EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewer’s Briefing Materials
John Lewis Interview, 12/04/2006

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Miller Center Documents¹

- John Lewis Timeline.

Secondary Source Materials


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1961

John Lewis is one of the original thirteen ‘Freedom Riders,’ a group of white and black civil rights activists who ride buses from Washington, D.C. into the South with the purpose of racially integrating bus seating to force the federal government to enforce a 1960 Supreme Court ruling on bus desegregation. It is largely these freedom rides that incite riots in Alabama that vastly increase federal attention to the civil rights battle. Though initially reluctant to play any part in the Freedom Rides, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy (RFK) eventually dispatches aide and friend John Seigenthaler to Alabama to provide protection for the Riders. When a Greyhound bus carrying Lewis and other Freedom Riders enters Montgomery, Alabama on May 20th, an angry white mob brutally attacks them. Seigenthaler becomes ensnared in the violence and takes a blow to the head as he is trying to rescue a young woman from the mob. When RFK hears the news he is “possessed by an enormous anger…as if he had been down in Montgomery himself and had been hit.” James Hilty writes that the attack on Seigenthaler “proved one of several turning points for Kennedy on civil rights… Seigenthaler’s ordeal [was a] revelation of the viciousness of the segregationists…” (James Hilty, Robert Kennedy: Brother, Protector, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, p. 323) The fact that the Montgomery riot took place is also a sign of Alabama Governor John Patterson failing to honor a promise he had made to RFK to protect the Freedom Riders, which leaves JFK and RFK livid. RFK dispatches federal marshals to protect Lewis and the Freedom Riders the next night as they hold a mass meeting at the First Baptist Church. (John Lewis, Walking With the Wind, New York: Simon & Schuster, pp. 148-149, 156-160; The Atlanta Journal and Constitution, 05/09/2001; The Boston Globe, 05/22/2001)

1963

Summer

Lewis helps found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) for civil rights. He serves as the group’s Chairman until 1966.

One week after being elected Chairman of the SNCC, Lewis is among a group of prominent black leaders who meet President John F. Kennedy (JFK), RFK, and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson in the Oval Office. JFK is concerned with getting an important civil rights bill through Congress and doesn’t want the planned March on Washington to take place, as he thinks it might be counterproductive to the effort. Nevertheless, Lewis is a key planner and keynote speaker for the historic March on Washington in August. Though skeptical at first, the Kennedy administration officially supports the rally and its cause. Though Lewis is asked to tone down some of his rhetoric, he gives a fiery speech asking ‘which side is the federal government on?’ By this time, Lewis is recognized as one of the ‘Big Six’ leaders of the Civil Rights movement, along
Lewis leads the SNCC in organizing voter registration drives in the South during Mississippi’s historic Freedom Summer.

On March 7th, Lewis and Hosea Williams attempt to lead 600 protestors from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama to protest in favor of voting rights in that state. They are attacked by Alabama state troopers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma in what becomes known as ‘Bloody Sunday’. The atrocities of this day are reportedly very influential in building support for the Voting Rights Act passed in Congress later in the year.

After leaving the SNCC, Lewis becomes Associate Director of the Field Foundation. He also participates heavily in the Southern Regional Council’s voter registration programs. He eventually becomes Director of the Voter Education Project (VEP).

When it becomes apparent early in the year that RFK is going to run for president, Lewis volunteers to work for his campaign. Although Lewis had reportedly been skeptical of the Kennedys’ commitment to civil rights earlier in the decade, Arthur Schlesinger writes that, by 1968, Lewis believes RFK to be “‘the only political leader’ addressing the ‘real issues of the United States.’” (Schlesinger, p. 873) His primary task is to work on getting out the black vote for RFK’s first primary election in Indiana. On April 4th, RFK plans to stop in Indianapolis for his first visit and speech there, which Lewis helps to organize. As RFK flies into Indianapolis, he and his staff learn that Martin Luther King Jr. has been shot and killed. RFK gives an unwritten and unrehearsed speech to the huge crowd that had gathered to hear him for the planned visit, announcing to them that King had been killed and asking them for restraint and compassion. Lewis later said of RFK’s words, “It was an amazing speech…He stripped himself down. He made it personal. He made it real.” (Lewis, pp. 384-388)

After RFK wins the Indiana primary, Lewis moves on to the primary for Oregon. RFK eventually loses the Oregon primary, and Lewis moves on to California. By this time, Lewis works closely with RFK, and the two develop a strong personal relationship. On the night of June 4th, RFK is projected to win the California primary, virtually assuring him the Democratic nomination. Lewis is upstairs at the Hotel Ambassador with RFK, who decides at close to midnight to go downstairs to make his victory speech. Before he leaves, he jokes to Lewis, “you let me down today. More Mexican-Americans voted for me than Negroes.” He then tells Lewis and the rest of the room to wait for him and that he will be back in fifteen minutes. After his speech, RFK is shot three times by Sirhan Sirhan in the kitchen of the hotel. He dies the next morning. (Lewis, pp. 393-396)
After receiving a telegram from the Kennedy family, Lewis travels to New York to serve as an Honor Guard for RFK’s coffin before the funeral. Lewis attends the funeral, and RFK’s brother Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA) (EMK) delivers the eulogy. (Lewis, p. 396)

