EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN LEWIS

December 4, 2006
Washington, D.C.

Interviewer
Janet Heininger

Also present:
Brenda Jones

EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN LEWIS

December 4, 2006

Heininger: Well, you've had a long history with the Kennedy family. Tell me what your first impressions were and when you first met Ted Kennedy.

Lewis: I first met Senator Ted Kennedy during the early 1960s. It was one of those things, when I saw him and said hello. He probably wouldn't remember me saying hello to him. It was after the election of President [John F.] Kennedy, and it was after Birmingham, after the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, the turbulent events of Birmingham during the spring of 1963. I must first say that I had this unbelievable sense of admiration and affection for the Kennedy family. When President Kennedy was running for Senator, he gave a great many of us a sense of hope, a sense of optimism. So I readily identified with the Kennedy family. Not just with the President, but also with his brothers, Robert [F. Kennedy] and Ted.

Heininger: But your closest relationship was clearly with Robert, not with the President or subsequently with Ted, too. You had a long relationship with him.

Lewis: Well, I got to know Robert Kennedy during the spring and summer of 1963. He was just a wonderful human being, a wonderful man. He had a great sense of humor, and he came across with the sense that he really believed, he really felt something. He had this great sense of passion, and I identified with that. When I was chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, better known as SNCC, at some of our meetings I would imitate Robert Kennedy or President Kennedy. In some of those late evenings, when we would be meeting, we would have little skits, and someone had to play the role of President Kennedy or play the role of Robert Kennedy.

Heininger: And you were one of them?

Lewis: I played one of them. During those years I was much younger, and I could get the voice down pretty well.

Heininger: I was going to say, can you do the Boston accent?

Lewis: I came very close to it, really, for someone who grew up in rural Alabama, in the heart of the Deep South with a deep southern accent, to be able to do that New England accent—and I did it pretty well.

Heininger: Can you paahk your caah?

Lewis: Paahk the caah in the lot. As President Kennedy said on one occasion, "I don't understand it, why the white people in Albany, Georgia can't meet with the Negroes. After all, we meet with the Russians in Geneva. Call my brother, Bobby, and tell Bobby to call Dr. [Martin Luther] King."

Heininger: That's good. That's really good.

Lewis: Thank you.

Heininger: That's good. Does he ever do that publicly? [Said to Brenda Jones, Communications Director, who was present.]

Lewis: No, no, no.

Heininger: So you developed a close relationship with Bobby. But what about with the President? When you first started interacting with the Kennedy family in early '61, what did you expect in terms of their stance on civil rights? You said it gave you a sense of hope, but things didn't move very quickly.

Lewis: Well, we had expected a great deal from President Kennedy, this new President, because he ushered in a period of great hope, a period of great expectation. His first real test, not just for the President, but also for his brother, the Attorney General, came in May of 1961 during the Freedom Rides, when we had informed the Attorney General, through a telegram, that we were going to go on the Freedom Rides. Apparently, Robert Kennedy didn't know about the Freedom Rides, didn't hear anything about the rides, until we had been attacked, first in South Carolina and later in Alabama.

Heininger: Did you have a sense that this wasn't penetrating into the White House either?

Lewis: I had a sense that President Kennedy hadn't been informed, that he didn't know what was happening, and then another sense that maybe, just maybe, they didn't know how to deal with some of the officials in the South. They were very cautious. They didn't want to go too fast. They didn't want to do anything to rub white southerners, especially white politicians in the South, the wrong way, because they were thinking about the election in '64.

Heininger: And do you feel that that lasted the entire Kennedy years?

Lewis: Oh, no. I don't think it lasted the entire Kennedy years. During the midst of the Freedom Rides, and two years later during Birmingham, I think both President Kennedy and Robert Kennedy became fully committed to the cause of civil rights. I think there was a feeling, on the part of President Kennedy, and especially his brother, Robert Kennedy, that they had to move, and move very fast, to get the American government—the Federal government—on the right side when it came to civil rights, and had to use the force of the government if necessary.

Robert Kennedy was very disturbed and really upset when he felt that during the trip from Birmingham to Montgomery there was a deliberate effort on the part of some of the state officials in Montgomery, along with police officials, to lead us into a trap where we would be beaten by an angry mob of Klan people and others.

Heininger: Did you have a sense as to where Ted Kennedy was in any of this?

Lewis: During that period I didn't hear that much about Ted Kennedy. It was Bobby and the President.

Heininger: Well, they had the positions.

Lewis: They had the position in places of power, where they could do something, and we expected the President and his brother to do something. Bobby Kennedy tried his best. He did his best to spare us the violence that we received in 1961. I saw this man grow, and during that time he had a tremendous influence on his brother, the President.

I remember on one occasion, being in Washington, in the summer of 1963, before the March on Washington. We had a meeting in the office of the Attorney General concerning some racial problems and demonstration in Cambridge, Maryland. And it was during one of those meetings, one evening Bobby Kennedy said to me, "John, I now understand. The young people, the students have educated me." And from that day on, I think he became all-out committed to the cause of civil rights.

Heininger: So Ted then comes to the Senate, is elected to the Senate. Do you have any sense in those early years—this is before a lot of your contact with him—that the same attitude was being passed on to the younger brother now?

