



Selected Proceedings from the 1999 annual conference of the International Leadership Association, October 22-24, Atlanta, Georgia USA

Seeds of Leadership, Tides of Change
By John R. Lewis

Thank you for that wonderful introduction. This great organization, the International Leadership Association, is non-partisan, not supposed to get involved in politics but, you know, next year is an election year. I know you know a great deal about American politics, polling, research, and focus groups. Maybe you can come back to Atlanta, back to Georgia, and say the same thing over and over. I'd be more than grateful. (Laughter).

Let me just take a moment to welcome all of you to Georgia. Good to have you here. I'm delighted to see all of you. I must tell you that I am so pleased and so happy that you would invite a politician to say a few words about leadership. (Laughter). But I must tell you that I didn't grow up to be a leader. I grew up to try to make a contribution, to be a participant in the struggle for change. First of all, Dr. Ronald Walters, my good friend and brother, was so kind. He didn't tell you that I didn't grow up in a big city like Atlanta or in a big city like Washington or New York or Chicago or Athens, Georgia, or Athens, Ohio, or Baltimore, Maryland. But I grew up thirty miles from Montgomery in southeast Alabama near a place called Troy.

My father was a sharecropper, a tenant farmer. In 1944 when I was four years old - and I do remember when I was four; I don't know how many of you remember when you were four, but I do remember that when I was four in 1944 - now you know my age - my father had saved \$300 and with the \$300 he bought 110 acres of land. That's a lot of land for \$300. I'm not trying to suggest that my father was a leader, but he did have a big family: ten children. There were seven boys, including myself,

John R. Lewis, "Seeds of Leadership, Tides of Change," presented at the International Leadership Association conference October 22-24, 1999 in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. Available online at: <http://www.ila-net.org/Publications/Proceedings/1999/jlewis.pdf>

and three girls. So I grew up in a family with six brothers and three sisters. On this farm we raised a lot of cotton, lots of corn, and a lot of peanuts.

Now if you come and visit my Washington office or just happen to be in downtown Atlanta, you may notice that we raise a lot of peanuts here in the state of Georgia, and the Georgia Peanut Commission provides us all members of the Georgia Congressional delegation with an adequate supply of peanuts, to make them available to our guests and visitors and people from our district or the state of Georgia when they come to D.C. The first thing the staff will offer you will be some peanuts. I don't eat too many of those peanuts. (Laughter). I don't want any of you leaving and going and telling the Georgia Peanut Commission but, I don't eat too many of those peanuts. I ate so many peanuts when I was growing up I just don't want to see any peanuts. (Laughter). Even when I get on a flight and fly from Washington to Atlanta the flight attendants try to push peanuts on me. I just say, "No thank you, but thank you." (Laughter). But also on this farm we raised a lot of hogs and a lot of cows and a lot of chickens.

When I was four, it was my responsibility to care for the chickens. I know as leaders, some of you know all about leadership and have studied the different forms of leadership - whether it's grassroots, indigenous leadership or it's trained leadership, whether it's elected or ordained leadership. You're very smart. You've read all of the great books; you read all of the great newspapers and listen to NPR. (Laughter). But you don't know anything about raising chickens. (Laughter). You may be leaders who know something about leadership but you don't know anything about raising chickens. (Laughter).

Let me tell you what I had to do when I was a young black boy growing up in rural Alabama during the 1940s and 1950s. I had to take the fresh eggs and mark them with a pencil, place them under the setting hen and wait for three long weeks for the little chicks to hatch. Now some of you may ask, "Well, John, Congressman, Mr. Lewis, why do you mark those fresh eggs with a pencil before you place them under the setting hen?" Well, from time to time another hen could get on that same nest and there would be some more eggs. You would have to be able to tell the fresh eggs from the eggs that were already under the setting hen. When these chicks would hatch, I would fool these setting hens; as a matter of fact, I would cheat on them. It could have been the first sign of leadership. (Laughter). I would cheat on these setting hens. I kept on fooling these setting hens.

