John Lewis served as chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), director of community organization for the Southern Regional Council, director of Voter Education Project, director of domestic operations for Action Agency, and city councilman at large in Atlanta. Since 1987, he has represented Atlanta's Fifth Congressional District in the United States House of Representatives.

John Lewis

Q: What can we do—and by "we," I mean black and white—to improve race relations in this country and get people working together again?

LEWIS: More than anything else, there is a need for leadership. Leadership at the highest level of government. I think one of the things that the president of the United States can do—hopefully, he will do—is make a commitment in support of the need for us to put the question of race behind us. And not just make a statement, but encourage people throughout the year to do what we can as a nation and as a people to eradicate racism. Encourage business groups, the academic community, the religious community, to conduct programs, seminars, workshops on race relations. I think our young people need to know the distance that has been come, but at the same time the distance that we still must travel. There's still a need for organizations in the black community, the white community, the Jewish community, and others to deal with the whole question of race.

Q: How do you feel about the breakdown of the coalition between blacks and Jews that was so central to the civil rights movement?

LEWIS: I think it's one of those tragedies, really, because during the 1960s there was no better working relationship than the one between blacks and Jews. I say to young people—blacks and young Jewish students and others in Atlanta and around the country—that we have a history of working together and somehow we must rebuild that coalition. In many communities all across this country, you still have a black-Jewish coalition,

a black-Jewish dialogue, where there are ongoing efforts by blacks and Jews to work together. To give you an example; Bill Gray from Philadelphia, along with the Jewish community there over the past few years, has organized a group of black and Jewish students who traveled from Philadelphia to Israel for two weeks, and then to West Africa for two weeks. Last year, the same group that went to Israel and West Africa came to Atlanta, and we took them on a tour of the South. They saw some of the rural South. They went to Tuskegee; they went to Montgomery; they went to Selma, in addition to being in Atlanta.

Q: What do you see as the issues that will be the foundation of a new coalition?

LEWIS: Well, I don't see any meaningful changes in the future based simply on race. I just don't see what we might call a civil rights movement similar to the 1960s. I think, if we're going to see major social and economic changes in the years to come, those issues must be issues that affect blacks and whites alike. One of the major issues today affecting the whole country is this large number, millions of young black men, who are growing up, coming into young adulthood with very little formal education, without a sense of purpose, without a sense of direction. The black community, black organizations, cannot handle that problem alone. This is a problem for the total society, white America, the federal government to get involved in. The problems within our large urban centers—drug abuse, gangs, and other anti-social behavior—it's all related. And there must be massive intervention on the part of the national government. It's in our best interest as a democracy. It must not be looked upon as a black problem. I think we've made progress; we've come a distance. But the sad fact is that there is still a terrible distance we must travel. There are just too many people, human beings in America, who have been left out and left behind, that the movement passed by. With all of the changes, with all of the legislative action, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Fair Housing Act of 1968, the rulings of the Supreme Court; there are just too many lives that have not been greatly impacted. There are still people affected by racism. There are certain places in this country where the conditions are still not much different from 1960 or 1965.

Q: Have we lost ten years under Ronald Reagan and George Bush?

LEWIS: I'm afraid we've lost ten years plus, really. At one time, I thought, as a nation and as a people, that we were ready to take that great leap; we were ready to move much faster. And I think, with the election of Reagan, that movement was arrested. You know, Rosalynn Carter said during the Reagan years that she felt the Reagan administration made people feel comfortable in their homes with their prejudices. And I think that's what happened during those eight years. Despite economic conditions, a president, a leader, a political leader, a major moral leader or social leader can inspire people and bring out the very best in people. Robert Kennedy was able to do that. Martin Luther King, Jr was able to do that. I think often about what this country would have been, and maybe what the world would have been, if Martin Luther King, Jr and Robert Kennedy had lived; what type of life we would have today. I think we would be much further down the road toward a society free of the disease of racism and violence; that we would have less poverty, a greater sense of community, a greater sense of family. There would be a greater sense of purpose, a greater sense of direction within the American community. We all lost something in the loss of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr Some of that hope, some of the optimism—a great deal of that hope, I should say; and a great deal of that optimism—died with them. And we have not been able to renew much of that hope and optimism.

Q: If Dr. King were alive today, what do you think he would be doing and saying?