Lewis: I had the sense that he's a Kennedy, and how could he be different? He's a member of the family. If the President is committed, the other brother, Robert Kennedy, is committed, what about Ted Kennedy? I don't think Senator Ted Kennedy wanted to do anything but just do a good job in a very quiet and effective manner as a Senator. He didn't want to do anything that he thought would have an adverse impact on the administration of his brother. He grew like Robert Kennedy grew, and especially after the assassination of President Kennedy, and after the assassination of Robert Kennedy. He came into his own. I remember seeing him on one occasion during the brief Presidential campaign of Robert Kennedy. I heard him speak someplace in California, and you could tell that he was ready to go all-out on some of the big issues of our time.

Heininger: Do you have a sense that he—you said that you felt that he didn't want to do anything that adversely affected his brother's administration or subsequently then with Robert. Do you have a sense that he felt himself very much in the younger brother role, and thinking, *I'm overshadowed by my older brothers*?

Lewis: I had that sense. I had the sense that he was being overshadowed by the President and the Attorney General. He's a new Senator. He's a new kid on the block and he was just going to do his work. And I think he did it, and he became one of the most effective legislators probably in modern times.

Heininger: You've known all three personally. Tell me a little bit about the differences that you saw in their political styles.

Lewis: President Kennedy—when we first met with him, he listened. He was a good listener. He listened very well and was very—he didn't engage in a great deal of conversation, he just listened. He would ask different people what they think, what their views were.

I remember in June of 1963, when we met with him in the White House, and the idea of the March on Washington came up. He didn't like the idea of people marching on Washington, and he told us that. He told [Asa Phillip] Randolph, "Mr. Randolph, if you bring all these people to Washington, wouldn't there be violence, chaos and disorder? Then we will never get a civil rights bill through the Congress." Mr. Randolph responded and said, "Mr. President—" in his baritone voice— "this will be an orderly, peaceful, nonviolent protest, and we are going to march on Washington because the masses are restless."

President Kennedy responded and said, "Well, we have problems, but we can solve them." We left that meeting with President Kennedy, came out on the lawn of the White House, announced to the press that we had a meaningful and productive meeting with the President of the United States, and we told them we were going to march on Washington.

A few days later, we met in New York and invited four major white, religious, and labor leaders to join us and issued that call. We came back to Washington on August 28, 1963, and the White House, the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, and their staff were very supportive and very helpful. The day of the march, when the march was all over, they invited us down to the White House, and President Kennedy stood and greeted each one of us. He was beaming like a proud father. He was so happy. He was so glad and gratified that things had gone so well. He said, "Thank you. You did a good job" as he shook each of our hands. And when he got to Dr. King, he said, "And you had a dream." That was my last time seeing President Kennedy alive, on August 28, 1963. I have a photograph with that group.

When we heard that President Kennedy had been assassinated, we all cried. I cried because I felt I lost not just my President, but someone who was so inspiring to me, and such a wonderful human being. As a matter of fact, my organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, SNCC, was to hold a meeting in D.C. the weekend of President Kennedy's funeral. I suggested to the staff and other offices of the organization that we go to Arlington Cemetery and pay tribute to President Kennedy. The people said no. So as a group, we never did it, but I did it on my own some time later.

Heininger: You were very young then.

Lewis: I was 23.

Heininger: That's young.

Lewis: Very young. I had all of my hair, was a few pounds lighter.

Heininger: So he was a listener. What about Robert Kennedy?

Lewis: Robert Kennedy asked a lot of questions. Not just asked questions, but he talked and said what we've got to do, what we must do. He had passion. He felt it in his gut. He was not that reserved. I remember down the road—over the years I would see him, and you know, he went

through a period of being somewhat lost and somewhat I guess subdued, and just a period of great mourning with the loss of his brother. But he came out of it with a sense of determination, with the sense that I've got to pick up where my brother left off, like he had a mission. He did everything possible, I think, in a very short time, to try to make real the hopes and dreams, not just of his brother but of the administration.

Heininger: So your sense was he picked up the torch.

Lewis: Yes. I think there was this feeling. I think it was perhaps ingrained in the brothers, maybe by the father, maybe by the family, that if something happened to one, you have to pick up and carry on. It was just a sense of mission, this sense that I must travel this path to fulfill the wishes, the dreams, the aspirations of my brother, of his administration.

Heininger: And during that '68 campaign, you worked very closely with Bobby Kennedy at that point. Did you have much contact with Ted Kennedy at all?

Lewis: During the campaign, I would run into Ted Kennedy from time to time, but I didn't see him on a regular basis. We went to Indiana, and in Indianapolis, we heard that Dr. King had been assassinated. It was devastating but I said to myself, *We still have Bobby Kennedy,* and I threw myself into the campaign. I saw Teddy, I believe, in Oregon. They lost the primary there—that's the first Kennedy loss. And then we went on to California and I ran into Teddy Kennedy in Northern California. We worked primarily in southern California, in the L.A. area, and Teddy was in the northern area during the last few days.

