

# HISTORY IS A WEAPON

## The Revolution is At Hand

This is the text of the speech John Lewis wrote to be delivered at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. Though it is the original text, apparently there were two slightly different versions of it. Almost all of the text below is quoted from *Let Nobody Turn Us Around*, courtesy of John Lewis himself. The italicized portions denote differences from that source's text found in *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader* whose editors credit "a leaflet" version distributed at the March on Washington.

By the morning of the March on Washington, Lewis had already changed the text slightly. Yet not long before the rally, civil rights leaders were still attempting to persuade John Lewis to tone down parts of the speech, which they considered too harsh. You will see the portions of the text that were subsequently changed by Lewis by noticing the [bracketed], asterisked\* portions of the text. Look for an annotation of those changes at the end of the document.

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-for they have no money for their transportation, for they are receiving starvation wages . . . or no wages at all.

[In good conscience, we cannot support 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.]<sup>1</sup>

The voting section of this bill will not help the thousands of citizens who want to vote; will not help the citizens of Mississippi, of Alabama and George who are qualified to vote, who are without a sixth-grade education. "One-Man, OneVote," is the African cry. It is ours, too.

People have been forced to move for they have exercised their right to register to vote. What is in the bill that will protect the homeless and starving people of this nation? What is there in this bill to insure the equality of a maid who earns five dollars a week in the home of a family whose income is a hundred thousand dollars a year?

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.]<sup>2</sup> This bill will not protect the hundreds of people who have been arrested on trumped-up charges, like those in Americus, Georgia, where four young men are in jail, facing a death penalty, for engaging in peaceful protest.

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

We are now involved in a serious revolution. This nation is still a place of

[cheap] 3 political leaders who *build their careers on immoral compromise 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. Where is our party?*

In some parts of the South we have worked in the fields from sun-up to sundown for twelve dollars a week. In Albany, Georgia, we have seen our people indicted by the federal government for peaceful protest, while the Deputy Sheriff beat Attorney C. B. King and left him half-dead; while local police officials kicked and assaulted the pregnant wife of Slater King, 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 for political expediency.

[I want to know, which side is the federal government on?]<sup>4</sup>

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 hundreds of years. We will not wait for the President, nor the Justice Department, nor Congress, but we will take matters into our own hands, and create a great source of power, outside of any national structure that could and would assure us victory." For those who have said, "Be patient and wait!" we must say, "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 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 mere 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 the people*. (Lewis' emphasis)

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."

We won't stop now. All of the forces of Eastland, Barnett and Wallace *and Thurmond* won't stop this revolution. [The next time we march, we won't march on Washington, but 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.*]<sup>5</sup> 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!!* (Lewis' emphasis.)

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

From *Let Nobody Turn Us Around*, edited by Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, pg.409:

1 Changed to: "True, we support the administration's civil-rights bill, but this bill will not protect young children and old women from police dogs and fire hoses."

2 Changed to: "In Danville, Virginia, policemen, armed with submachine guns and in armored cars, regularly broke up mass demonstrations by Negroes. After each demonstration, scores of Negroes were taken to hospitals with fractured skulls and lacerations."

From *Walking With the Wind* by John Lewis, pgs. 227-228.

3 The word "cheap" was removed, through "immoral compromises" remained.

4 This question was removed.

5 The call to march "through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did" was changed to: "We will march through the South, through the streets of Jackson, through the streets of Danville, through the streets of Cambridge, through the streets of Birmingham. But we will march with the spirit of love and with the spirit of dignity that we have shown today."

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