "In its present form, this bill will not protect the citizens of Danville, Virginia, who must live in constant fear of a police state. It will not protect the hundreds and thousands of people that have been arrested on trumped charges."<sup>22</sup> He also cited the death penalty charges facing SNCC field secretaries in Georgia because of their involvement in nonviolent protests demanding voting rights as another example of legal impediments to voting. Historian William P. Jones called Lewis's speech the "most scathing critique of Kennedy's [voting rights] bill" delivered at the march.<sup>23</sup>

Lewis's speech symbolized the broad coalition of political actors who supported the March, which Jones called "one of the most successful mobilizations ever created by the American Left."<sup>24</sup> It marshaled political actors ranging from trade unionists to domestic workers and feminists. To this end, Lewis's speech accentuated the economic radicalism that had been etched into the earlier framing of the march as the March for Jobs and Freedom. The earlier vision of the march dated back to the 1940s, when Randolph envisioned a mass protest in support for better economic opportunities for African Americans including the desegregation of the national defense industry.<sup>25</sup> Clearly, Randolph, King, and Wilkins reframed the march into a far more conciliatory protest. The 1963 march nonetheless fueled contentious national debates from Black leftists like Malcolm X and members of SNCC, which foreshadowed the imminent shift in the direction of Black politics that would loom large over Lewis's entire political life.

<sup>16</sup> Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 283.

<sup>17</sup> James Forman was a leading strategist in SNCC. As its executive secretary, Forman played a decisive role in collecting and documenting the organization's history and shaping SNCC's political agenda.

<sup>18</sup> Garth E. Pauley, "John Lewis's 'Serious Revolution': Rhetoric, Resistance, and Revision at the March on Washington," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84, no. 3 (1998): 320–40, at 325.

<sup>19</sup> Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 318.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis and D'Orso, 318.

<sup>21</sup> John Lewis, "Speech at the March on Washington (28 August 1963)," *Voices of Democracy: The U.S. Oratory Project*, ed. Gareth Pauley, July 2, 2010, <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/lewis-speech-at-the-march-on-washington-speech-text>.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, "Speech at the March on Washington."

<sup>23</sup> William P. Jones, "The Forgotten Radical History of the March on Washington," *Dissent* 60, no. 2 (2013): 74–79, at 77.

<sup>24</sup> Jones, "The Forgotten Radical History of the March on Washington," 75.

<sup>25</sup> Paula F. Pfeffer, A. Philip Randolph, *Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 68.



Second, Lewis wove into his address SNCC's transnational political agenda by linking the civil rights agenda to African decolonization and the African independence movement, proclaiming "'One man, one vote' is the African cry. It is ours too. It must be ours!"<sup>26</sup> The explicit link to African freedom was unprecedented in light of Randolph's efforts to narrow the civil rights agenda to the political and economic concerns facing U.S. Blacks. Lewis's expansive political agenda can be traced back to the founding of SNCC. According to Clayborne Carson's acclaimed historical account of the organization, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, freedom movements in Africa influenced youth activists in the United States and shaped SNCC's political philosophy. A year after Lewis's call for solidarity with African freedom movements, he participated in a SNCC delegation to Africa. Activist and actor Harry Belafonte sponsored the 1964 trip, during which Lewis and others met student leaders and African American expatriates in Liberia, Ghana, Zambia, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Egypt.<sup>27</sup> As noted by Carson, Lewis was especially enthralled by his visit, believing that "the destiny of Afro-Americans was 'inseparable from that of our black brothers in Africa. It matters not whether it is in Angola, Mozambique, Southwest Africa, or Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Harlem, U.S.A.'"<sup>28</sup>

Lastly, Lewis's address called for a "social revolution" to upend the political corruption endemic within the two-party system. As Lewis exclaimed, "What political leader can stand up and say, 'My party is the party of principles?'"<sup>29</sup> Lewis added, "For the party of Kennedy is also the party of Eastland," pointing to Mississippi Democrat and US senator James Eastland as the face of political corruption.<sup>30</sup> Described in a *Washington Post* obituary as "a living symbol of southern intransigence on the issues of racial segregation and civil rights," Eastland was chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, where he led the effort to squash 127 civil rights bills.<sup>31</sup> Lewis went on to indict the Republican Party as well, proclaiming "The party of [Jacob] Javits<sup>32</sup> is also the party of [Barry] Goldwater," the Republican senator from Arizona who staunchly opposed civil rights legislation. Goldwater's *Washington Post* obituary characterized the five-term senator as a "demagogue and a leader of right-wing extremists and racists" during his 1964 presidential campaign.<sup>33</sup>

While scholar of rhetoric Garth Pauley believes the delivered speech significantly altered and minimized Lewis's fierce criticism of national politics and his opposition to the Kennedy administration's handling of civil rights,<sup>34</sup> I maintain that Lewis's modified address remained in spirit fundamentally committed to SNCC's leftist political agenda. Unlike many of his SNCC colleagues who opposed Lewis's decision, the future congressman made a political calculation based on his moral faith and political acumen. Indeed, modifying the speech did not reduce its political force and veracity. Instead, the political terrain of "good trouble" was etched out in Lewis's delivery.

Still, Lewis faced mounting criticisms from left-leaning SNCC members, many of whom questioned his cozy relationships with establishment Black politicians and organizations

<sup>26</sup> Lewis, "Speech at the March on Washington."

<sup>27</sup> Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 135.