There was a sense of brotherly love between, I think, Bobby and Teddy. I'm talking about real—they knew each other and they grew closer. I believe after the assassination of President Kennedy, Teddy and Bobby became closer.

I will never forget being at Saint Patrick's Cathedral for the funeral, when Teddy delivered the eulogy. He stood there and spoke from the depth of his soul, and it took unbelievable strength for him to do what he did and to say what he said. One time he broke. I will never forget the lines that he used. He said something like: Don't make more of my brother—" to paraphrase it—"don't make more of him in death than he was in life." And he went on to say something like, "As we take him to his resting place." I remember boarding that funeral train to travel from New York to Washington. It seemed like it was not just the entire Kennedy family on that train, but America was literally on that train with Bobby.

Heininger: Those were extraordinary days.

Lewis: Those were unbelievable days. They were days of hope and days of great excitement and fulfillment, but also days of sadness.

Heininger: Dashed hopes, too.

Lewis: I have said, from time to time, that with the assassination of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bobby Kennedy, the hopes and dreams and aspirations of so many died. I think something died in America, and something died within all of us really. We probably would never, ever, live the way we lived again, because these three young men had so much to offer,

not just to America and not just to the American people, but to the world community. I feel even today that we were robbed of something, denied something, because of the untimely deaths.

Heininger: So where is Ted in all this?

Lewis: Ted is there. He's preparing himself; he's working quietly, effectively. Today he must be looked upon as the last of the great warriors, the last of the—I don't refer to him as an old guard, because Teddy Kennedy has the ability, the capacity, to be anew—to rebuild himself.

Since I've been in Congress—and I've been here almost 20 years—it's amazing to me that he's so daring and so courageous on some of the big issues. He didn't have to do it. He didn't have to get out front. He didn't have to speak out against the war. He didn't have to stand up and do, but that's part of his DNA [deoxyribonucleic acid], and so that's what guides him. I don't think he puts his fingers in the air to see which way the wind is blowing. I think he truly goes with his gut and says, "I'm going to do it because I believe it's the right thing to do, to speak up, to speak out." Or what I call "get in the way." A lot of people don't like this liberal Senator, this Kennedy getting in the way, but he can't help himself.

Heininger: How do you think things would have been different for him if his brothers had not died?

Lewis: If his brothers had not died and they lived, I think he still would be a great Senator. If you talk to some of the people across the way in the Senate, or some of the observers, they would tell you that no one there is a better Senator. He's not selfish. He's very inclusive when it comes to the big issues. Whether it's trying to get an increase in the minimum wage or fighting to get the Voting Rights Act renewed, to get a civil rights act, to do something about hate crime, he's very inclusive. Or do something about health care. He doesn't try to hog the limelight. He's always calling and saying, "I have this idea. Let's do this. Let's pull together, let's work together on this." And people appreciate that.

Heininger: How would you compare his personality to that of Bobby's?

Lewis: Bobby was a little more—I guess the word I want to use—he had a little more vigor and vitality, ready to fight and go for it. Bobby would stand up and say, "They may not want me to come to the University of Alabama, but I'm going. They may not want me to go to the University of Georgia, but I'm going, or to some place in Kansas, but I'm going. They may not want me to come to South Africa, but I'm going." Teddy, I think, is much more at home in the legislative arena, but he didn't mind going out speaking at a rally for civil rights or dealing with workers.

Heininger: Is he more willing to adapt to the slower legislative pace and the ability to get things done in Congress than you think his brothers, who were also both Senators, were?

Lewis: I think Teddy probably was a little more deliberate. Because I think he probably understood, had been around longer now than his brother had been. He probably had a deeper understanding of the legislative process and probably has a greater ability and capacity to try to build consensus and build bridges. I think today, whether it's on the House side or the Senate

side, or whether it's out in the larger American community, when it comes to certain issues, people will say, "Call Teddy. Speak to Teddy about it."

People in the civil rights community or in organized labor, they would say, "Check with Teddy Kennedy." You wouldn't *dream* of introducing a major piece of civil rights legislation or voting rights, health care, education, doing something about hate crime, doing something about discrimination against an individual with a different sexual orientation, without including Ted Kennedy.

Heininger: You watched him for many years.

Lewis: Well, I've seen him.

Heininger: How did he get from '68 to where he is now? Did you see an evolution in him? Did you see a development?

Lewis: Over the years I think he's grown. He's studied, he's done his homework, and he worked with so many different individuals, groups. He's not a stranger. He's not a newcomer on a lot of these big issues, really. He's been there. He probably knows more about many of these issues—because you go over to testify before the Judiciary Committee on some nomination of some judge or member of the Supreme Court.

Heininger: Like Judge [John] Roberts?

Lewis: Yes. Teddy prepped more than any other member of that panel. That's not to say anything bad about the others, but he knows. He has a great mind. Early on, I think people underestimated him. When historians pick up their pen and write about the legislative process and what happened during the time that Ted Kennedy was a member of the United States Senate, they will have to write that he was one of the great Senators. You can ask people from the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. Ask people from the Human Rights Campaign, from organized labor, the rank-and-file civil rights people. If there was a poll taken today amongst civil rights individuals, the activists, the leaders, what legislator to them was more for civil rights and shepherded it getting through the process, they would have to say, "Ted Kennedy."

