

John Lewis

John Robert Lewis (1940–2020) was an American politician and a member of the US House of Representatives. A civil rights activist during the 1950s and 1960s, Lewis was first elected to Congress in 1987 and represented Georgia's fifth congressional district. Prior to his career in government, Lewis was a well-known member of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and took part in the famous Freedom Rides of 1961.

Background, Early Life, and Education

Lewis was born into a working-class African American family in Troy, Alabama, on February 21, 1940. During his childhood, Lewis worked with his family, who were sharecroppers. Sharecropping is a farming system in which a property owner allows workers to grow crops on his or her land in exchange for a percentage of the profits earned on the crops. It was a difficult way to earn a living, but Lewis was determined to work hard and get an education.

Lewis went on to attend the American Baptist Theological Seminary, a religious school in Nashville, Tennessee. He then earned a degree in philosophy and religion from Fisk University. During his time as a student, Lewis became active in the civil rights movement, which was seeking to create fair laws and equal opportunities for African Americans.

Involvement with the Civil Rights Movement

During the 1950s and 1960s, segregation laws were used in the American South. Segregation was a system in which white people and African Americans were kept separate in public spaces. Each race had its own schools, parks, hotels, restaurants, and so on. Whites and African Americans had their own seating sections on interstate buses and were not allowed to use the same waiting rooms or sit at the same lunch counters in bus stations. This is what Lewis helped challenge when he became a Freedom Rider in 1961.

Lewis was part of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), one of the organizations taking part in the Freedom Rides. The Freedom Rides began in 1961, and were meant to test the US Supreme Court's decision that segregation was not allowed on interstate buses. In May 1961 several groups of African American and white people took interstate bus trips through the Southern states. During the trips, the members of both races would mix with one another in places where they were supposed to remain separate.

Some of the Freedom Riders, including Lewis, received death threats and were beaten for their actions. Despite the opposition, Lewis continued to fight for African American civil rights throughout the 1960s. He became the SNCC chairman in 1963 and held the post until 1966. In 1963 Lewis also helped organize the Great March on Washington, a political rally that was one of the most famous events of the civil rights movement. He took part in the march in Washington, DC, and was present when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968) made his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. In 1965 Lewis led protesters in a march across the Pettus Bridge in his home state of Alabama. This march ended in violence when Alabama State Troopers attacked the peaceful protesters.

Lewis was arrested more than forty times for his activities during the 1950s and 1960s and was threatened and attacked on multiple occasions. He played a major role in the ultimate success of the civil rights movement. He is widely thought of as a hero. Lewis received more than fifty honorary degrees from universities across the United States, including five from Ivy League schools. In 1977 President Jimmy

Carter (1924-) chose Lewis to lead ACTION, an umbrella volunteer organization made up of more than 250,000 members.

Career in Politics

Lewis began his career as a politician in 1981, when he was elected to the city council in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1986 he successfully ran for Congress in Georgia's fifth congressional district, which has a large population of African American voters. Lewis, a Democrat, was re-elected to Congress by the district's voters repeatedly and often won by a wide margin.

In Congress, Lewis supported health care reform and improvements in education and worked to fight poverty. He was a champion of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and led the fight to renew it multiple times. The legislation outlawed poll taxes, literacy tests, and other impediments designed to prevent minorities from voting. In 2013 the US Supreme Court struck down part of the law, much to Lewis's dismay. In 2021 House Democrats led the push to advance the John Lewis Voting Rights Act to protect the right to vote. While all House Democrats supported the legislation, all Republicans voted against it.

Lewis supported legislation to address gun violence. After a mass shooting in Orlando, Florida, in June 2016 he led about forty House Democrats in a sit-in calling on Congress to pass common-sense gun control legislation.

In addition to his work in the US House of Representatives, Lewis is the coauthor of *MARCH*, a series of graphic novels about the civil rights movement that became best sellers in the United States. *MARCH: Book Three* was the first graphic novel to win the National Book Award. In accepting the award he recalled going to the public library when he was sixteen years old to get a library card and being turned away because the library was for white people only. Lewis also won many awards for his work and service. He received the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award for lifetime achievement. President Barack Obama (1961-) awarded Lewis the Medal of Freedom in February 2011. Lewis announced in December 2019 that he had pancreatic cancer. He died on July 17, 2020. A documentary about his life, *John Lewis: Good Trouble*, was released a month before his death.