



John Lewis: A Life

Tuesday, October 22, 2024

Visit our media library at constitutioncenter.org/medialibrary to see a list of resources mentioned throughout this program, watch the video, and more.

[00:00:04.5] Tanaya Tauber: Welcome to Live at the National Constitution Center, the podcast sharing live constitutional conversations and debates hosted by the Center in-person and online. I'm Tanaya Tauber, the senior Director of Town Hall programs. In this episode, David Greenberg explores his new biography, *John Lewis: A Life*, chronicling the remarkable story of the Civil Rights activist in Congress. He's joined by Harvard Professor Kenneth Mack for a discussion on Lewis' life, his impact on American history, and his heroism that inspired America's new Birth of Freedom during the Civil Rights Movement. Lana Ulrich, Vice President of Content and Senior Council at the National Constitution Center moderates. Here's Lana to get the conversation started.

[00:00:54.2] Lana Ulrich: Thank you for joining us, David Greenberg and Kenneth Mack.

[00:00:57.5] David Greenberg: Thank you.

[00:00:58.8] Kenneth Mack: Thank you. Pleasure to be here.

[00:01:01.7] Lana Ulrich: Before we begin today's discussion, I'd like to start by playing a brief clip of Representative John Lewis' acceptance speech at the National Constitution Center during the 2016 Liberty Medal Ceremony. In this clip, representative Lewis speaks passionately about his lifelong commitment to advancing justice and equality and his dedication to moving America toward a more perfect union.

[00:01:26.0] John Lewis: All I wanted to do is to help out, to do what I could to help make this country and the world community a little bit better, more just, a little more peaceful for all of its citizens. There's so many people who I wish I had lived to see this day, to see the power role that nonviolence and civil disobedience have played in humanizing and changing America and many other parts of our little planet. We were just ordinary people, but we had an extraordinary vision to live in a society that respects the dignity and the worth of every human being. We wanted to build what we call, what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. And others call the beloved community. We truly believed that by refusing to comply with what was wrong, we could get our nation to do what was right.

[00:02:38.5] Lana Ulrich: So as we reflect on what we've just heard, I'd like to open up our conversation by first starting with you, David. So we've just heard John Lewis' powerful words describing his desire and the goal of the Civil Rights Movement through nonviolent resistance to

build what he referred to as the beloved community. And your book is a wonderful retelling of Lewis' rich and important life, but also a telling of the history of the Civil Rights Movement as a whole. And we'd like to soon get into discussing the details of the movement, Lewis' involvement, and what he and others, including Dr. King, meant by the beloved community. But first, could you start us off by telling us about John Lewis' early life? He was born in 1940 in Pike County, Southeast Alabama. His great-great-grandparents had been enslaved. What was it like growing up for him at the time in Alabama? And what was his family life like? And what sparked his early interest in civil rights?

[00:03:33.4] David Greenberg: Well, it's really a fascinating story. And until researching this book, I fully did not appreciate the sort of distance John Lewis traveled in his life. They were really extremely poor, he and his family. They were farmers. Began to sharecroppers, managed to scrape together enough to buy a plot of their own, in which they took great pride. But they had a small house. He called it a shotgun house. You could fire a shotgun through one door and have it go out the back door. Until he went to college, he not only never had his own bedroom, he never had his own bed. He had nine siblings, the boys would share a bed even. There just wasn't that much space. So it was a hard life. He hated farming, picking cotton, and pulling corn.

[00:04:23.8] David Greenberg: He loved school and he loved reading. So some days he would hide under the porch because his parents wanted him not to go to school. They needed him to farm. And when the school bus pulled up, he would dart out from under the porch onto the bus. Some kids skipped school to stay home. He did the opposite. So from an early age, he disliked this hard life. And he also, of course, disliked the Jim Crow regime, the brutal sting of segregation that he had to live under. He'd go into town in Troy, and the White kids and families could sit in the main seating area, and he and his brothers and sisters and other Black kids would have to sit up in the balcony, or he'd go to get an ice cream and then have to eat it outside bird's drugstore, whereas the White people could eat inside. And he knew in his gut this was unfair.

[00:05:18.6] David Greenberg: So in some ways, the activism, nobody needed to inspire it. And yet, as I said, he was a reader, an avid reader, and followed the news. And during the time of Montgomery bus boycott, he's around 15 years old, and he hears Martin Luther King on the radio, and he sees what's happening around the South and he's inspired. And so from an early age, he decides King is going to be his model. He wants to devote his life, at first, he thinks to being a preacher, but as a preacher like Martin Luther King, to bettering the position of Blacks in the American South and indeed to bring equality to America.

[00:06:06.3] Lana Ulrich: Ken, please feel free to add any other details about Lewis' early life. And David just mentioned some of the early inspiration for his desire to fight for civil rights, including hearing about the bus boycotts. So, can you tell us a little bit more about what else was going on in the country at the time, just to give us a bit more context of the historical period into which he was born?

[00:06:30.5] Kenneth Mack: Sure. In the '40s and '50s, when Lewis was growing up, the American South was deeply segregated. But by that, we don't just mean that Blacks and Whites had to go to separate schools, eat at separate lunch counters, but it was a deeply hierarchical society. Black people had to be on the bottom, and particularly rural Black people had to be on

the bottom. And in particular, in the deep South, which is where he grew up, rural Black people had to be on the bottom. So in David's book, he describes going into Troy, which was kind of like the big town for him. He grew up on the farm, where he said he never saw White people when he was little, this is how David expresses it. This was a society where Black people were in their place and there was no way to get out of it. It was hard to imagine how to get out of it. You are just a farmer kind of plowing up your fields every year trying to get enough money to pay back the loans that bought your equipment.

