

Outlook 6/14/98
MARY McGRORY

A Man of Consequence

Publication of Rep. John Lewis's autobiography, "Walking With the Wind," is a literary event, for sure. This is the definitive account of the civil rights movement, written in the first person by one of its leaders. It is also a political event. Lewis, a Democrat from Georgia, is universally regarded as a home run of a human being—brave, honest, humble. Now with the help of a skillful collaborator, Michael D'Orso, he has produced a compelling history that promises to become a sensation and make him the country's most prominent black leader, the long-awaited successor to Martin Luther King Jr.

Vice President Gore gave a publication-day party at his mansion for Lewis. They have known each other since they were both young and in Nashville, where Lewis was

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He's Proved Anything Is Possible

McGRORY, *From CI*

giving the city fathers fits with student sit-ins. Lewis called Gore "brother," music to his host's ears. With Lewis's arm around him, Gore can corner the black vote. None of his possible rivals could compete. Lewis could also make Jesse Jackson's threat of yet another nuisance presidential challenge sound more than a little tinny.

"Walking With the Wind" reminds all interested parties of just who was at the barricades in Montgomery, Birmingham and Selma. He fingers the peacocks and the poseurs. He even faults his idol, King, for joining demonstrations late or ducking out early.

Lewis, one of 10 children of an Alabama sharecropper, was born with a voracious appetite for justice and education. When the rest of the family went off to the fields to pick cotton, he would hide under the porch and wait for the bus he took to the wretched one-room school that Pike County provided for black children. He struggled to get into college, American Baptist Theological School, where he fell upon the ideas of nonviolence and joined the young lions from other colleges who felt that they were owed the right to be treated like American citizens—and, for openers, to be allowed to eat at public lunch counters.

On Feb. 12, 1960, they began the sit-ins that changed the South. The ensuing years brought Lewis an unremitting diet of violence and hatred from uniformed fellow Americans. He was slammed around without mercy by sheriffs, herded into paddy wagons with electric prods, flung onto jailhouse floors, shoved, kicked and beaten. His skull was pounded by club-wielding state troopers and finally fractured in Selma, where unarmed demonstrators, including children, were set upon by their local police.

Lewis recounts all of this in meticulous detail, so vividly that you read it as if you had never heard

it before. He even tells you the kind of tear gas that Sheriff Jim Clark chose for the assault at Selma. In an interview the other day in his office, Lewis said he has just about total recall of the events. "I can remember what people said and when things happened—a beating in Montgomery, the reporters who risked their lives to witness."

The initial reaction to his book has been emotional. Last weekend at the Atlanta Historical Center, he was greeted by a crowd of 400. Among them was a white woman who, with tears streaming down her cheeks, called out: "Thank God you're still alive. We lost Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, but we have you."

It is impossible to read this inspirational and hideous story of courage and cruelty without being moved. Blacks will read it with rage and pride. The civil rights movement was rife with idealism and good strategy. Lewis and James Bevel and Diane Nash and his other comrades were schooled in Christian doctrine and the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence. They showed major self-discipline. In the early, almost idyllic days of the sit-ins, the members of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (of which Lewis eventually became chairman), created a political movement that was a model of political activism. Everything was seen to: dress code, food, transportation, attitude. They walked in silence, they had one spokesman, they hung in. They won. There is no trace of them today. Maybe Lewis can revive in them that hope and faith, maybe at least persuade them to come out and vote again.

If there is one thing this splendid, pulsing book is saying, it is that anything is possible if you insist. John Lewis wasn't supposed to be in Congress. He was supposed to lose to Julian Bond, who was taller, lighter-skinned and nationally famous. But he's finishing his 12th year in the House, and he's a figure of consequence. Now that he has told his glorious, harrowing story, he will be even more so.