I would take these little chicks and give them to another hen or put them in a box with a lantern and raise them on their own. I'd get some more fresh eggs and mark them with a pencil and place them under the setting hen, encourage the setting hen to stay on the nest another three weeks in order to get some more chicks. I was never able to save \$18.98 to order the most inexpensive hatcher from the Sears & Roebuck store in Atlanta so I kept cheating on these setting hens and fooling these setting hens. That was not the right thing to do. It was not the moral thing to do. It was not the most loving thing to do. It was not the most nonviolent thing to do. But I kept on cheating on these setting hens. (Laughter).

As a young child, as a young boy, I wanted to be a minister. So one of my uncles

John R. Lewis, "Seeds of Leadership, Tides of Change," presented at the International Leadership Association conference October 22-24, 1999 in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. Available online at: <http://www.ila-net.org/Publications/Proceedings/1999/jlewis.pdf>

had Santa Claus bring me a Bible. I learned to read the Bible and started preaching. So from time to time, with the help of my brother and sisters and first cousins, we would gather all our chickens together in the chicken house or in the chicken yard as you are gathered here this afternoon and we would have church. (Laughter). The chickens, along with my sisters and brothers and first cousins, would make up the congregation. I would start preaching and as I would preach the chickens would become very, very quiet. (Laughter). As a matter of fact, when I look back on it, some would bow their heads; some would shake their heads. (Laughter). They never quite said "Amen," but I'm convinced that the great majority of these chickens tended to listen to me better than most of my colleagues listen to me today in the Congress. At least these chickens were a little more productive. They produced eggs. (Laughter).

Growing up there in rural Alabama during the 1940s and 1950s, I saw those signs when we would visit the little town of Troy, visit Montgomery, visit Tuskegee or Birmingham. I saw those signs that said "White Men," "Colored Men," "White Women," "Colored Women." I saw those signs that said "White Waiting," "Colored Waiting." As a young child, I tasted the bitter fruits of racism. I remember in 1950, as a young child of ten, I went down to the Troy Public Library to get a library card to check out a book. I was told by the librarian that the library was for whites only and not for coloreds. But I went back to the public library in Polk County, Alabama, in Troy on July 5, 1998, for a book signing and they gave me a library card.

So it says something about the distance we've come. Maybe it says something about the progress made. I didn't grow up to be a leader. Like Ronald Walters, I was a participant in a struggle, in a movement. But the two of us saw young people in Nashville in 1960 and 1961 and 1962. We saw young people, black and white, all over the South sitting down at lunch counter stools, sitting in at restaurants. By participating in a march, by walking a picket line, these young people grew up overnight and many of them became leaders. All across the American South we saw black men and women and some young people involved in a movement, a grassroots movement, who became grassroots or indigenous leaders. Today we live in a better country, in a better place because of their leadership.

As a young person sitting down at a lunch counter, being trained in a philosophy and a discipline for nonviolence, to be sitting there as someone would come up and put a lighted cigarette out in your hair or down your back or pull you off the lunch counter stool or beat you - or someone would accuse you of disorderly conduct, disturbing the peace and you'd be very orderly and very peaceful - you'd have to emerge as a leader, as so many of us young people during those days did. A few short years ago here in the American South it was almost impossible for people of color to be able to participate in the democratic process. After the sit-ins, after the Freedom Rides, after the March on Washington, during the Mississippi Summer project in 1964, in a state that had a black voting-age population of more than 450,000 and

We saw young people, black and white, all over the South sitting down at lunch counter stools, sitting in at restaurants. By participating in a march, by walking a picket line, these young people grew up overnight and many of them became leaders.

John R. Lewis, "Seeds of Leadership, Tides of Change," presented at the International Leadership Association conference October 22-24, 1999 in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. Available online at: <http://www.ila-net.org/Publications/Proceedings/1999/jlewis.pdf>

only about 16,000 blacks registered to vote, my old organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, better known as SNCC, organized the Mississippi summer project.

We recruited more than 1,000 young people, students, teachers, lawyers, doctors, priests, ministers, rabbis and others to come and work in the Freedom Schools teaching people to pass the so-called literacy tests. During those years it was almost impossible for a person of color to register to vote. You had to interpret said section of the constitution of the state of Mississippi or Georgia or Alabama and the U.S. Constitution. There were black doctors, black lawyers, black schoolteachers, farmers, housewives; on one occasion a black man with a Ph.D. in theology was told that he flunked the so-called literacy test. He couldn't read or write well enough. In one parish in Louisiana a black man was asked to give the number of bubbles in a bar of soap. How many leaders in America today, how many lawyers, how many scientists, can tell us the number of bubbles in a bar of soap?