[00:07:44.6] Kenneth Mack: And if you stepped out of line, somebody was likely to kill you. And in fact, that happened to somebody who was associated with Lewis' family. So it was a deeply hierarchical place where it was hard to imagine anything different, where it was a struggle just to get through the day in the year. And Lewis is really kind of unique among the people who wound up being leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King, James Farmer, Andrew Young, Julian Bond, they were all middle class people. Even the people from the South were middle class people. Their parents were ministers and things like that. That was not John Lewis. He was different from almost everybody who wound up in the Civil rights leadership.

[00:08:32.8] Lana Ulrich: So David, he goes off to school to attend the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, which is when he starts to become more involved in some of the activities regarding civil rights and the student movement. But you write about how after he was away at school for about a year, he missed home in Troy and he wanted to attend Troy State. But the problem was that the school was all White, and he decided that he wanted to try and integrate the school. And he met with Ralph Abernathy, who is Martin Luther King Junior's lieutenant, as well as Dr. King himself in Montgomery. And they meet this young man and they're surprised and impressed with his desire and fortitude to try to integrate the school, and they decide they want to support him in bringing a lawsuit to do so. But because he was under 21, he needed his parents' approval. So how did his parents react to his decision and what challenges did they face? Did both they and he face in trying to challenge segregation in this way?

[00:09:28.7] David Greenberg: Yeah, it's a remarkable story. I mean, it's remarkable that John Lewis has the self possession at, I think it was 18, maybe 19, to write to Dr. King and propose this, and then go to Montgomery to meet with King and Abernathy and Fred Gray, the lawyer for the SELC King's Group. Then he goes back to Troy and his father picks him up at the bus station, and he sits down with his parents at the kitchen table, and he lays out what King and Abernathy and Gray told him, which is that they would need to be on board for this kind of a lawsuit. And Lewis was excited to do it, afraid but excited. But as the conversation went on, he could just see they weren't having it. They feared, as Ken said, if you stepped outta line, you could face retaliation. Maybe their credit line at the store for the farm would dry up. They needed to pay off the tractor or the seed or whatever it might be. They might lose work. They might face violence or even be killed.

[00:10:41.3] David Greenberg: And for them, they were good Christians, believers in God, and they felt God was gonna take care of them in this hard life, and it didn't make sense to cause trouble. And of course, later in life, John Lewis would take up that slogan, Good Trouble, which was pushing back on his mother in particular when she would say, don't get into trouble, because

he felt you had to make trouble. But at the time, he was under 21 and he wasn't gonna cross his parents on this one. As fate would have it, he goes back to Nashville that fall, and that's when the whole sit-in movement, the nonviolent movement, really picks up steam. So, there's sort of a nice irony that the failure to take up the Troy State integration plan results in him becoming a leader in this very important, very historically important Nashville movement.

[00:11:40.1] Lana Ulrich: Ken, you've written about the history of the sit-ins and the sit-in movement. So tell us about the movement, not just in Nashville, but also nationwide. Did it start elsewhere? And how did it grow to become a nationwide movement? And what was the legal basis for which those who were participating in the sit-ins were using to assert their legal rights?

[00:12:00.7] Kenneth Mack: Well, I think David makes clear in his book, there were sit-ins elsewhere, and John Lewis and his group in Nashville were planning and conducting sit-ins. There had actually been sit-ins in the 1940's in Washington DC. Howard University students had sat in local restaurants. There had been protests against segregation when it was imposed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There would've been bus boycotts, lots of conflict all the way back. So, Lewis wasn't the first, and his group wasn't the first. And there, there was lots of that kind of energy spurring up all over the country. It was both young people who were impatient, and it was organized groups like the Fellowship on Reconciliation. And so of course we know that it started with the Greensboro sit-ins with the college students who started all off. But Lewis is already sort of part of this group that's conducting, planning, thinking about it. And so they quickly become part of it.

[00:13:14.5] Kenneth Mack: They had no legal basis. I mean, to tell you the truth, there were many southern states that had laws mandating various kinds of segregation. And even if there weren't laws mandating that a particular facility be segregated, the basic rule of law that had been in place since the early 20th century was that if you were a business owner, you had an absolute right to exclude anybody from your business for any reason. So you could have a restaurant that was open to everybody and you could exclude Black people, and that was legal. And there had been a Civil Rights Act that had been passed during reconstruction, that actually did promise integrated public accommodations by the US Supreme Court, which was historically hostile to civil rights litigation, found it unconstitutional.

[00:14:15.0] Kenneth Mack: So the sit-in protests had very little basis for what they were doing. The one little thing that they had was that there were a series of rulings saying that in interstate transportation, those particular facilities could not be legally segregated. So that ultimately produces the Freedom Rides, the bus rides that provoked such violence through the South. But other than that, there was basically no basis for what Lewis and his colleagues bravely started to do.