1977

Lewis runs for U.S. Congress in Georgia’s fifth district in an election to fill the vacancy left by Lewis’ friend Andy Young, who had been appointed U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations by President Jimmy Carter. Lewis finishes second in a mixed primary of twelve candidates, allowing him to participate in a runoff with favorite Wyche Fowler. In the closing days before the runoff, EMK travels to Georgia to campaign for Lewis, making it the first time the two meet for any significant amount of time. Lewis loses the runoff election, 62 to 38 percent. Nonetheless, he notes later how much he appreciated EMK’s support: “I admired Ted Kennedy for his willingness to carry on, to get out there in the public arena even after what happened to his brothers...here he was, carrying on, making trips like this, traveling down to Georgia to speak on behalf of a fellow Democrat.” (Lewis, p. 422)

After losing the Georgia runoff, Lewis is appointed by Carter to head the federal volunteer agency ACTION.

1980

Lewis resigns from ACTION early in the year. He reportedly cites the unresponsiveness of the bureaucracy and his inability to take a stand on political issues as his main reasons for leaving. (The Washington Post, 02/03/1980)

Upon leaving ACTION, Lewis is reportedly immediately ‘wooed’ by the Carter and EMK presidential campaigns, both of which are looking for the support of nationally recognized African-Americans. Though a Newsweek article speculates that Lewis joins EMK’s campaign, he reportedly abstains completely from the Democratic primary battle. As he says later, “The fact was that I really had no strong feelings about either Carter or Kennedy. I was certainly never as enthused about Ted Kennedy as I had been about Bobby. I never really worked with him. I didn’t know him the way I knew Bobby.” (Lewis, pp. 428-430; The Washington Post, 02/03/1980, 07/21/1986)

1981

Lewis is elected to the Atlanta City Council.

1986

Lewis is elected U.S. Representative for Georgia’s Fifth Congressional District. He surprisingly defeats former best friend and fellow civil rights legend state senator Julian Bond in a bitterly contested Congressional runoff on September 2nd. Bond, the clear favorite of the race, had won the Democratic primary election on August 12th, but fell short of a majority, therefore forcing him into the runoff against second place finisher Lewis. Forced to choose sides between two men he knows and likes, EMK chooses to support Bond, primarily because Bond was the only Georgia delegate to support EMK against Carter at the 1980 Democratic Convention. As EMK aide Mike Frazier says, “The senator still likes John, still
considers him a friend. But Julian was there when the senator needed him most. We owe Julian Bond. And we pay our debts.” (The Washington Post, 07/21/1986) Lewis later says of EMK’s decision, “I was not surprised. To his credit, loyalty counts for a lot with Ted Kennedy. Julian had supported him against Carter in 1980 while I stood aside. He hadn’t forgotten that, and I understood.” (Lewis, p. 440; The Washington Post, 07/21/1986; The New York Times, 09/02/1986, 09/03/1986)

1990

**Summer** In the House debate over the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Congressman Jim Chapman adds a controversial amendment that would allow employers to transfer workers with communicable diseases out of food-handling jobs, whether or not the disease could actually be transferred through the handling of food. The amendment is most notably targeted at restaurant workers with AIDS. The rationale is that even though AIDS could not be spread through food, restaurant employers forced to keep workers with AIDS would lose a lot of business based on public fears of the disease spreading. Lewis strongly opposes the amendment on the grounds that it encourages discrimination based on perceived problems rather than on real problems: “Twenty-five years after the passage of the major civil rights legislation of the 1960s, we are still hearing the same tired arguments that were used to justify segregated restaurants.” (1990 Congressional Quarterly, p. 451) Nonetheless, the House votes to add the amendment on May 17th before overwhelmingly passing the bill on May 22nd. The Senate had passed their version the previous September. Back in the Senate in June, an unusual motion by Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) that would require the Senate conferees on the ADA bill to accept the House’s Chapman amendment in conference passes by voice vote. But EMK, who chairs the bill’s conference committee, argues that precedent suggests that Senate conferees are in no way obligated to abide by Helms’ motion. EMK then suggests to the Senate conferees that they drop the amendment, which they do. When the bill goes back to conference for a second time in July (for an unrelated issue), the Senate rejects an identical motion by Helms. Both Houses pass the final conference bill on July 12th-13th, and Bush signs it into law on July 26th. The ADA bill extends the protections from discrimination in employment and public accommodations given to racial and ethnic minorities in 1964 to people with disabilities. It also requires that all public services and telecommunications be made equally accessible for disabled people. (1990 Congressional Quarterly Almanac, pp. 447, 451, 460-561)

