

The Winners Get To Write History: A Review Essay. Mike Miller

**Walking With The Wind--A Memoir of the Movement by John Lewis with Michael D'Orso
Simon & Shuster, 1998. \$26.00. ISBN 0-684-81065-4
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Mike Miller was a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee ("Snick") from mid-1962 – December, 1966. He worked in Mississippi in the Summer and early Fall of 1963. He was the San Francisco Bay Area representative for SNCC.

John Lewis was Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the early to mid-1960s, now serves as a Congressman from Atlanta and is a leader in the Democratic Party's House of Representatives caucus. His Memoir is the powerful narrative of an African-American leader from his boyhood in the 'mid-1950s to the mid-1990s. The book also reveals the limits of nonviolent direct action as a strategy for fundamental social change and fails to clearly present alternative points of view that were debated during the rise and fall of The Movement.

A Lively Story Well Told

Walking is the story of growing up in an entirely black, rural, southern world. Unlike his sisters and brothers, John Lewis went off to college, joined the emerging student movement and devoted himself to The Movement. He went to work for foundations and the War on Poverty. In the mid-1980s he was elected to Congress. For those who want another rich and textured look at the intensity, struggles and hope of the early 1960s, they will find it here.*

In the early student movement, Lewis made a commitment to "the Beloved Community...nothing less than the Christian concept of the kingdom of God on earth (which saw) all human existence throughout history as striving toward community, toward coming together." The power of religious faith and the commitment to nonviolence served as moral anchors and rudders to steer through a stormy period. Lewis embodies this tradition. We come to appreciate his strength of character and conviction as he tells this tale. He is at once proudly black and without a trace of anti-white sentiment.

The book also chronicles SNCC's decline as a major force in the Southern black community and major influence in the country. According to Lewis, the pivotal event was the defeat of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) at the 1964 Democratic Party Convention and the seating of the whites-only "regular Democrats." I agree with this assessment. Soon thereafter, black power exploded as SNCC's new slogan. In its anger, SNCC ate itself up internally and lost its deep connection with poor black communities in the South.

The Limits of Nonviolence and Direct Action

Unintentionally, the book reveals limits inherent in the philosophy of nonviolence and the strategy of direct action. The nonviolent direct action student movement won important victories against segregation. National and international media told its story. Northern church, labor and liberal allies responded with support--even if at times wavering. Southern political establishment-supported violence forced the Congress and President to take legislative and executive action to implement equal rights. But the direct action movement did not involve the rural and small town black poor who were the vast majority of the community.

When SNCC's Bob Moses went to Mississippi and asked local black leaders what they were interested in, the answer was clear: "voter registration." Being registered meant first class citizenship. It also offered the possibility of breaking the power of the Southern "Dixiecrats" who held most important Committee Chairmanships in Congress. Voting opened the possibility for whatever change was foremost in the minds of local people--improved public services, job opportunities or ending police brutality. African-American majorities in dozens of counties offered the possibility of black-led local governments.

Organizing "local people" to register was very different from organizing students. Students have less to lose; they don't have jobs, families, homes; that is precisely why they can be in the forefront of militant social movements. By organizing a relatively small, disciplined direct action cadre, the student movement had a huge impact. The philosophy of nonviolent action tapped both the religious faith specific to the southern black tradition and the idealism more generally characteristic of student activists. The concepts of redemptive suffering, forgiving one's enemies and calling upon a higher law as the source of morality were, and are, powerful. While not from that tradition, it had a powerful effect on me as it did on other northern whites who became involved in SNCC. What idealist wouldn't find the idea of the Beloved Community appealing.

To register, a black applicant had to go to the County Courthouse. Initially, only a handful of local adults had the courage to try. Their names quickly became known in the white community, and the response was swift: firing, eviction and cutting off of credit. Another response was not uncommon: nightriding Klansmen shooting into your home, sometimes throwing a firebomb forcing the occupants out into the open where shots were taken at them. When that happened to Hartman Turnbow in small town, rural Mississippi, he came out of his house with guns blazing. SNCC field secretaries involved in voter registration did not ask people not to protect themselves, with guns if necessary, when their homes were attacked. Philosophical nonviolence demands a nonviolent response even at the risk of death. It is very unlikely that there would have been a voter registration movement had this been a litmus test for participation. Lewis fails to adequately deal with the self-defense and the tactical versus philosophical nonviolence debate of the period.