[00:14:50.9] Lana Ulrich: That's really interesting, that the sit-ins themselves at the lunch counters, Woolworths and things like that, perhaps there was no clear ruling that they could look to to assert their rights, or at least the ability to not have to, or at least the ability to be served in such locations. As they mentioned, people would be out shopping. There was nowhere for them to go, nowhere for them to eat. And so, they were really fighting for the rights of all the citizens in Nashville. But as you mentioned, there was the legal basis, the rulings about interstate travel,

which David, you talk about in your book. 1946, *Morgan v. Virginia*, where the Supreme Court ruled that separate seating on interstate buses was unconstitutional.

[00:15:32.9] Lana Ulrich: And then in 1960, which was a Supreme Court decision in *Boynton v. Virginia*, which ruled that under the Interstate Commerce Act, which prohibited racial discrimination during travel, bus terminals had to desegregate. And the students, in the student movement then turned to, as Ken said, focusing on protesting discrimination interstate travel, which led to the Freedom Rides, which you also go into great detail in your book. So, yeah, David, feel free to add to anything about the sit-in movement, and then also tell us about Lewis' experience in joining the Freedom Rides and the dangers that those riders faced along the way.

[00:16:09.5] David Greenberg: Right. Well, I'll just say first, Ken's point about the lack of a legal basis was precisely why they turned to the teachings of civil disobedience. And in Nashville, there was a minister, still a divinity student at the time, named James Lawson, who sort of became the lead figure, although there were many others. Kelly Miller Smith, who ran the First Baptist Church, Andrew White, a whole group of ministers kind of had that kingian persuasion. They had a group that was really a chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference Kings Group that was called the Nashville Christian Leadership Council. So it was both students with their organic energy, but also this organized group. And when the Greensboro students do their sit-in, their kind minister who's involved with them, a guy named Doug Moore calls up James Lawson and says, we need your help.

[00:17:13.0] David Greenberg: And Lawson, of course, felt a little chagrined that they hadn't done their sit-ins earlier 'cause they'd actually been planning them for months. But it was because there was no legal basis that civil disobedience became the practice. And it was, yes, you do break the law and you do go to jail, and you don't get resentful about that. They sang freedom songs. They sang "We Shall Overcome" as they're going off to jail, because that's the plan working. It's showing the unjustness of the current legal system and hoping that it will mobilize all kinds of people to bring pressure to change the system. And then just quickly on the Freedom Rides, again, you see both the students and these existing civil rights organizations working in concert.

[00:18:04.6] David Greenberg: Initially, well, there had been an earlier Freedom Ride called The Journey of Reconciliation in the 1940s, but it didn't really get anywhere. There's no guarantee that these movements are gonna succeed. And after the *Boynton* decision, James Farmer who runs CORE, and he's part, it's linked With FOR, the Fellowship on Reconciliation decides they're going to do another Freedom Rides, this time to test this newer ruling and force places to uphold it. It starts off with an integrated group of all kinds of people, different ages. John Lewis is one of them. His friends drive him to the bus station. He goes to DC and sort of travels through the Upper South. But he leaves the trip for a couple of days to interview for a fellowship, 'cause he's about to graduate from American Baptist.

[00:19:02.5] David Greenberg: And while he's away from the trip, there's just a horrific bombing of one of the buses in Anniston, Alabama, and then more violence when a second bus reaches Birmingham, I believe it is. By this time, John Lewis is back in Nashville with his student friends and they're hearing the horrific reports on the radio. And they decide, we have to

go in and pick up because CORE and FORMA were going to say, okay, that's enough. This is just too brutal. People are going to get killed. And it was these young students, 19, 20, 21, who decided we're going to go forward with it. They basically force FORMA's hand, King and others to say, okay, the Freedom Rides will go forward, violence be damned. And eventually, this brings about Robert F. Kennedy, the attorney general and the ICC agreeing to serve new rulings and new enforcement so that indeed you will have to treat Whites and Blacks equally in interstate travel, bus terminals, the dinettes that are there and so forth. So it winds up being a major victory and also just galvanizing national attention to the cause of desegregation.

[00:20:28.1] Lana Ulrich: Yeah, I'm so glad you brought up the role of nonviolence in the movement and the commitment to what Gandhi called Satyagraha, which is truth resistance. And as you mentioned, they had workshops essentially to learn about how to practice nonviolence, which was very, very difficult in light of the extreme violence that they faced and not fight back. And throughout the book, it's clear, Lewis in particular was very committed to nonviolence. And there was, eventually over time, there were some debates and discussions about whether or not the movement could still commit to that given, again, all this violence that was being committed. Lewis himself was beaten several times, imprisoned numerous times and still had that commitment, which was very difficult.

[00:21:11.8] Lana Ulrich: But as you also noted, these images of these nonviolent protesters that got them broadcast out to the country also helped to mobilize support for their movement and I think to galvanize the other students to come and join and participate as well. And I think that that's also the case with Bloody Sunday in Selma. And so, Ken, anything else to add just about the Freedom Rides and then also the story of what happened in Selma as well, which was, again, local government, which was, I think it may be distinct from other previous incidents where perhaps it was random citizens or things like that. In this case, it was more local officials. And then how did the federal government try to fight back and support the protesters and what challenges did they face as well when it came to combating this kind of violence?

[00:22:07.0] Kenneth Mack: Well, just picking up on what David said, this was very much, it was civil disobedience. It was disobeying unjust laws. There were some legal basis for some of the things they did, like the Freedom Rides. But Selma really does sort of crystallize it because, as you said, it's not as if police officers were always involved in the violence, even the violence that purports to be by KKK mobs was coordinated with local police, facilitated with local police. But in Selma, it is the local police who are beating the civil rights protesters, which is different. And that's the image that gets broadcast around the country. So it really is unjust laws and unjust legal system, unjust power, all of that stuff.

