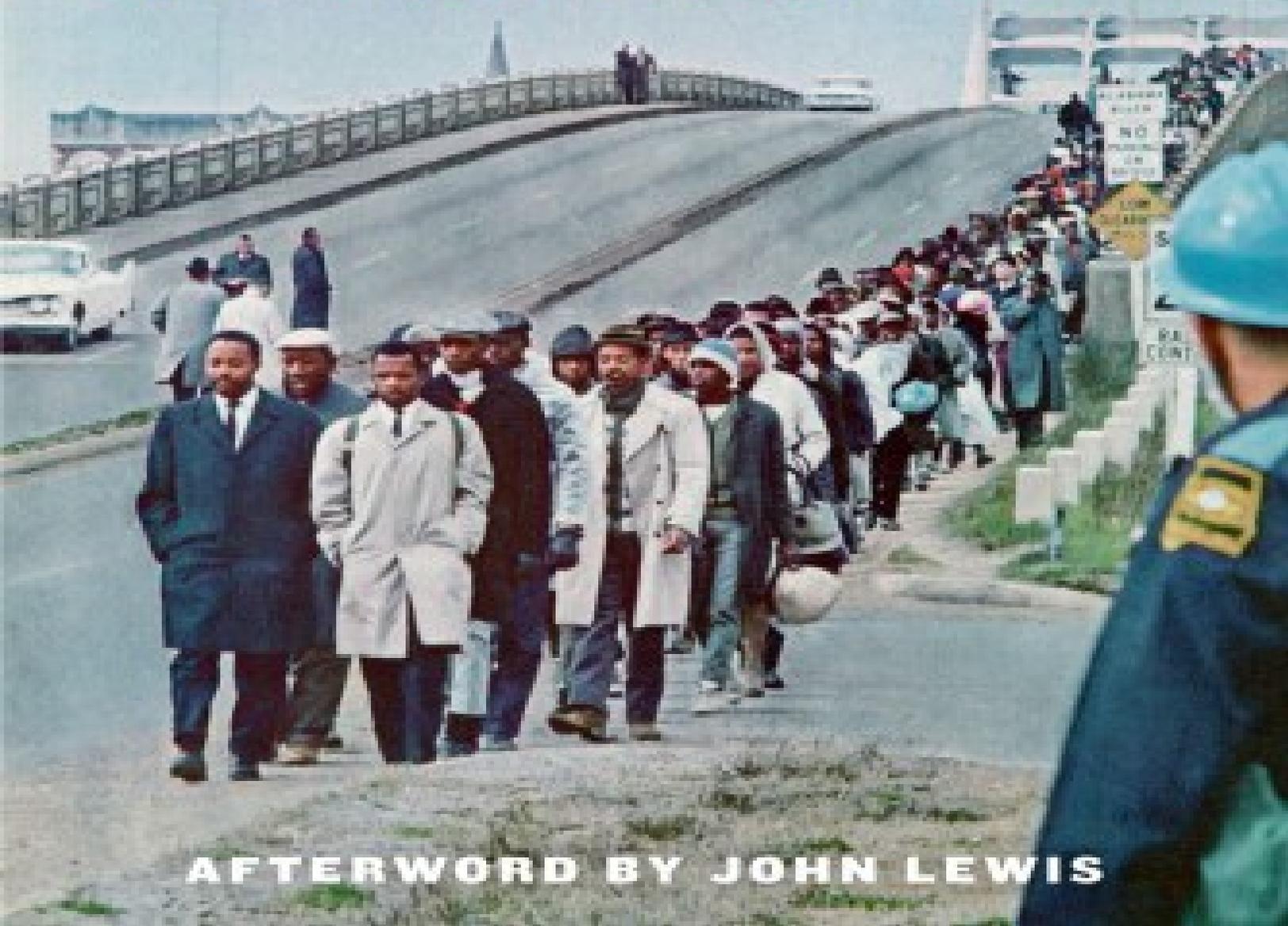


JON MEACHAM

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

HIS TRUTH IS MARCHING ON

JOHN LEWIS AND THE POWER OF HOPE



AFTERWORD BY JOHN LEWIS

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Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then said I, Here *am* I; send me.