A Group of Witnesses Versus a Mass Movement

Lewis was a leader of the Nashville Student Movement which went through months of careful preparation before it engaged in its first sit-in. He notes with irony that the Greensboro students whose February 1, 1960 sit-in sparked the student movement, had little preparation in nonviolence. In Birmingham thousands of demonstrators challenged Bull Connor's Police force and found themselves beaten by clubs, hosed with high-power water guns and bitten by police dogs. Some of them fought back. They threw rocks and bottles. On being viciously grabbed by a policeman, instead of going limp they struggled and sometimes kicked. Lewis wanted a mass movement; indeed he calls for one now. But it is hard to imagine a mass movement that is also as fully disciplined in its nonviolence as Lewis wants. There is no answer to this quandary to be found in his Memoir, nor is it discussed. As the author describes the period immediately following the freedom rides, "The outrage generated by the ugly resistance...swelled the movement with new members, ...Unfortunately, many...were unschooled in the techniques of nonviolent action. Worse, most of them had little or no interest in learning (emphasis added)." Even in Nashville, home of the most disciplined cadre of philosophically nonviolent resisters, "I could see that discipline eroding, crumbling a little at the edges." Implicit is the claim that if people had been nonviolent the problems of The Movement could have been avoided.

Organizing Versus Mobilizing

The mass demonstrations of Birmingham and many smaller counterparts shared significant similarities. None was more important than the fact that they were "mobilized" in the black church. Often days of preaching and teaching would precede the event. People drew courage from one another and inspiration from song, sermon and "testifying." From a common starting point, demonstrators would move together toward their target. The action might be sustained for days, even weeks. Arrests would surely take place shifting action from the streets into the tedium of the courts. Long before final decisions were rendered, everyone went home. There was no powerful, permanent organization left behind. In the debate of the time, this was called "mobilizing." Preaching ability was highly valued as a tool to motivate participation. Individual courage was at a premium, especially for those who stood at the front of a march line. These were Lewis strengths.

SNCC voter registration workers were trying to build permanent, powerful, locally-run organizations that would be in place for the long haul. Full-time organizers working with the "grassroots" of the Black Belt had to

identify leaders and potential leaders, work with them to overcome fear, assist them in the development of skills and self-confidence. The process required patience, steadfastness and being around for the long haul. Lewis' memoir simply fails to understand this part of The Movement.

There is a sadly revealing testimony to this failure. Lewis says, "My family had never really been connected to or understood my involvement in the movement. To them, it was as if I was living in a foreign country. Their lives were very simple... They didn't look beyond their immediate surroundings...(S)truggling to make ends meet, going to church on Sundays--that was their world. And I was...doing all these things they didn't understand, didn't know about or didn't want to know about. Maybe they were scared. Maybe it was just too big, too overwhelming. 'Put it in the hands of the Lord' was my mother's attitude toward anything she couldn't get her hands around...Whenever I (went) home...we would talk about Pike County, about the farm, about how my brothers and sisters were doing...(T)here was nothing for me in Pike County." His father died in 1977. Lewis says, "My father had become one of the best known men in Pike County...Everyone knew Eddie Lewis, and they all turned out for his funeral."

Lewis' family is like other Black Belt families who were the rocks upon which SNCC built community organizations. Yet Lewis could not relate SNCC activities to his own family. Visiting people like his parents, SNCC staff heard stories about counties, farms and families. In these stories were seeds for a discussion about voter registration and the possibility of something better, about the legacy they wanted to leave their children, about democracy and the right to be a first class citizen. John's approach was different: he participated in sit-ins and freedom rides, led marches, spoke at demonstrations and was a spokesman for The Movement. All were important. But he wasn't an organizer. Nor, as this book makes clear, did he understand organizing.