[00:23:00.0] Kenneth Mack: And then there's this question of discipline. I mean, one of the things that David's book makes clear is that Lewis is an ultra disciplined person. There weren't a lot of student protests then. This is actually the origin of our modern student protest movements that are so familiar today. But there weren't really a lot of student protests then. It's just beginning. These people are starting it. And how do you remain disciplined? How do you keep somebody from breaking off and engaging in violence? Well, what do you do if the police arrest you? Do you pay the fine and do you get out of jail or do you just serve your sentence? And in Nashville, they decide to serve their sentences. There are all these things that are kind of

pioneering that are so familiar today, but they are kind of inventing it, trying to figure out how we do this and how do we remain disciplined and what's going to happen to us and violence might happen to us.

[00:23:56.2] Kenneth Mack: So that's kind of what this moment is about. And there are a bunch of legal angles to it. The Kennedy administration as an administration wasn't as sympathetic to the Civil Rights Movement as it might have been. But the one locus of sympathy is the Department of Justice. Sorry, not that one. The greatest locus of sympathy is the Department of Justice and run by Robert Kennedy. And they're kind of trying to figure out ways to protect the civil rights marchers. Sometimes they send in federal marshals. But the problem is law enforcement protection of the public is a local function. The police are supposed to do it. And the Civil Rights Movement and civil rights laws have all been about trying to empower the federal government to step in when the police aren't going to protect you, when the police are basically saying they're not going to protect you, and when the police are beating you up.

[00:25:02.0] Kenneth Mack: And so it's a kind of complicated dance for Robert Kennedy and the Justice Department to figure out when we can send the marshals? What can we do to try to protect these folks in the South? Because the whole basis of the legal system is that the local and state authorities are supposed to protect them. But it's the local and state authorities who are going to oppress them, often violently.

[00:25:28.2] Lana Ulrich: Right. And I think that, yeah, there's a lot of discussion, David, in your book about, yeah, that tension decision of to what extent do we send federal troops in, again and again, honestly, based on all of the different incidents that pop up in the deep South. And that relates to a question from one of our audience members, Bonnie Zedick, who asked, to what extent was the 14th Amendment used by John Lewis and others to move their demands forward? I think maybe both from a legal sense of individuals asserting their rights, but also, I guess, there was the calculation of the federal government, to what extent could the government bring its own power to bear in these local or historically local actions?

[00:26:11.4] David Greenberg: Maybe I'll let Ken take up the 14th Amendment question. But I'll just say, even though John Lewis and others in the student movement and the Civil Rights Movement were very at odds with, often angry with the Kennedy administration for not doing more, for not acting faster, they also ultimately came to see they had a friend even if it was a sometimes hesitant friend on these issues. And they were constantly looking to get the federal government to act. When there were travesties of justice, incidents of violence, you see in the SNCC papers, these telegrams that they're writing to John Doar and Brooke Marshall and the other people in RFK's Justice Department spelling it all out. They sort of started to get the ear of the Justice Department. It didn't mean that Kennedy always did everything they wanted.

[00:27:19.0] David Greenberg: But it was a real difficulty because then if you think the law is maybe going to be on your side, you can get hesitant. So King, I won't go into the whole controversy at Selma, but on that first attempt to do the Selma march to Montgomery, to march all the way to the State Capitol in protest for voting rights, King was expected to lead it. But there was an injunction and he didn't want to defy the injunction. And there's actually, so after Bloody Sunday, there's a second attempt, and King goes to the bridge and then on orders, turns

around. And a lot of the people in SNCC are very bitter. They call it Turnaround Tuesday. And they sing, ironically, "Ain't Nobody Gonna Turn Me Around" as they march back to Brown Chapel.

[00:28:14.7] David Greenberg: Ultimately, the march does come off a couple of weeks later. But King is sort of in this different position because he really wants to be respected, there's a judge in Alabama, Frank Johnson, who has tended to do very favorable rulings for the movement. But so he thinks we better stick to the rules on this one. And so there are some times where SNCC wants to go forward and King wants to hold back. And other times when King or Lewis is ready to go forward and SNCC is not wanting part of it. It's a lot of different judgments. And as Ken put it, kind of this dance about when you try to invoke the feds and when you don't.

[00:28:57.8] Lana Ulrich: Yeah, I think that gets to something that you mentioned early on in the book, David, where Thurgood Marshall comes to speak on campus. And they're very supportive of the student movement. But I think there was maybe a sense from whether it's the civil rights lawyers or other leaders in the movement that perhaps maybe the students should maybe exercise a little more patience or hold off. And so, Ken, what was the maybe tension or complementarity of both the legal movement of bringing the cases before the courts, *Brown v. Board*, asserting rights under the 14th Amendment, and then the student activism that was also simultaneously going on with the support of the lawyers, but also perhaps maybe intention at certain times?

