John Lewis

John Lewis: A Life by **David Greenberg**

In this sweeping and deeply researched biography, historian **David Greenberg** chronicles the life and legacy of **John Lewis**, one of the most courageous and influential leaders of the American civil rights movement.

Born to sharecroppers in Alabama, Lewis rose from humble beginnings to become a central figure in some of the most pivotal events in American history. He was a Freedom Rider, the youngest speaker at the 1963 March on Washington, and chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He is perhaps best known for leading the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on “Bloody Sunday” in 1965, where he was brutally beaten by state troopers in Selma.

Greenberg traces Lewis’s journey beyond the civil rights era—through his efforts with the Voter Education Project, his leadership in Atlanta politics, and his long tenure as a respected and principled member of the U.S. House of Representatives, often called “the conscience of Congress.”

Drawing on extensive interviews (including with Lewis himself), archival materials, and newly uncovered FBI documents, *John Lewis: A Life* offers an intimate and comprehensive portrait of a man whose commitment to justice, nonviolence, and democracy shaped a nation.

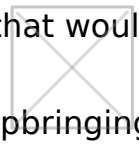
Chapter 1: The Boy from Troy

Chapter 1: **The Boy from Troy** details the early years of John Lewis, offering insight into his formative years in Pike County, Alabama. Born on February 21, 1940, John stood out in his family for his love of reading and his strong desire for knowledge, traits that set him apart from his siblings. His father, Eddie Lewis, often described him as a "peculiar boy," a label that reflected John's deep curiosity and dedication to learning. His family supported his interests, particularly his sister, Ethel Mae, and his father, who encouraged him to read books like Robert Louis Stevenson’s works and biographies of influential African Americans, including Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery*, which became one of his favorites.

The chapter also traces John’s family heritage, revealing that his great-great-grandparents, Tobias and Elizabeth Carter, had been granted a small piece of land after the Civil War, a testament to the complexities of post-slavery life in America. Despite initial success, by the time John was born, the Carters had been reduced to working as tenant farmers for a white landowner, Josh Copeland. This shift from landownership to tenant farming represents the struggles faced by many African Americans after the Civil War, a reality that would deeply influence John’s understanding of economic and racial inequality. His family’s difficulties were a product of a system that maintained racial and economic divisions long after the formal abolition of slavery, shaping John’s early perceptions of justice and equality.

John’s upbringing was marked by the harsh realities of poverty and the systemic racism of the Jim Crow South. The Lewis family lived without modern conveniences; they boiled water for baths and used outdoor toilets, typical of many Black families at the time. Despite these hardships, Eddie Lewis instilled a sense of dignity in his children, emphasizing the importance of safety, food, and respect in a world where violence, particularly from groups like the Ku Klux Klan, loomed as a constant threat. This backdrop of fear and hardship helped John develop a resilient character, one that would drive his lifelong commitment to civil rights and social justice.

The pervasive racism and segregation of the South deeply impacted John’s worldview. As a child, he experienced firsthand the discrimination that restricted access to education, healthcare, and public facilities based on race. These experiences were not just incidents of individual prejudice but part of a larger system of racial injustice that John would later devote his life to combating. His exposure to such inequalities at a young age fueled his desire to challenge the status quo and fight for equal rights for all people, a cause that would define his future activism.



John’s religious upbringing, largely shaped by his mother, Willie Mae, played a central role in forming his sense of moral conviction and hope. Raised in the church, he was inspired by the teachings of Christianity, which emphasized love, justice, and equality, principles that would guide his future work. His early ambition to become a minister reflected his desire to serve both his community and a higher purpose. This aspiration was not only about preaching but also about empowering others to fight for social change, and it was this vision that ultimately propelled him toward higher education and a career in activism.

The chapter concludes with John’s determination to pursue education as a means of bettering himself and his community. His ambition to attend seminary school was rooted in his belief that through education, he could become a more effective advocate for racial equality. This thirst for knowledge, paired with his commitment to social justice, laid the foundation for his future role as one of the most influential figures in the civil rights movement, shaping his journey as a leader dedicated to challenging inequality in all its forms.

Chapter 2: Nashville

Chapter 2: Nashville focuses on the early life and formative experiences of John Lewis as he moves to Nashville in 1957 to attend the American Baptist Theological Seminary. At just seventeen years old, Lewis embarks on a new chapter away from his family, carrying with him a trunk gifted by his uncle. The seminary, established in 1924 to provide education for African Americans pursuing ministry, has a rich history. Despite being founded in response to the exclusion of Black Baptists from white institutions, it is within these walls that Lewis begins his journey toward becoming an advocate for civil rights. The campus, with its picturesque views by the Cumberland River, offers him both a sense of belonging and the opportunity for self-discovery.

Upon arriving in Nashville, Lewis settles into Griggs Hall, experiencing the freedom of living on his own for the first time. In order to support his education, he works in the dining hall, which exposes him to a diverse group of students with similar goals of pursuing ministry. While he immerses himself in his studies, Lewis struggles with his speech impediment, which often leaves him feeling isolated and disconnected from others. Despite this, he finds solace and comfort in his academic work, particularly in subjects like history and philosophy, where he excels under the mentorship of professors who inspire him to think critically about the world around him. Through his education, Lewis begins to build a foundation for his future advocacy, where the pursuit of knowledge goes hand-in-hand with the fight for social justice.

The most significant influence during his time in Nashville is Kelly Miller Smith, a respected civil rights leader and minister who challenges Lewis's thinking and urges him to consider how faith and social change intersect. As Lewis navigates his journey at the seminary, he begins to see a divide between those focused on traditional ministry and those, like Smith, who believe in using religion to advocate for social change. This realization sparks a growing interest in civil rights issues, especially in

light of the segregation and inequality that plagued the South at the time. Through Smith’s guidance, Lewis’s awareness deepens, and he becomes increasingly determined to take action. This period of his life proves to be a turning point, as Lewis not only strengthens his commitment to the ministry but also begins to view the civil rights movement as an essential aspect of his faith.

By joining the NAACP and attending local meetings, Lewis becomes part of Nashville’s burgeoning civil rights movement. These meetings serve as a platform for learning and connecting with other activists, who emphasize the philosophy of nonviolent resistance inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. As Lewis builds relationships with other like-minded students, he is exposed to the urgency of the civil rights struggle. One of the most profound relationships he forms is with Harold Cox, a fellow student who guides him through the complexities of activism. Although Lewis initially befriends students who are less focused on activism, he remains resolutely committed to social justice, driven by the examples set by leaders like Smith. His sense of purpose grows stronger as he begins to understand the significant role he will play in the ongoing fight for equality.

As the spring semester of 1959 arrives, Lewis's commitment to civil rights activism intensifies. He becomes deeply involved in planning the sit-in protests aimed at desegregating Nashville’s lunch counters. His increasing interest in nonviolent resistance sets the stage for his future leadership role in the civil rights movement. This chapter highlights not only Lewis’s intellectual and emotional growth but also his evolution into a dedicated activist, ready to challenge the status quo and push for systemic change. By immersing himself in both academic and activist circles, Lewis solidifies the foundation for his future role in the movement, marking the beginning of a journey that would change the course of history.