This lack of understanding is further demonstrated in the description of his later (1967) work for the Southern Regional Council's "Community Organization Project." (It) "was aimed at establishing cooperatives, credit unions and community development groups...throughout the Deep South. This was grassroots work, very much in keeping with the War on Poverty...community organizing from the bottom up...the concept of self-help." Any "grassroots work," no matter who the sponsor and no matter what the purpose, fits under the rubric of "community organizing." It is this fuzziness that allows Lewis to say of employment by VISTA, "We had our volunteers apply many of the same techniques and tactics that had been used so effectively to mobilize people during the peak years of the movement." SNCC's organizing, however flawed in fact, was in concept about self-determination through community power--a very different idea from the government-sponsored citizen participation programs that characterized the early years of the Poverty Program. Self-help was important to each, but for radically different reasons. The War on Poverty sought to incorporate people in the system, more or less--with the exception of racial discrimination--as it was. SNCC's self-help was about building power to confront systemic racism and poverty. The reader won't learn the difference in the book.

The Winners Write History

Finally, and most disappointing to me, are one-sided stories of old rivalries, self-serving statements, repetition of errors and significant omissions--all to support the author's point of view and justify things he did in the past. The author is much better than his book. John Lewis is a man of integrity, competence, determination, humility, enormous courage and a generous spirit. These virtues are overshadowed by a "get-even" spirit. Some examples:

In what was at best a slippery deal, Stokely Carmichael (now Kwame Ture) ousted Lewis as SNCC's Chairman. In the wee small hours of the morning following Lewis' re-election as Chairman, with far fewer voters present, a parliamentary maneuver was used to hold a second election. This time, Carmichael defeated Lewis. Lewis gets in his digs. "It was interesting to compare (Carmichael) to (Jim) Bevel. Both loved to speak. Both loved working an audience. But Bevel was a listener as well as a talker. He was open, eager to hear what you had to say, hungry to absorb new concepts and ideas. Stokely, on the other hand, was someone who had the answer and you were going to listen to it, period." Not the Stokely I knew in Greenwood, Mississippi during the voter

registration/community organizing period of Summer, 1963. Certainly not the Stokely whose famous Freedom school class, "What Is Good English," (see accompanying document) elicited in Socratic fashion from the session's participants a brilliant, down-home, exegesis on race, class and power.

When asked about the position of women in SNCC, Carmichael once responded, "prone." As SNCC people know, this incident occurred in a joking mood when several staff members were trying to match each other with jibes. Yet Lewis repeats the quote as if Carmichael was dead serious.

In the 1986 primary race for Congress, John Lewis and ten other contenders faced front-runner Julian Bond. One of the candidates challenged the others to take a drug test. At the time, rumors were flying that Bond and members of his staff were using cocaine. Lewis says, "As a rule I don't believe in drug testing. I think it violates our basic constitutional rights..." But in this case, Lewis agreed to take the test knowing that Bond, with whom he worked closely in SNCC, had already said that he wouldn't participate in such an invasion of privacy. In the runoff, Lewis and Bond faced each other. Bond delivered something of a low blow, claiming an impropriety, which he would have known not to be true, in one of Lewis' campaign contributions. Lewis struck back in a subsequent TV debate challenging Bond to take the drug test. The attack was deadly effective and contributed to Lewis' upset victory. During the campaign, Lewis raised questions of character weakness in Bond. Bond replied, "We've been friends for twenty-five years...But never in those twenty-five years did I ever hear any of the things you are saying about me now." To which Lewis replied, "(T)his campaign is not about the past. It's not about our friendship."

Strong leaders often have a strong weakness: whatever they do can be justified--even if it can't when done by someone else. Lewis' justification was, "This is a referendum on the future of our city, on the future of our country." Strong ego can beget egotism. Believing that the outcome of one congressional district race is "a referendum on the future of our city, on the future of our country," makes possible less-than-ethical conduct.

As for me, I'd keep the twenty-five years of friendship rather than hold the referendum.

2,480 words; August 26, 1998

Waveland: Work-Study Institute, February-March, 1965.

Notes by Jane Stenbridge about a class held by Stokely Carmichael.

The most important class was "Stokely's speech class." He put eight sentences on the blackboard, with a line between, like this:

I digs wine	\\\\\\\\\\\\\\\\	I enjoy drinking cocktails
The peoples wants freedom	\\\\\\\\\\\\\\\\	The people want freedom
Whereinsoever the policemens goes they causes troubles	\\\\\\\\\\\\\\\\	Anywhere the officers of the law go, they cause trouble
I wants to reddish to vote	\\\\\\\\\\\\\\\\	I want to register to vote

Stokely: What do you think about these sentences? Such as--The peoples wants freedom.