LEWIS: I think he would be speaking out against the violence in our inner cities. He'd be leading the campaign against drugs. He would be calling upon the nation to lay down the tools and instruments of war and violence. And he probably would still be saying that we need to spend billions of dollars on something like a domestic freedom budget; a domestic Marshall Plan to rebuild American cities.

Q: Are drugs and inner city violence a greater threat to black Americans today than racism?

LEWIS: Oh, yeah. I said a few days ago, when I was leading a group of about two hundred young black men through a housing project here, that I felt the epidemic of drugs and the proliferation of violence related to drugs was probably the greatest threat to the black community since the days of slavery. We found a way to fight segregation and race discrimination. It took a lot of time and a lot of effort and a lot of legal work, but we were able to use our bodies as living witness against this system of segregation and racial discrimination. How do you organize and mobilize a community to say that we want the drugs out and to teach people, educate people, that this is not the way, that there is a better way.

Q: Would Dr. King, if he were here today, be focusing his energies in the North or in the South, in the cities or in rural areas? Where would his priorities be?

LEWIS: I think, if Dr. King was alive today, he would be spending a great deal of his time appealing to people in the large urban centers in both the North and the South, but especially in the North. You know, today there is a sense among black Americans that, in places like Atlanta and maybe even in parts of Alabama and Mississippi, the opportunities for blacks may be greater than in the North. So you have this unbelievable migration of young professional blacks from the North to the South. So I think that Dr. King would be trying to find a way to give people a sense of hope and greater opportunity in those places where people are leaving from.

Q: Could you comment generally on the link between crime and racism. Which is the chicken and which is the egg; or do they feed off each other?

LEWIS: That's a hard one. I think, if people are forced to live under certain conditions, and if it's racism that created the conditions, it helps breed violence and crime. Just the way we build our cities, when we cut people off from one another and isolate so many people in these unbelievable housing projects; where we ghettoize people and pile people on top of people; whether we are conscious of it or not, whether it is a racist decision or not; many of the situations in which people find themselves sap all

of their human energy and their sense of optimism. It breeds despair and it breeds conditions that give way to violence and crime.

Q: What particular pieces of legislation do you think would make a difference?

LEWIS: I think we need a massive job training effort. I was very hopeful, with the cold war being over and behind us, that we would be able to reach some type of budget agreement on deficit reduction and start spending billions of dollars, taking money out of the highway trust fund, out of the airport trust fund, where we have billions of dollars, and build up what we call an infrastructure trust fund to generate jobs and economic development across the country. It could train millions of American citizens, especially young men, to start rebuilding America; our highways, our sewage systems, our waterways. During the eight years of the Reagan administration and so far during the Bush administration, we've heard very little if anything, except from [Secretary of Housing and Urban Development] Jack Kemp, about urban America. And urban America is literally, it's like it's dying on the vine. The cities are rotting. They're dying, and we're talking about spending five hundred billion dollars or more to bail out the S&Ls [savings and loan associations]. But we need to be spending billions and billions of dollars to bail out the people who are trapped in our large urban centers. I think—I really believe this—I think that Martin Luther King Jr and the civil rights movement saved America, at least the southern part of America, from becoming like Northern Ireland or Lebanon. And we've made progress. I've said over and over during the past few years, we have witnessed what I like to call a non-violent revolution, especially in the South. But it doesn't mean that we cannot and will not go through another period of social upheaval and social conflict.

Q: To what extent do you see racism in America today as a barrier to progress?

LEWIS: Racism is still a barrier. Despite all of the progress we've made, the scars and the stains of racism are still deeply imbedded in almost every

corner, in almost every segment of American society. Race affects almost everything we do. Whether a person moves up in an organization, whether a businessman is successful or not; it can be based on race. Whether a particular school system or school district gets money, computers in their classrooms, and other resources that are needed to enhance the quality of education; I think it's based on race.

Q: Are there other societies that you think have dealt with the issues of race more successfully than we have?

LEWIS: No, not at all. See, I think we're so different. I think we have to travel down this road by ourselves, really. We are involved in an experiment in America. We have to make it work; I believe that we can make it work; and it must work. There may be some setbacks; there may be some interruptions, disappointments here and there. But you know, we're on that long march; we're on that road. We're traveling down that road toward a society based on equality and equal opportunity. We're on our way toward the building of a loving community; that open society, that interracial democracy. We may slow down and walk and sort of march in place, but I think we're on our way. There are going to be different forces rising up from time to time, trying to slow down that effort or interfere with that effort. But as a nation and as a people, there won't be any turning back.