—THE BOOK OF ISAIAH



Ku Klux Klansmen on a stroll through downtown Montgomery, Alabama, in November 1956; they were promoting a

nighttime cross-burning rally amid the boycott to end segregated bus service.

OVERTURE

THE LAST MARCH

We were beaten. Tear-gassed. Bullwhipped. On this bridge, some of us
gave a little blood to help redeem the soul of America.

—JOHN LEWIS, on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, commemorating the Bloody Sunday march of
1965

HIS STEPS WERE SLOW, careful, precarious. But John Lewis knew the way, and his gaze was steady, even peaceful, as he took in the old steel ramparts above his head and the brown asphalt under his feet. It was a Sunday in March 2020, on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, not unlike that first, fabled Sunday, fifty-five years before. Then as now, the breeze was cool, the late-winter sun soft, and the water below silent and swirling. The civil rights hero and longtime U.S. congressman from Atlanta was back again, walking the old path, his mind a mix of past and present. Once stocky from endless church suppers and innumerable political picnics and banquets, he was now frail and thin—shockingly so to friends accustomed to his familiar girth, a thickness of body that had made him so reassuringly solid, so central, so orienting, so much *John Lewis*. The weight loss was not a matter of choice, but of affliction—the worst kind of affliction, the result of cancer that had attacked his pancreas. Yet here he was, just weeks after his eightieth birthday, smaller but unbowed, standing once more above the Alabama River.

He led his fellow pilgrims up the bridge. They sang, inevitably, a few verses of “We Shall Overcome.” Lewis knew the song was important, just as days like these were important. They brought the story to life. As the years passed, he worried that the civil rights movement was receding into myth and legend. The battles of more than a half century ago could seem as distant as Agincourt or Antietam. The last chapter of Lewis’s life, then, was about history and hope, remembrance and renewal. His message was consistent: “If the young people of the South—young black people, young women, young men—could change the world then,” he’d say, “then we can do it again, now.” There were these pilgrimages to Selma, to Montgomery, and to Birmingham, the commemorations, and, day in and day out, the fact of *being* John Lewis, a man whose physical scars mirrored the wars of a nation.

Quietly charismatic, forever courtly, implacably serene, he was charming about his effect on others. “People come up to me in airports, they walk into the office, and they say, ‘I’m going to cry; I’m going to pass out.’ And I say, ‘Please don’t pass out; I’m not a doctor.’” He was, rather, a preacher and a prophet, a man of faith and of action.

Surrounded by civil rights veterans and members of Congress on that day in 2020, Lewis was handed a microphone. His frame may have been diminished, but his voice was not. That voice was still big and booming and passionate—a surprise, often, to audiences who saw Lewis as a quiet man. He was quiet, though, only until he had something to say. And when he had something to say, he said it with the preacherly cadences he’d honed delivering sermons to a flock of chickens on his family’s tenant farm in Pike County, Alabama—a place, Lewis recalled, so small it was nearly impossible to find on a map.

“It is good to be in Selma, Alabama, one more time,” he said to the crowd, pausing between phrases, letting the words sink in. “On this bridge just a few short years ago a few of the children of God started on a journey.” He’d been one of them—just twenty-five years old and already, from the age of twenty, a bloodied soldier of the movement. They’d been there, he recalled, because of his teacher in nonviolence, the Reverend James M. Lawson, who stood there still, in 2020, at the age of ninety-one. They’d been there because of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ralph D. Abernathy, and Lewis’s fellow student activist Diane Nash. And they’d been there, Lewis told the other pilgrims, because of “the saints of old.”

There could be no more profound inspiration. In his *Ad Martyras*, Tertullian, the second-century Church Father, wrote that to face prison and death for the faith was a noble fate. The real prison was sin and injustice; to love in the face of hate was the deepest call of the Lord Himself. Prison, Tertullian wrote, “is full of darkness, but you yourselves are light; it has bonds, but God has made you free.” To Tertullian, the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church.