Heininger: You had a very close relationship with Bobby. What's your relationship like with Ted?

Lewis: My relationship is very good. It's a wonderful relationship. I see him from time to time at different meetings. When his book came out, he had his wife invite me to the book signing, and I introduced Teddy at a public meeting here. I have a great deal of respect and love for Ted Kennedy. As you well know, I was working in the President [Jimmy] Carter administration, and I heard that Teddy was going to seek the Democratic nomination. I made a decision to leave the administration because I didn't want to be in a campaign opposing Ted Kennedy. President Carter thought I was going to work for Ted Kennedy, and he called me in one day. I told him I was going back to Atlanta, but that was the reason. He's a wonderful friend, a wonderful friend.

Heininger: But you also didn't come out and support him.

Lewis: No.

Heininger: In his electoral bid.

Lewis: I stayed neutral. I didn't want to get caught between the two of them, and I thought it was the right thing to do. I think he understood.

Heininger: But then when you ran in the runoff against Julian Bond, he didn't support you.

Lewis: Because in 1986, Julian, I think, probably got to him first. I don't know what happened. On the other hand, he came down and campaigned for me, raised money for me in 1977. It could have been that he thought, like so many people thought then, that Julian had a better chance of winning. I don't know. You know, we never discussed that.

Heininger: You haven't discussed that?

Lewis: We never discussed it.

Heininger: Really?

Lewis: We had never discussed that. And today, we act like it never happened.

Heininger: Do you think it affected your relationship at all?

Lewis: Not at all, not at all. He's been very supportive of me. He's been so gracious. When I received the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award, he was wonderful. He made a contribution to my own campaign in recent years, out of his campaign. He came to our house in Atlanta. He's been wonderful.

Heininger: But you never discussed it; that's so interesting.

Lewis: Sometimes in families, you grow up in a very large family, and I grew up in a very large family. Ted Kennedy grew up in a sizeable family, a large family. There are certain things that you understand and you just don't talk about it. It's a relationship. We're friends; we're brothers.

Heininger: Did you expect that he would back you in the runoff against Julian Bond?

Lewis: No, I didn't. And I had this whole thing not so much winning people over from Bond's side. I was going to run on my own record. I would have loved to have his support: It would have been fine, but Julian had Teddy, Bill Cosby, the Four Tops, I think, and a few other people. I just had myself. But it all worked out.

Heininger: And you won.

Lewis: Since we've been colleagues in the Congress, you couldn't ask for more. You couldn't ask for more.

Heininger: What have you worked on most closely with him?

Lewis: The civil rights bill. What was it called during [Ronald] Reagan or [George H.W.] Bush—Bush one—when we had the Civil Rights Act? The Civil Rights Act of 1991.

Heininger: The one with [John] Danforth? It got shepherded through, right?

Lewis: Right. So we worked on that.

Heininger: But you didn't go to the White House.

Lewis: No. And I didn't go to the White House for the signing of the Voting Rights Act reauthorization. It was for a different reason. On the Voting Rights Act, we worked very closely together. I wish you could see some of the notes that he sent me over the years, the letters. I save everything: every Christmas card, every note, every little letter. He sent me some of the most wonderful notes and letters about different things over the years.

The day the Senate voted on the extension of the Voting Rights Act, he invited me over to be on the floor when the vote was cast. And then he took me into a little room, a beautiful room, and at this table, where I think Lyndon Johnson signed the original act on this particular desk. A few days later, I got the most wonderful picture, letter, and a note inscribed on the photograph. It looked like something from another period, like something that the Founding Fathers would do, and he sent it to me. I got it framed. It's in my office down in Atlanta. I will cherish that forever.

Heininger: You have something else from him too that we were going to give to you today. The bill tally he sent that over to you with a note and a signed copy of his speech that he made on the floor.

Lewis: Yes. It's things like that. People call you and say, "I'm thinking about you today." It's hard and difficult to explain the chemistry. We're just certain people going through certain struggles and battles. Teddy has fought for the long haul. He's been there. I guess the point I'm trying to make—he's not just been consistent, he's been persistent. This is a guy who has never, just never, given in. He's a warrior. He's consistent, he's persistent, he's determined, and he may pull back today but pick up tomorrow and keep pushing, and I admire that.

Heininger: Where does that come from?

Lewis: I think it's—

Heininger: Was it there to begin with, or did it come out because of all the tragedies he's had to endure?

Lewis: I think it probably was there in the beginning, and maybe, just maybe, what he had to deal with refined it and made him stronger. People don't know that during some of those early meetings—I heard Teddy speaking someplace not too long ago, and he said he went to a meeting someplace in the Deep South. I'm not sure if it was Reverend [Ralph] Abernathy or Dr. King. Somebody picked him up. For a Kennedy to travel to Alabama or to Mississippi or to Georgia during another period was dangerous.

The way people refer to President Kennedy, to Bobby Kennedy, some of the southern Governors, members of the White Citizens' Council, members of the Klan, they thought President Kennedy and his brother—one Governor, I'm not sure if it was Governor John Patterson, it wasn't [George] Wallace—maybe Wallace—but referred to Bobby as "Bobby Socks." They thought that the Kennedys were responsible for all of the unrest in the South. They thought it was a Kennedy who inspired these Negroes to get in the streets, to sit in, to go on the Freedom Ride, to march in Birmingham.