Chapter 3: The Sit-Ins

Chapter 3: The Sit-Ins explores the significant turning point in the Civil Rights Movement that unfolded through the sit-in protests in Nashville, beginning in early 1960. Prior to John Lewis’s return to Nashville in January, local ministers had attempted to challenge segregation at lunch counters but were consistently met with fierce resistance from the owners of department stores. Their efforts, although persistent, lacked the broader support and momentum needed to achieve meaningful change. However, in February 1960, a group of students from North Carolina A&T organized a groundbreaking sit-in at a Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. This act of defiance against segregation not only caught the attention of the public but also sparked a wave of similar actions across the South. The Greensboro sit-ins became a crucial catalyst for the broader Civil Rights Movement, providing a clear example of how nonviolent direct action could challenge and eventually dismantle discriminatory practices.

The events in Greensboro inspired Nashville students like Angeline Butler and motivated them to organize their own sit-ins. The momentum from Greensboro began to influence Nashville, where civil rights activists saw the opportunity to expand their own efforts. Initially, James Lawson, an experienced leader of nonviolent activism, hesitated to engage directly in organizing a response, preoccupied with his academic obligations. But the growing enthusiasm among students pushed him to reconsider. John Lewis and his peers, with their deep commitment to nonviolent principles, were eager to put their passion into action. At a pivotal meeting at Fisk University, seventy-five students gathered to plan their next steps, with some new to the idea of nonviolent protests. Even though many were unfamiliar with these methods, their shared desire to bring about change quickly united them under the banner of equality.

As the Nashville Student Movement mobilized for the February 12 sit-ins, the students meticulously planned their actions to ensure the protest's success. Under Lawson's guidance, they were trained in the principles of nonviolence, which emphasized not only physical restraint but emotional and psychological discipline as well. The students were advised to wear neat clothing, carry books, and be prepared for arrests, anticipating the possibility of violent backlash from segregationists. Lewis, while confident in the commitment of his peers, was wary of the readiness of some of the newcomers. However, the collective energy and dedication of the group allowed them to move forward with their goal. The day of the sit-in saw students dividing into groups to occupy the lunch counters in various downtown stores, bringing their message of nonviolent resistance to the forefront of the fight for civil rights. The response was immediate, with white counter-protesters harassing the students, but their unwavering commitment to nonviolence remained intact. As arrests piled up, the students found strength in their shared experiences and their firm belief in the justice of their cause. Media attention began to grow, further amplifying the movement and gaining the support of the public.

In the weeks that followed, the sit-in protests gained momentum as students from across the South joined the movement. However, they faced growing opposition from white segregationists who resorted to more violent tactics and discriminatory actions in an attempt to crush the protests. Legal consequences for the protesters also intensified, but the young activists remained resolute in their pursuit of justice. The strength of their unity and the support of local figures in the community kept the movement alive, even in the face of overwhelming adversity. The Nashville Student Movement not only succeeded in integrating some of the city's public spaces but also paved the way for future sit-ins and acts of nonviolent protest across the nation. Their courage and determination played a critical role in the larger Civil Rights Movement, inspiring future generations of activists. Through their collective actions, they helped dismantle the deeply entrenched system of segregation, contributing to the broader fight for equality in America.

Chapter 4: SNCC

Chapter 4: SNCC delves into the formation and early activities of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), focusing on the pivotal role the organization played during the civil rights movement, especially in Nashville. The chapter begins by highlighting the success of the Nashville sit-ins, which were instrumental in the desegregation of local businesses. These protests not only advanced the cause of civil rights but also forged deeper connections among the activists, including John Lewis and his fellow students, whose bond grew stronger as they worked side by side in their shared struggle for equality. The Nashville movement became a catalyst for wider efforts in the civil rights movement, symbolizing the energy and determination of the youth involved in challenging segregation. As the sit-ins gained momentum, they set the stage for even more organized efforts aimed at achieving racial justice in other parts of the country. The sit-ins themselves were a testament to the resilience of those who refused to accept the status quo and were willing to face violence and injustice in pursuit of change.

In April 1960, the scene shifted to the Highlander Folk School, a key site for civil rights training and discussion, where eighty-two activists, including those involved in the Nashville protests, gathered for a retreat. Highlander, known for its focus on nonviolence and grassroots organizing, played a crucial role in shaping the strategies of the civil rights movement. For John Lewis, Highlander was a transformative space where he was exposed to the importance of education and political empowerment in combating systemic oppression. It was at Highlander that the seeds for SNCC's formation were sown, as activists from various schools and backgrounds came together to discuss how best to continue their fight for justice. A pivotal aspect of this retreat was the debate over the philosophy of nonviolence, which divided some of the participants. While Lewis and his supporters viewed nonviolence as a moral and ethical

principle that could transcend political tactics, others saw it as a practical method for achieving specific goals. This debate set the stage for SNCC's future, as it began to develop its own unique approach to activism, distinguishing itself from other civil rights organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

As the group’s direction became clearer, SNCC evolved into an organization focused on direct action, and its influence grew exponentially. The chapter also illustrates the tensions within the civil rights movement, particularly the generational divide between seasoned leaders and the younger activists of SNCC, who were determined to take bold steps. The desire for autonomy from the more established civil rights organizations was a major force in SNCC’s development. Unlike the SCLC, which was closely aligned with the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr., SNCC’s members were interested in more radical, youth-led initiatives. The establishment of SNCC, which was originally formed as the Temporary Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, reflected a new wave of activism that was not bound by the traditional methods of their predecessors. As SNCC’s membership expanded and its mission became more refined, the group moved beyond the college campuses where it had begun and started to take its fight to the heart of the segregated South. The Nashville protests evolved into a broader campaign targeting businesses and public spaces, where young people continued to challenge both the social and legal systems of segregation. Despite facing violent opposition and arrests, the persistence of SNCC members began to yield results, including the eventual integration of Nashville’s movie theaters, a significant achievement that further solidified the group's importance within the civil rights movement.

By the chapter’s conclusion, it’s clear that SNCC’s activities in Nashville and beyond were defining moments in the larger civil rights struggle. While the group faced considerable challenges, including internal disagreements over tactics and external resistance from segregationist forces, their efforts represented a critical shift in the movement. As SNCC's legacy continued to grow, the sit-ins in Nashville stood as a testament to the power of nonviolent resistance, as well as to the profound impact of youth activism in the broader fight for civil rights and racial equality. The chapter

reinforces the idea that, even though the civil rights movement encountered setbacks and obstacles, the determination of activists like John Lewis and his peers laid the groundwork for future victories and continued progress toward racial justice.

Chapter 5: The Freedom Rides

Chapter 5 delves deeply into John Lewis’s transformative journey during the period of the Freedom Rides, a pivotal moment in the civil rights movement. As Lewis neared graduation from the American Baptist Theological Institute, his aspiration to become both a teacher and minister shaped his worldview. Initially, he believed that his faith could guide him in teaching others, but over time, his vision expanded to the belief that empowering African Americans to address racial injustice through political and social activism was equally important. As the church’s influence began to diminish in his life, Lewis recognized that his mission could extend beyond preaching. He shifted his focus to organizing and training others to engage in direct action, acknowledging that the civil rights movement required bold leadership and a willingness to sacrifice for justice. His personal evolution from preacher to civil rights activist reflected the broader shift that many in the movement experienced, seeking a more direct and forceful challenge to racial oppression.

Lewis’s first major step into civil rights activism came when he sought to integrate Southern bus stations, focusing his efforts particularly on Birmingham, Alabama, which was infamous for its white supremacist violence. While many leaders were hesitant about the risks involved, Fred Shuttlesworth, a key figure in the civil rights movement, cautioned against the plan due to the grave danger posed by violent backlash. However, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) had already planned the Freedom Rides, which aimed to challenge the desegregation of bus facilities by testing the enforcement of a Supreme Court ruling. The rides were an extension of the nonviolent principles promoted by Mahatma Gandhi, and they became a crucial test of the federal government’s commitment to enforcing civil rights law. Despite the grave danger, Lewis and his fellow activists felt compelled to take part, determined to fight for change. This movement, rooted in nonviolent resistance, became an essential part of

the broader civil rights struggle.