To John Lewis, the truth of his life—a truth he had lived out on that bridge in 1965—was of a piece with the demands of the gospel to which he had dedicated his life since he was a child. He was moved by love, not by hate. He was as important to the founding of a modern and multiethnic twentieth- and twenty-first century America as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison and Samuel Adams were to the creation of the republic in the

eighteenth century. This is not hyperbole. It is fact—observable, discernible, undeniable fact.

On this anniversary, Ralph and Juanita Abernathy's daughter Juandalynn took the microphone from Lewis and broke into a hymn of the movement:

*Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom over me
And before I'd be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave,
And go home to my Lord and be free.
No more mourning, no more mourning, no more mourning over me
And before I'd be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave,
And go home to my Lord and be free.*

Listening intently, his eyes and ears taking everything in, Lewis simply said, "God bless you."

He'd heard the song before. He'd seen the sights before. He'd walked this pavement before. On Sunday, March 7, 1965, in a planned march from Selma to Montgomery to protest the systematic exclusion of African Americans from the voting booth—in violation of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, still flagrantly ignored in the American South a century on—Lewis and his friend Hosea Williams were stopped by Alabama authorities at the foot of the bridge. Some on horseback, all wielding weapons, the white officers charged the column of nonviolent marchers. "Get 'em!" one white woman cried out. "Get the niggers!" Lewis was beaten and, lying on the pavement, was ready to die.

Yet he survived, and the images of the attack that Sunday helped push President Lyndon B. Johnson to call for, and pass, federal legislation guaranteeing voting rights. Taken together with sit-ins to integrate lunch counters and other public facilities and Freedom Rides to integrate interstate travel, the Selma march, Lewis recalled, "injected something very special into the soul and the heart and the veins of America. It said, in effect, that we must humanize our social and political and economic structure. When people saw what happened on that bridge, there was a sense of revulsion all over America." Revulsion, then redemption: Is there anything more American? "Redemption—redemption is everything," Lewis said. "It is what we pray for. It is what we march for."

In the middle of the last century, Lewis marched into the line of fire to summon a nation to be what it had long said it would be but had failed to become. Arrested forty-five times over the course of his life, Lewis suffered a fractured skull and was repeatedly beaten and tear-gassed. He led by example

more than by words. He was a peaceful soldier in the cause of a religiously inspired understanding of humanity and of America. And he bent history to his will—though he would insist the important thing was not his will, but God’s.

The world was one way before John Lewis came out of Pike County and into the maelstrom of history, and it was another way when he was done. Though, to be strictly accurate, he was never done. “In the final analysis, we are one people, one family, one house—not just the house of black and white, but the house of the South, the house of America,” Lewis said. “We can move ahead, we can move forward, we can create a multiracial community, a truly democratic society. I think we’re on our way there. There may be some setbacks. But we are going to get there. We have to be hopeful. Never give up, never give in, keep moving on.” Devoted to the ideal of a soul’s pilgrimage from sin to redemption, from the wilderness of the world to the Kingdom of God, Lewis walked with faith that tomorrow could be better than today, and that tomorrow was but prelude to a yet more glorious day after that.

To put complicated matters simply: John Robert Lewis embodied the traits of a saint in the classical Christian sense of the term. A complex concept, sanctity has at various times been applied to all believers or to a special few. In Greek, the language of the New Testament, sainthood is derived from *hagiazō*, which means “to set apart” or “make holy.” (The Latin is *sanctus*.) Generations of believers have held that some human lives are in such harmony with the ideals of God that they should be singled out. One need not embrace Catholic practice and doctrine to benefit from the contemplation of men and women who, in the words of an old hymn, “toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew.” One test of a saint, closely tied to the test of a martyr, is the willingness to suffer and die for others. Which Lewis was willing to do—again and again and again.