Heininger: Not real safe for a Kennedy to go to the South then.

Lewis: It was not the best place to be seen or to be making public appearances, but today it's a different world.

Heininger: What effect do you think that his failed Presidential bid had on his life and his career?

Lewis: To me, he didn't lose a beat. He just picked up and kept moving. And I think he probably had an executive session with himself. I never talked with him about it, but I think he said, I'm going to be the best Senator. I'm going to be the best legislator that I can be. And I think that's what he's done. So I won't become President. I'll be a good Senator, and I will be an effective Senator. I will use my position as a Senator to do good. He spoke out against some things that were going on in this administration. He spoke out against what we were doing in the Middle East when everybody else was so quiet. At times it seemed like it was only Kennedy out there all alone.

Heininger: Why does he do it?

Lewis: I think it's a part of himself. It's part of what makes Ted Kennedy Ted Kennedy. You see something that is wrong; you try to make it right, as he said about his brother, Bobby. That you spend only a certain amount of time here, and you have to give it all you have, and that's what he's been doing.

Heininger: Do you have a sense that his faith has shaped him at all?

Lewis: Oh, yes. I'm sure he's very mindful of what has happened to his family, and that he's the leader. He's the father figure, grandfather figure now. He's the head of the clan, and he has to be out there, not just for his family but for a lot of people. There's a whole generation of people that got into politics, got into public service, went into the Peace Corps, did a lot of other wonderful things because of his family.

Heininger: What's your relationship been with his son, Patrick [Kennedy]?

Lewis: It's been a good one. It's been a wonderful one.

Heininger: You work in the same institution, in a way.

Lewis: We've had a good relationship. I've been to his district. He invited me from time to time. Sometimes I haven't been able to go, but it's been a wonderful relationship. He's a wonderful

young man. I see him from time to time. "I saw your father—" and sometimes I say to him, "Tell your dad I say hello."

Heininger: You worked with him on hate crimes legislation. How did that come about? Who initiated it?

Lewis: He did. Organizations and groups would say, "Senator Kennedy will be calling you," and he would say, "I'm going to introduce such and such a thing. I would love to have your support."

Heininger: Then on the issue of minority health care, who initiated that?

Lewis: His office. I don't think we did it. It was his office. Teddy has a tremendous interest in providing health care for everybody and easing the disparity between the minority and the majority population. If you want something done, Teddy is the person to go to, and especially if you have a relationship with him. I know so many other Senators, but I don't think I know any of them as well as I know Ted Kennedy. I have a better relationship with Ted Kennedy than any of them. I've known him longer, long before I came to Congress.

Heininger: What do you think his legacy will be?

Lewis: He was a champion for those that have been left out and left behind, a warrior for civil rights, a warrior for workers, a spokesperson for some of the great issues of our time. He just didn't make noise. He just didn't get in the way. He made things happen.

Heininger: How long did it take him to become effective in the Senate?

Lewis: It took a few years. Because he was the first—those early years, and go back to what I said earlier, he was in the shadow of his brother, President Kennedy, and his brother, Robert Kennedy. With the two of them gone, I think he dove in, worked hard, and continued to work hard.

Heininger: If you look at the different decades, if you look at the '60s and say these are the years when he was under the shadow, until the deaths of both of his brothers, and then a fairly substantial period of mourning after Robert's death. If you looked at him in the 1970s, how would you explain what he did in the 1970s versus the 1980s, which is after the Presidential bid, and the 1990s—I don't know what we call this decade we're in right now—the double zeroes or—? Could you divide his career in stages like that?

Lewis: I think you could. He came out of that period of great, unbelievable sense of sadness and a great sense of loss. President Kennedy, brother Robert—but he came out, I think, with a sense of purpose and a sense of direction, and he began to master the legislative process. For a brief period he was the leader, or one of the leaders, of the Senate. He had the little thing with Robert Byrd, I guess. After that, I think he just really went gung-ho, I'm just going to learn everything I can. It's like saying I'm going to be the best, not little Senator or big Senator. I'm just going to be the *best* Senator.

He championed so many issues during that period, the mid '70s. I would see him at meetings from time to time, and he would show up at the Kennedys' house. There was the Robert F.

Kennedy Memorial. Every now and then, he would show up at some of the meetings, or maybe on an anniversary of Bobby's death, but more and more he came into his own. He travelled some. I remember him coming to a SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] convention, I think it was in Atlanta. During I guess the '80s and the '90s he really came into his own. He has been a shining star, a wonderful example for a lot of members of both the House and the Senate ever since.

Heininger: Do you think he's more effective when the Democrats are in the opposition or when they're in the majority?

Lewis: I think he can be very effective with the Democrats in the majority, because he would be the chair, and he can lead. I think he's much more effective in the majority, because he can set the agenda. In the minority, you can raise issues, raise questions, but in the majority, you can make things happen, and I think Ted Kennedy will work with his colleagues on both the Democratic side and the Republican side, but especially the Democratic side.