Zelma: It doesn't sound right.

Stokely: What do you mean?

Zelma: "Peoples" isn't right.

Stokely: Does it mean anything?

Milton: People means everybody. Peoples means everybody in the world.

Alma: Both sentences are right as long as you understand them.

Henry: They're both okay, but in speech class you have to use correct English.

(Stokely writes "correct English" in corner of blackboard.)

Zelma: I was taught at least to use the sentences on the right side.

Stokely: Does anybody you know use the sentences on the left?

Class: Yes.

Stokely: Are they wrong?

Zelma: In terms of English, they are wrong.

Stokely: Who decides what is correct English and what is incorrect English?

Milton: People made rules. People in England, I guess.

Stokely: You all say some people speak like on the left side of the board. Could they go anywhere and speak that way? Could they go to Harvard?

Class: Yes...No...Disagreement

Stokely: Does Mr. Turnbow (Hartman Turnbow, courageous local leader from Mileston in Holmes County) speak like on the left side?

Class: Yes.

Stokely: Could Mr. Turnbow go to Harvard and speak like that? "I wants to reddish to vote."

Class: Yes.

Stokely: Would he be embarrassed?

Class: Yes...No...Disagreement again.

Zelma: He wouldn't be, but I would. It doesn't sound right.

Stokely: Suppose someone from Harvard came to Holmes County and said, "I want to register to vote." Would he be embarrassed?

Zelma: No.

Stokely: Is it embarrassing at Harvard but not in Holmes County? The way you speak?

Milton: It's inherited. It's depending on where you come from. The people at Harvard would understand.

Stokely: Do you think the people at Harvard should forgive you?

Milton: The people at Harvard should help teach us correct English.

Alma: Why should we change if we understand what we mean?

Shirley: It is embarrassing.

Stokely: Which way do most people talk?

Class: Like on the left.

(He asks each student. All but two say "left." One says that southerners speak like on the left, northerners on the right. Another said that southerners speak like on the left, but the majority of people speak like on the right side.)

Stokely: Which way do radio and television people speak?

Class: Left.

(There was a distinction made between northern commentators and local programs. Most programs were local and spoke like on the left, the class said.)

Stokely: Which way do teachers speak?

Class: On the left, except in class.

Stokely: If most people speak like the left, why are they trying to change these people?

Gladys: If you don't talk right, society rejects you. It embarrasses other people if you don't talk right.

Hank: But Mississippi society, ours, isn't embarrassed by it.

Shirley: But the middle class wouldn't class us with them.

Hank: They won't accept "reddish." What is reddish? It's Negro dialect and it's something you eat.

Stokely: Will society reject you if you don't speak like on the right side of the board? Gladys said society would reject you.

Gladys: You might as well face it, man: What we gotta do is go out and become middle class. If you can't speak good English, you don't have a car, a job or anything.

Stokely: If society rejects you because you don't speak good English, should you learn to speak good English?

Class: No!

Alma: I'm tired of doing what society say. Let society say "reddish" for a while. People ought to just accept each other.

Zelma: I think we should be speaking just like we always have.

Alma: If I change for society, I wouldn't be free anyway.

Ernestine: I'd like to learn correct English for my own sake.

Shirley: I would too.

Alma: If the majority speaks like on the left, then a minority must rule society. Why do we have to change to be accepted by the minority group?

Stokely: Let's think about two questions for next time: What is society? Who makes the rules for society?

The class lasted a little more than an hour. It moved very quickly. It was very good: That is, people learned, I think they learned because: 1. People learn from someone they trust, who trusts them. This trust includes Stokely's self-trust and trust, or seriousness about the subject matter. 2. People learn more, and more quickly from induction rather than deduction. 3. People learn when they themselves can make the connection between ideas; can move from here to here to there to there. 4. People learn when learning situations emphasize and develop one single idea which is very important to them personally. 5. People learn when they can see what they are talking about. He used the board.

* A sampling of recent excellent books to be pursued by readers interested in the period includes Taylor Branch's Pillar of Fire, John Dittmer's Local People, Joanne Grant's Ella Baker, Richard Lischer's The Preacher King, Charles Payne's I've Got The Light of Freedom and Jo Ann Robinson's The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It.