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This may sound sentimental and overly grand, and if one were saying it about virtually anyone other than Lewis, it likely would be. To see John Lewis as a saint and a hero, however, is not nostalgic, nor does such an understanding flow from a kind of easy-listening historical sensibility in which the civil rights movement is white America’s safe and redemptive

drama. It comes, rather, from the straightforward story of what Lewis did, how he lived, and why. He accomplished something on the battlefields of twentieth-century America, in the skirmishes in our streets and in our cities and in our hearts, that links him with the saints of ancient ages, with the revolutionaries of the eighteenth century, and with the abolitionists and Union soldiers of the nineteenth. In Abraham Lincoln's First Inaugural, the new president appealed, eloquently but theoretically, to "the better angels of our nature." John Lewis is a better angel. The American present and future may in many ways hinge on the extent to which the rest of us can draw lessons from his example.

That is, to be sure, the most difficult of tasks. Our Constitution was founded on a dark yet realistic view of human nature: that we are fallen, frail, and fallible. The aim of the new republic was not perfection, an impossibility on this side of Paradise, but, as Gouverneur Morris put it in the preamble to the Constitution, a Union that would prove "more perfect." Experience teaches us that injustice is endemic to political life. "The tragedy of man," the twentieth-century Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr observed, "is that he can conceive self-perfection but cannot achieve it." And the tragedy of America is that we can imagine justice but cannot finally realize it.

Such an acceptance of the inevitability of falling short—that we will never fully be all we ought to be—is comforting for many. By allowing for failure, history is reassuring, for failure can thus be seen as inherent and excusable. If living with injustice is part of the nature of things, then perhaps we need not put ourselves through the most anguishing of trials to fight it. We can become too quick to be satisfied with a bit of progress, unconsciously limiting our vision by focusing on the incremental rather than on the transformative. As Martin Luther King, Jr., put it in a phrase drawn from the abolitionist Theodore Parker, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." *Bends*, not *swerves*—but what we can miss in this cold-eyed understanding of history is that the arc won't even bend without devoted Americans pressing for the swerve.

That's why Lewis is so vital. He rejected the tragedy of life and history, dismissed the suffocating limits of pragmatism, and instead embraced the possibilities of realizing a joyful ideal. He seemed to walk with Jesus Himself, who called on his followers to give everything to the cause of the poor and the downtrodden and the oppressed. The injunction of the gospel is to take up one's cross, not to take it as it comes; to lose one's life in the

service of others, not to keep one's options open.

"The finest task of achieving justice," Niebuhr wrote, "will be done neither by the Utopians who dream dreams of perfect brotherhood nor yet by the cynics who believe that the self-interest of nations cannot be overcome. It must be done by the realists who understand that nations are selfish and will be so till the end of history, but that none of us, no matter how selfish we may be, can be only selfish."