[00:29:40.1] Kenneth Mack: Yeah, the student activists, they need the lawyers because they're going to get put in jail. And that's the kind of brutal fact of it. And Thurgood Marshall is a complicated figure because as a young man, he was a bit more radical than he was by the time the '60s rolled around. So he's very connected to the local protest groups when he's bringing his first civil rights desegregation cases in the 1930s. But by the '50s, he's sort of an institution. He sort of things, okay, I've got it. He was famously jealous of Martin Luther King when, after the Montgomery bus boycott, King comes in to LACP annual meeting and Marshall calls him, I'm going to get the quote a little wrong, I think he calls him a boy trying to do a man's job because he thinks these ministers, like they don't really know anything. Like it's us who have been kind of leading this thing for 20 years.

[00:30:42.9] Kenneth Mack: So I think that there definitely was a lot of tension on Thurgood Marshall's side when the younger, even younger than King, student protesters started up in the early 1960s. These people are, they feel kind of irresponsible. They're going into somebody's business and they're not leaving. There's a lot of precedent for that. As I said, like people have done that all the way back to the 1940s and before. But also, in his heart of hearts, Marshall is sympathetic to the protesters, and the protesters, he's 20 years older than them and they kind of think he's a little bit of an old funny daddy. So each side has to come over time to think to understand that they need one another and that they complement one another, and that you need the litigation. You need the people who can go talk to the President of the United States, who can file lawsuits, etcetera, etcetera. And you need the people who are going to shake things up on the ground and do stuff that the elders aren't always comfortable with. And that's a kind of tension, a creative tension that plays out in the movement between people like Thurgood Marshall and the local protesters like John Lewis.

[00:32:01.1] David Greenberg: And if I can just add, sometimes in the literature of the Civil Rights Movement, it gets a bit simplified into this kind of sharp break that there's two camps of either strategy of lawsuits and you win your Brown decisions, your Boynton decisions, and you sort of march toward your goals that way. Or it's what they call direct action, things like the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides, where it's the people on the ground directly challenging these laws. In truth, there was just a great deal of interplay and interconnection. As Ken said, the students who get arrested need lawyers. King had Fred Gray and Clarence Jones and other lawyers who were very important to his decision making.

[00:32:50.1] David Greenberg: And Thurgood Marshall, at one point came to Nashville in 1960 after some of the great successes. Nashville is one of the sit-in movements that achieved some early success. And he actually gives it his blessing. I mean, how could he not? They've achieved big success. But he understood. He was not hostile to these students. He might sometimes object to some of their decisions. Also, I should say, the NAA, in other ways Kelly Miller Smith, the leader of the national movement, was the leader of the local NAACP chapter. The NAACP had done sit-ins in Oklahoma in, I think, '58 it was. So these binaries sometimes aren't always as strict as a kind of simplified version of civil rights history may make them out to be.

[00:33:50.6] Lana Ulrich: Right. And David, too, in your book tracing Lewis's life, eventually he becomes part of the leadership. He becomes part of the big six himself as he goes through all his experiences. He matures over time. He's at the White House before and after the march on Washington. And over time, as he becomes more experienced, he's challenged to think about more broader, you could say, political considerations. They edit a speech during the march, which he's not happy with, but accepts. And then eventually he's navigating the internal divides that occur with SNCC. So he transforms from the student leader to this national leader, which eventually leads him into politics, for example, working to help elect Senator Bobby Kennedy. So, yeah, I guess say a little bit more about that evolution from the student work to the work on the more national scale and then getting into politics.

[00:34:47.6] David Greenberg: Yeah, and in fact, in the biography, I break it down into what I call two parts or two books. Part one is protest. Part two is politics. And that comes from a famous article written by Bayard Rustin, who is a very important figure in the movement, a mentor to John Lewis. I think more than people realize, more than I realized before doing this research, Lewis really looked to him. And Rustin writes an article, I think it's 1965, called From Protest to Politics, where he says after the success of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which makes lunch counter desegregation, among many other things, illegal. I don't think they quite passed the Voting Rights Act yet, but it was coming.

[00:35:34.6] David Greenberg: So where do movement activists, where do African-Americans turn their energies? He proposed politics could be kind of the continuation of the movement. Some people didn't like that. They wanted to remain on the outside, pushing against the system. But Lewis and others in SNCC take up politics. As you say, he goes to work for Bobby Kennedy's 1968 presidential campaign. That, of course, ends in tragedy with Kennedy's assassination. And of course, this is just two months after Martin Luther King's assassination.

And John Lewis is at a really low point in his life. He's actually in the hospital for what seems to have been depression.

[00:36:24.0] David Greenberg: He's just started dating a woman named Lillian Miles, and she's visiting him in the hospital every day, bringing him his mail, bringing him the newspaper. And just in a very matter of fact, unromantic way, he proposes to her. He's 28, which in those days was pretty old for a guy to have his first serious romantic relationship. And a lot of his friends from the movement were married. Some were already married and divorced. And Lillian, one of Lewis's friends, a congressman named Buddy Darden, a White congressman from the neighboring district, said, you have to understand Lillian coming in, she was responsible in large part, obviously, Lewis had his own ambitions, but for fueling his ambitions, for encouraging his political career, for helping define this path, this whole amazing second act of his life.

[00:37:23.4] David Greenberg: Many of the people from the movement, I mean, many of them went on to do very distinguished and impressive things. But not too many became national figures and icons the way Lewis did. And he did it through politics. And it was a real pivot trying to figure out where to go after these successes that the movement had achieved.