During the next few years he's going to make some things happen. I think you're going to see this man work very hard to do something about health care—comprehensive health care, a comprehensive, all-inclusive health program for all citizens. And we're going to get an increase in the minimum wage. It's going to come very soon. Teddy is going to push, push, push. He's going to make it happen.

Heininger: If you look back at the debate over health care in the early '90s—

Lewis: With Mrs. [Hillary Rodham] Clinton.

Heininger: In '94.

Lewis: When we were in the majority?

Heininger: Right, when the Democrats were in the majority. He wasn't a chief player at that point.

Lewis: Well, that initiative was started at the White House.

Heininger: Why didn't it get through?

Lewis: There were other problems. This time around, I don't think you're going to have those problems. I think Teddy and some others will be major players and will be taking the lead. During those years, we controlled the Congress and the White House, right?

Heininger: Is he more effective when the Democrats control everything?

Lewis: Oh, I think so.

Heininger: Or when there is a division between the White House and the Congress?

Lewis: I think he's much more effective when we control everything, but he can be effective when we control the Congress and the other party controls the White House. I think Teddy would say it's better when we control everything.

Heininger: Well, he'd say that, but if you look at the record, do you think he's more effective when—you know, some people would say only [Richard] Nixon could take us to China.

Lewis: Right, right.

Heininger: Is he somebody who seeks to work with Republicans and let them take the credit?

Or to get things through on the Republicans' watch?

Lewis: Well, he did it on No Child Left Behind. I never really discussed that with him. I'm not so sure how he feels about that today, and I don't think he feels too good about that. George Miller on the House side and Teddy on the Senate side, I'm not so sure they feel very good about that.

Heininger: What about when he worked with Nancy Kassebaum on the health insurance portability? That was again under a Republican President.

Lewis: Right. There was a relationship there. Teddy has the ability to reach across the aisle, and he did it with Senator Kassebaum. He's a very good friend, or at least they used to be very good friends—I think they still are—with Orrin Hatch.

Heininger: Yes. An odd pairing if there ever was one. Why is he able to work with these people?

Lewis: I don't think Teddy holds things against people. That's the way he comes across to me. I don't think he goes around holding grudges. I just don't think he's made of that. And when you get to know him, he's a pretty warm, nice man. I've never seen him—I saw Bobby on one occasion when…he didn't lose it, he just told people where to go. I've never seen Teddy blow up. He can stand up and argue, but he never loses his cool.

Heininger: Were the edges sharper with Bobby than they are with Ted?

Lewis: Oh, yes. Oh, I think so.

Heininger: Do you think that's personality?

Lewis: I think it's personality, really. Some people accused Bobby of being ruthless. He was very direct, and he was much more insistent and demanding. I remember one occasion during the Oregon campaign. We were all at the hotel and there were people like Peter Evans or Adam [Walinsky], and I think Jeff Greenfield. We were out in the hallway, getting ready to go to a meeting, and I think we were talking too loud or something, and Bobby was in the room. He said, "You young guys can go out, and rather than making all this noise, you're going to go out and get me some votes." Or something like that. And we dashed out.

Heininger: You've seen the public-speaking manner of all three of them. Can you talk a little bit about their different styles? Where were each of the three of them most comfortable? In one-on-one, in front of large groups, or in front of small groups? Were there differences among the three?

Lewis: I think they all loved a crowd. Most politicians love a big crowd.

Heininger: Well, there are more votes in a big crowd than there are one-on-one.

Lewis: Oh, yes, many more. Sometimes Bobby came across sort of shy, but when he got wound up, he was good. He was very good.

Heininger: When he got in front of a crowd he would change?

Lewis: Right. Teddy, on a stop, I'm talking about when he's at a rally—it's the best. He reminds me of the fire and the passion that Hubert Humphrey had. You talk about the politics of hope, optimism, and when Teddy gets wound up, he's really at his best. When you see him speaking to a hall full of union members, human rights, civil rights types, he'd come there with fire. From time to time in the early years, he would have a manuscript. Now you see him from time to time, it's two or three cards. Sometimes he puts those cards away and just goes for it, and he's good. Now President Kennedy, I saw him speak to a big crowd in Nashville when he was campaigning. That was on the campaign stop. He was a good communicator. The speech when he spoke to the nation in June of 1963, when he said, "The question of civil rights is a moral issue." It was very effective. But he was good. He was at home with television.

Heininger: At home or more at home?

Lewis: More at home.

Heininger: It helped in his campaign in 1960.

Lewis: It really did, it certainly did. Some people think that's why he won, because he was more at home.

Heininger: He didn't have his five o'clock shadow.

Lewis: That's right.

Heininger: Ted is different from his brothers, then. How would you say he is most different from his brothers?

Lewis: I think the fact that—what had made him different had been some years, almost 40 years, since the assassination of Bobby.

Heininger: Yes, a long time.

Lewis: That's a long time. Forty-three years since President Kennedy. He lived in a period when they didn't have an opportunity to—that they were not blessed to live in, and it's a different

world, so he's a different human being. He's a different character. He's been shaped by something else. When Bobby was assassinated, he was speaking out against Vietnam. Today, we're building ties and trade relations with Vietnam, and it's one country. Today, I think the world is—and Teddy realizes it probably more than most—that the world is a much more dangerous place, really. I think he worries about the leadership of America, where we're going, and he realizes that we could be doing much better. I think a lot of us think what could have been, what would have been.

