

Freedom Marching Through History

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Kevin Glackmeyer/AP

Rep. John Lewis walks arm in arm with (from left) House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and Assistant Leader James Clyburn as the Rev. Jesse Jackson Jr. follows across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., on Sunday, the 46th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, when Lewis was beaten during civil rights protests.

SELMA, Ala. — Rep. John Lewis is dancing. It's Sunday, and the Georgia Democrat is on a cold and windy sidewalk surrounded by a group of his Congressional colleagues there for a re-enactment of his 1965 march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge — the protest known as Bloody Sunday.

In a few minutes, Lewis will march and sing and pray. But right now, on the street leading to the bridge in downtown Selma, he wants to dance. A group of young people lining the march route are moving in unison to a hip-hop beat, and their enthusiasm inspires Lewis to break from his spot at the front of the Congressional delegation and join in.

He throws his hands in the air and wiggles his hips. The kids screech in delight.

Lewis, 71, looks spry, and later, when he speaks on the bridge and recalls what happened to him there 46 years ago, when protesters marching for voting rights were beaten, gassed and turned away by state troopers, his steady voice booms.

He's among a dwindling number of those who can tell firsthand the story of the civil rights movement, the ones who can recount not only the dates of the marches and the names of the protestors, but also what the sting of a water hose or a billy club to the head felt like.

That is one of the reasons Members of Congress have joined Lewis for his 11th annual trip to Alabama to revisit the very churches and streets where history was made. Sixteen Members have

accompanied Lewis this year on the three-day tour, organized by the Faith & Politics Institute. Many have brought their children and grandchildren.

They've come to hear civil rights veteran Dorothy Cotton tell the stories of her days teaching citizenship classes to blacks who didn't understand that they had the right to vote. They've come to hear Bernard Lafayette share his tales of organizing bus boycotts and Freedom Rides.

They've come to stand in the church in Birmingham where a bomb killed four little girls in 1963, and to see Lewis point to a choir bench in a church in Montgomery where he hid from an angry mob one night in 1961.

Rep. Chris Van Hollen is traveling with his teenage son, Alex, a paler blond and thinner version of his father. "That's the reason I wanted to bring him," the Maryland Democrat says. "He should see this while he can. It's an experience you want to savor while you can."

A Congressman's Sermon

Brown Chapel AME Church, Selma

The pews are packed in Brown Chapel, where the marchers gathered on Bloody Sunday before heading for the bridge. A gospel choir is singing full-tilt and the Rev. Jesse Jackson Jr. has joined the group. Beside the pulpit sits Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.), Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) and House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.).

The church's pastor prays. Jackson urges attendees to tithe. Actually, it's more of a shakedown than a request. "Give more than your shoes cost," he urges the well-heeled visitors from Washington, D.C., who sit among the church's congregants. "Give how you live."

There is more singing, and a speech from the mayor. But the star of the morning is Assistant Leader James Clyburn, who is to deliver the sermon.

The South Carolina Democrat isn't a minister, but he's the son of one, and when he begins speaking, he sounds like a professional. His subject is the Sunday-school favorite: the story of the good Samaritan. A man is injured on the side of a road; two other men pass him by, but a third, a Samaritan riding the road on a donkey, stops and tends to him. Finally, Clyburn delivers the lesson. "Sometimes, you have to get off your high horse!"

By now, the audience is with Clyburn. As he dabs the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief, they punctuate his speech with hollers of "Yes, sir!" and "That's right!"

"Sometimes," Clyburn intones, alluding to both the bloody history of the civil rights movement and to the challenges of today, "you have to get down where the problem is."

Confessions of a 'Southern White Boy'

The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Birmingham

The Members of Congress on the trip seem different in Alabama than they do in Washington. In the Capitol, they are VIPs. Here, they are ordinary people. But they also are taking time to do things that are outside their usual rhythm: listen, sing, be silent and reflect. Some are out of their element. To those who hail from districts up north, the Southern drawls and the collard greens with ham hock for lunch are foreign.

