



Original Draft of John Lewis' Speech at the March on Washington



We march today for jobs and freedom, but we have nothing to be proud of, for hundreds and thousands of our brothers are not here. They have no money for their transportation, for they are receiving starvation wages, or no wages at all.

In good conscience, we cannot support wholeheartedly the administration's civil rights bill, for it is too little and too late.

There's not one thing in the bill that will protect our people from police brutality.

This bill will not protect young children and old women from police dogs and fire hoses, for engaging in peaceful demonstrations: This bill will not protect the citizens in Danville, Virginia, who must live in constant fear in a police state. This bill will not protect the hundreds of people who have been arrested on trumped up charges. What about the three young men in Americus, Georgia, who face the death penalty for engaging in peaceful protest?¹⁹

The voting section of this bill will not help thousands of black citizens who want to vote. It will not help the citizens of Mississippi, of Alabama and Georgia, who are qualified to vote but lack a sixth-grade education. "ONE MAN, ONE VOTE" is the African cry. It is ours, too. It must be ours.

People have been forced to leave their homes because they dared to exercise their right to

register to vote. What is there in this bill to ensure the equality of a maid who earns \$5 a week in the home of a family whose income is \$100,000 a year?

For the first time in one hundred years this nation is being awakened to the fact that segregation is evil and that it must be destroyed in all forms. Your presence today proves that you have been aroused to the point of action.

We are now involved in a serious revolution. This nation is still a place of cheap political leaders who build their careers on immoral compromises and ally themselves with open forms of political, economic and social exploitation. What political leader here can stand up and say, "My party is the party of principles?" The party of Kennedy is also the party of Eastland. The party of Javits is also the party of Goldwater.²⁰ Where is *our* party?

In some parts of the South we work in the fields from sunup to sundown for \$12 a week. In Albany, Georgia, nine of our leaders have been indicted not by Dixiecrats but by the federal government for peaceful protest. But what did the federal government do when Albany's deputy sheriff beat attorney C. B. King and left him half dead? What did the federal government do when local police officials kicked and assaulted the pregnant wife of Slater King,²¹ and she lost her baby?

It seems to me that the Albany indictment is part of a conspiracy on the part of the federal government and local politicians in the interest of expediency.

I want to know, which side is the federal government on?

19 In February 1963, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) fieldworkers Ralph Allen, Don Harris and John Perdue led voter registration and community organizing drives as part of the Southwest Georgia Project. Local authorities arrested them on charges of insurrection, which carried the death penalty in Georgia. The charges were dropped when they were released from prison the following November.

20 In 1963, James Oliver Eastland was a Democratic Senator from Mississippi who was known for his resistance to racial integration; Jacob Javits was a Senator from New York who was known as a liberal Republican and supporter of civil rights efforts; and Barry Goldwater was a conservative Republican Senator from Arizona who supported some desegregation and civil rights efforts but opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

21 C.B. King co-founded the Albany movement, a civil rights campaign in Georgia. In 1962, while attempting to meet with a jailed protester, a sheriff beat King with a walking cane, splitting open his scalp. Marion King, wife of civil rights activist Slater King, was knocked to the ground and beaten by police during the same incident while her children looked on. She later lost her unborn baby as a result of the attack.



ORIGINAL DRAFT OF JOHN LEWIS' SPEECH AT THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON (CONTINUED)

The revolution is at hand, and we must free ourselves of the chains of political and economic slavery. The nonviolent revolution is saying, "We will not wait for the courts to act, for we have been waiting for hundreds of years. We will not wait for the President, the Justice Department, nor Congress, but we will take matters into our own hands and create a source of power, outside of any national structure, that could and would assure us a victory."

To those who have said, "Be patient and wait," we must say that "patience" is a dirty and nasty word. We cannot be patient, we do not want to be free gradually. We want our freedom, and we want it *now*. We cannot depend on any political party, for both the Democrats and the Republicans have betrayed the basic principles of the Declaration of Independence.

We all recognize the fact that if any radical social, political and economic changes are to take place in our society, the people, the masses, must bring them about. In the struggle, we must seek more than civil rights; we must work for the community of love, peace and true brotherhood. Our minds, souls and hearts cannot rest until freedom and justice exist for *all people*.

The revolution is a serious one. Mr. Kennedy is trying to take the revolution out of the streets and put it into the courts. Listen, Mr. Kennedy. Listen, Mr. Congressman. Listen, fellow citizens. The black masses are on the march for jobs and freedom, and we must say to the politicians that there won't be a "cooling-off" period.

All of us must get in the revolution. Get in and stay in the streets of every city, every village and every hamlet of this nation until true freedom comes, until the revolution is complete. In the Delta of Mississippi, in southwest Georgia, in Alabama, Harlem, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia and all over this nation, the black masses are on the march!

We won't stop now. All of the forces of Eastland, Bameett, Wallace and Thurmond²² won't stop this revolution. The time will come when we will not confine our marching to Washington. We will march through the South, through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did. We shall pursue our own scorched earth policy and burn Jim Crow to the ground — nonviolently. We shall fragment the South into a thousand pieces and put them back together in the image of democracy. We will make the action of the past few months look petty. And I say to you, WAKE UP AMERICA!

NOTE

The Kennedy administration and several organizers of the march were uncomfortable with some of Lewis' original language and pressured him to change it. In order to preserve unity with movement leaders, Lewis agreed to remove or revise certain phrases. For example, he cut the phrase "cheap political leaders," his criticism of the civil rights bill as "too little and too late" and the provocative question, "I want to know, which side is the federal government on?" He also removed the Civil War references to marching through "the heart of Dixie" and pursuing a "scorched earth policy." See the revised speech that Lewis actually delivered on the Civil Rights Movement Archive website at <https://www.crmvet.org/info/mowjl2.htm>.

Text Sources: Lewis, John. *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998; Civil Rights Movement Archive. *The March on Washington, Original Draft of SNCC Chairman John Lewis' Speech to the March*. <https://www.crmvet.org/info/mowjl.htm>.

Photo Source: Adelman, Bob, photographer. *John Lewis, then leader of SNCC now congressman, rises to speak at the March on Washington* Bob Adelman. Washington D.C., 1963. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2013645770>.

²² Eastland, Bameett, Wallace and Thurmond were conservative politicians who opposed desegregation efforts and promoted white supremacy.