

From John Lewis

4 September 1958
Troy, Ala.

In the summer of 1958 Lewis met with King at Ralph Abernathy's First Baptist Church to discuss his interest in applying for admission to segregated Troy State University.¹ King, Abernathy, and Fred Gray encouraged Lewis to apply, King reportedly telling him: "We will get the money to fight the legal battle. . . . If you really want to do it, we will see you through." Although the "boy from Troy," as King called him, was ultimately unable to overcome his parents' concerns about his applying to the segregated institution, he continued to follow King's activities with great interest and sent this letter after King's arrest in Montgomery.² On 11 September King thanked Lewis for his encouraging words: "These are the type of gestures that serve to give one strength and courage in the midst of a difficult struggle."

1. John Robert Lewis (1940–), born near Troy, Alabama, earned a B.A. (1961) from American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville and another B.A. (1967) from Fisk University. While in Nashville in the late 1950s Lewis attended nonviolent direct action workshops conducted by Gandhian Methodist minister James Lawson. Lewis participated in that city's lunch counter sit-ins in early 1960, and that same year helped form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He joined the Freedom Rides of 1961, and in 1962 was elected to the board of SCLC. Lewis served as chairman of SNCC from 1963 until 1966, and in that role was a member of the "Big Six" black leaders to meet with President Kennedy in 1963 and a keynote speaker at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. In Selma in 1965, Lewis and Hosea Williams led marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge where they were brutally beaten by state troopers in an incident that became known as "Bloody Sunday." After leaving SNCC in 1966, Lewis went on to direct the Voter Education Project and later became a Democratic representative to Congress from Georgia.

2. Lewis, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), pp. 75–79.

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
309 S. Jackson St.
Montgomery, Alabama

5 Sept
1958

Dear Dr. King:

We want you to know that we are much concern about the mistreatment of you on Wednesday by race prejudice policeman of Montgomery.

We are with you 100%. If there anything we can do please let us know. We will go the last mile of the way

Yours truly,

[*signed*] John R. Lewis

Rev. John R. Lewis

Advisor, Pike County Fellowship of Christian Youth

TLS. MLKP-MBU: Box 34A.