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COMMENT

THE PRESIDENT'S HERO

by David Remnick

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A couple of decades ago, when Barack Obama was on a break from Harvard Law School and visiting friends in Chicago, he carried around a copy of “Parting the Waters,” the first volume of Taylor Branch’s magnificent trilogy about Martin Luther King, Jr., and the rise of the civil-rights movement. Obama was staying with Jerry Kellman, his mentor during his three years as a community organizer on the South Side. Kellman said that he greatly admired Branch’s book. Obama brightened and said, “Yes, it’s *my* story.”

Mind reading is a decidedly low form of journalism. Yet it is not hard to imagine that as Obama emerged into the noonday light last Tuesday to receive the oath of office, as he left the Capitol’s warm interior and saw before him the carpet of humanity stretching down Capitol Hill to the monuments miles distant, that he made a mental leap to Marian Anderson’s defiant concert at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939, to the March on Washington that King led twenty-four years later, to the entire story of a struggle that he was too young to join but came to claim as his own.

After absorbing the thudding roar from the Mall, Obama glanced to his right. He spotted there on the steps, a few feet away, John Lewis—squat, bald, hatless—the eleven-term representative of Georgia’s fifth congressional district and the only one of the speakers at the March on Washington still among the living. Obama bent to embrace him.

“Congratulations, Mr. President,” Lewis whispered in his ear.

Obama smiled at the sound of that and said, “Thank you, John. I’ll need your prayers.”

“You’ll have them, Mr. President. That, and all my support.”

At the March on Washington, King’s speech was the most eloquent, Lewis’s the most radical. Lewis was just twenty-three at the time, the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. In the original draft of his speech, the demand for racial justice and “serious revolution” was so fearless that, in the last minutes before the program began, Dr. King, Bayard Rustin, Roy Wilkins, and other movement organizers negotiated with him to remove any phrases that might offend the Kennedy Administration. Lewis planned to say, “We will march through the South, through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did. We shall pursue our own ‘scorched earth’ policy and burn Jim Crow to the ground—nonviolently. We shall fragment the South into a thousand pieces and put them back together in the image of democracy.” He had to lose the bit about Sherman’s army, but the rest of the text, capped by its final warning—“We will not be patient!”—left no doubt about Lewis or about the audacious generation he represented.

Two years later, in Selma, Lewis led a march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge straight into a blockade set up by Alabama state troopers. The first nightstick came down on Lewis’s skull. The troopers used whips, horses, a hose wrapped in barbed wire. Along with Lewis, ninety demonstrators were injured. At the White House, Lyndon Johnson watched it all on television and deepened his resolve to push the Voting Rights Act. The day before Obama’s Inauguration, which marked what would have been King’s eightieth birthday, Lewis told a visitor at his office in the Cannon House Office Building, “Barack Obama is what comes at the end of that bridge in Selma.”

Inaugural weekend was “bewildering” to John Lewis. “It is almost too much, too emotional,” he said. Preaching at the Shiloh Baptist Church on Ninth Street N.W., Lewis had told parishioners that he would have thought that only a “crazy” person would predict the election of an African-American President in his lifetime, but now he was sure that the masses on the Mall would be joined by the “saints and angels”: by Harriet Tubman and Carter G. Woodson, Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Du Bois, Nat Turner and Frederick Douglass, John Brown and Sojourner Truth.

For hours, Lewis greeted constituents at his office and handed out inaugural tickets. Then he set off to visit the Mall, moving, it seemed, in a daze of unreality. He could not quite believe the size of the crowds gathering so early—especially the great numbers of African-Americans, young and old, many of

them from distant places.

Lewis grew up in Pike County, Alabama—the Jim Crow South. His parents picked cotton, peanuts, and corn; the children left school at harvest time to join them. Their small house had no electricity or running water. Their lives, according to the dictates of Alabama law after the collapse of Reconstruction, were stripped of democratic rights and human possibility.

Lewis read his Bible and on Sundays tuned in to WRMA, the gospel station out of Montgomery, to hear the Soul Stirrers and the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi. Lewis was a soulful, intelligent, and eccentric child. When religious feeling washed over him, he began visiting the henhouse out back to preach to the Dominiques and the Rhode Island Reds. The chickens composed his ministry: Lewis baptized new chicks; he raised and fed them; he buried the dead under a mound of wildflowers. As Lewis wrote many years later in his autobiography, “Walking with the Wind,” he was a lonely searcher learning compassion for God’s creatures.

One Sunday morning in 1955, when he was fifteen, Lewis listened to a sermon on WRMA called “Paul’s Letter to the American Christians.” The story was of Paul’s call to brotherhood. The preacher was a young Baptist in Atlanta named Martin Luther King. Two years later, Lewis made contact with King and his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and, in no time, King became his mentor and his friend. As a teen-age seminarian in Nashville, Lewis attended nonviolence workshops, organized lunch-counter sit-ins, and took part in the first Freedom Rides, constantly risking arrests, harassment, and beatings.

As Lewis walked around the Mall last week, shaking hands, posing for hundreds of photographs, a young African-American introduced himself as the police chief of Rock Hill, South Carolina. “Imagine that,” Lewis said. “I was beaten near to death at the Rock Hill Greyhound bus terminal during the Freedom Rides in 1961. Now the police chief is black.”

At the beginning of the 2008 campaign, Lewis, a Clinton-family loyalist, sided with Hillary—as did the majority of African-Americans. By February, however, when it became clear to him and to so many others that Obama was not running a symbolic race, that he represented “a movement” and could win, Lewis had switched.

“Barack has lifted people,” Lewis said, as he posed for pictures with some women from D.C. “Old people, young people, children, black and white. Look out on the Mall here. You can see it in their walk, can’t you?”

One teen-age boy sweetly asked, “Mr. Lewis, my mama says you marched with Dr. King. Is that true?” Like an old fighter who is not displeased to recount ancient combat, Lewis nodded and said, well, yes he had, and perhaps for the five thousandth time he sketched the journey from Selma to Montgomery.

“Barack was born long before he could experience or understand the movement,” Lewis said, heading back to the Capitol. “He had to move *toward* it in his own time, but it is so clear that he digested it, the spirit and the language of the movement. The way he made it his own reminds me of a trip I made to South Africa in March, 1994, before the post-apartheid elections. We met with a few leaders of the African National Congress—young people—and despite their age they knew everything about the late fifties and sixties in the American South, the birth of the civil-rights movement. They were using the same rhetoric, they had the same emotional force. One young South African actor got up and recited a poem by a black slave woman from Georgia! And that is the way it is with Barack. He has absorbed the lessons and spirit of the civil-rights movement. But, at the same time, he doesn’t have the scars of the movement, because of how he grew up. He has not been knocked around as much by the past.”

Obama’s promise to shut down Guantánamo, to outlaw torture and begin reversing immediately some of the most egregious policies of the Bush era, gave Lewis hope that “the movement” had finally come to the White House.

“People have been afraid to hope again, to believe again,” he said. “We have lost great leaders: John F. Kennedy, Martin, Robert Kennedy. And so people might have questioned whether or not to place their full faith in a symbol and a leader. The danger of disappointment is immense, the problems are so big. None of them can be solved in a day or a year. And that’s the way it was with the civil-rights movement. This is the struggle of a lifetime. We play our part and fulfill our role.”

At the luncheon following the swearing-in ceremony, Lewis approached Obama with a commemorative photograph and asked him to sign it. The President wrote, “Because of you, John. Barack Obama.” ♦

ILLUSTRATION: TOM BACHTTELL

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