The whole drive for the right to vote came to a head in Mississippi during the summer of 1964, thirty-five years ago. The night of June 21, 1964 three young men - Andy Goodman and Mickey Schwerner, white, and James Chaney, black - went out to investigate the burning of a black church near Philadelphia, Mississippi. These three young men were arrested not for violating any law but for being considered outside agitators; they were an interracial group who had come to help. They were arrested by the sheriff, turned over to the Klan, taken to jail, taken out of jail, turned over to the Klan again, later beaten, shot and killed. Now these three men - Andy Goodman, Mickey Schwerner and James Chaney - didn't die in Vietnam; they didn't die in the Middle East; they didn't die in Africa. They didn't die in Eastern Europe. They didn't die in Central or South America. They were young leaders, young people who died in our country for the right of us all to become participants in the democratic process. The young people in the movement, in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, other participants in the Civil Rights movement, other leaders didn't give up. We kept the faith. We kept our eyes on the prize.

Later that summer, July 2, 1964, President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. He won re-election in November, 1964. Martin Luther King, Jr., received the Nobel Peace Prize in December, 1964. Later he met with President Johnson at the White House. He said, "Mr. President, we need a strong Voting Rights Act." The great leader of the free world, most powerful elected leader in America or in the world, told this Baptist minister, this civil rights leader who had just won a Nobel Peace Prize, "Dr. King, we don't have the votes in the Congress to get a Voting Rights Act." Martin Luther King came back to Atlanta and met with all of us in SCLC and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, SNCC, at a little meeting place, a restaurant. We made a decision to go to Selma, Alabama, where the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had been involved since 1962.

In Selma, Alabama, in 1965 only 2.1 percent of blacks of voting age were registered to vote in Selma and Dallas County. There was one county in Alabama, Lowndes County, between Selma and Montgomery, that was more than 80 percent African American, but there was not a single registered African American voter in the county. The white registration was more than 100 per cent. How can that be? There were

John R. Lewis, "Seeds of Leadership, Tides of Change," presented at the International Leadership Association conference October 22-24, 1999 in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. Available online at: <http://www.ila-net.org/Publications/Proceedings/1999/jlewis.pdf>

some white people no longer with us, they were gone, but somebody voted on their behalf on election day.

In Selma you could only attempt to register the first and third Mondays of each month. In Selma, Alabama, in Dallas County, you had a sheriff by the name of Jim Clark. He was a very big man and he was a very mean man. Both black and white citizens of Dallas County and Selma were afraid of this man. He wore a gun on one side, a nightstick on the other side and he carried an electric cattle prod in his hand and he didn't use it on cows. He wore a button on his left lapel that said, "Never. Never for voter registration. Never for integration." He was a different kind of leader. He ruled with brute force. But it was my duty to lead a group of elderly black men and women up the steps of the Dallas County Courthouse just to get inside the door on the third Monday, January 18, 1965. Just to get inside the door, up the steps, get a seat, get an application to try to pass the so-called literacy test. He met me at the top of the steps and said, "John Lewis. You're an outside agitator." At that time I had all of my hair and I was a few pounds lighter. I looked him straight in the eye and I said, "Sheriff, I may be an agitator but I'm not an outsider. I grew up only ninety miles from here. We're going to stay here until these people are allowed to register to vote." He said, "You're under arrest," and he arrested me along with a few other people and took us to jail.

A few days later Martin Luther King, Jr., and a group of ministers came to Selma to organize and mobilize the black community of Selma, Alabama, to conduct a nonviolent workshop, to share a vision of a loving community, of a truly interracial democracy. He mobilized the city of Selma and the surrounding community to such a degree that in less than one week more than 3,000 citizens of Selma and the surrounding communities and counties had been arrested. We filled the jails of Selma.

