

# Ivory Tower

MAY 2, 1966



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# An Interview with John Lewis

Over a month ago, John Lewis, the chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), was in town on a speaking and fund raising tour. One morning we drove to South Minneapolis and interviewed Mr. Lewis. Dr. Allan Spear of the History Department joined us at the interview. Dr. Spear's area of specialization is race and nationality in American history and he currently teaches the History Department's course of that name. Mr. Lewis began by giving some of the details of his life.

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"I just don't think we are going to stop the spread of anything through the use of bombs, napalm, gas. . . ."

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LEWIS: I was born on a farm near a little town called Troy, Alabama, about 50 miles south of Montgomery. I attended the public schools of Pike County, Alabama—for the first six years in a Methodist church with all six grades in one big room with one teacher. . . . I graduated from Pike County Training School in May of 1957 and in September of '57, when I was 17, I entered American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, Tennessee. I studied religion for four years and received an AB in religion in June of '61.

I got involved in a series of non-violent workshops in the city of Nashville during the school year of '59. Each Tuesday night, a few students from the American Baptist Seminary, Fisk University, and Vanderbilt Divinity School attended workshops conducted by a young pacifist minister of FOR [Fellowship of Reconciliation] who was a student at Vanderbilt. Then in the spring of 1960, after the sit-ins started in Greensboro, North Carolina, I got involved in a sit-in demonstration

and since then I've been active in the civil rights movement.

EDITOR: When was SNCC forming, in the early Sixties?

LEWIS: Yes, SNCC, as you know, grew out of the sit-ins of 1960. . . . Easter weekend in April of 1960, Dr. [Martin Luther] King called a meeting of students who had been very active in the sit-in movement all across the South—people, I guess, who had emerged as spokesmen or leaders in their own college communities. At that particular meeting SNCC became an organization. During the early days, we shared an office with SCLC in Atlanta and from time to time we received funds from SCLC.

EDITOR: Has the orientation of SNCC changed since then?

LEWIS: In 1960 and '61, SNCC was just what its name implies, it was a means, a method to coordinate the different activities of protest groups all across the South. You had local protest groups in all of the major cities. Each protest group in these cities would send a member as a delegate to the coordinating committee and these delegates made up the coordinating committee. But SNCC is no longer protest oriented. We no longer have what we call local protest chapters. Now SNCC is more or less staff oriented, we're no longer based primarily on the Southern Negro college campus, but based within the Negro community . . . on our own staff.

SPEAR: There've been reports of antagonism between some of the SNCC people and Dr. King—that some of the SNCC people feel Dr. King has built up too much of a cult of personality and has not allowed adequate opportunity for the development of indigenous leadership. . . . What is there to this?

LEWIS: Well, we do believe in SNCC in building

what we call local and indigenous leadership . . . so that local people won't have to depend upon one organization or one man coming in to free or liberate them. SNCC people strongly feel that an idea should be carried forward by a group of people rather than just one man. . . . On the other hand, we recognize that in SCLC there's a strong feeling that if you have an idea, if you have a movement, you must have a person to symbolize, in a sense to personify, the idea, the movement. I think you have this in Dr. King. Some people in SNCC have been critical of SCLC and Dr. King, but I think that perhaps there is a greater degree of unity and togetherness between SNCC and SCLC than between SNCC and any of the other civil rights organizations.

SPEAR: What about the charges that Dr. King comes into communities that SNCC has prepared for a year or two without much publicity, such as Selma, and then gets all the publicity so that it appears, in the national press at least, that the whole thing is the creation of Dr. King, whereas much of the groundwork had really been done by SNCC?

EDITOR: And on that, it's been said that not only did Dr. King come in, but the show he put on undermined a lot of carefully built community

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"I think in the long run that in the South we are going to have more of an integrated community than we have in the North."

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leadership. A grand march was not conducive to the sort of slowly built leadership that SNCC had wanted to try to produce.

LEWIS: It is true in the case of Selma that SNCC had been working there since the fall of 1962, trying to build up a grass roots organization and

trying to do some independent political organizing. Very few people in the country knew anything about what was going on in Selma or knew that SNCC was working there until SCLC or Dr. King came in. . . . SNCC people believe in taking a long and a hard look at independent political organizing and not in just one dramatic event. A lot of people in SNCC were against the march. I know almost our entire executive committee was against the march. On the other hand, our staff people who had been working in Selma felt that we had to be there with those people, and we marched because the people in Selma were going to march.