The Freedom Ride officially began on May 4, as Lewis and a group of activists split into two teams, riding on Greyhound and Trailways buses. Initially, their journey was met with relatively minor hostility, but it soon escalated as they encountered violent resistance from segregationists. Along the way, the Freedom Riders participated in intense training for nonviolent resistance under the leadership of James Farmer, who helped guide their strategic and moral approach to the struggle. Although friends and family expressed deep concern for their safety, Lewis remained committed to the cause, understanding that their participation could have a profound impact on the movement. His decision to join the Freedom Rides, despite the personal risks, was motivated by his belief in the necessity of confronting segregation head-on. As the ride progressed, tensions grew, and on May 8, the riders encountered their first major clash in Charlotte when one of them was arrested. The violence escalated rapidly in Rock Hill, where the group was physically attacked by white locals. This confrontation underscored the brutal opposition they would face as they moved further into the South. Despite the violence and injuries, the riders maintained their commitment to nonviolent principles, showing remarkable resilience in the face of brutal opposition.

As the Freedom Rides continued, the level of violence escalated, but so did Lewis’s determination. After briefly taking a detour to Philadelphia to accept a fellowship, Lewis returned to find that the Freedom Riders were encountering even more dangerous opposition. However, his dedication to the movement was unwavering. He knew that their participation was essential not just for the success of the rides but for the broader fight for justice and equality. This chapter captures the courage of John Lewis and his fellow Freedom Riders, highlighting the profound personal and collective sacrifices they made to advance civil rights. Their unwavering commitment to nonviolence in the face of intense violence became a powerful symbol of the movement. Even as they faced tremendous hardship and physical danger, their spirit of resistance was stronger than ever, demonstrating the power of collective action in challenging systemic racism. The chapter underscores how the Freedom Rides helped galvanize the movement, pushing the nation closer to realizing the ideals of justice

and equality for all, and cemented Lewis’s role as one of the defining figures of the civil rights movement.

Chapter 6: Open City

Chapter 6: Open City delves into the intense and transformative summer of 1961, exploring John Lewis's prominent role in the Civil Rights Movement, particularly in Nashville. After the Freedom Riders' release from Parchman Penitentiary, Lewis gained a newfound public visibility, receiving significant recognition for his courage. His invitation to speak at the “Freedom Jubilee” in Pittsburgh was a testament to his growing influence. Despite the accolades, Lewis remained humble, stating that he felt he had accomplished little, reflecting his selfless dedication to the cause. The chapter also emphasizes the vibrant and growing Nashville movement, which became a focal point for student activism across the country and even internationally, drawing passionate individuals ready to stand up against racial segregation and injustice in public spaces.

The narrative also highlights a pivotal moment at Fisk University, where over a hundred activists convened to discuss the direction of the Civil Rights Movement. During this symposium, Lewis, who was still dealing with legal challenges from his involvement in Mississippi, recognized the growing division between those focused on immediate direct action and those leaning towards voter registration initiatives endorsed by the Kennedy administration. This divide ultimately led to a critical gathering at the Highlander Folk School, where veteran activist Ella Baker played a pivotal role in bridging the gap. The result was the formation of two distinct wings within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)—one focusing on immediate direct action and the other on broader voter registration efforts. This strategic shift expanded the movement's goals and provided clearer paths for engagement with both political and social challenges.

As tensions mounted throughout the summer, particularly between the older, more seasoned activists like Lewis and the newer, younger members, the debate about the

best approach to civil rights activism intensified. Lewis's commitment to nonviolence was increasingly challenged by those who believed more radical methods were necessary to achieve quick change. A notable instance of this conflict occurred during a protest at H.G. Hill supermarkets in Nashville, where confrontations with hostile locals escalated, resulting in multiple arrests. These events highlighted the difficulty of maintaining nonviolent discipline in the face of aggression, a struggle that was part of the broader tension within the movement. Despite these challenges, Lewis remained a strong advocate for nonviolence, believing that adherence to peaceful protest was crucial to the movement’s integrity and success.

The chapter also explores the initiation of "Operation Open City," a campaign aimed at desegregating public spaces and securing equal employment opportunities across Nashville. Despite the decline in participation as the summer progressed, Lewis stayed committed to the cause, leading a small, dedicated group known as the "Horrible Seven." Their work was not without its challenges; while some campaigns were successful, others, like attempts to integrate high-end restaurants, resulted in arrests and frustration. These struggles illustrated the complexities of activism and the unpredictability of success, reinforcing the importance of persistence and strategy in the fight for civil rights. Lewis's leadership during this time was instrumental in keeping the movement’s goals alive, even in the face of daunting opposition.

As summer turned to fall, the narrative shifts to the increasing focus of SNCC on rural areas, especially in Mississippi, where voter registration efforts faced even more severe resistance. Lewis, ever the optimist, believed that expanding the reach of the movement was essential for achieving lasting change. Despite the difficulties faced, his commitment to the cause never wavered. The chapter concludes with an affirmation of Lewis's unwavering dedication to the broader civil rights struggle, emphasizing his ability to overcome both personal and organizational challenges. It highlights the complexity of his leadership as he navigated the evolving landscape of activism, grappling with internal disagreements, external pressures, and the ongoing struggle to secure justice and equality for all.

Chapter 7: The March on Washington

Chapter 7: The March on Washington delves into John Lewis’s vital contribution to the civil rights movement during a critical period in the early 1960s. After significant progress in Nashville, where nonviolent protests led to promises of desegregation, Lewis remained committed to expanding his activism. He organized a swim-in at a segregated pool and a human barricade at a local supermarket, actions that garnered widespread media attention and highlighted the growing unrest in cities across the United States. These activities reflected a broader shift in the civil rights movement, with increasing demands for change and a rise in more assertive tactics. The national pressure continued to build, leading to President John F. Kennedy's introduction of a civil rights bill in June 1963, largely in response to the escalating protests and civil disobedience.

By mid-June, Lewis was unexpectedly thrust into a leadership role. He was invited to an emergency meeting in Atlanta by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), where he was elected as the new chairman. This marked a pivotal moment in the movement, as SNCC's focus transitioned from college campuses to the rural South. Under Lewis's leadership, the organization began addressing broader social and economic injustices, extending beyond the fight for desegregation to tackle issues like poverty and disenfranchisement. This shift reflected the movement's growing recognition that true equality required addressing economic disparities alongside civil rights.

As discussions about organizing a march on Washington began to take shape, key civil rights leaders, such as A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, took the lead in pushing for the event. Their goal was to highlight not only the demand for desegregation but also the need for jobs and freedom for African Americans. Initially, many civil rights leaders were cautious, fearing that the march might lack a clear, militant message.

However, Rustin and his team worked diligently to bring together various groups, including civil rights organizations, labor unions, and religious institutions, ensuring that the march would gain the widespread support it needed. This inclusive approach eventually brought SNCC into the fold, solidifying the march as a defining moment in the struggle for racial equality.

As the march date approached, Lewis faced the difficult task of crafting a speech that would reflect his organization’s demands while also considering the expectations of the broader coalition. He knew that the speech needed to convey the urgency of the civil rights struggle, but he also had to navigate the pressure from other leaders to soften his message. Despite concerns that his words might alienate some allies, Lewis fought to preserve the integrity of his message, emphasizing the need for immediate action and a more aggressive stance on civil rights. Tensions were high as Lewis worked to balance his desire to address the issues that mattered most to his constituents with the demands of a larger, diverse movement.

