

A great man, but not the whole movement

Let's not neglect other heroes of the civil rights era.

By Amy Cohen

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was a uniquely visionary, compelling, and righteous man whose actions led directly to the greatest achievements of the civil rights movement: the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. As a teacher of African American history, however, I fear our collective memory of the era has narrowed as we have focused intently on one leader and neglected to celebrate others who made the movement's victories possible. As we rightly acknowledge the special role played by King, let's not forget those who fought at his side.

John Lewis turned 70 last year. There were no documentaries broadcast, monuments dedicated, or major newspaper tributes published to mark the occasion, but I guess that shouldn't be surprising. Students in my 10th-grade African American history class and most of my friends have never heard of him.

The son of Alabama sharecroppers, Lewis was a central figure in the civil rights movement. Although he was a child at the time of *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Montgomery bus boycott, he was involved in virtually all the significant civil rights events that followed, often in a leadership role.

In 1960, as a 19-year-old seminary student, Lewis became a leader of the Nashville lunch-counter sit-ins, which catalyzed similar protests throughout the South and led to the creation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC.

The following year, Lewis participated in the Freedom Rides, sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality to test the 1960 *Boynton v. Virginia* decision, which outlawed segregation of interstate travel. In the first of a series of violent episodes that marked the rides, Lewis was beaten in Rock Hill, S.C. Interestingly, when the notorious firebombing of one of the buses occurred, Lewis was in Philadelphia interviewing for a job building houses overseas with the American Friends Service Committee. After the bombing, CORE wanted to call off the Freedom Rides, but Lewis and other SNCC members chose to continue in spite of the danger.

As chairman of SNCC, Lewis was among the small group of civil rights leaders who met with President John F. Kennedy in the weeks leading up to the 1963 March on Washington. On the day of the march, he was the youngest speaker on the podium, and he is the only one still alive.

Perhaps most significant was Lewis' leading of the march over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., on the day in 1965 that came to be known as Bloody Sunday. King was supposed to lead the march but felt he had missed too many



An elections official in Alabama confronts civil rights leaders. John Lewis is behind and to the right of King.

Sundays at his church. Other members of SNCC, thinking the march was too dangerous, also chose not to participate. Lewis' skull was badly fractured that day, but he was out of the hospital in time to walk with King several weeks later, when the march actually made it all the way from Selma to Montgomery, a high-water mark in the campaign for civil rights.

Lewis stood alongside King and Rosa Parks when Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act. Since 1987, he has represented Georgia in the House of Representatives.

Why have so few Americans heard of Lewis despite his pivotal role in the civil rights movement? The reasons range from the superficial — such as his short stature, lack of charisma, and unremarkable name — to the significant — for instance, his support for multiracial democracy and non-violent protest, as opposed to the more inflammatory goals and methods of his contemporaries in the Black Power movement. If you think height, charisma, an unusual name, and radical politics don't matter, compare the fame of Stokely Carmichael to that of John Lewis.

Lewis' absence from our collective memory illustrates a troublesome trend. So much emphasis has been put on King that an entire movement is personified by one towering figure.

It would enhance rather than detract from King's legacy to broaden our pantheon of heroes who participated in the civil rights movement. The Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act took the efforts of thousands of brave individuals and scores of courageous leaders.

Americans should certainly consider Martin Luther King Jr. a national hero of grand proportions who well deserves the federal holiday in his honor. Leaders such as John Lewis, however, are also worthy of our respect, gratitude, and recognition.

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