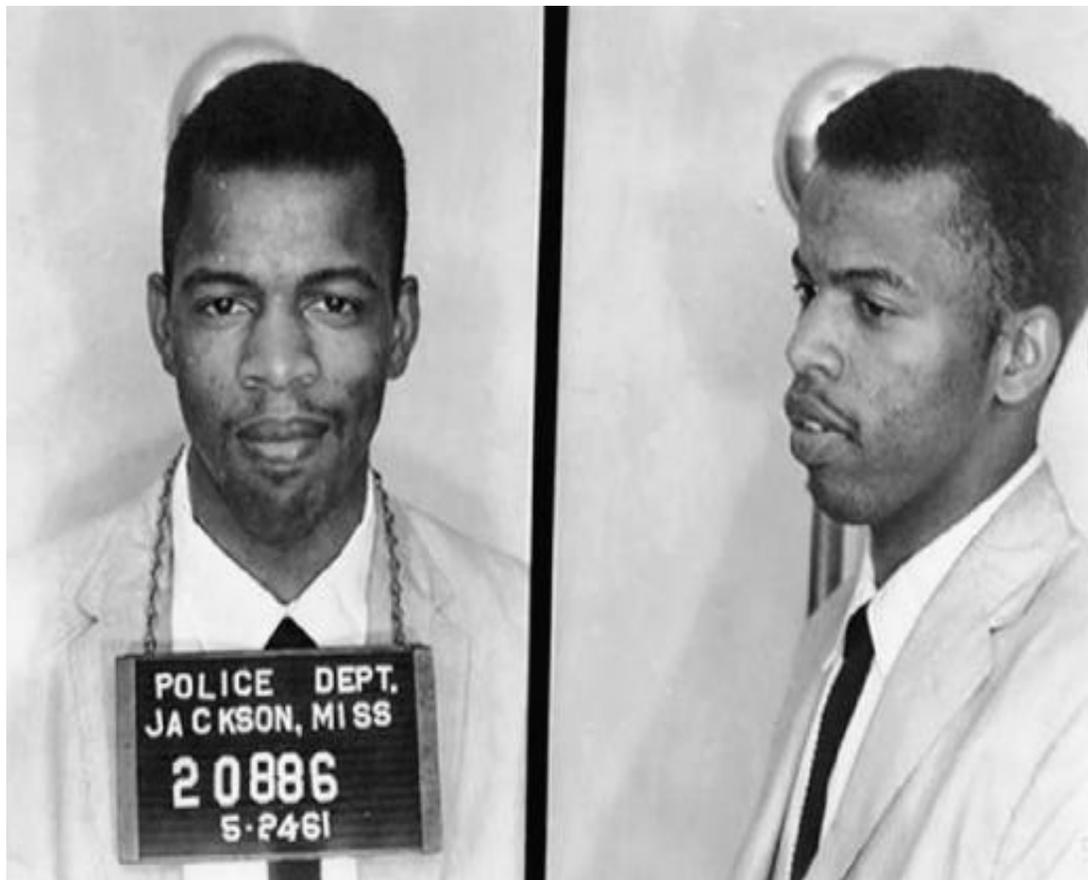
Fair enough—but without the Utopians the experiment fails, for without a peak to scale we would remain in the valley, milling about. Lewis was a prophet of the mountaintop, a signpost in the wilderness. In pointing toward the perfect, he insisted that a moderate course was no course at all, only a continuation of the wrong. He understood sin, but he chose to see the depravity of the world as something to be fought, not to be accepted. His inspiration came from the New Testament: "*Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth...Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" As Lewis recalled, the struggle within time and space was about "Heaven *and* earth. This was the social gospel in action. This was love in action, what we came to call in our workshops soul force."

In December 1975, in a story headlined SAINTS AMONG US, *Time* magazine listed Lewis, along with Mother Teresa (a portrait of whom appeared on the issue's cover), Dorothy Day, and others as "Messengers of Love and Hope: Living Saints." The term, the magazine wrote, "is heavy with meanings, not all of them congenial to modern man....To many, 'saint' is a medieval word, redolent of incense, conjuring up halos and glowing, distant images of spiritual glory in some great cathedral's stained-glass windows. To others, the word is still useful, if prosaic, shorthand to describe someone who willingly suffers something that seems beyond the call of duty: a son or daughter, for instance, who spends years caring for a senile and demanding parent. Somewhere between the two is the vision of the contemporary saint as a person of persistently heroic virtue and courage whose life is a model for others—a Mother Teresa, perhaps, or a Mahatma Gandhi."

Or a John Lewis. "A saint has to be a misfit," the historian of religion Martin Marty told *Time*. "A person who embodies what his culture considers typical or normal cannot be exemplary." It was neither typical nor normal to sit at segregated lunch counters in Nashville, or to walk into segregated bus stations in Rock Hill, Montgomery, Birmingham, and Jackson, or to march

across that bridge in Selma.

Lewis was not perfect, but that's not the test of a saint. Diane Nash, who loved him, said she didn't think of him in saintly terms. "He was human," she recalled. "He was my friend, my brother." Saints, however, *are* human. That's what makes them saints rather than saviors. Yes, he could be prideful and stubborn, and down the decades some found his message antiquated, trite, and incommensurate with enduring racial, economic, and criminal justice inequities. "*Time* magazine called John Lewis 'a saint,'" Joseph Lowery, a King lieutenant who became president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, said after Lewis had defeated Julian Bond, an old and intimate friend of Lewis's, in a tumultuous 1986 congressional campaign. "I never heard anybody in the black community say that....John Lewis gives the appearance of humility. I don't know whether he's humble or not, but white folk think he's humble. And white people tend to like humble black folk."