Members of Congress, often so ready with a quote, seem unsure, uncertain and humble.

Rep. Spencer Bachus surprises the crowd with his candor during an after-dinner talk on Friday night. The Alabamian, one of only two GOP lawmakers in the group, tells his own story of growing up in segregated Alabama.

In 1962, his father, a contractor, violated the state's unwritten rules by hiring a black subcontractor to install windows in a school the elder Bachus was building. When the work was done and the deadline for completing the project nearing, vandals smashed every window in the school while the police looked the other way.

Bachus, 63, who was a teenager during the most violent years of the movement, describes his struggles with his own history. "As a Southern white boy, there is a certain amount of shame we have to live with," he says. But civil rights leaders and activists didn't make life better only for blacks, he says.

The civil rights leaders, in effect, saved Southern whites from their worst angels. By not resorting to violence in the face of violence, he says, they prevented the country from entering a cycle of bloodshed like those that have scarred countries like Kosovo or Afghanistan. "Thank God for Martin Luther King for what he did for the white people of Alabama," Bachus said.

Bachus ends his testament with another, a rare admission from a lawmaker, that things aren't always black and white.

"We have challenges ahead," he tells the crowd, referring to the issues lawmakers face back in Washington. "And there is not a day where I don't feel like my faith is being pushed one way or another."

Ordinary Places, Extraordinary People

First Baptist Church, Montgomery

It is Rep. Mike Quigley's first time on the Alabama trip. The Illinois Democrat isn't sure what he's looking for here, and he's in a reflective mood.

Quigley is standing in the back of the First Baptist Church, pressing his palms into the back of a wooden pew and looking at the pulpit. This is where Lewis once spent the night hiding from a mob outside during an early Freedom Ride. The places Quigley has visited this weekend, he says, seem smaller than he had imagined, perhaps because they loom so large in history.

“They look like everyday places, which they are,” Quigley says. “They’ve just been made extraordinary by extraordinary people.”

And he’s right; the churches on the tour are working churches where regular people attend services, choir practices and Sunday school. They are modest affairs. The basement of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, where a bomb intended to intimidate protesters killed four girls in 1963, looks like any other church basement. It has linoleum tile floors and bulletin boards and a poster of the Lord’s Prayer taped to the wall. It smells like disinfectant.

Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was a pastor and where the city’s famous bus boycotts were organized in the wake of Rosa Parks’ arrest, has battered pews and simple stained glass panels. And the Edmund Pettus Bridge is a drab steel and concrete structure, its iconic lettering bleeding rust stains down the metal edifice.

“You think of churches in Rome and Poland, and they’re grand and impressive. ... But these places,” Quigley says, “are special in their own way.”

A Bridge to Somewhere

Edmund Pettus Bridge, Selma

In the now-famous grainy footage of what happened on the Pettus Bridge in 1965, Lewis appears as a serious young man in a light-colored trench coat carrying a small backpack. He leads a column of somber protesters onto the bridge, where he meets a trooper with a bullhorn. Within moments, troopers advance on the marchers, clubs swinging.

That incident led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act in August of that year. But on Sunday, the trip across the bridge doesn’t feel like a history lesson.

Lewis stands on the bridge, this time surrounded by his Congressional colleagues, and retells the story. He tells them about the beating that left his skull fractured, and the pop of tear gas being released, and the feeling that he was going to die right there on the bridge.

But he also recalls for them what was in that backpack. “I had a few books I wanted to read in jail and one apple and one orange, and my toothbrush and toothpaste,” he says.

On the very spot where the beating took place, hearing those small details seems to waken ghosts and fold the past into the present. The lawmakers gather around Lewis in a tight knot, asking questions in hushed voices.

“Had you been beaten before?” Reid asks. Lewis nods.

Earlier in the weekend, Lewis issued a simple set of instructions to the group: Hold on to the feelings that visiting these places stir.

“We meet in a sacred place,” he said. “Remember it. Don’t forget it.”