**July** EMK proposes legislation that would overturn six 1989 Supreme Court decisions and would permit victims of discrimination or of sexual harassment to more easily sue their employers for damages. EMK allies himself with Senator John C. Danforth (R-MO) to help the bill pass, with Danforth insisting upon a lower/easier standard than that suggested by EMK for employers to fire employees. The bill passes on the 18th, 65-34, but surprisingly without a veto-

**October**

President George H.W. Bush vetoes the bill overturning the 1989 Supreme Court decisions, saying “the bill actually employs a maze of highly legalistic language to introduce the destructive force of quotas into our National employment system.” (Clymer, p. 480) EMK works hard in the Senate to gain the votes to override the veto, but fails when 34 senators vote to sustain. Responding to the veto, EMK says of Bush that he “dishonors his high office...The President has taken the low road on civil rights.” Lewis concurs, noting, “It was fully appropriate for David Duke [ex-Ku Klux Klan leader present in the Senate gallery] to be here. The president’s veto provided cover for the likes of him, the skinheads, and the Klan...to discriminate.” (*USA Today*, 10/25/1990; Clymer, pp. 481-482)

**1991**

**October**

EMK again attempts to pass a bill overturning the 1989 Supreme Court decisions negatively affecting civil rights. The bill (often referred to as the Civil Rights Act of 1991) generally makes it easier for workers to file/win job discrimination suits. It also amends Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act to permit sexual harassment victims to seek damages, but caps damages at $300,000. Largely because of Danforth’s continued support, and reportedly because of increased public interest in sexual harassment due to the recent Anita Hill accusations against Clarence Thomas in his Senate confirmation hearings, the bill passes on the 30th, 93-5. Bush threatens to veto again, but is convinced not to by Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole (R-KS) and a small group of Senate republicans. Lewis says of the final bill, “It is not perfect. It is not a panacea. But it is a step in the right direction.” (1991 Congressional Quarterly Almanac, p. 260) Controversy erupts over a Bush signing statement memo written by White Council C. Boyden Gray suggesting that government agencies should now phase out affirmative-action hiring practices. Several Democrats invited to the White House ceremony refuse to attend out of protest, including Lewis. EMK is the only Democratic lawmaker to attend, giving nothing but positive statements about Bush, and saying he will give him the benefit of the doubt. Clymer reports that “Ultimately, the differences between the bills agreed to in 1991 and vetoed in 1990 were slight.” (1991 Congressional Quarterly Almanac, pp. 251-261; Clymer, pp. 500-501; *The Houston Chronicle*, 11/22/1991)

**1995**

**June**

A flag desecration amendment receives the two-thirds majority needed in the House on the 28th, but is rejected in the Senate 63-36, three votes short of the two-thirds needed. EMK and Lewis are among the most vocal opponents in
each chamber. EMK says, “The Constitution is the enduring charter of our nation and our liberties. It should not be treated as a billboard on which to plaster the bumper-sticker slogan of the moment.” (USA Today, 06/29/1995)

1996

Along with a list of other notable Democrats, both EMK and Lewis attend the funeral of Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown. Brown’s plane had crashed in Croatia while he was on an official trade mission. Before his death, Brown had been seen as a rising star in the Democratic Party. He had also served as a deputy campaign manager for EMK in 1979 in his primary fight against Carter. (New York Daily News, 05/11/1996)

1998

Summer

In response to a series of highly publicized hate crimes, EMK appears with Lewis, Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR) and Representative John Conyers (D-MI) to denounce those acts and to renew efforts to pass more expansive federal hate crimes legislation. Shortly thereafter, EMK and Representative Charles Schumer (D-NY) introduce a hate crimes bill in both Houses of Congress. Specifically, the bill would add crimes motivated by a victim’s sexual orientation, gender or disability to the list of what constitutes a hate crime. Under the existing 1968 law, hate crimes were defined only as those motivated by race, color, religion or national origin. The new bill would also expand federal jurisdiction over hate crimes, making it no longer necessary to prove that the victim was participating in a specific federally protected activity (such as voting) when victimized. It would also provide new grants to states in order to make it easier to prosecute hate crimes cases. The bill reportedly makes no notable progress in either house this year. (The Boston Globe, 07/20/1998, 07/28/1998, 07/29/1998, The Atlanta Journal and Constitution, 06/17/1998)

August

EMK’s son Representative Patrick Kennedy (D-RI) invites Lewis to Providence, Rhode Island for the 35th anniversary of Martin Luther King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech at the March on Washington. Both Lewis and Patrick Kennedy speak at the small multiracial Sheldon Street Church about how much has been done and what the country still needs to do regarding civil rights. (The Atlanta Journal and Constitution, 08/28/1998)

