Children who made a revolution

by John Herbers in the July 15, 1998 issue

By David Halberstrom, The Children. *(Random House, 783 pp.)*

By John Lewis with Michael D'Orso, Walking with the Wind. *(Simon & Schuster, 496 pp.)*

We have had almost three decades to assess the effects of the civil rights movement that began with the 1954 Supreme Court decision against school segregation. Before it fell apart at the end of the 1960s, the movement brought far-reaching changes in the law, politics and society as it wiped out centuries of overt racial discrimination across the South. The loss of life was minimal for so decisive a revolution.

David Halberstam's book is an exhaustive account of the lives of some of the foot soldiers in the struggle. Halberstam underscores an element in the movement that now seems to be little understood, if not forgotten: the bedrock Christian faith that undergirded every successful turn.

The breakup of the movement has been ascribed to a number of causes--among them the divisive Vietnam war that drew away resources and commitments from the movement, and the fact that most of its major goals had been met as the '60s drew to a close. Though the movement had gone a long way in turning the country around, it had just begun to grapple with what is possibly a more difficult challenge: reducing the poverty that gripped--and still grips--millions of people of color. At the time, many of us who had been close observers of the movement thought it capable of going on to greater reforms.

Instead, it fractured, chiefly because so many of its members and leaders abandoned the tradition of nonviolence and the goal of integration. They turned to black separatism and preached returning violence with violence. Many white liberals who had allied themselves with the movement did not speak out against the militants, either because they agreed with them or were reluctant to anger them.

It is well known that Martin Luther King Jr. was a Baptist minister who adopted the nonviolent tactic preached by Gandhi, believing it to be compatible with his Christian faith. Less well known is the role played by other ministers such as James M. Lawson Jr., who not only embraced nonviolence but spent some time in India studying it. As a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School, Lawson drew students from the several black colleges in Nashville and surrounding areas into workshops on nonviolent resistance. Local and state discriminatory laws were to be defied with marches and sit-ins, acts sure to arouse some of the oppressors to violence. But never should the protesters fight back. In this way the cruelty and violence against blacks routinely administered in hidden places would be brought out into the open for all the world to see. The protesters would retaliate by filling up the jails to such an extent that the authorities would have to address the reason for their protest.

Lawson's young students integrated a number of Nashville institutions and won remarkable concessions. Many of them went on to participate in demonstrations across the South. King, of course, had started it all with the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott that resulted in the Supreme Court ban on segregation in public transportation. He and Lawson set up the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a national alliance of black pastors dedicated to the principle of nonviolence. Over the next few years the nation would see in state after state, city after city, massive protests in which the participants absorbed the punishment--protests that brought about federal intervention and the repeal of discriminatory laws. Nearly all the protest campaigns were based in churches, and nonviolence prevailed when participants moved to the streets.

By the spring of 1964, a mood of militancy had begun to rise in the black community, and the discipline of nonviolence began to falter. Leaders were having trouble holding the line against violent retaliation. Some of the marchers were tired of being beaten and jailed, while in some places their protest failed to move white officials. There were warnings of what could happen if nonviolence faltered. Thomas Merton wrote that it was "possible that as the movement gains in power, the reasonableness and Christian fervor . . . will recede into the background and the movement will become more and more an unreasoning and intransigent mass movement dedicated to the conquest of sheer power, more and more inclined to violence."

To counter this threat, King went to St. Augustine, Florida, a center of right-wing conservatism and racial bigotry. Civil rights leaders across the country predicted a

long, hot summer of discontent. King said he was trying to bring about a “purifying prelude” to the summer by staging a campaign “where Negroes remain completely nonviolent.” From that standpoint the campaign was a success. Night after night marchers walked into a public park and absorbed the beatings and slander of gangs of hoodlums who were given free rein by the town authorities.

I wrote an article in the New York Times magazine quoting King at length on his strategy and purposes in St. Augustine. But somehow his explanation did not convince many educated readers who had been sympathetic with the movement. In some quarters King was being judged by the American standard of win or lose. He had not achieved his goals in some of the campaigns that had followed the Montgomery bus boycott. Few understood that his purpose was not to prevail in city after city, but to bring the force of the federal government to bear on the whole region. And this business of purifying the movement impressed various cynics as a cop-out.

Nevertheless, the St. Augustine campaign did succeed, both in opening some doors to blacks and in preserving nonviolence, which for the most part prevailed through the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer and the Selma, Alabama, campaign of 1965. The latter resulted in the landmark Voting Rights Act that transformed politics in the South. But then came the cries of “black power” and the inflammatory rhetoric that frightened many of the whites whom King had been trying to reach.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which King and his allies had helped set up and which had formed the cutting edge of campaigns across the region, took a radical turn. The chairman of SNCC, John Lewis--one of Jim Lawson’s students who had stuck faithfully with nonviolence--was dismissed and replaced by Stokely Carmichael, who advocated violence as the means of achieving a revolution. Carmichael’s model was the African Mau Mau. SNCC also kicked out whites who had faithfully served in the trenches.

After massive riots in the cities, the assassinations of King and Senator Robert F. Kennedy and the turmoil of the Vietnam war, millions of poor blacks were left stranded in urban decay. That is where many still are, despite years of studies, seminars and public and private programs to help them escape.

