John Lewis signs books in the lobby of the LBJ Presidential Library on April 9, 2014.
In the wake of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination, the newly sworn-in President Lyndon B. Johnson vowed to honor his predecessor’s legacy by ushering through Congress the strongest piece of civil rights legislation to date, saying, “No memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy’s memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long.” President Johnson kept his word. With bipartisan passage through Congress, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law on July 2, 1964, at a nationally televised ceremony in the White House.

At the time of the signing, three of my friends were still missing in Mississippi—Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney. A few weeks later, their dead bodies were found buried in an earthen dam outside Philadelphia, Mississippi. They had come south to participate in what we called “Freedom Summer,” which was a massive effort led by the organization that I chaired at the time, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, better known as SNCC, to organize and register black voters in Mississippi. They were kidnapped and executed for trying to help people register to vote. It was clear that additional federal action was needed. We needed a voting rights act.

Nearly every day of my life since then, I have thought about Michael
Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney. They were so young when they were murdered, barely old enough to buy a beer. I have thought about how much progress the lives they sacrificed have brought about. I have thought about the countless individuals who stood in immovable lines all across the eleven states of the old Confederacy, attempting to register to vote but denied that right simply because of the color of their skin. I remember very well the weeks and months leading up to the signing of the Voting Rights Act. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., on his return from Europe after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, met with President Johnson. Dr. King said to President Johnson, “We need a voting rights act.” President Johnson responded by saying, “Dr. King, I just signed the Civil Rights Act. We don’t have the votes in the Congress to get a voting rights act passed. If you want it, make me do it.”

The efforts of Martin Luther King Jr., the young people of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, those brave and courageous men and women working in Mississippi, and countless people putting their bodies and lives on the line in Selma, Alabama, as well as ministers and religious leaders speaking up all across America, created the climate, created the environment to get a voting rights act passed.

President Johnson responded by speaking to the nation and delivering one of the most meaningful and powerful speeches any American president ever delivered before a joint session of Congress. That night, on March 15, 1965, he poured out his soul, his heart, his guts, in proposing the Voting Rights Act, and then before the closing of the speech he said, “And we shall overcome.” I was sitting next to Dr. King watching the speech on television, and when President Johnson said those words I looked over at Dr. King and watched a single tear roll down his cheek. We knew then that it was just a matter of time—the Voting Rights Act would be passed.

President Johnson brought together legislators from both sides of the aisle and the Voting Rights Act was passed. I will never, ever, forget the morning of August 6, 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson reached across his shoulder and presented me one of the pens he used to sign the Voting Rights Act of 1965. That pen, and the signing of the act, helped change America forever. Without the signing of the Voting Rights Act, in my estimation, there would not be a Jimmy Carter, or a Bill Clinton, and I’m positive there would not be a Barack Obama as president of the United States of America.

The Civil Rights Summit said in effect that President Johnson must be

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looked upon as one of our great presidents. In my estimation, this man from Texas has never received the credit he is due. Part of this is because of his involvement in the war in Vietnam. But look at his legislative successes: the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and so many other pieces of progressive legislation such as Medicare, Medicaid, the Fair Housing Act, and the Higher Education Act as well as the War on Poverty, among others.

More than anything, I believe the Civil Rights Summit of 2014 dramatizes to the nation that President Johnson’s legacy in the progress in our federal laws must continue. We cannot allow ourselves to go back. We must continue to push and pull, to struggle, to speak up and speak out, and to use our bodies, our hearts, and our minds to make America a better place.

*President Lyndon B. Johnson hands a pen to John Lewis after signing the Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965.*