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| |  |  | | --- | --- | | Lewis, John (1940- ) | [Next entry](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_lewis_rufus_1906_1999) | |
| Celebrated as one of the civil rights movement’s most courageous young leaders, John Lewis, a founding member and chairman of the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_student_nonviolent_coordinating_committee_sncc/), greatly contributed to student movements of the 1960s. He described Martin Luther King as ‘‘the person who, more than any other, continued to inﬂuence my life, who made me who I was’’ (Lewis, 412).   Born on 21 February 1940, Lewis was raised on a farm near Troy, Alabama, where his parents were sharecroppers. Lewis was ﬁrst exposed to King and his ideas when he heard one of the young minister’s sermons on the radio. This was a revolutionary moment for Lewis who thought of King as a ‘‘Moses’’ of his people; one who used ‘‘organized religion and the emotionalism within the Negro church as an instrument, as a vehicle, toward freedom’’ (Allen, ‘‘John Lewis’’). Inspired by this idea of the [social gospel](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_social_gospel/), Lewis began preaching in local churches when he was 15 years old. Upon graduating from high school, Lewis enrolled in the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville.   Lewis’ ﬁrst direct encounter with King occurred in the summer of 1958, when he traveled to Montgomery to seek King’s help in suing to transfer to Troy State University, an all-white institution closer to his home. Lewis met with King, [Ralph Abernathy,](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_abernathy_ralph_david_1926_1990/) and [Fred Gray](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_gray_fred_david_1930/) at Abernathy’s First Baptist Church, and they decided they would contribute their ﬁnancial and legal assistance to ‘‘the boy from Troy,’’ as King called him (Lewis, 68). Lewis’ parents, however, feared the potential repercussions of the lawsuit. Lewis acknowledged these sentiments and returned to American Baptist that fall.   While in Nashville, Lewis attended direct action workshops led by [James Lawson](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_lawson_james_1928/) and came to embrace the Gandhian philosophy of [nonviolence](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_nonviolent_resistance/). Lewis became heavily involved in the Nashville movement and participated in a series of student [sit-ins](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_sit_ins/) in early 1960 that aimed to integrate movie theaters, restaurants, and other businesses. In April 1960, he helped form SNCC and later participated in the [Freedom Rides](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_freedom_rides/) of 1961. During this campaign, Lewis realized the potential implications of his involvement in the movement after being severely beaten by white youth. Faced with jeopardizing his ability to graduate from American Baptist by being incarcerated for participation in a demonstration, he stated: ‘‘this is [the] most important decision in my life, to decide to give up all if necessary for the Freedom Ride, that Justice and Freedom might come to the Deep South’’ (Branch, 395).   Lewis received his BA from the American Baptist Theological Seminary in 1961. Acknowledging him as ‘‘one of the most dedicated young men in our movement,’’ the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_southern_christian_leadership_conference_sclc/) elected him to their board the following year in an attempt to bring more young people into the organization (SCLC, 16 May 1962). In 1963 he was chosen by acclamation as the chairman of SNCC. As leader of the organization, Lewis often found himself torn between his allegiance to SNCC and his relationship with King. Lewis told King that ‘‘it has always been a deep concern of mine that there has not been enough communication between S.C.L.C. and SNCC,’’ however, this was not a sentiment shared by other members of either group (Lewis, 11 April 1964). Lewis’ decision to ‘‘maintain a liaison with Dr. King and the SCLC’’ earned him much criticism within SNCC (Lewis, 379). Lewis, however, valued King as the man who had ultimately set him on his life’s path, and chose to uphold strong ties with both him and SNCC.   As chairman of SNCC, Lewis participated in many of the civil rights movement’s most momentous events. On 28 August 1963, he delivered one of the keynote speeches at the [March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_march_on_washington_for_jobs_and_freedom/). Fellow civil rights leaders had advised Lewis to revise his speech because of its blunt criticisms of the federal government’s inaction, but the ﬁnal version was still regarded as ‘‘the most controversial and militant speech at the March,’’ proclaiming that ‘‘we march today for jobs and freedom, but we have nothing to be proud of’’ and asking in an accusatory manner, ‘‘which side is the federal government on?’’ (Lewis, 28 August 1963). Lewis went on to play a crucial role in the 1964 [Freedom Summer](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_freedom_summer_1964/) by coordinating voter registration drives and community action programs in Mississippi.   On 7 March 1965, Lewis and [Hosea Williams](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_williams_hosea_1926_2000/) led several hundred protest marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama in a demonstration aimed at drawing attention to increased voting rights in the South. The march came to be known as ‘‘Bloody Sunday,’’ because of the brutal beatings that many of the marchers received from state troopers; Lewis himself was severely attacked and suffered a fractured skull. Lewis’ involvement with SNCC ended the following year when [Stokely Carmichael](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_stokely_carmichael_1941_1998/) won a bid for the chairmanship, and Lewis perceived that the organization was heading in a militant direction that conﬂicted with his ‘‘personal commitment to nonviolence’’ (Carson, 231).   Lewis continued his civil rights involvement in later years as the head of voter registration initiatives run by the Southern Regional Council and the [Voter Education Project](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_voter_education_project/). In 1977 President Jimmy Carter chose him to head ACTION, a federal volunteer agency. He attempted to enter government that same year with a House congressional campaign but was unsuccessful. He served on Atlanta’s city council from 1982 to 1986, when he defeated [Julian Bond](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_bond_julian_1940/) in the Democratic congressional primary and was elected to the House of Representatives, where he served 11 terms.   SOURCES   Archie Allen, ‘‘John Lewis: Keeper of the Dream,’’ *New South* 26 (Spring 1971):15–25.  Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 1988.  Carson, *In Struggle*, 1981.  Lewis, Speech delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, 28 August 1963, SNCCP, GAMK.  Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 1998.   Lewis to King, 11 April 1964, MLKJP-GAMK.   SCLC, Minutes from board meeting, 16 May 1962, MLKJP-GAMK. |