

## A Veteran Teacher's Lessons: John Lewis' Legacy for Our Students

July 17<sup>th</sup> our country lost a living legend. John Lewis began his quest for civil rights as a teenager. He was the youngest speaker at the 1963 Poor People's March on Washington. A famous 1965 photograph shows Alabama state police swinging a club at Lewis' head while he marched for African American voting rights in Selma. Unbowed, he was elected to the House of Representatives in 1986 serving 17 terms. He became known as the "conscience of the Congress".



*An Alabama State Trooper swings his club at John Lewis' head during the civil rights march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on May 7, 1965. (Newscom/Everett Collection)*

The lessons of Lewis' life is particularly poignant for our students this year, many of whom are witness to nationwide protests to end police brutality, insisting that black lives matter.

Black lives mattered for Lewis and all those who marched in the civil rights movement. This year is an opportunity to discuss Lewis' legacy. Fortunately, Lewis collaborated with graphic novelist Andrew Aydin in a three volume, first-hand, account of his life entitled [March](#). There is also a [comic book of March](#) which includes excerpts from all three volumes and can be downloaded to a *Kindle* for free. This is a good place to start.

You may want to show your students [“Episode 6, Bridge to Freedom \(1965\)”](#) from the award-winning documentary, *Eyes on the Prize*. It opens with the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery. In addition, a new 2020 documentary on Lewis’ life is now out, entitled, [John Lewis: Good Trouble](#).

There are many lessons from Lewis’ life. First, he entreats all of us to stand up against injustice, to right society’s wrongs. He often said, “My philosophy is very simple. When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, say something, do something, get in trouble, good trouble, necessary trouble.”

Secondly, Lewis’ civil rights movement insisted protest be nonviolent, ensuring that demonstrators claimed the moral high ground from segregationists. They effectively won over majority of Americans to support African American civil rights with this philosophy.

Thirdly, his movement knew how to work on two tracks: marching in the streets while simultaneously pushing politicians to pass new laws. They were instrumental in getting the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 passed by Congress. And their successes spawned a new generation of African American politicians now in local, state, and national government. They knew how to take big ideas and make them happen.

Recent protests, as those in the 1960’s, have seen large numbers of nonviolent demonstrators. However, we’ve witnessed scenes of violent confrontations with police, the destruction of property, and looting, too. We need to engage students in a historical debate and a current one: What methods of protest are most effective in producing lasting change?

In our classrooms, students should study the variety of ways people fought for African American equality, including the [nonviolent civil rights movement](#) and the voices and organizations for [Black Power](#), too.

As we mourn the passing of a civil rights icon, we should honor John Lewis’ memory by sharing the lessons of his life long struggle for human dignity.



*Representative John Lewis receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama in 2011. Getty Images*