

Apathy Irks Man Who Fought for Vote

Southern Black Risked Life, Now Must Urge People to Use Right

BY JEFF PRUGH

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ATLANTA—Fifteen years ago, John Lewis was a young seminary-bound student who repeatedly was clubbed, tear gassed and jailed while fighting for the civil rights of his fellow blacks across the Deep South.

Now, as executive director of the nonprofit Voter Education Project, Lewis, 36, is exhorting blacks, other minorities and young people in 11 states of the Old Confederacy to exercise what he calls their most crucial right—the right to vote.

While significant progress has been made by Lewis' foundation-financed organization, particularly in black voter registration, he concedes that his crusade faces a difficult struggle against voter apathy, cynicism and Watergate-enhanced distrust of public officials.

"I can't understand it, really," said Lewis, shaking his head with mild annoyance. "Here, so many people shed blood—and in some cases lost their lives—just trying to make sure people could be granted the right to vote. And now, there's such a tre-

mendous reluctance—even by young people who demanded that the voting age be lowered to 18—to take advantage of that right."

What disturbs Lewis and his 12-member, Atlanta-based staff most are recent surveys showing that more Americans than ever are inclined not to participate in the political process and that the lowest voter turnouts occur among persons 18 to 21.

Recently, a national survey of non-voters conducted by Washington's Committee for the Study of the American Electorate concluded that more than 70% of voting-age persons will not vote in the forthcoming presidential election.

The interviews also distinguished a new category of non-voters—the "dropout" who voted frequently in 1968 or earlier but since has become estranged from the political process.

"We're in serious trouble," Lewis said, "if we come to the day when counting the people who *didn't* vote is more significant than counting those who did. If this trend con-

tinues, it will be a threat to American society."

Unlike the United States, most democracies use some form of universal registration, with federal governments assuming responsibility for assuring that all citizens are registered.

Voter registration in Australia, for example, is mandatory, according to a study of other democracies by the American Voter Education Fund, Inc. The law is enforced by small fines.

In West Germany, the study reported a voters list is compiled from police files (each citizen must register with the police). Canada and Great Britain use political-party and government "enumerators," respectively, for door-to-door registration, with more than 95% of voting-age persons registered for each election.

In recent weeks, Lewis and his field workers have fanned out across the South, not only encouraging voter registration, but exploring reasons for not voting.

Although the number of black reg-

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istered voters in the 11 Southern states has climbed from 1 million to 3 million since the voter education project was founded in 1962, Lewis said another 3 million blacks remain unregistered.

Signing up voters requires a "selling job," Lewis said, not just in the South but nationwide.

That is why the Voter Education Project has launched a get-out-the-vote media campaign, including public-service TV spots distributed to 400 stations, with appeals by entertainment and sports personalities such as Carroll O'Connor, Freddie Prinze, Bea Arthur and Muhammad Ali.

Posters are also being used. One is a drawing of a black person's hands depositing a ballot in a voting box surrounded by cotton plants, with the headline: "Hands that pick cotton . . . now can pick our public officials."

That poster illustrates that most of the Voter Education Project's resources have been directed at registering blacks, particularly in the rural South, where Lewis says inaccessibility of registration and polling places remains an enormous problem.

"It's not like California at all—I was amazed at how easy it is to register and vote there," said Lewis, recalling a 1968 trip to Los Angeles

when he worked in the presidential primary campaign of the late Sen. Robert F. Kennedy. "Just about everywhere I went, there was a polling place or registration table. Fire stations. Schools. Shopping centers. Houses."

By contrast, Lewis said, the rural Southerner sometimes must drive 50 miles to a voting booth. Blacks, particularly, he said, often must overcome additional obstacles such as fear of losing one's job and intimidation by law-enforcement authorities.

"In some places," he explained, "registration may take place only on the first and third Monday of each month. That means, for instance that a black farm worker has to ask his supervisor for time off to register. His boss may exert subtle pressures to keep him from leaving his job, even for a few hours.

"And once he finally arrives at the courthouse to register, he's likely to come in contact with a uniformed sheriff. Even today, the Southern sheriff still symbolizes oppression to many of these people."