When the day of the march finally arrived, Lewis delivered a speech that resonated with the thousands gathered in Washington. He spoke passionately about the necessity for immediate change, voicing the frustrations and hopes of the Black community. His delivery was powerful and direct, capturing the essence of the movement’s demands. The speech helped solidify his role as a leading voice in the civil rights struggle, elevating both his personal significance and the broader movement. The march was a tremendous success, drawing attention to the need for civil rights legislation and setting the stage for future advancements in racial equality. The chapter concludes by highlighting the lasting impact of the march, which became a pivotal moment in American history, furthering the cause of civil rights and equality for all citizens.

Chapter 8: One Man, One Vote

Chapter 8: One Man, One Vote captures a deeply transformative and heartbreaking moment in the civil rights movement. In September 1963, the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, resulted in the deaths of four young African American girls. This act of racial violence, which shocked the nation, served as a rallying cry for activists and marked a turning point in the struggle for justice. The brutal bombing was part of a broader campaign by white supremacists, designed to intimidate and oppress the Black community in the South, particularly in Birmingham, which had gained the notorious nickname of "Bombingham." As the city grappled with the shock and loss, the national outcry over this senseless act of violence only heightened the urgency for civil rights reform.

John Lewis, who had been in Troy, Alabama, when news of the bombing reached him, felt a profound sense of responsibility to act. His first instinct was to travel to Birmingham and take part in the ongoing struggle for justice, even though he knew the risk involved. Upon arriving in the city, he immediately joined fellow activists from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), all of whom were equally determined to address the tragedy with urgency and resolve. Despite the anger and frustration that the bombing stirred, the group maintained their commitment to nonviolent resistance. The tragedy made it clear that the stakes were higher than ever, and the importance of staying true to the principles of peaceful protest became even more apparent in the face of such unprovoked violence.

As the SNCC strategized their next steps, Diane Nash suggested forming a “civil rights army” to continue pushing for systemic change through nonviolent action. She advocated for extensive training in peaceful protest techniques alongside bold and decisive direct actions, such as blockades, to make their voices heard. However, not everyone agreed with her approach. Some, like Fred Shuttlesworth, expressed

concerns about the potential risks and the consequences of such a high-profile demonstration. During a critical meeting with Martin Luther King Jr., the SNCC leaders received his advice to exercise caution, urging them to remain grounded in the established methods of nonviolent protest that had previously proven successful. This internal disagreement reflected the growing tension within the movement as different leaders struggled to find the right balance between urgency and strategy.

The chapter also shifts focus to the ongoing battle for voting rights, particularly in Selma, Alabama. In this rural community, African American citizens continued to face systemic barriers in registering to vote, and local authorities, led by the infamous Sheriff Jim Clark, used brutal tactics to suppress their efforts. The violence in Birmingham reignited the determination of activists, driving home the need for change and pushing the movement toward greater urgency. Lewis, along with others, recognized that securing the right to vote was one of the most vital steps in securing long-term civil rights victories for African Americans. The chapter highlights the interconnection between the efforts in Selma and the tragedy in Birmingham, showing how these events propelled the movement forward despite the overwhelming odds.

Ultimately, the bombing in Birmingham and the subsequent actions of the civil rights movement created an atmosphere of heightened awareness and urgency. The chapter delves deeply into the complexities of the civil rights struggle, shedding light on the ideological conflicts within the movement. Lewis, along with his fellow activists, faced an impossible choice: to remain true to their principles of nonviolence while confronting an increasingly hostile environment, or to adapt their tactics in response to the rising tide of violence. As the chapter concludes, it underscores the resilience of the movement, demonstrating how leaders like John Lewis navigated personal and philosophical challenges while working to achieve justice. Despite the dangers, setbacks, and disagreements, the movement forged ahead, determined to secure the basic rights and dignity of all African Americans, and the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church became a crucial moment in this ongoing fight.

Chapter 9: Freedom Summer

Chapter 9: Freedom Summer is a poignant reflection on the civil rights movement's intensifying struggles and the volunteer efforts during the summer of 1964. In June, the Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, served as a gathering place for those eager to contribute to the cause. This initial assembly was marked by a diverse group of volunteers, mostly white and male, who came from across the nation. The training they underwent was intense, aiming to prepare them for the hostile environments they were about to face in the Southern states. Prominent civil rights figures such as Fannie Lou Hamer and Bayard Rustin played crucial roles in the training, emphasizing the importance of nonviolent action and mutual respect. Their lessons, derived from years of firsthand activism, aimed not only to prepare the volunteers for physical danger but also to instill a sense of purpose in the larger context of social justice.

Despite the strong sense of solidarity and purpose, the volunteers were warned that the stakes were high. They were told bluntly that they might not make it back home. This warning was not idle; the historical context of violence against civil rights workers, especially in the South, made it a grim reality. Tensions also arose within the group itself, as there were differences of opinion about how best to move forward with the movement. While many were united in their commitment to nonviolent resistance, there were significant divisions over strategy. These internal divisions only heightened the sense of urgency, but also provided a foundation for deeper discussions that would shape the future of the movement. The unity between the Students Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) provided a semblance of cohesion, but deep philosophical differences regarding the direction of the movement created an undercurrent of tension.

The tragic disappearance of three civil rights workers in Neshoba County in late June shocked the entire nation and brought the risks of the movement to the forefront.

Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman, who were investigating a church burning, were detained by local authorities under false pretenses and later disappeared. As their whereabouts remained unknown, their absence sparked a national outcry and prompted a search by both federal agents and local citizens. The discovery of their burned-out car and submerged bodies later confirmed the worst fears. John Lewis, stationed in Meridian, Mississippi, was deeply affected by the tragedy. The heightened police presence in the area only added to the mounting tension, as local authorities, who had actively suppressed civil rights efforts, denied any knowledge of the incident.

The discovery of the men’s bodies buried under an earthen dam was a devastating blow, not only to the families of the victims but to the entire civil rights movement. Lewis, who had already dedicated much of his life to fighting for voting rights and social equality, was shaken by the violence. However, despite the grief, he remained resolute in his belief in nonviolence. The loss underscored the deep racial divisions in the country, particularly in the South, where Black activists routinely faced brutal opposition. The public outrage that followed the discovery of the bodies was significant, but Lewis observed that the media’s response often seemed to reserve more empathy for the white victims, revealing the entrenched racial biases that shaped the public’s perception of civil rights. Despite this, Lewis remained unwavering in his commitment to nonviolent activism, understanding that it was the key to securing long-term change in American society.

The chapter reflects on the complexities of the civil rights movement and the escalating risks that activists faced during this pivotal period. While the challenges were great, including the rise in violent opposition and ideological divides within the movement, the determination to keep pushing forward never wavered. For Lewis and many others, Freedom Summer was not just a call to action; it was a defining moment that would influence their commitment to justice and equality for the rest of their lives. As the movement continued, these painful yet transformative experiences solidified the resolve of civil rights leaders, making it clear that the path to equality would require both personal sacrifice and collective effort. The chapter concludes by

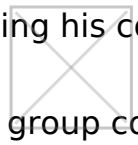
underscoring the critical role of grassroots organizing and the importance of nonviolent protest in overcoming systemic racial injustice. Despite setbacks, the courage and resilience displayed during Freedom Summer left an indelible mark on the history of the United States.