[00:37:48.3] Lana Ulrich: Right. And I think beyond or, I guess, in complementing his work in politics was his work on voter registration and the Voter Education Project. And so, Ken, in the '70s, Lewis ran the Voter Education Project, and for a while, they were struggling to make gains. Black voters in the South remained unregistered. There was still a lot of fear and intimidation. But by the later '70s, his work began to reshape the electorate. So tell us a bit about his work in voter education and the importance of that even after the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

[00:38:29.4] Kenneth Mack: Yeah, as David's book really makes clear for many people who didn't really realize this, that Lewis is engaged in this very important work in the 1970s for the Voter Education Project, trying to get people registered to vote in the South, trying to get people to come out to vote in the South, trying to educate people about voting in the South. Our conventional narrative is that there's a Selma to Montgomery march. Lyndon Johnson says, we shall overcome. The Voting Rights Act gets passed and people can vote. But it's not that simple. For centuries, Black people have been on the bottom, particularly in rural parts of the South. Are people really gonna come out to vote when they've been intimidated all their lives?

[00:39:18.5] Kenneth Mack: There's all these kinds of indirect barriers to voting. It wasn't just people sort of, registrars administering literacy tests, but they're people who are being intimidated about voting in various subtle ways, even after the passage of the Voting Rights Act. And so the Voting Rights Act itself was important, and its reauthorizations were important to try to sort of stem some of the ways in which voting was suppressed. But also you had to just go out and do the groundwork. This is not political work. This is just basic civic education. Get people out, understanding their rights, understanding that they can go and vote, and trying to work against the subtle ways in which they are discouraged from voting.

[00:40:10.7] Kenneth Mack: And that was the work that Lewis threw himself into in the 1970s. And I mean, you can't imagine, there were very few Black members of Congress in the 1970s.

And then in the 1980s and the early 1990s, in part because of the Voting Rights Act, the number of Black members of Congress began to increase markedly. And Lewis becomes one of these people. There were very few local Black elected officials throughout the South. So it's a lot of hard work to get communities out and do that kind of stuff to produce that kind of result, and that's the work that Lewis did. So you couldn't imagine lots of things that come from Black voting that we now sort of take for granted without the hard work that Lewis and others did in the '70s.

[00:41:10.8] Lana Ulrich: Yeah, David, feel free to add more about Representative Lewis's work with voter education, getting the vote out. And then as Ken said, going from focusing on getting the vote out to then running for office himself. What led him to making that change and to wanting to run for office?

[00:41:29.5] David Greenberg: Yeah, as well, I mean, he does spend those years seeing other people get elected, his friends, Julian Bond is sort of one of the first who's elected to the state assembly, later state senate in Georgia. And Bond is one of his best friends from SNCC days. Andy Young, who's top aide to Martin Luther King, becomes the first Black congressman from Atlanta. So these are people around John Lewis who are going into politics. And, I mean, I think people know his personality. He was always kind of till the end, a very self-effacing, humble man who at first was sort of reluctant to put himself forward. He just thought of himself as this boy from the farm. I mean, one of his staff members told me a story of when he met the Queen of England. He came back to the office like, can you believe I met the Queen of England, as if he was still just a kid on the farm.

[00:42:32.9] David Greenberg: So he had to sort of develop confidence, but he realized, yeah, I think this is for me. When Andy Young went into the Jimmy Carter administration, and Lewis took great pride in the election of Jimmy Carter, I should add, because if you look at that 1976 electoral college map, where Carter, a Democrat, wins, very different from how Democrats win today. Carter won most of the South, and on the strength of Black votes, which were people that with Lewis' help and the help of the voter education process had come to pass. So he felt this was a great triumph for Black people, Black southerners in particular.

[00:43:12.1] David Greenberg: So anyway, Andy Young goes into the administration, there's an open congressional seat, and Lewis decides to run. He doesn't win but finishes a creditable second. He then goes to work for Carter in the administration, moves to Washington for a few years, but this really plants the bug. And he comes back, he runs for city council, serves a couple of terms on city council, and then has his big race in 1986 against his best friend Julian Bond. I won't give the whole story here, but it's a chapter unto itself in the biography. It's incredibly dramatic, kind of a David versus Goliaths, tortoise versus hare. Lewis kind of comes from behind for this upset victory, and then serves 34 years in Congress. But anyway, it's something that he has to learn, that he has to convince himself he's ready for. But once he does, he actually becomes a very good politician.

[00:44:15.1] Lana Ulrich: Right. Yeah, you describe the difficulties in running against Bond, who was also a civil rights leader in the movement, and the effect it had both on their friendship and also on their supporters and the difficulty he faced in making that decision and running that

race. But ultimately, he did win. I think they did a post-interview where it seemed like they reconciled to some extent.

[00:44:42.0] David Greenberg: Yeah, there was some reconciliation and they would do events together and be friendly, but there was always, I think, an underlying bitterness on Bond's part, and I think perhaps more on the part of his second wife, John Lewis was not invited to the funeral. And so ultimately there's a tragedy to that story. A sadness to it as well.

[00:45:14.5] Lana Ulrich: Well, Ken, as you mentioned, Lewis was part of this vanguard of more and more African Americans being elected to Congress. So I guess just say a little bit more about the transformation from, or at least the shift from focusing again on voters, getting the vote out to perhaps running for Congress, and then maybe others around that same time that were making similar gains as Representative Lewis in trying to represent their constituents in Congress.