Then on the night of February 18, 1965, in a little town called Marion, Alabama, Perry County in the heart of the black belt - Perry County is the home county of Mrs. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mrs. Ralph Abernathy, and the late Mrs. Andrew Young, Jane Young - a young man by the name of Jimmy Lee Jackson was involved in a march for the right to vote. Something happened and he tried to protect his elderly grandfather. He was shot in the stomach. A few days later he died at the Good Samaritan Hospital in Selma. He had been shot by a state trooper. And because of what happened to him, we decided we would march from Selma to Montgomery to dramatize to the nation and to the world that people of color wanted to become participants in the democratic process. We announced that the march would take place on March 7, 1965. On Saturday, March 6, Governor Wallace issued a statement that the march would not be allowed. On that same day the Sheriff requested that all white men over the age of twenty-one come down to the courthouse that evening to be deputized and become part of his posse to stop the march. That Sunday morning a group of us gathered at church for a religious service. After the services, about 525 of us held a nonviolent workshop outside the church in a parking lot. After the workshop we said a prayer and made a statement to the media. I read the statement on behalf of all of the marchers. We lined up in twos and started walking in an orderly, peaceful manner through the streets of Selma, Alabama, on our way to Montgomery, fifty miles away.

John R. Lewis, "Seeds of Leadership, Tides of Change," presented at the International Leadership Association conference October 22-24, 1999 in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. Available online at: <http://www.ila-net.org/Publications/Proceedings/1999/jlewis.pdf>

I was walking with a young man by the name of Hosea Williams. We were selected to be the leaders of the march. I was selected because I was the chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Although my organization said we should not participate, I said I would participate as an individual. Hosea was selected because Andy Young and another person from SCLC had flipped a coin and it fell to Hosea to walk beside me. Dr. King didn't want all the leaders of SCLC to be in jail. We were sure we were going to be arrested that Sunday afternoon.

We got to the foot of the bridge leaving the city of Selma, across the Alabama River, across the Independence Bridge. We looked down below us and saw all of this water. Hosea asked, "John, can you swim?" I said no. I asked, "Hosea, do you swim?" And he said no. "Well, there's too much water down there. We're not going to jump; we're not going backwards; we're going forwards." And we continued to walk. We came to the apex of the bridge. We saw a line down below of Alabama State Troopers. And behind the state troopers we saw Sheriff Clark and his deputies, members of the posse, men on horseback. And we walked on. We came within hearing distance of the state troopers and a man identified himself as a major, in the Alabama State Troopers. He said, "This is an unlawful march and will not be allowed to continue. I give you three minutes to disperse and return to your church." Less than a minute and a half later he said, "Troopers, advance." You saw these men putting on their gas masks. They came toward us, beating us with nightsticks and bullwhips, while others on horses released their tear gas. I was hit in the head by a state trooper with a nightstick and had a concussion there at the bridge. That's when it became known as bloody Sunday. To this day, I don't recall how I made it back across the bridge through downtown Selma to the church. But I do recall being back at the church. It was filled to capacity. More than 2,000 people were on the outside trying to get in to protest against what had happened at the bridge. Someone asked me if I wanted to say anything. I stood up and said, "I don't understand it. President Johnson can send troops to Vietnam but cannot send troops to Selma to protect people whose only desire is to register and to vote."

Later that afternoon I was transferred to the Good Samaritan Hospital. The next day Martin Luther King, Jr., and Reverend Ralph Abernathy came to visit me. Dr. King said, "Don't worry. We'll make it from Selma to Montgomery. The Voting Rights Act will be passed." Eight days later, on March 15, 1965, President Johnson opened a joint session of the Congress, and made one of the most vehement speeches any American president has made in modern times about the necessity of voting rights or civil rights. In his speech, President Johnson condemned the violence in Selma to send the new Voting Rights Act to the Congress. In the speech he said over and over again, "And we shall overcome." We were all chanting the theme song of a movement.

In Selma, Alabama, in Dallas County, you had a sheriff by the name of Jim Clark. He was a very big man and he was a very mean man.... He was a different kind of leader.