It has long been apparent that the burden of reform rests largely on white society, which controls most of the nation’s wealth and institutions. For reform to succeed,

whites and blacks must work together. But not only were white liberals rejected by the militants; many of them defected in ways they themselves did not seem to understand. For example, white liberals pressured King to refrain from publicly opposing the Vietnam war on the grounds that such a position would weaken the movement. But how could King be true to his Christian record and convictions if he did not oppose the war? To have refrained from speaking out would have driven many of his followers out of the movement and hastened its demise.

And many white liberals failed to oppose the move toward black nationalism. A colleague whose judgments I had respected said of the tilt to militancy that while he could not condone the use of violence, he thought it might be a good idea for blacks to isolate themselves for a time. Such positions were taken despite the fact that all-black communities set up in this century and back-to-Africa movements had both been dismal failures. And then some liberals who had contributed to the movement opposed affirmative action at the time it was needed most.

After all these years, what is the legacy of Christian nonviolence? First is the body of law and the public practices stemming from it. It is hard to think of any other method that could have achieved so much so quickly and so peacefully. And those who adhered to it under difficult circumstances have been exonerated and honored, while those who opposed it, except for a few figures such as Malcolm X, have been largely forgotten. Although there is some militancy among blacks today, King is generally held up as the role model.

It was not always so. Long before his death, King was hounded daily not only by J. Edgar Hoover and his FBI, the Ku Klux Klan and traditional conservatives, but by young turks in his own movement who wanted him to risk his life more than he did (and who derided him as “De Lawd”) and by supporters who disagreed with his tactics.

Most of Jim Lawson’s students of nonviolence, the subject of Halberstam’s book, kept the faith. Chief among these was John Lewis, now a congressman from Georgia, who wanted to be a preacher but was diverted into the movement. Those who covered the movement knew him chiefly as the marcher most often beaten by angry whites. We lost count; he lost count. But he was always there. His tough exterior hid a gentle and forgiving nature.

Lewis, like some of the other Lawson kids, came to Nashville straight off the farm, in his case from southern Alabama. His life is a reminder of an often forgotten truth about the South--that rural blacks by and large had strong, stable families before economic deprivation drove many north to urban slums. Robert Coles noted this in Mississippi in 1964, when hundreds of white college students who moved in to conduct freedom schools for black children were housed with black families. The students, bringing all the hang-ups of white society with them, were surprised, Coles said, that their impoverished hosts whom they had come to save had great stability and self-assurance.

To understand how Lewis could absorb so much abuse without becoming embittered or cynical, it is helpful to examine his character at an early age, as described with grace and poignancy in his memoir. His home was like thousands of others occupied by blacks across the South: no electricity, no plumbing, aging unpainted walls and a dirt yard. Everyone in the family was required to work in the fields from sunrise to sunset in order to earn a bare living. Yet every Sunday the family rode in a mule-pulled wagon to a Baptist church several miles away for a day of preaching, singing and socializing.

When John was five years old he was put in charge of the 60 or more chickens on the farm. He was immediately drawn to his flock.

They seemed so defenseless, so simple, so pure. There was a subtle grace and dignity in every movement they made, at least through my eyes. But no one else saw them in that way. To my parents, brothers and sisters, the chickens were just about the lowest form of life on the farm--stupid, smelly nuisances, awkward, comical birds good for nothing but laying eggs and providing meat for the table. Maybe it was that outcast status, the very fact that those chickens were so forsaken by everyone else, that drew me to them as well. I felt as if I had been trusted to care for God's chosen creatures.

At dawn every morning John preached to them and they actually seemed to listen. He tried in vain to stop his parents from killing them for food.

Looking back, Lewis thinks that his concern and care for the chickens was the first indication of "what would come to shape my character and eventually guide me into the heart of the civil rights movement--qualities I certainly could not name at the time such as patience, compassion, nonviolence, civil disobedience and not a little

bit of willful stubbornness.” If he could care so tenderly for chickens, it followed that he would come to have great compassion for people who were systematically confined to poverty and abuse.

Some of the obstacles Lewis had to overcome were put up by members of his own race. His parents did not like change or his role in the movement. “There was little room for change in the world my parents knew, and what change there was was usually for the worse.” His mother’s program for a better life was “work, work, work”--an approach Lewis sensed would never be enough. “It’s not hard to understand at all the mixture of fear and concern they both felt as they watched me walk out into the world as a young man and join a movement aimed, in essence, at turning the world they knew upside down.”

From the beginning of the civil rights movement black leaders had realized that reaching their goals was partly dependent on remaining open and cooperative with the media. As a white reporter I always felt safer in black neighborhoods than among whites, many of whom considered us as an arm of the enemy. But after Stokely Carmichael and other young militants ousted Lewis as SNCC chairman and moved on to black nationalism the situation changed drastically.

SNCC leaders who had long shared information with me cut me off rudely; they seemed not to care what I wrote about them. Lewis and those around King continued to be cordial and cooperative, acknowledging the importance of the media in a democratic society. Carmichael, a native of the Caribbean, represented the young secular idealists who had rushed into the movement with the shortsighted goal of winning gains for blacks without regard for the white majority that had oppressed them, while those grounded in the Christian faith never abandoned their belief that God loves all people.

As the dust from the conflicts settled, Walker Percy noted the irony that the civil rights movement had been especially successful for whites. The integrationists in the movement succeeded in freeing white southerners from their obsession with race. After enforcement of the Voting Rights Act and other civil rights laws, whites came to realize that the world would not end because blacks had gained civil freedom. They then turned their attention to other matters. Meanwhile, millions of blacks remained locked in poverty. It is to free them from this second kind of oppression that John Lewis is still marching.