Lewis after his arrest in Jackson, Mississippi, on Wednesday, May 24, 1961, during the Freedom Rides. He'd be sent to Parchman Farm, the notorious penitentiary William Faulkner once described as "destination doom."

A blunt, biting, and fair point, but Lewis need not have all the answers to all our questions to be a figure of inspiration and illumination. “Next to Holy Scripture there certainly is no more useful book for Christians than that of the lives of the saints, especially when unadulterated and authentic,” Martin Luther wrote. “For in these stories, one is greatly pleased to find how they sincerely believed in God’s Word, confessed it with their lips, praised it by their living, and honored and confirmed it by their suffering and dying.”

Was John Lewis a saint in the classical sense of the term? “I would say yes,” James Lawson said long years after Nashville. “He clearly tried to be one who followed Jesus. That was a very important mantra for me in teaching nonviolence: to let the ‘Kingdom’ about which Jesus prayed when he said ‘Thy Kingdom come’—a kingdom governed by the Sermon on the Mount—begin in every person. And John made that Christian understanding the center of his life. In the nonviolent movement—which he followed in different forms through all the years—and in his personal life, John always lived that faith. I would say that without reservation or hesitation.” Lewis, then, made the Christian ideal real.

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For many Americans, especially non-Christians, the thought that Christian morality can be a useful guide to much of anything is risible, particularly since so many white evangelicals from 2016 forward chose to throw in their lot with a solipsistic American president who bullies, boasts, and sneers. Yet Lewis’s life suggests that religiously inspired activism may hold one of the best hopes for those who aim to make the life of the nation more just.

At times in its history, Christianity has been an instrument of repression. In our living memory, however, it has also been deployed as a means of liberation and progress. “All men,” Homer wrote, “have need of the gods,” and the secular wish to banish religion from the public square is perennial but doomed—one might as well try to eliminate economics, geography, or partisanship as forces that shape our politics. The more productive task is to manage and marshal the effects of religious feeling on the broader republic. “In ages of faith the final aim of life is placed beyond life,” Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in his *Democracy in America* in the Age of Jackson. “The men of these ages, therefore,...learn by insensible degrees to repress a

multitude of petty, passing desires.” This was the vision, a religious vision, that elevated America in the mid-1960s.

The story of the civil rights movement is often rendered as a struggle between nonviolence and violence, between the demand for “Freedom Now” and the cry for “Black Power.” John Lewis and Martin Luther King preached and practiced nonviolence, believing strongly that the vote was the most formidable of weapons. There were, however, other important voices in the arena. Malcolm X, for instance, argued that black Americans had a moral obligation to use “any means necessary” to achieve what the Founders had thought of as the rights of man. Those means included the right of self-defense, and the right of self-defense included the right to engage in violence to defend against white-supremacist terror. Yet the ethos articulated by Malcolm X was not, as many white critics would have it, about burning America down. It was, instead, about urging African Americans to draw on the traditions of the American Revolution to battle state-sanctioned white supremacy in order to claim their rightful place as citizens. George Washington and Patrick Henry had resorted to arms to win their liberty—so, Malcolm X argued, why shouldn’t African Americans be able to draw on that example in the face of fear, intimidation, and brutality?

Remedying four centuries of slavery, of segregation, and of inequality of opportunity is no simple matter. The witness of a Lewis and of a King and a Malcolm and a host of others was—and is—necessary to reform a nation in which racist ideas still prevail. Experience tells us that the task is staggeringly difficult. Lewis approached the work one way; many others choose different routes. In the fourth century, arguing against Christians who wanted to remove an altar to the pagan deity Victory, the Roman writer Symmachus noted, “We cannot attain to so great a mystery by one way.”

Nor can America attain racial, economic, and political justice in only one way. This book is about John Lewis and his vision, which was also the vision of Martin Luther King, and which changed, in a limited but real sense, how America saw itself. When the nation sees differently, it enhances its capacity to act differently. From Seneca Falls to Selma to Stonewall, America has gradually expanded who’s included when the country speaks of “We the People.”

Now as then, the tradition of faith that drove Lewis is too often used not to pursue justice but to amass power. Now as then, many white Americans profess to believe the gospel. And now as then, too many are content to