Heininger: If his brothers?

Lewis: If his brothers had lived, what type of world we would be living in. Where would we be as a nation and as a people? I think Teddy worries about the idea, the fact that we're the most powerful nation on this little planet, and at the same time we're the most isolated, that we've lost so many of our friends around the world. Someone who came to the Senate when he did, in the early '60s—he lived through Vietnam, was part of the Cold War—and to see where we are today. On the one hand, we made unbelievable changes here at home and abroad, and on the other hand, we haven't done too well.

President Kennedy had this idea in dealing with Central and South America, an Alliance for Progress. Today, we don't hear anything about Central or South America. The only thing we talk about, immigration, that's our policy toward Central and South America, I guess.

Heininger: And Hugo Chavez.

Lewis: Really. So it's our neighbors to the south of us. It's like they don't exist. I think people like Ted Kennedy are concerned that we shouldn't be just reacting to something; that we have to have a policy, a role. What is our role? What is our purpose as a nation and as a people?

Heininger: What effect do you think he's had on the growth of the conservative movement?

Lewis: He's been a whipping boy for the conservative movement, and a lot of people who campaign, especially in my part of the country, will say, "Oh, you're going to go up there and vote with Ted Kennedy. You're going to be another Ted Kennedy." So to be identified as voting with Ted Kennedy is a bad thing for people, because Teddy Kennedy is for health care for everybody, you vote. If Ted Kennedy supports a piece of legislation that he's introduced or proposing, then that's supposed to be bad. But I think that is losing some of its bite. When people raise money, some of the conservative groups, they beat up on Ted Kennedy, and they've been doing it for years. It's a way to raise money. It's a way to defeat someone, put them in the same boat with Ted Kennedy.

Heininger: And yet he's one of the most effective coalition builders in the Senate.

Lewis: I know it. People don't understand that. This is a guy. This is a Senator. He may be from New England, he may be progressive or liberal, but he has the ability, the capacity to reach across the aisle and work with people—moderate, conservative people—and that's what it should be all about, being able to agree on something and get something done.

Heininger: Why is there a disconnect then between the public image and how Kennedy actually operates? Why is that not better known?

Lewis: I think the failure may be on the part of the offices of Senator Kennedy, maybe on others, to communicate that. You get that image, it is set. People keep saying it over and over again. People believe that this guy is dangerous to our way of life, our way of thinking. He's liberal. He fought for all these liberal judges and he's against all the conservative judges. It's a mindset out there, and it's hard to change that. It's hard to overcome that. It's been planted, and people get that message. I think another thing you hear a great deal—talk radio. I call it "hate radio." They love to beat up on Ted Kennedy, and the likes of Ted Kennedy. I hear it coming from a station, and a host of one of the shows in Atlanta, the Rush [Limbaugh] wanna-be type.

Heininger: Does he not take enough credit for what he actually accomplishes?

Lewis: I think he failed to take credit, but that's not the man. He's not a showboater. He's what I call a tugboat. I used that in my campaign.

Heininger: Although he can give stemwinder speeches.

Lewis: Oh yes, right.

Heininger: And ramp up. He is an anomaly in American politics.

Lewis: He's very inspiring. I've seen him—you come down to the Hyatt Regency on the hill, the Regency Hotel, to somebody's hotel when they're having a union convention or they're having it in some big city, and you've got to follow Ted Kennedy, you don't want to do that. Or you're on the same thing. He's good. He has people jumping up and hollering and shouting, and they're ready to march through hell's fire when they hear Senator Kennedy.

Heininger: Why did he not become President?

Lewis: I think part of it—I don't know, but I think that maybe just in the psyche of America, the fear that if you go out there and campaign and work and nominate a Kennedy, something could happen. I think that was in the back of the minds. I'm not saying that's why it didn't happen, but it had to be in the back of the mind of a lot of people.

Heininger: That would keep it going, wouldn't it? Could he have won against Carter?

Lewis: Oh, I think that's possible. I think it's possible, yes. He's much more progressive.

Heininger: And charismatic.

Lewis: Yes.

Heininger: Did you see any changes in him after he married Vicki [Reggie Kennedy]?

Lewis: I never knew Joan [Bennett Kennedy]. I never got to know her. Vicki is much more outgoing and very warm, and seems to be very supportive. I think that's a great love affair there.

I think they really love each other, and even the way Teddy called her name, like, "Vicki—see if you could tell Vicki." She's a very nice lady. I think she's been very good for him.

Heininger: How so?

Lewis: I think she keeps him grounded, I guess. That may not be the word to say. Grounded may not be the word. I think she's been just good for his life. It's Vicki and the children. I think he's got some dogs I hear him talk about from time to time.

Heininger: Yes.

Lewis: Yes.

Heininger: Yes, very close to the dogs. You like him.