Chapter 10: Africa

Chapter 10: Africa takes readers on a transformative journey alongside John Lewis as he embarks on a life-changing trip to Africa in the mid-1960s. This chapter begins with a personal letter from his mother, Willie Mae Lewis, to his brother Robert, which provides updates on family matters, including their father’s recovery and the activities of his siblings. She expresses concern about Robert's decision to travel to Africa, citing the distance and the potential risks. However, Robert was determined to understand his heritage and was inspired by the connections he had made with African students during his time in Nashville and Highlander. His interest in exploring Africa’s influence on the civil rights movement, combined with the advice from Bayard Rustin, led him to see the trip as a chance to expand his understanding of race, politics, and social justice on a global scale. Rustin encouraged Robert to approach the journey with an open mind and secure patrons to make the trip a success, which led to Harry Belafonte stepping in to provide financial support for the trip to Guinea, where they would meet with key figures in the Guinean independence movement, including President Sékou Touré.

On September 10, Lewis set out from Atlanta, filled with a mix of excitement and trepidation about the journey ahead. However, the excitement was dampened when they encountered difficulties at JFK airport due to overbooking on their flight. Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, undeterred by this obstacle, led the group in a peaceful sit-in on the jetway, ensuring that they would be able to board the plane and begin their journey. It was Lewis's first experience flying, and while it was exhilarating, it was also anxiety-inducing for him. Upon their arrival in Senegal, the group received a warm welcome and was struck by the sight of Black professionals in roles that were rare to see in America at the time. This moment marked a turning point in Lewis’s understanding of racial identity, as it offered a glimpse into a society where African

Americans could thrive in professional settings that were still largely out of reach back home. The trip continued to Guinea, where they stayed at Villa Sily and enjoyed lavish meals and cultural festivities. However, amid the celebration, Lewis was also deeply engaged in meaningful conversations with local activists, ministers, and political figures, gaining insights into Guinea's one-party political system and the struggles it faced as it sought independence. This experience offered him a new perspective on activism, deepening his commitment to the fight for civil rights.



As Lewis and the group continued their journey, they visited Liberia and Ghana, where the cultural differences between the African nations and the United States became more evident. Lewis began to reflect on the shared aspirations for freedom and equality that united African Americans with African nations, while also grappling with the complexities of his identity as an African American in a land that was both familiar and foreign. The trip culminated in Zambia, where the group witnessed the jubilant celebrations of Zambia's independence, which filled them with hope and inspiration. However, despite the festive atmosphere, Lewis felt disconnected from the local culture, a sense of displacement that reinforced the challenges of navigating one's identity as an African American in a global context. Upon his return to the United States, Lewis felt a renewed sense of purpose, determined to foster international solidarity within the civil rights movement. His time in Africa inspired him to continue his work not only within the confines of the American civil rights struggle but also with an awareness of the global dimensions of race and injustice. However, his return to the U.S. was marred by the realization that SNCC, the organization he had once worked so tirelessly for, was facing internal divisions and challenges in its direction. The growing ideological rifts and leadership struggles within the organization led Lewis to reconsider his place within it, ultimately challenging him to define his role in the ongoing fight for racial justice. This chapter underscores the importance of global perspectives in shaping the civil rights movement and highlights Lewis's evolving understanding of activism, identity, and solidarity in the pursuit of justice.

Chapter 11: Selma

Chapter 11: Selma delves into the monumental events that unfolded during the 1965 voting rights campaign in Selma, Alabama, highlighting the intense struggle for racial equality and justice. In February of that year, the civil rights movement faced significant repression, particularly under Judge James Hare’s orders, which stifled the growth of local activism. Amid this repression, key figures like Amelia Boynton turned to Martin Luther King Jr., hoping his national recognition could catalyze the push for change. King’s arrival in Selma was strategic, as he knew that Sheriff Jim Clark’s violent actions would draw much-needed attention to the cause, allowing the civil rights movement to garner widespread support. Yet, King’s involvement wasn’t without controversy, especially within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), whose members feared that his national prominence would overshadow their grassroots efforts.

John Lewis, a dedicated member of SNCC, viewed King’s presence as an essential force for change, understanding that King was welcomed by local Black residents who saw him as a necessary ally in their fight for justice. Lewis, unlike some within his own organization, did not view King’s influence as a threat but rather as a complementary force to the ongoing struggle in Selma. Following King’s arrival in early January, the groundwork for a campaign that sought to secure voting rights for African Americans was set into motion. The movement was quickly propelled into the national spotlight as Lewis and other activists hoped to rally enough support for their cause to prompt federal intervention, as many of the issues affecting voting rights had persisted despite the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. This federal intervention was crucial, as local challenges to Black voter registration and participation remained widespread, even after legal barriers had been officially removed.

As the campaign gained momentum, Lewis and other leaders organized peaceful demonstrations, knowing that their collective actions would need to remain nonviolent in order to maintain moral high ground. However, the response from local law enforcement, including repeated arrests and physical assaults against peaceful protesters, revealed the depth of the entrenched racial hostility. Despite these obstacles, the unwavering commitment of the activists inspired the local community to join them in their fight, understanding that their struggles were part of a larger effort for equality and justice. The violence aimed at the activists only solidified their resolve, with John Lewis consistently reminding the community of the importance of staying true to nonviolent principles, even in the face of aggression. On February 10, 1965, the violence escalated when a group of teenagers participating in the protest was violently halted, leading to an increased sense of urgency and danger within the movement. Sheriff Clark’s actions exemplified the violent opposition to civil rights, creating an atmosphere of tension and fear.

On February 26, the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson served as the final straw, intensifying the desire for action and uniting the civil rights movement in their call for justice. Jackson’s tragic death while participating in a peaceful protest in the face of police brutality was the catalyst for a larger mobilization, and the call for a march from Selma to Montgomery grew stronger. Despite the risks involved, activists from across the country rallied to support the cause, with many seeing the march as not only a protest against Jackson’s death but a larger plea for voting rights and an end to systemic racial discrimination. The brutal treatment of the marchers, including beatings, arrests, and the overall harsh response from law enforcement, led to national outrage, bringing further attention to the deep-rooted racial inequities in the South. Public sympathy swelled as the media played a crucial role in highlighting the violence faced by peaceful protesters, pushing the federal government to acknowledge the pressing need for legislative action. The Selma campaign eventually became a defining moment in the civil rights movement, symbolizing the resilience and courage needed to challenge and dismantle systemic racism in America. It marked a pivotal moment, not just in the fight for voting rights but also in the broader struggle for

equality and justice for African Americans.

Chapter 12: Revolt at Kingston Springs

Chapter 12: Revolt at Kingston Springs provides an insightful account of a critical turning point in John Lewis's life and his role within the civil rights movement during the mid-1960s. In May of 1965, Lewis penned a powerful essay for the *New York Herald Tribune*, calling for the civil rights movement to place greater emphasis on political power and action. Drawing inspiration from Bayard Rustin, who had long advocated for addressing systemic inequalities in jobs, education, and housing through political engagement, Lewis made the compelling argument that meaningful change for Black Americans could only occur when they held political office. He strongly believed that without Black representation in politics, the challenges faced by African Americans would continue to be ignored, and the conscience of political parties would remain devoid of the issues most critical to Black communities.