Sitting next to Martin Luther King, Jr., in the home of a local family in Selma while we listened to and watched President Johnson I saw tears come down his face and again he said, "The Voting Rights Act will be passed." Martin Luther King, Jr., was

John R. Lewis, "Seeds of Leadership, Tides of Change," presented at the International Leadership Association conference October 22-24, 1999 in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. Available online at: <http://www.ila-net.org/Publications/Proceedings/1999/jlewis.pdf>

right. The Voting Rights Act was passed and signed into law on August 6, 1965. And we did make it all the way from Selma to Montgomery. Rather than the 525 who began, we were about 35,000 people when we arrived in Montgomery. The nation wanted the voting rights act. The leadership of the nation wanted the Voting Rights Act. The American people created the climate, the environment to get leaders to say, in so many words, we may have a desire to say no but the people are forcing us to say yes.

Leaders must lead. Leaders must get out in front, not just on the big issues but also the little issues. That's what leadership is all about: not being afraid. It is about being at the birth of an idea, of a dream, of a philosophy. During the 1960s many of us believed in the idea of a beloved community, an open society, a good society and an all-inclusive society. Many of us as individuals, not just as leaders but as participants, had studied the philosophy of nonviolence as a way of life, as a way of living. But when you accept nonviolence simply as a technique or as a strategy, it becomes like a faucet. You can turn it on; you can turn it off. We accepted the idea that means and ends are inseparable. If you strive to create the beloved community, the good community, an all-inclusive community, if that is the goal, if that is the end, then the means must be consistent with the end we see.

**Leaders must lead.
Leaders must get out in
front**

In my new book *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), I tell a story. It's a true story. When I was growing up in rural Alabama during the 1940s, I had an aunt who lived in what we call a shotgun house. That's unknown

here. You don't know what a shotgun house is. Somebody may try to fool me but don't try to fool me. You don't know what a shotgun house is. My aunt lived in a shotgun house. This house had a tin roof. She didn't have a green manicured lawn. She had a dirt yard. And every weekend, sometime late Friday afternoon or early Saturday morning, she would get an old broom made from dogwood branches and sweep this dirt yard very, very clean. One Saturday afternoon we were out playing in her clean dirt yard. She didn't like the fact we were playing in her clean dirt yard. But a storm came up. The wind started blowing. The thunderstorm rolled in. The lightning started flashing. She suggested that we all should come inside her old shotgun house. There were about twelve or fifteen of us, sisters and brothers and some first cousins. The wind continued to blow. The thunder continued to roll; the lightning continued to flash.

As the rain started beating on this old tin house roof, my aunt became very afraid. She was frightened; she started crying. We all started crying. We thought this old house was going to blow away. At one point the whole house appeared to lift from its foundation. We all walked to that side, trying to hold down this old house with our little bodies. When the other corner appeared to lift, we would go over to that side. We were little children holding hands; we were walking with the wind. The mark of a leader.

The thunder may roll. The lightning may flash and the wind may blow but you must do as we did almost fifty years ago: stay in the house. Never, ever leave the house. We all live in one house. Call it what you may; call it an American house. Call it the world house. Leaders must hold the house together. The thunder may roll; the

John R. Lewis, "Seeds of Leadership, Tides of Change," presented at the International Leadership Association conference October 22-24, 1999 in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. Available online at: <http://www.ila-net.org/Publications/Proceedings/1999/jlewis.pdf>

lightning may flash; the wind may blow. But don't leave the house. I've said it in recent years and I'll say it again today, maybe, just maybe our foremothers and our forefathers all came to this country in different ships but we're all in the same boat now. It doesn't matter whether you're from America or Africa or Europe, Asia, Central or South America. We all live on the same little planet, the same little space ship we call Earth. So we must create one house, one family, one community and a loving community. If someone had told me when I was preaching to those chickens, if someone had told me when I was marching with Martin Luther King, Jr., or sitting in with Ronald Walters, if somebody told me then that I would be beaten nearby to death, lying unconscious at a Greyhound bus station in Montgomery, during the Freedom Ride in May of 1961, if someone had told me when I had that concussion on the bridge in Selma, that one day I would be standing here as a member of the United States House of Representatives, I'd say you're crazy. You're out of your mind. You don't know what you're talking about.

So I say to all of you, as individuals who help mold and shape minds, who make real dreams and ideas, you must never, ever give up. You must never ever give in or give up. Don't get lost in a sea of despair. Keep the faith. Keep your eyes on the prize. Walk with the wind and let the spirit of history be your guide.

Thank you very much. (Applause).