Lewis: I admire him. He's a wonderful, wonderful friend, a wonderful human being. I think today, I probably can ask him, "Senator, will you consider doing such and such a thing?" He would say, "John, let's do it." Something like that, if it's the right thing to do—but I wouldn't ask him anything crazy and outlandish. I just wouldn't do it. I have too much respect and love for him really. He's that last of a breed, last of a breed. I'm very serious, and I've said this before, we may not be so lucky and so blessed as a nation, as a people, to witness—from time to time, generations come and go, and someone emerged. But I think the Kennedy family had a special hold on America, on our very psyche, really. He's the last of that symbolic figure. You see over there, I have a bust of Bobby.

Heininger: He really looks young, doesn't he?

Lewis: He was so young and so full of energy and vigor and vitality, and so inspiring. I think that was their book award. In fact, I have that in my house in D.C.

Heininger: This is—right, the RFK [Robert F. Kennedy] book award.

Lewis: And the picture there with Bobby was taken on July 22, 1963, at the Department of Justice. Over there is Teddy and Caroline [Kennedy Schlossberg], and I think Vicki may be in that picture.

Heininger: Is that the one at the Kennedy Library?

Lewis: Right.

Heininger: The lifetime achievement Profiles in Courage Award. What a great picture.

Lewis: That was one in our old house in Atlanta. He was so young there. I had more hair, and his hair was black, mine was black.

Heininger: You both look so young.

Lewis: That was 1977.

Heininger: When he came to campaign for you?

Lewis: Yes, special election.

Heininger: That's a great picture. Your hair was long.

Lewis: I had little sideburns.

Heininger: You've had a long relationship with the family. Out of all the people that we are interviewing, you are the only one who has had that relationship with all three brothers, and that makes your assessments of all three of them very valuable.

Lewis: Well, I got to know this one best. He was just a terrific guy. I was in his room the night at the Ambassador. It was one of the saddest times of my life, really. I'm convinced that if he had lived, he would have received the Democratic nomination in Chicago, he would have been elected President, and our world would be different. The world—not just America—but the world would be different. He would have surrounded himself with the best of the best. He would have ended the war in Vietnam much earlier and would have been able to do a lot of things, here at home and abroad.

Heininger: But you've known this one much longer.

Lewis: Much longer. It's going to be interesting to see, within the next few weeks and months, how everything will come together with us in the majority.

Heininger: How long do you think he'll stay in the Senate?

Lewis: He just got reelected. At least the next six years.

Heininger: But will he stay, like a Strom Thurmond?

Lewis: I think he loves the institution, but I think he feels this deep sense, as I said, a mission, that he's got to do something. He lost his brother in the war, President, Senator, and he's got to compensate for them. He's got to make up for them. I think that's part of his calling, part of his sense of I've got to be there. My brothers couldn't do it. They didn't live to do it. I've got to do it.

Heininger: Still? That mentality, you think, still pervades him?

Lewis: Oh, yes.

Heininger: That's a long time to carry that kind of burden.

Lewis: Yes. But you hear him sometimes, referring to President Kennedy. He'll say such and such a thing. It's there.

Heininger: He's had a tough life.

Lewis: Yes, very tough. It's very difficult for someone—he came to the Senate relatively young.

Heininger: Very young.

Lewis: And to lose two of your family members the way they were assassinated, and the burden. It's not just a political burden. He had both, sort of a personal family—he became a father figure for his brother's children. To have that responsibility and then the responsibility of picking up where they left off, as a leader not only of your party, but a leader of the nation.

Heininger: What does the public know least about him?

Lewis: I don't know. I don't know whether it comes across that he's a very warm, nice guy. I think in so many instances people see someone like a Ted Kennedy on a stage, distant, on the Senate floor debating some point, engaging in some argument about some great issue, and they never see them as just real human beings.

Heininger: You've had a long relationship with the family, a very important one. You've been very lucky.

Lewis: I feel more than lucky. I feel very blessed. I really do. For someone who grew up the way I grew up, to have an opportunity to meet with President Kennedy, to sit in a room with him and to get to know Bobby and Teddy and other members of the family helped make me a different person, a much better person. Even in my own life, sometimes I feel like Bobby Kennedy is not here, Dr. King is not here, President Kennedy is not here, so somehow you have to do something, because these are the people who inspired me and moved me along the way. And so you have to do something, you have to keep going. I've been going for almost 50 years. That's a long time.

Heininger: That's a long time.

Lewis: I was talking to some friends the other day and they said, "Don't you feel like just stopping and getting off of this track, this path?" I said, "You can't stop. You cannot." And I think that's the way Teddy feels—you cannot stop. You have to stay on the path. You have to keep going, keep moving.

Heininger: Did you ever meet their father?

Lewis: No. I never met the father. I met the mother, a wonderful woman. I met all of the sisters who were alive at the time. I shared a seat on a plane with Eunice [Kennedy Shriver] all the way from India back here. We went to Mother Teresa's funeral together on Mrs. Clinton's flight. We talked all the way over, all the way back. She's a wonderful talker, about a lot of things.

Heininger: This has been very enlightening.

Lewis: Thank you.

Heininger: It's been very useful. I really appreciate it.

Lewis: Thank you. Sorry it took us so long to do it.

Heininger: That's not a problem.