EDITOR: The playwright Lillian Hellman has



said that SNCC is courageous, but "lacks any political and philosophical consistency or sophistication." What would you say to that?

LEWIS: I don't think that SNCC as an organization is trying to present any hard line philosophy or ideology. . . . We believe in independent political organizing; that certain groups of people, certain forces in our country must remain outside of the major political parties.

EDITOR: For example?

LEWIS: An organization like the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party or the Lowndes County Freedom Organization in Lowndes County, Alabama. Not only these independent political organizations, but the civil rights movement itself and the peace movement must not become part of a larger bowl of soup. We must not let either major political party think that somehow they have us in their back pocket. We have to remain the conscience of both parties, of the very political structure, so that we can raise certain questions about it and force certain things on it.

SPEAR: I'd like to ask you about the kind of political organizations that are being developed now in the South. Some people have said that these are all black parties, and are leading to a kind of racial politics in the South which will be in the long run, perhaps, self-defeating. Would you like to say something about the so-called "Black Panther Party" and some of these other parties that have been called all-black parties as opposed to the white supremacy parties.

LEWIS: Well, in several counties in Alabama we have organized what we call Freedom Organizations. One good example is the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. The symbol of the organization is a Black Panther. The symbol of the Democratic party in Alabama is a white rooster. Recently they removed the slogan from the white rooster which read "White Supremacy for the Right."

Lowndes County is 82 per cent Negro and Negroes have not been able to vote there in the past 60 or 65 years. All of the white elected officials there are in some way connected with the

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"... We can enforce the draft law and income tax laws, but we don't have even the courage to enforce laws dealing with civil rights."

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Klan or some racist group. Now, according to Lowndes County citizens and the SNCC people there who helped them, the only reason they organized the party was because they were unable to find a single white official who would be a candidate who would be responsive to the needs and demands of the Negro people. So they organized this party, the Black Panther Party some call it, but the name of the party is the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. They're running an all-black slate. No doubt some will be elected.

It could be an all black county government. Most people in SNCC and I see this only as a transition. It is not in my own mind a black nationalist party . . . .

SPEAR: Well now, in Tuskegee the other approach has been tried with the TCA [Tuskegee Civic Association] and its attempt to support combined tickets of Negroes and moderate whites. I was reading an article in the *Nation* not too long ago written shortly after the murder of Sam Young which seemed to indicate that this experiment in Tuskegee was not particularly successful; that trying to support Negroes and moderate whites . . . was actually leading to a kind of middle-of-the-road government which was not providing the changes fast enough for Negroes. Do you have any observations on that?

LEWIS: I think what has happened in Tuskegee is that a great many of the young people in the student community at Tuskegee Institute and faculty members and people who live in the rural areas feel that the political situation in Tuskegee is being dominated by a group of professors at Tuskegee Institute and a few white moderates. There is a strong feeling throughout Tuskegee and Macon County that the government of Macon County and Tuskegee should be all black. There's real debate and real discussion going on right now about whether or not to organize an independent political party there.

EDITOR: In Mississippi in 1964 there was what was called a "White Folks Project" as one phase of the Mississippi Summer Project, the hope being to contact poor whites in Mississippi and get some interracial political movement going. As far as I know it wasn't successful. What is SNCC doing now in this line?

LEWIS: Well, it's a fact that our attempt in Mississippi to organize or make some inroads into the poor white community during the summer of '64 was a failure. I don't know how much SNCC can do because SNCC is predominantly Negro. Until we are able to get over the hump of race and racism there is very little that SNCC as an organization can do to bridge the gap between the white community and the Negro community. On the other hand, there is an organization in the South named SSOC — the Southern Student Organizing Committee — which is predominantly white and works very closely with SNCC and in a sense is an outgrowth of a great deal of the work of SNCC. They've been recruiting Southern white students and are hopeful that they will be working in the white community this summer and the next year.

EDITOR: I'd like to discuss some of the recent activities of SNCC. SNCC has been in the news recently in connection with your statement on the war in Vietnam. I have some excerpts from that statement:

We believe the U.S. government has been deceptive in its claims of concern for the freedom

of the Vietnamese people, just as the government has been deceptive in claiming concern for colored people in such other countries as the Dominican Republic, the Congo, South Africa, Rhodesia and in the United States itself . . .

We ourselves have often been victims of violence and confinement executed by U.S. government officials. We recall the numerous persons who have been murdered in the South because their efforts to assure their civil and human rights, and those murderers have been allowed to escape the penalty for their crimes.

It concludes expressing sympathy and support for the men in this country who are unwilling to respond to the military draft and urging people opposed to the war to work in the civil rights movement.