<sup>28</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 136, quoting John Lewis, "Statement to SNCC Staff Meeting," February 1965, available at Civil Rights Movement Archive, [https://www.crmvet.org/docs/650200\\_sncc\\_africa.pdf](https://www.crmvet.org/docs/650200_sncc_africa.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> Lewis, "Speech at the March on Washington."

<sup>30</sup> Lewis, "Speech at the March on Washington."

<sup>31</sup> Bart Barnes, "Obituary for James O. Eastland," *Washington Post*, February 20, 1986, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1986/02/20/obituary/8f8ccad3-c94c-42e5-aace-fe3017dcdb34/>.

<sup>32</sup> The *New York Times* called Jacob Javits, a US senator from New York, a "liberal Republican." He was a supporter of civil rights legislation while on Capitol Hill during the civil rights movement. See James F. Clarity, "Jacob Javits Dies in Florida at 81: 4-Term Senator from New York," *New York Times*, March 8, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/03/08/obituaries/jacob-javits-dies-in-florida-at-81-4-term-senator-from-new-york.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Bart Barnes, "Barry Goldwater, GOP Hero, Dies," *Washington Post*, May 30, 1998, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/daily/may98/goldwater30.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> Pauley, "John Lewis's 'Serious Revolution,'" 332.

like King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference.<sup>35</sup> In 1966, as SNCC members grappled with the organization's future, Lewis, who had been chairman since 1963, was ousted and replaced by a rising political star, Stokely Carmichael. As I have argued elsewhere, Carmichael's rise in SNCC stemmed from his expanding vision of Black politics, one rooted in the acquisition of economic and political power and transnational solidarity with oppressed people from around the world and especially in the African diaspora.<sup>36</sup> SNCC members respected Lewis's longtime involvement in political struggles and admired his perseverance despite the violent police attacks against him. And yet, the organization yearned for new and bolder leadership, one without direct ties to establishment African American politics.

### **“Good Trouble” and the Future of Democracy**

Shortly before his passing on July 17, 2020, Congressman Lewis penned a farewell epistle to the inheritors of King's dream and the torchbearers of Ella Baker's radical democratic leadership—those children, women, men, trans, and gender-nonconforming activists throughout the nation and world who demanded justice in the wake of ongoing police violence against Black and Brown bodies during a global pandemic. Lewis's *New York Times* op-ed, “Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation,” reminded Black Lives Matter activists and freedom fighters everywhere of his own journey to activism, to a life of pursuing “good trouble”: “Emmitt Till was my George Floyd. He was my Rayshard Brooks, Sandra Bland and Breonna Taylor. He was 14 when he was killed, and I was only 15 years old at the time. I will never ever forget the moment when it became so clear that he could easily have been me. In those days, fear constrained us like an imaginary prison, and troubling thoughts of potential brutality committed for no understandable reason were the bars.”<sup>37</sup>

Like a good preacher, Lewis pulled in his audience by narrating his moral and political journey with anecdotes of his loving and protective familial life during childhood. Those strong familial bonds would not, however, protect him from a society whose economic and political engines were fueled by the blood drawn by the violence of slavery and segregation's ongoing dehumanization of African Americans. Along with many SNCC activists, Lewis's political calling stemmed from his search to find a home and meaning beyond the normalcy of Black pain, suffering, and psychic trauma. With the help of SNCC, King, James Lawson, and others, Lewis discovered through nonviolent resistance the profound meaning of community and deep possibilities of democracy. This is the lifelong work of every citizen and human being. “When you see something that is not right, you must say something. You must do something.”<sup>38</sup> “Democracy is not a state,” Lewis argued, “[i]t is an act.”<sup>39</sup> Democracy is not a state of being or a religion, nor can it be guaranteed by any nation-state or global conglomerate. Democracy is a practice of collective action toward deep prison reform, eradicating economic and social barriers impeding human flourishing and freedom, and building a just society with substantive healthcare and educational needs for all. This is a pathway for developing and defending Lewis's vision of the “Beloved Community.” A life of “good trouble, necessary trouble”<sup>40</sup> demands from everyone the heavy lifting of the poor, disinherited, and dispossessed.

Obama's and Clinton's eulogies for the congressman defined Lewis's life as an example of the triumphant story of American democracy and the unwavering possibilities of equality

<sup>35</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 200.

<sup>36</sup> See Terrence L. Johnson, *We Testify with Our Lives: How Religion Transformed Radical Thought from Black Power to Black Lives Matter* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

<sup>37</sup> John Lewis, “Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation,” *New York Times*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/opinion/john-lewis-civil-rights-america.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Lewis, “Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation.”

<sup>39</sup> Lewis, “Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation.”

<sup>40</sup> Lewis, “Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation.”



and equal protection of the law to eliminate racism and discrimination. Yet it is remarkable that American exceptionalism was glaringly absent from Lewis's parting words. Lewis served seventeen terms in the US House of Representatives encouraging racial reconciliation, promoting human rights, and fighting for ongoing voting rights protection based on his unabashed commitment to nonviolence and the moral obligations of fighting for the least off. But in his farewell letter to the nation and world, he refused to tip his hat to Capitol Hill or bow to narratives of American triumphalism with superlatives of his homeland's democratic aspirations. Instead, Lewis's sendoff was straightforward: "[W]alk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide."<sup>41</sup> Good trouble. Pursue it with all one's might. This is the moral faith that fueled Lewis's lifelong justice and freedom work.

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<sup>41</sup> Lewis, "Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation."

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