[00:45:41.7] Kenneth Mack: Yeah. So there was this kind of what we call the long aftermath of the Voting Rights Act, right? That a lot of things that flow from it, and a lot, some of those things take decades. There was this wave of Black mayors in the '60s and '70s. But how do you get people elected to Congress, which are, the districts are much more complicated. In the South to this day, there's racial bloc voting, right? So how do you get Black people elected when most White people around them simply will not vote for them?

[00:46:22.8] Kenneth Mack: And so it took decades. And so there's a first kind of wave of Black members of Congress in the '60s and '70s. There's a kind of trickle, there's places like Atlanta and Chicago where you can get people elected. That's where Andy Young and John Lewis come in. But there are all these rural districts throughout the South where John Lewis did organize as a young man, where his organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, for instance, goes into Lowndes County, Alabama in the middle of the 1960s where you can get killed for organizing people to vote. And they organize, this actually wasn't really consistent with Lewis's philosophy, but they organized an all Black political party as a counterpoint to the Democratic Party. So it takes decades.

[00:47:12.5] Kenneth Mack: So the big shift is in 1992 which, because of the Voting Rights Act, and because drawing districts where Black people, or a plurality at least of the voters, that you get this new crop of Black voters, many of whom represent rural southern districts, which had never sent any Black people to Congress before. And Lewis was part of that, first as an organizer in the 1960s, and then second as a member of the Voter Education Project in the 1970s, and then in the 1980s as a member of Congress, and also having to vote and work on the success of Reauthorizations of the Voting Rights Act. So he's kind of in it from the beginning all the way through all the changes that today are so familiar to us, but had to be worked on over the course of decades. He's there at every stage.

[00:48:20.2] Lana Ulrich: Right. And David, you talk about Lewis, some of the issues he faced once he got into office, several big challenges, including the nomination of Clarence Thomas of the Supreme Court, the new Civil Rights bill. So tell us a little bit about his early congressional

career. What was he working on? What was he facing? What are some of the early decisions that he made and choices he had to make in terms of what to support and what to decide?

[00:48:46.7] David Greenberg: Yeah. Well, he plays it pretty smart. Like a lot of new congressmen, he sort of figures out, one of his first tasks is bringing home the bacon to his district. He gets put on a couple committees that are maybe seen as lesser committees. One is, I think interior and one is transportation. They have longer names than that. But he uses his spot on the transportation committee to help Atlanta, which has a major airport and is doing a lot of highway construction as the city is booming economically. On the interior, he kind of brings money to, for example, make the Sweet Auburn District of Dr. King's childhood home and other Black neighborhood into a historic neighborhood that can get federal funds that way. So he is thinking very creatively about how to help.

[00:49:45.8] David Greenberg: But he also, not surprisingly, becomes an outspoken leader on civil rights issues. People remember George Bush Sr. Very fondly these days. They forget that he was the first president to veto a Civil Rights Act since I believe Andrew Johnson. There was the Civil Rights Act, first it was 1990 that he vetoed, and then it came in in '91. And Speaker of the House, Tom Foley, a Democrat, brings John Lewis into the house leadership. He's only been in Congress a few years, but he's made a Deputy Chief Whip. And Foley does this in part because he wants John Lewis to be in those White House meetings with George HW Bush. And at one of them, Lewis sort of bringing his moral fervor to the table tells Bush you can't keep demagoguing the Civil rights Bill. Bush was calling it a quota bill, even though the Democrats had put in language explicitly saying this cannot be construed to support strict racial quotas.

[00:50:54.7] David Greenberg: And he kind of read Bush the Riot Act. And not for that reason alone, but from increasing pressure over the next few months, Bush ends up signing that 1991 bill. It was a real face. And so people in Congress, Foley, the Democrats, but also John Lewis, come to see that his moral authority can be a real weapon and a tool to achieve some important legislative changes. And that if he uses it strategically, he can actually turn his reputation into something that has real political efficacy.

[00:51:36.7] Lana Ulrich: Right. And throughout his congressional career, he really continues his civil rights legacy, returning to Selma every year to do a march. And he's also at the forefront of the fight to establish a national museum of African American history on the National Mall, which is eventually built largely due to John Lewis' work and his efforts to get that done.

[00:51:57.2] David Greenberg: Yeah, I mean, that story, if I may say for just a minute, is quite a dramatic one. It was first promoted by a congressman named Mickey Leland, who died in a plane crash. And this is right around the time Lewis is new in Congress. He takes up the bill to create an African-American History Museum. Year in, year out, some years it goes nowhere. Some years it's almost passed, but it's blocked by Jesse Helms, the racist North Carolina senator. And then finally, in the early 2000s, a very conservative religious Kansas senator named Sam Brownback comes kind of on his own to believe there's a need for such a museum. His staff discovers that Lewis has been doing this bill, and together over many years, they worked together in a bipartisan fashion. Dick Cheney makes a cameo appearance, giving surprise support to it, 'cause he's like on the board of the Smithsonian. And sure enough, the museum is realized.

John Lewis is there at the opening in 2016. It really is one of his great triumphs. Without him, that great museum would not have been built.

[00:53:16.5] Lana Ulrich: Yeah, it's a wonderful museum. And I think that the bipartisan-ness of the story behind it as well is great. And I just think just, again, goes to show and to indicate his moral authority, I think, in Congress to get something like that done. So Ken, you had a tour of Congress, or you met with Representative Lewis in Congress and just wanted to see if you wanted to share anything about your meeting with him and your experience getting to know him and experiencing seeing him in Congress itself.