What reaction to this have you had from the government?

LEWIS: I don't know of any overt reaction from the federal government. . . . Maybe they're reacting, but at this time I don't know of any specific action.

EDITOR: I know that the Attorney General has suggested that certain groups in the United States ought to be investigated and this seems to be correlated with the stand that they've taken on the war. Hasn't SNCC's name been mentioned in connection with this?

LEWIS: Well, there's a resolution pending now before the House calling for the investigation of the DuBois Clubs, Students for a Democratic Society, SNCC, the Black Muslims, and several other organizations because of their criticism of the war in Vietnam. As far as SNCC is concerned, we do not have any love for the House Un-American Activities Committee. . . . I have the strong feeling that if there's any attempt to investigate SNCC and some of these organizations, the Committee may be signing its death note. I think other forces in the country will come to the aid of SNCC and these other organizations.

SPEAR: I have heard you give an explanation of why you think the civil rights issue and the Vietnam issue are integrally related. Could you

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## John Lewis

(Continued from page 29)

repeat that?

LEWIS: As I have said so many times, it would be foolish for us to talk about civil rights today and tomorrow there be no civilization. For us to talk about free and open elections in Alabama and Mississippi and not ask for free and open elections in Vietnam is not consistent. . . . Then we have to look at the draft itself. The draft discriminates against poor people. More than 16 per cent of the people being drafted because of the war are Negroes; more than 18 per cent of all casualties in Vietnam are Negroes. The resources that are spent on this meaningless and useless war could be used to do away with the ghettos and the slums of this country. . . . I just don't think we are going to stop the spread of anything through the use of bombs, napalm, gas, burning villages, and killing old women and young children.

EDITOR: A member of the SNCC staff, Julian Bond, has been refused his duly acquired seat in the Georgia Legislature because of his alignment with the SNCC policy statement on Vietnam. What is Julian Bond's future?

LEWIS: I think that Julian Bond perhaps symbolizes for a lot of our young people the fact that you can be a politician and yet a man of principles. I think Julian is one of the few elected officials in this country who will be responsive to the people. His campaign in Atlanta was perhaps the only issue-oriented campaign. He received 83 percent of the votes cast in his district and if he were to run again today, he would be elected and would receive nearly 100 percent of the votes. He will run for re-election to the Georgia House this year and I think eventually the United States Supreme Court will order the Georgia House to seat him.

SPEAR: Do you think that the intransigence of the white community in the South will eventually decline enough so that there can be a really interracial society in the South, or are the battles between the races going to lead to the development of separate communities that may have equal rights, but no rapport with each other?

LEWIS: I think in the long run in the South we are going to have more of an integrated community than we have in the North. Because of the increase in Negro voter registration, the whole political structure, just because of mere numbers, is going to become interracial.

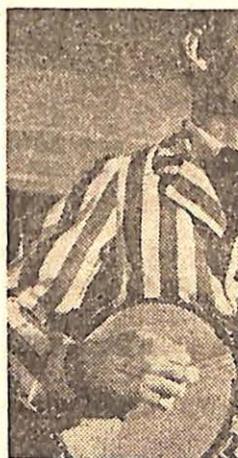
SPEAR: But what is to prevent Atlanta from becoming another Chicago where Negroes vote and there are Negroes on the City Council, and I guess there's a Negro or two on the School Board too, but it doesn't seem to make much difference?

LEWIS: In a city like Atlanta, we must give the people a candidate who will be responsive to the

people and who is one of the people, not someone who is sent down from on top by the machine like you have in Chicago. The Negro people in Chicago, in my estimation, don't have anyone to vote for. In cities like Atlanta, you not only have to have a political leader who is sensitive to the needs and demands of the Negro people, but also he must be one of them. . . .

Before we quit, I'd like to make one more point. The struggle that we are involved in in this country is not a struggle between black and white, but against a system of segregation that will destroy all of us if we do not destroy it. . . . Because some of the basic problems that we have are not problems that civil rights organizations can easily solve, we're going to need the help, support, and resources of the Federal Government.

I see the poverty program as a step in the right direction, but we're not really engaged in an all-out war on poverty like we could be. Somehow we have to make workable the poverty program and all the other social welfare legislation. The government must not just pass laws, but it must see that laws are enforced. It is very strange to me that we can make certain laws workable and can enforce these laws—we can enforce the draft law and income tax laws—but we don't even have the courage to enforce laws dealing with civil rights. . . . The greatest need right now is for our government to enforce the law. □



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