While Lewis's perspective on the need for Black political involvement found resonance with some within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), it also sparked varying responses. Activists like Stokely Carmichael, Bob Mants, and Judy Richardson began organizing key initiatives aimed at empowering Black voters, notably in areas like Lowndes County, Alabama. Another notable political campaign came from Julian Bond, who ran for the Georgia legislature. Bond's campaign created division within SNCC, with some members feeling it was a vital step for Black political engagement, while others, like Lewis, supported it for its potential to spark further momentum for African American political representation. Despite the differing views within SNCC, Lewis believed that Bond's victory could set a powerful precedent for greater involvement in politics by the African American community.

The passage of the Voting Rights Act in August 1965 was a significant milestone in the civil rights movement, and Lewis's attendance at the signing ceremony marked a culmination of the efforts he had worked toward for years. President Lyndon B.

Johnson’s emphasis on the enforcement of the Voting Rights Act was a critical point for Lewis, who understood that the law’s success would depend not just on its passage but on its active and persistent implementation. However, as the law’s passing did not immediately change the realities on the ground, Lewis faced further challenges in the form of arrests during protests for Black voter registration in Georgia. These protests highlighted the ongoing struggles African Americans faced in securing their voting rights, even after landmark legislation had been passed. The continued unrest and growing frustration in urban areas, fueled by police brutality and economic inequality, led to the eruption of riots in several major cities. While Lewis empathized with the causes behind the riots, he remained firm in his stance that violence was not the answer and advocated for peaceful, organized protests to achieve lasting change.

Despite the victories achieved through the Voting Rights Act, deepening philosophical divides emerged within SNCC about the movement’s future direction. These differences were further exacerbated by the growing discontent with the Vietnam War, with some civil rights activists questioning how to reconcile their efforts in fighting for racial equality with the U.S. military’s actions overseas. Amidst this turmoil, Lewis began to notice a shift in the movement’s ideological landscape as more militant factions, including those led by Carmichael, started to gain ground. The push for Black Power and more radical approaches to achieving civil rights created a divide that left Lewis feeling disconnected from the organization’s evolving priorities.

The turning point came during a key SNCC meeting in Kingston Springs, Tennessee, where Lewis’s leadership came under challenge by Carmichael, who advocated for a more aggressive, confrontational approach to the movement. In a shocking turn of events, Lewis lost his position as chairman of SNCC to Carmichael, marking the end of an era of leadership that had been defined by nonviolence and inclusivity. Lewis’s defeat in this election was not just a loss in terms of organizational power, but it also felt like a personal betrayal, as it represented the increasing departure from the ideals he had fought for. The rise of Black nationalism and the shift in focus from racial harmony to more radical forms of activism left Lewis uncertain about his future role in the civil rights movement. Although he continued to grapple with the evolution of the

movement and his place within it, Lewis’s unwavering commitment to justice and equality remained at the core of his identity, even as the civil rights landscape was rapidly changing around him.

Chapter 13: Lost in New York

Chapter 13: Lost in New York delves deeply into a significant turning point in John Lewis's life, during a time when the civil rights movement faced profound internal divisions. The rise of Stokely Carmichael within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) created a sharp divide, as his focus on Black Power and self-reliance sharply contrasted with the earlier, more inclusive principles of nonviolent resistance. His speeches and actions, which celebrated Black pride and autonomy, sparked backlash, especially from white donors and allies who had supported SNCC. The organization received a flood of criticism, with some letters expressing disappointment and others veering into outright racism. Despite Carmichael's attempts to clarify his position, the tensions only deepened, particularly when he linked Black Power to a radical transformation of Western civilization. This alienated a significant portion of the SNCC's original leadership, including John Lewis, who felt increasingly disconnected from the direction the movement was taking.

As the rift grew, SNCC experienced the loss of several key figures who were disillusioned by the organization's new militant approach. Media coverage further soured public perception of the group, focusing on Carmichael's provocative statements and the riots sparked by police violence against Black citizens. The violence that followed further tarnished SNCC's reputation and led to decreased funding. This period marked a critical moment of self-reflection for Lewis, who had always believed in nonviolence as the cornerstone of civil rights activism. As the movement moved towards more radical methods, he struggled to align himself with a new direction that contradicted his deeply held principles of peaceful protest and unity. His concerns grew as the focus shifted from a collective struggle for justice to an increasingly divisive, individualistic stance that seemed to ignore the broader unity that had once united the civil rights community.

Amidst the unraveling of SNCC, Lewis found himself turning towards a new chapter in his life. Moving to New York in the early 1970s, he began working with the Marshall Field Foundation, which brought financial stability and allowed him to step away from the turmoil of the civil rights movement at that time. While the new job offered a comfortable salary, it didn’t come without its own emotional challenges. Lewis found himself experiencing a deep sense of loneliness in the sprawling city, far removed from the tight-knit relationships he had formed in the South during his years of activism. Even though he had the opportunity to engage in meaningful work and was surrounded by the vibrancy of New York, he still reflected on his past involvement with SNCC and the trajectory of the civil rights movement. He struggled with feelings of alienation, as the ideological shifts within the movement weighed heavily on him, especially as the traditional routes of activism seemed to be crumbling. Yet, through this time of introspection, he reaffirmed his belief in the power of grassroots work and the importance of continuing the fight for justice, even if the methods and strategies were changing.

During this period, Lewis also focused on completing his degree from Fisk University, showing his dedication to personal growth and education despite the challenges he faced. He also continued to reflect on the relationship between organized religion and civil rights activism, considering the spiritual dimensions that had always guided his efforts. His time in New York became one of self-discovery, as he not only grappled with his growing disillusionment but also started to consider his next steps in the movement. Despite the struggles, he remained committed to his vision of a civil rights movement that was rooted in unity and inclusiveness, a stark contrast to the divisiveness that had begun to take hold within SNCC. In the end, this period of reflection and personal growth laid the groundwork for his return to the political stage, where his dedication to justice would continue to define his legacy.

Chapter 14: RFK

Chapter 14: RFK takes us through John Lewis's involvement in the 1968 presidential campaign of Robert F. Kennedy, a journey that profoundly shaped both his personal and political life. The chapter begins with Lewis, along with his friends Connie Curry and Joan Browning, celebrating Kennedy's decision to challenge President Lyndon Johnson for the Democratic nomination. This decision came after widespread frustration over Johnson's handling of the Vietnam War, which had been exacerbated by Eugene McCarthy's strong performance in the New Hampshire primary. While Lewis had been initially skeptical of Kennedy during the Freedom Rides, he had grown to believe in his commitment to civil rights and social justice, seeing in him a figure who could bring about meaningful change.

In response to Kennedy's announcement, Lewis wasted no time in offering his support. He quickly sent a telegram to Kennedy's campaign, volunteering to help in any way he could. Knowing that Black voters would be critical to Kennedy's success, Lewis moved to Indianapolis, where he worked tirelessly to energize voters and promote the Indiana primary. One of his most significant contributions was organizing a rally in a predominantly Black neighborhood, aiming to galvanize the local electorate. However, tragedy struck when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on the same day as the rally. Despite the immense grief, Kennedy chose to address the crowd, delivering an emotional speech that both mourned King's death and called for unity, urging the audience not to let anger and violence take hold.

As riots erupted across the United States, Indianapolis remained largely peaceful, a testament to the calming influence of Kennedy's speech. In the aftermath of King's assassination, Lewis was profoundly affected, and he witnessed the toll that the event had on Kennedy as he worked with the community to arrange King's funeral. Tensions ran high when Lewis and other campaign staffers met with Black community leaders,

but despite the fraught atmosphere, they managed to secure support for Kennedy in exchange for campaign funds. Over the following months, Lewis remained deeply involved in Kennedy’s campaign, working to secure victories in the primaries. However, a shift began to emerge among younger Black leaders, who became increasingly disillusioned with the political system and began questioning the direction of the movement. They were not as easily persuaded by Kennedy’s message, leading to challenges in maintaining a united front within the campaign.