[00:53:54.3] Kenneth Mack: Yeah, I had the privilege of meeting him a few times. I'd done some research on his family history for a television documentary some years ago. And then my family, my wife and kids and I, we met him at the White House at an event once. And then one time, we were coming to Washington, DC, and we wanted to go see him. And I'm not like a big shot or anything like that. He doesn't really have to kind of cater to me. And I am not one of his constituents. Like you're a member of Congress, you cater to your constituents. But we made an appointment, we showed up. John Lewis was exactly the same in person as the public image. I mean, a lot of people aren't really like that, but he really is like that. Very self-effacing, very normal guy. Just kind of deep, he has a deep human feeling for other people.

[00:55:03.8] Kenneth Mack: And so we came, we met with him. He showed my kids around Congress. He took them onto the House floor. He showed them how House members vote, and like, I guess you put a little card in the machine. The machines weren't on, but he asked my kids to go put the card in the machine. He takes us to the House members dining room. And I guess there wasn't a lot going on that afternoon. I'm sure if there was some legislation being debated, etcetera, etcetera, he would've to do his job. But he had a couple of free hours. And it's not like we asked for free hours. We just asked to come see him. But we wound up spending about two hours with him. Again, it's not like I'm somebody. I'm just like somebody who wanted to see him, and I've got an interest in civil rights history. My kids admired him. And so he was very humble and spent a couple of hours with us.

[00:55:56.2] David Greenberg: And if I can just add quickly, I heard many stories like this about him from friends and constituents. He loved doing this. And sometimes there would be stuff going on and the staff would say we have Georgia Pacific executives here in the office. Where's Mr. Lewis? And they would listen to the voices of school kids echoing off the marble, because if there was a school group wandering around, John Lewis would be there giving them a little lesson in civil rights history, taking them up the steps to the rotunda, whatever it might be. He just loved talking to students, children, especially about the movement, about their history, about Congress and American Civics. It brought him a great deal of pleasure, and it was part of how we saw his job too.

[00:56:54.5] Lana Ulrich: Oh, yeah. That's a wonderful and wonderful story, Ken. Thank you for sharing that, and so glad you gotta have that experience with him. So we're running out of time and I just want to ask one final question just to close out this program, which has been so great. I've learned so much. And so David, I'll start with you, kind of a two part question actually, because we have an audience question that I think is good. First, Steve Goldberg asks,

David, if you could have an hour with John Lewis now after you've written the book, what questions would you ask him? And then also, if you could just provide some closing thoughts on how you might describe what John Lewis's legacy for America might be.

[00:57:32.8] David Greenberg: Right. Well, both are big questions, and as much research as I did and as many people I talked to, there's still a lot I didn't quite figure out, didn't get to know. He remains, in some ways, to me, he was a very introverted and in some ways private person. And I would love to know more about his other relationships besides Lillian who was his wife from '68 to 2012, 30, 40 some years. And get to know a bit better more about his family. Some of that is in the book, his relationship with his parents and his siblings. But I think there's more to learn.

[00:58:28.0] David Greenberg: As for the legacy, look, I think there are many legacies about the importance of his resolve and determination in the face of adversity. That's something that I think has stayed with us. I think this theme of the book from protest to politics is also important. We need protests, we need people on the outside who are unhappy with the system and willing to push it to change. But we also need people who are within the system, who are dedicated and have high ideals, who want to make change within and figure out how they can do it even in times of adversity.

[00:59:18.8] Lana Ulrich: Ken, I'll give you the last word. And same question to you, how would you describe John Lewis's legacy?

[00:59:25.7] Kenneth Mack: Well, I would say that I like the clip with which you opened our session, right? It was like, everyone is a human being and they're entitled to dignity. But you can't say it. It takes a lot of work. And that work always has to be renewed. He was a fighter for civil rights his whole life through a number of different venues. But his whole life, and his whole life he thought that you win some things and sometimes you go backwards, that that fight has to be renewed. So when you think of all of those people who were in the Civil Rights Movement, who became a national figure? Almost none of them. I mean, some of them for tragic reasons, assassinations and things like that. But he was the one who carried it through, was a national figure to the end and always understood that voting rights were precarious and constantly had to be reasserted. Civil rights were precarious and constantly had to be reasserted. And I think that's his legacy to us, to carry on that struggle.

[01:00:48.7] Lana Ulrich: Thank you so much, David Greenberg and Kenneth Mack for joining me for this discussion today on the remarkable life and legacy of John Lewis.

[01:00:57.6] Kenneth Mack: Thank you. Pleasure to be here.

[01:01:00.3] David Greenberg: Likewise.

[01:01:05.9] Tanaya Tauber: This episode was produced by Lana Ulrich, Bill Pollock, and me Tanaya Tauber. It was engineered by Greg Sheckler and Bill Pollock. Research was provided by Samson Mostashari, Cooper Smith, Gyuha Lee, Matthew Spero, and Yara Daraiseh. Check out our full lineup of exciting programs this fall at constitutioncenter.org/town-hall. There you can

register to join us in person or online. As always, we'll publish these programs on the podcast, so stay tuned here as well, or watch the videos. They're available in our media library at constitutioncenter.org/medialibrary. Please rate, review, and subscribe to Live at the National Constitution Center on Apple Podcasts, or follow us on Spotify. On behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Tanaya Tauber.