2000

In his January State of the Union address, President Bill Clinton makes mention of the fact that minorities are lagging behind whites in health and health care. He announces that he will include in his budget request $20 million for a new center at the National Institute of Health to research minority health care in an attempt to understand and alleviate health and health care disparities between races. This request is notably similar to a legislative proposal sponsored by EMK and Lewis in Congress the previous fall. Both EMK and Lewis are reportedly pleased by Clinton’s attention to the issue, with Lewis noting that “This will go a long way toward eliminating the disparity in minority health care.” (The Atlanta Journal and Constitution, 01/27/2000)
2001  In May, Lewis is presented the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award for Lifetime Achievement at the JFK Library in Boston. Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg presents Lewis with the award, and EMK and his wife Victoria Kennedy attend the ceremony. (*The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 05/22/2001)

In late November, Bush announces that the Justice Department building will be renamed after EMK’s late brother, former US Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. Lewis attends the official ceremony in the Great Hall of the Justice Department. (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 11/24/2001)

2002  In late September, EMK and Lewis are two of the most prominent Congressional Democrats to criticize Bush’s threatened invasion of Iraq. (*The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 09/28/2002)

2003  In a profile and retrospective on EMK in *The Boston Globe* in January, Lewis says of EMK’s work on civil rights, “There’s no question that he’s the embodiment of so much that we hoped for. Sometimes you have politicians come along, and they sort of talk about it, but they don’t feel it. This man feels it.” (*The Boston Globe*, 01/05/2003)

2004  EMK and Lewis are among the leaders of efforts to pass the Fairness Act/Civil Rights Act of 2004. The legislation would make it easier for victims to choose to have the final decision on their discrimination claims decided in court rather than through private arbitration. It would also lower the burden of proof for plaintiffs to collect damages in discrimination lawsuits. As EMK says, “Our proposals will strengthen existing protections—often in cases where courts have let us down by unacceptably narrowing construction of existing law, or where Congress has unfortunately been less than clear in enacting past legislation.” The bill is reportedly trapped in committee for most of the year. (*The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 02/12/2004)

*Summer*  EMK and Lewis reportedly receive the loudest cheers at a health care rally at Faneuil Hall in Boston during the Democratic National Convention. Both men speak about the need to provide health care for every American. (*The Boston Globe*, 07/31/04)

2005  *September*  President George W. Bush nominates John Roberts, Jr. first as Associate Justice and then as Chief Justice (after Chief Justice William Rehnquist’s death) to the U.S. Supreme Court. On the 12th, confirmation hearings for Roberts begin before the Senate Judiciary Committee. On the 13th, EMK questions Roberts on his positions on the constitutionality of extant civil rights legislation, such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the 1968 Fair Housing Act.
EMK particularly focuses on voting rights, which Roberts had previously claimed was beyond the jurisdiction of the Court. Roberts points out that at the time he expressed these opinions, he was a staff lawyer at the Department of Justice under President Ronald Reagan. On the 15th, Lewis testifies against Roberts, saying that when he was a lawyer for the Reagan and H.W. Bush administrations, Roberts sought to narrow interpretations of existing civil rights laws. As Lewis tells the Committee, “We cannot afford to elevate an individual to such a powerful, lifetime position, whose record demonstrates such a strong desire to reverse the hard-won civil rights gains that so many sacrificed so much to achieve.” (USA Today, 09/15/2005) EMK announces his opposition to Roberts’ confirmation on the 21st. On the 22nd, Roberts is approved by the Judiciary Committee, 13-5. On the 29th, Roberts is confirmed, 78-22, by the full Senate, and is sworn in as Chief Justice just hours later. Senate Democrats split 22-22 on the vote. EMK votes against Roberts both in Committee and in the full Senate. (The Boston Globe, 09/23/2005; USA Today, 09/15/2005; The Washington Post, 09/30/2005; Roberts Confirmation Hearings Transcripts, http://www.washingtonpost.com)

October

EMK and Lewis both pay tribute to civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks immediately following her death. EMK says, “The nation lost a courageous woman and a true American hero.” Lewis notes that “A half-century ago, Rosa Parks stood up not only for herself, but for generations upon generations of Americans. Her quiet fight for equality sounded the bells of freedom for millions.” (New York Daily News, 10/25/2005)

2006

EMK and Lewis are the two most recognizable public figures to be barred from boarding flights due to others bearing their names appearing on the U.S. “no-fly list” for suspected terrorists. (The Toronto Star, 01/07/2006)

February

EMK and Lewis are among the notable ten senators and 100 Congressmen to attend the funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s widow, Coretta Scott King. EMK leads the Senate delegation to the funeral. (The Atlanta Journal and Constitution, 02/05/2006)