Despite these setbacks, including losses in some key primaries such as Oregon, Lewis continued to fight for Kennedy’s vision. He saw Kennedy’s candidacy as a natural extension of the civil rights movement, one that would bring real change to the country. As the California primary approached, enthusiasm for Kennedy’s campaign reached its peak, and supporters believed that victory was within reach. But on the night of his victory celebration, tragedy struck once more when Kennedy was shot by Sirhan Sirhan, throwing the campaign and the nation into further turmoil. Lewis, who had become deeply invested in Kennedy’s campaign, was devastated by the assassination, grieving not only the loss of a leader but also the loss of a man who embodied hope for the future of racial equality and social justice. Despite the profound sorrow, Lewis remained engaged in the political process, recognizing that the fight for civil rights and equality was far from over. His resilience in the face of such loss illustrated his unwavering commitment to the ideals of justice, equality, and the power of community involvement. This chapter serves as a powerful reminder of the personal sacrifices made by those who fought for civil rights, as well as the enduring impact of Kennedy’s campaign on Lewis and the broader movement for social change.

Chapter 15: The Voter Education Project

Chapter 15: The Voter Education Project takes readers through John Lewis's transformative journey in the aftermath of Richard Nixon's election in 1968, combining his personal evolution with his deepening commitment to political activism. In December of that year, Lewis married Lillian at the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, marking a new chapter in his life. While his marriage to Lillian symbolized personal happiness, it also mirrored the ongoing fight for civil rights that shaped his worldview. His wedding, celebrated amidst the turbulent political backdrop of the civil rights movement, highlighted the intersection of his personal and political commitments, underscoring his role in shaping the future of both his family and his nation.

As the executive director of the Voter Education Project (VEP), Lewis assumed a crucial leadership position, tasked with addressing the challenges of voter registration in the South. Despite the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s, which removed legal barriers to voting, many African Americans still faced significant obstacles when it came to participating in elections. These obstacles were not just physical but deeply rooted in a culture of fear, passivity, and disenfranchisement, shaped by years of oppression. Lewis recognized that changing the laws alone was not enough to bring about true equality and inclusion. He understood the importance of cultural change and worked to empower communities to believe in their right to vote, understanding that participation in the electoral process was a vital step toward full political inclusion.

Lewis's strategies at VEP were focused on outreach and engagement, recognizing that financial and political pressures, especially from Nixon’s administration, would make it difficult to advance voter education efforts. In particular, the Tax Reform Act of 1969 posed a threat to funding for voter registration programs, highlighting the difficulty of sustaining civil rights gains amidst political opposition. Despite these challenges, Lewis remained steadfast in his belief that the right to vote was fundamental to achieving

equality and justice. He advocated for increased funding for voter registration efforts and worked with community leaders to organize grassroots campaigns that encouraged participation. His efforts, often met with resistance, showcased his resilience and unshakable commitment to civil rights and political engagement.

The narrative continues by examining the ongoing challenges of voter registration, even as significant civil rights victories were achieved, such as the 1970 renewal of the Voting Rights Act. Despite these legal triumphs, Lewis faced the reality that many African Americans were still hesitant to engage in the electoral process. This hesitation stemmed from a variety of factors, including a history of disenfranchisement, intimidation, and the prevailing notion that political participation had little impact on the everyday lives of African Americans. Lewis understood the complexities of these challenges and worked to address them through education, advocacy, and personal engagement with communities. His leadership in the Voter Education Project served as a critical turning point in the ongoing fight for equality, as he pushed for a deeper understanding of the power of the vote.

Through grassroots tours, town halls, and community outreach efforts, Lewis emphasized the importance of voting as a tool to shape a better future. He tirelessly worked to break down the barriers of fear and mistrust that had been built over generations, encouraging African Americans to see their participation in the electoral process as both a right and a responsibility. His advocacy extended beyond the immediate political landscape, aiming to build a more inclusive democracy that would reflect the ideals of equality and justice. The chapter highlights not just his tactical approach but his unrelenting belief in the transformative power of political engagement, underscoring the ongoing importance of voter participation in achieving true civil rights and social justice.

Chapter 16: The First Race

Chapter 16: The First Race highlights John Lewis's initial foray into electoral politics and the challenges he faced as he campaigned for a congressional seat in 1976. Following Jimmy Carter's election as President, Andrew Young's appointment as the United States Ambassador to the United Nations opened up a seat in Congress that many, including Lewis, had their eyes on. Initially hesitant, Lewis worried that his entry into the race might risk African American representation in Congress, especially since Young had been a key figure in the Black community. His concern stemmed from the potential of undermining the progress made by African Americans in Congress after years of struggle.

However, as time passed, the pressure and encouragement from his wife, Lillian, helped Lewis see the opportunity before him. Lillian believed deeply in John's potential and knew he could make a significant impact in higher office. Their personal life had also recently changed with the adoption of their son, John-Miles, which added another layer of motivation for Lewis to pursue his ambitions. Lillian played a crucial role in pushing him forward, encouraging him to run for the seat and offering unwavering support as they navigated this new chapter in their lives. John, already respected for his work in civil rights and his position with the Voter Education Project (VEP), was ready to take the leap, knowing that it was the right time to step into the political arena.

As his campaign gained momentum, Lewis found himself in direct competition with Wyche Fowler, a more established and seasoned candidate. Despite his strong moral reputation, Lewis was not as experienced in the realm of electoral politics as Fowler, which made the race increasingly difficult. With his candidacy representing the hopes of many African Americans in the district, Lewis tried to focus on key issues, such as increasing voter participation and addressing racial inequalities, but the road to victory

was filled with obstacles. The district, which was 60 percent white, posed significant challenges for Lewis, as many white voters were unsure of his ability to represent their interests. This made the campaign more complex, with Lewis's message of racial unity and social justice often falling short compared to Fowler's more polished political background.

Throughout the race, Lewis remained committed to representing all of his constituents, particularly the marginalized communities he had championed throughout his life. He faced resistance not only from Fowler but also from fellow Black candidates, including Ralph Abernathy, who questioned Lewis's connection to the established Black leadership. Lewis's campaign, while gaining traction in some areas, struggled to gain widespread financial support, further complicating his efforts. The campaign also lacked the financial backing of more influential figures and, at times, was hampered by his perceived lack of political charisma. One of his most significant missteps occurred during a press event aimed at Black reporters, which failed to attract the attention needed to generate excitement and rally support.

Despite these setbacks, Lewis's determination to fight for a better, more inclusive future kept him focused on the goal. His message of unity was one that resonated with many voters who wanted to see someone truly represent their interests, but connecting with white voters in such a divided district remained an ongoing challenge. As Election Day approached, Lewis's grassroots efforts continued, with his team working tirelessly to mobilize voters and bridge the gap between the Black and white communities. Still, the political landscape remained deeply divided, and Lewis found himself at odds with both his allies and his opponents.

In the end, the results of the election were a sobering reality for Lewis, who garnered 29 percent of the vote, compared to Fowler's 60 percent. Though his defeat was a hard pill to swallow, Lewis recognized that the fight was far from over. He knew that his first attempt at political office had paved the way for future endeavors and that the lessons learned from this race would help shape his political career moving forward. His campaign, though unsuccessful, had brought attention to the issues facing African

Americans in the South and solidified his position as a prominent figure in the fight for civil rights and equality.

