

Name _____ Date _____

John Lewis & Nonviolent Action

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. John Lewis played a role in almost every major event of the Civil Rights Movement. He was one of the Big Six, a term referring to six leaders of prominent civil rights organizations. The Big Six included Lewis, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE); labor organizer Asa Philip Randolph; Roy Wilkins of the NAACP; and Whitney Young, Jr. of the National Urban League. John Lewis played a pivotal role in protecting civil rights and securing voting rights for millions of African Americans. This work took coordinated efforts across organizations, people and places to effect change.

Notes

2. John Lewis was born in 1940 in Alabama, where his parents were sharecroppers. At 15, he heard Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speaking on the radio about the Montgomery bus boycott and felt called to action. Lewis learned of the philosophy of nonviolent action as a college student. This philosophy has its roots in India with Mohandas Gandhi, an activist who fought for Indian independence. In the United States, Lewis and others were inspired by Gandhi's strategies for effecting change through peaceful protests and civil disobedience. At this time, segregation was deeply entrenched in the American South. Lewis grew up with segregation in schools, transportation, neighborhoods, stores and more. Black Americans who broke from the fixed racial order often met violent consequences. He wanted to change this.

Notes

3. As a college student, Lewis organized sit-ins at lunch counters in Tennessee. In a sit-in, activists protest by occupying a space. Sit-ins are examples of nonviolent direct action. In 1960, black protesters in North Carolina held sit-ins at segregated lunch counters reserved for white people only. The sit-ins quickly grew to become a coordinated campaign for civil rights led by college students. The sit-ins that Lewis organized were part of this larger effort taking place in 30 locations across seven states.

Notes

4. The Supreme Court had declared segregation in interstate travel and bus terminals unconstitutional in rulings in 1946 and 1960. But the US government was not enforcing these rulings. The Freedom Rides were organized by James Farmer of CORE. In 1961, 13 black and white activists rode a bus through the South challenging the government to enforce desegregation. John Lewis was among them.

Notes

Lewis was the first rider to be attacked when he entered a waiting room for whites only in a Greyhound terminal. In Alabama, the bus was set on fire, and the KKK launched brutal attacks. Through all of this, the Freedom Riders remained dedicated to nonviolence. They used a tactic called “Jail-No-Bail,” refusing to pay for unconstitutional arrests and keeping attention on the issue. Eventually, the National Guard was called to protect the riders. The Freedom Rides became a milestone for the Civil Rights Movement, showing the power of nonviolent direct action.

5. In 1963, at the age of 23, John Lewis helped organize the historic March on Washington. The March was a demonstration of 250,000 people at the Lincoln Memorial to demand equal justice under the law. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech at this event. Lewis was also a keynote speaker and gave an impassioned speech on the need for equity for black and white Americans.

Notes

6. In 1964, John Lewis helped organize community action during the Freedom Summer in Mississippi. This was a coordinated effort of voter registration drives to counter the continued disenfranchisement of black voters. In 1965, the issue of voting rights became centered on Selma, Alabama. Organizers planned a march from Selma to Montgomery. John Lewis joined the front lines. On March 7, 600 peaceful marchers were stopped on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. This event became known as Bloody Sunday. White citizens, along with the sheriff and his deputies, attacked and fired tear gas at the crowds. John Lewis was beaten so badly his skull was fractured. Footage was shown on the news, drawing media attention to the issue of voting rights.

Notes

Another march was planned, and President Johnson sent troops to protect the protesters. These events prompted Johnson to sign the Voting Rights Act into law on August 6, 1965. This law banned literacy tests and other discriminatory policies and gave the federal courts power to monitor places with a history of violations.

7. After Lewis left the SNCC, he continued his work for equality as director of the Voter Education Project. In 1986, Lewis was elected to Congress as a US Representative of Georgia. In his tenure as a congressperson, he has worked on measures to fight poverty and to improve education. He has also overseen multiple renewals of the Voting Rights Act. Lewis has continued protesting for causes he believes in, using the strategies of nonviolent action. In 2016, he led a sit-in on the floor of the House of Representatives to bring attention to gun violence after a mass shooting in Orlando, Florida. Lewis is the first recipient of the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award for Lifetime Achievement.

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