

From Selma to the CIA

# John Lewis, civil rights militant turned big-business politician, dies at 80

20 July 2020

Congressman John Lewis, one of the last surviving figures of the civil rights movement, died Friday, July 17 after a months-long battle with pancreatic cancer. He was 80 years old. Tributes poured in from the corporate media and from leading Democratic and Republican politicians. The Trump administration ordered flags flown at half-staff on federal buildings and US military bases.

Lewis played a prominent role in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, serving as chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee from 1963 to 1966. He was arrested more than 40 times at protests across the American South and beaten repeatedly by racist mobs and racist police and sheriffs.

He was the youngest (and last survivor) among those who addressed the 1963 March on Washington, and later led the 1965 protests in Selma, Alabama, culminating in the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge where state troopers attacked and beat protesters, including Lewis, who suffered a fractured skull.

The youthful Lewis had physical courage and moral passion, but this was combined with complete prostration before capitalist politics. His political evolution personified the subordination of the civil rights struggles to the Democratic Party, which ultimately led its surviving leaders—after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.—to take their place in the political establishment and corporate structures of American big business.

After 16 years of participation in struggles for desegregation and voting rights, Lewis lost a race in 1977 for a congressional seat in Atlanta, then took a job in the Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter in 1977, as a deputy director of the VISTA public service program, which included the Peace Corps. He returned to Atlanta to run and win a seat on the city council in 1981, before finally gaining the congressional seat in 1986 that he held for the next 34 years.

In his legislative career, Lewis became a thoroughly predictable Democratic Party hack, a longtime supporter of Nancy Pelosi, who described him as the “conscience of Congress.” Given its character as a cesspool of corruption and defense of corporate interests, being the “conscience” of Congress is like being the moral guardian of a brothel.

Lewis viewed the election of Barack Obama as the first African American president as the culmination of his political efforts, no matter that the living standards of workers, including black workers, continued to decline, and the American government carried out wars and assassinations around the world at Obama’s direction. In other words, Lewis’s goal was the integration of the American political elite by the incorporation of African Americans, while not challenging the economic and social structure of American imperialism in the slightest.

Below, we reprint a perspective column from January 16, 2017, on Lewis’s political evolution.

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## From Selma to the CIA: John Lewis, Donald Trump and the demise of the “civil rights” establishment

By Patrick Martin, 16 January 2017

In an interview conducted Friday for NBC’s Sunday morning program “Meet the Press,” Democratic Representative John Lewis announced that he would boycott the inauguration of President Donald Trump because, “I don’t see this president-elect as a legitimate president.”

There are many reasons to reject and oppose the presidency of Donald Trump: he personifies the financial oligarchy that now dominates the US political system and seeks to subordinate all public policy to its mad drive to amass ever-greater wealth; he has filled his cabinet and White House staff with ultra-right ideologues, fellow billionaires and ex-generals; his government is committed to a program of drastic cuts in spending for education, health care and other public services, combined with a massive military buildup.

Lewis, however, mentioned none of these things. He based his rejection of Trump on the report by US intelligence agencies about Russian hacking during the 2016 presidential election campaign. “I think the Russians participated in helping this man get elected, and they helped destroy the candidacy of Hillary Clinton,” he said. “That’s not right. That’s not fair. That’s not the open democratic process.”

No evidence has been presented proving that the Russian government was responsible for hacking the Democratic

National Committee and the Clinton campaign. The hue and cry over Russian hacking has two purposes: to conceal the actual content of the leaked emails, which showed the right-wing and antidemocratic character of the Clinton campaign, and to whip up public opinion in the United States in favor of political, economic, diplomatic and ultimately military “retaliation” against Russia.

There is not the slightest genuine democratic content to Lewis’s critique of Trump. He did not cite Trump’s loss of the popular vote by nearly three million votes, or the impact of voter ID laws enacted by many Republican-controlled state governments to suppress minority voting. His attack on Trump consisted solely of embracing the CIA-led anti-Russian campaign in language reminiscent of the 1950s redbaiter Joseph McCarthy.

There is a grim historical irony here. During the years of the most intense struggles for civil rights in the South, in the 1950s and 1960s, the FBI, the police in cities like Birmingham, Alabama, and the southern Democratic politicians all claimed that protests against segregation were the work of “outside agitators,” communists sent in to do the bidding of the Soviet Union. But John Lewis, who played a significant role as a student leader during those years and led the march for voting rights from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, has remembered only one thing: denouncing your opponents as tools of Russia is a proven propaganda tactic.

A congressman from Atlanta for the past 30 years, Lewis personifies the recruitment and corruption of a section of middle-class African-Americans to reinforce the domination of capitalist politics. Civil rights leaders like Lewis were co-opted as part of a conscious strategy of the US ruling elite to refurbish the Democratic Party and the state machinery as a whole.

Dozens of major cities were turned over to African-American mayors, some of them veterans of the civil rights struggles, others merely cashing in on it. The Congressional Black Caucus expanded its number from a handful to more than thirty. With the assistance of programs like affirmative action, slots were created for black academics, government officials, military officers, corporate executives and ultimately CEOs.

These positions were not very numerous, but they were well paid, politically symbolic and gave a cover of “diversity” for the depredations of American big business and the crimes of the Pentagon. US imperialism incinerated tens of thousands of defenseless Iraqi conscripts while General Colin Powell, the first black chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, briefed the press on the progress of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. In similar fashion, Powell, as the first black secretary of state, and Condoleezza Rice, the first black female national security adviser, were at George W. Bush’s side when he launched the illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq.

This process culminated in the election of Barack Obama, the first African-American president—also the first president to

assert the right to assassinate American citizens, using drone-fired missiles, anywhere in the world. Obama, a creature of the military-intelligence apparatus, expanded the war in Afghanistan, launched a new war in Libya and engaged the US military once again in war in Iraq and Syria. He continued and strengthened the police state operations of the CIA, the FBI and the National Security Agency.

It is noteworthy—and characteristic of this corrupt layer of African-American Democratic politicians—that John Lewis has never opposed the military-intelligence operations of the Obama administration. On the contrary, Lewis received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Obama in 2011, the same year Obama authorized the drone-missile assassination of Anwar al-Awlaki, an American citizen.

Some 50 years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. made a critical step forward when he sought to combine the struggle for democratic rights at home with opposition to imperialist war abroad, courageously coming out against the war in Vietnam. There is not a shred of such principle among those who today seek to wrap themselves in King’s mantle in order to cover their own right-wing politics.

After Dr. King’s assassination in April 1968—an event that was undoubtedly linked to his turn against the Vietnam War—his acolytes made their peace with the establishment. Some of them, like Andrew Young, who had always stood on the right wing in King’s councils, became open apologists for US imperialism, with Young serving as US ambassador to the United Nations in the Carter administration.

Others, like Jesse Jackson, Julian Bond and John Lewis, became political hacks for the Democratic Party, giving this party of big business a “progressive” cover as it moved further and further to the right. Lewis also served in the Carter administration, running several antipoverty programs, before winning a congressional seat in 1986. In recent years, he has cashed in quite literally on his role in the 1960s, with his Faith and Politics Institute selling seats to lobbyists for \$25,000 apiece to his annual visit to Selma to reenact the 1965 march.

The enlistment of Lewis in the warmongering anti-Russian campaign only underscores the political challenge facing the American working class. No section of the Democratic Party will conduct a genuine or principled struggle against the monstrous right-wing program of the Trump administration and the Republican Congress. The Democratic Party, like the Republicans, defends the profits and wealth of the financial aristocracy and the global interests of American imperialism.

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