On a desk in Lewis' downtown Atlanta office is a stack of reports filed by Voter Education Project staffers and volunteers, citing infringements of voting rights in the South. Examples:

—Camden, Ala.: "The white principal of a Wilcox County high school called the black teachers, cooks, janitors and bus drivers on his staff together and told them, 'You vote for these folks (white candidates or you lose your job.'"

—Holly Springs, Miss.: "Approximately 300 blacks were turned away from the polls because they were classified as dead. Some of their names were purposely left off the books and some names had been scratched off. There were also policemen at each booth intimidating people, walking in front of people and just frightening people away."

—Opalocka, Fla.: "Three black city sanitation workers were denied the right to register at the City Hall by a city clerk who strongly suggested that they return after the election. Concerned about their job security, the three left, unregistered."

—Belle Glade, Fla.: "An incident occurred while one of the workers was helping two gentlemen register. The clerk called the Police Department and had the two men arrested for drunkenness. The program supervisor rushed to the jail, but the men had been set free without charges. Word spread like wildfire, and people were more hesitant to register than before."

Investigating and taking legal ac-

tion against such abuses is only part of what the Voter Education Project has done since it was established as a nonpartisan foundation in 1962 to elevate minority political consciousness in the South.

With a current budget of \$425,000, the project also attacks devices it deems detrimental to the impact of black votes—gerrymandering, at-large elections, and exorbitant filing fees. Grants help pay for training workshops, canvassing and gasoline for transportation to registrars' offices.

Its 27-member board of directors includes Mrs. Coretta Scott King, widow of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the civil-rights leader; the Rev. Theodore M. Hexburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame, and Georgia state Sen. Julian Bond.

The project is now experiencing a financial recovery from the recession of two years ago when contributions fell off sharply, the jobs of five staffers had to be eliminated, and the budget was slashed to \$300,000.

One reason for the recovery is a recent Atlanta dinner which raised about \$60,000 and featured Democratic presidential candidate Jimmy Carter as keynote speaker.

"It was our best fund-raising effort ever," said Lewis, adding that the project invites Democratic and Republican speakers in alternate years to assure bipartisanship.

Anyone meeting John Lewis for the first time would hardly suspect he was one of the civil-rights movement's most aggressive and courageous campaigners as director of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the early 1960s.

He is a taciturn man who speaks almost in a whisper, grew up on a farm in his native Alabama, and was educated at Fish University and American Baptist seminary. Now, along with his wife, Lillian, who grew up in Los Angeles, he has adopted a three-month-old son, and a quiet life-style.

His world now seems distantly removed from the bloody Freedom Rides, the Selma-to-Montgomery march and other confrontations, including one in which his skull was fractured.

"I'm not a person who likes controversy," he said, explaining his manner, "but if ever the situation dictates a fight, I will do it. Really, though, I did not consider myself militant or radical."

It was for that very reason, he said, that he was voted out as SNCC leader in 1966 and replaced by Stokely Carmichael, a far more outspoken activist.

Lewis is holder of the 1975 Martin Luther King Jr. Nonviolent Peace Prize and has been selected by Ebony Magazine as one of America's "most influential blacks."

He plans to widen the Voter Edu-

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cation Project's outreach toward young people as much as minorities. "I'm deeply concerned," he said, "when I visit colleges, and young people—white and black—tell me they are turned off by our political process."

But Lewis remains a champion of nonviolent social change, of the philosophy he and others embraced when they withstood mob and police violence a decade ago.

"The nonviolent movement of the '60s was like a bridge over troubled waters," Lewis told participants in a recent Atlanta seminar. "I think during the '70s we are going to have more troubled waters, and we're going to have to build strong bridges to move us on."

Job Relocation Benefits for New Workers Improve

NEW YORK (AP)—Relocation assistance to new employees is definitely improving, says Ticor Relocation Management Co., an employee relocation services firm. However, most U.S. companies still offer transferring employees more generous relocation benefits than those offered newly hired employees.

The most marked differences involve real estate assistance.

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