Lewis’s initial political race, despite the disappointment of losing, proved to be a turning point in his life. It was not just about securing a seat in Congress but about representing a larger movement for change that resonated with people across the country. His ability to reflect on the election and his ability to remain optimistic about the future were testaments to his resilience and commitment to his values. Although the race had presented numerous challenges, Lewis’s unwavering spirit to continue the fight for justice and equality was clear, and it foreshadowed the many political battles he would go on to win in his long career in public service.

Chapter 17: ACTION

Chapter 17: ACTION takes the reader through a pivotal chapter in John Lewis's life, where he transitions into a new role after the defeat of his congressional bid. In April, an offer from President Jimmy Carter changes the course of his journey. Carter, known for his complex blend of Southern populism and technical expertise, appointed people from diverse backgrounds to serve in his administration. Sam Brown, a notable advocate for anti-war efforts, was tasked with leading ACTION, a new umbrella agency that combined several volunteer programs. After recognizing the potential of John Lewis following his unsuccessful congressional run, Brown and his team recommended Lewis for the position of associate director for domestic operations, offering him an opportunity that would shape his future.

Initially, Lewis contemplated taking a different path, such as writing a memoir or simply enjoying some time fishing. However, the prospect of working with ACTION was exciting, offering him not only a substantial salary but also the chance to continue his lifelong mission. His goal had always been to foster community building based on the ideals of love and peace. By accepting the position, he was given a platform to further those ideals on a national stage. Unfortunately, just after his acceptance, Lewis experienced profound personal loss with the death of his father, Eddie Lewis. This marked a somber moment in his life, with his father's funeral in Pike County drawing a significant crowd of mourners. During the ceremony, Lewis honored his father with a deeply moving eulogy.

By July, the Senate confirmation hearings for his new role proceeded smoothly, with Lewis confidently handling questions from the committee. He was well-prepared, which became apparent as he navigated the process with ease. Even Georgia’s own senator, Herman Talmadge, who had once been a staunch segregationist, praised him as "eminently qualified." During the hearings, Lewis outlined his vision for ACTION,

emphasizing its potential to replicate his grassroots work on a much larger scale. His aim was to bring community involvement and engagement into the national dialogue, making it central to the agency's operations. By August, as he began transitioning into the role, Lewis noticed how ACTION’s environment carried a youthful, casual energy reminiscent of the 1960s, a time that had shaped much of his own activism.

Despite settling into office life and managing a new home in a challenging neighborhood, the political landscape was far from easy. His wife, Lillian, and their son, John-Miles, remained in Atlanta as Lewis worked to foster a close-knit, family-like atmosphere within his staff. Though the work was fulfilling, controversies began to mount. The organization faced constant criticism from Republican figures who claimed ACTION was too radical and aligned with the ideas of the War on Poverty era. These attacks reminded Lewis of the scrutiny he faced during his time with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The tension only grew as the agency's direction and funding came under fire, putting immense pressure on Lewis.

Things worsened when internal disputes emerged within the Peace Corps, with some questioning whether traditional service roles were at odds with activism. Lewis, ever compassionate, sought to mediate these conflicts, but his involvement only added to the mounting ideological divides. His leadership style—patient, compassionate, and grounded in his moral convictions—won him many admirers within the agency. However, these challenges were exacerbated by the political tensions of the time, especially with a GOP that continued to attack his every move. As Lewis wrestled with these issues, he faced deep personal and political questions, particularly about returning to Georgia, where his sense of purpose had originally been shaped.

By the end of the chapter, Lewis’s experience with ACTION was a blend of fulfilling work and navigating political strife. His time with the agency was marked not only by his enduring dedication to civil rights and community work but also by the increasing frustration with political battles. Despite the challenges, he continued to make significant contributions to the field, driven by the lessons learned from his past and the hope of shaping a better future. His tenure in ACTION, with all its difficulties and

triumphs, would prove to be a formative chapter in his lifelong fight for justice and equality.

Chapter 18: Atlanta

Chapter 18: Atlanta takes the reader on a journey through John Lewis's return to his hometown of Atlanta in 1980, as he sought to continue his public service work after years of activism. Initially, Lewis considered running for mayor, yet after careful reflection, he decided that this role wasn’t a good fit for him. Instead, he focused on the upcoming city council elections in 1981, aiming for an at-large seat, recognizing his desire to serve the community in a different capacity. During this time, Lewis also took up the role of director of community affairs for the National Consumer Cooperative Bank, with a focus on driving economic development in low-income areas. However, his experience in this role left him feeling unsatisfied, particularly when he had to make difficult decisions, such as overseeing the termination of loans, leading to backlash from the communities he aimed to support.

By early 1981, as speculation around the city council race grew, Lewis officially announced his candidacy. Challenging the incumbent Jack Summers, Lewis campaigned across Atlanta, connecting with voters in neighborhoods of all socioeconomic backgrounds. Through his efforts, he gained valuable insights into the struggles facing the city, and his once-hopeful view of Atlanta’s progress began to wane. He quickly recognized that the issues of segregation, poverty, and crime were still rampant in certain areas, and while some progress had been made, there was still much work to be done. Lewis used his platform to advocate for the interconnectedness of urban issues and emphasized policies that would target economic inequality, enhance job opportunities, and address systemic injustices within the city’s government.

During his campaign, Lewis framed himself as “a voice for the voiceless,” giving particular attention to the issues within the Black community. He called out the growing crime rates and the lack of proper intervention from city leadership. In

addition, his criticism of the city council’s ethics and the many conflicts of interest among its members earned him both support and scorn. One of the most significant points of contention was his opposition to the presidential parkway project, which was being championed by President Jimmy Carter. Lewis, concerned about the impact the development would have on historic neighborhoods, led campaigns against the project, bringing attention to environmental racism and the risks it posed to lower-income and minority communities.

While the council voted against him in the initial proposal for the parkway, Lewis’s resolute activism didn’t go unnoticed. His vocal stance on the issue sparked an outpouring of community support, which ultimately played a pivotal role in modifying the development plan. His tireless efforts to preserve these neighborhoods illustrated his deep commitment to fighting for marginalized communities, even in the face of political adversity. Despite some setbacks, his reputation as a champion of justice continued to grow, and his persistence in the political arena only strengthened his resolve. However, this chapter also reflects the personal and political complexities that came with Lewis's rise in city politics, including the strained relationships with some of his peers, particularly his rivalry with Julian Bond. This period marked a critical turning point for Lewis, as he transformed from a revered civil rights leader into a significant political figure in the city of Atlanta, navigating the intersection of activism, governance, and personal sacrifice.

By the end of the chapter, Lewis emerged as a figure who understood the intricacies of both political compromise and moral integrity. His activism, which had always been deeply rooted in social justice, remained unwavering as he transitioned into the world of local politics. Through his work on the city council and his continued advocacy for the disenfranchised, Lewis showed the city and the country what it meant to fight for equality and opportunity for all, no matter the cost. The chapter not only outlines the political dynamics Lewis faced but also provides insight into the personal evolution of a man who remained driven by a commitment to serving his community and ensuring a more equitable future for future generations.

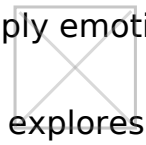
Chapter 19: John vs. Julian

Chapter 19: John vs. Julian delves deeply into the intense political rivalry between two men who were once close friends, John Lewis and Julian Bond. Bond, born into a life of privilege as the son of a prominent educator, navigates the political world with an air of confidence and ease, benefiting from both financial resources and influential connections. On the other hand, Lewis, raised in the rural South by sharecroppers, has had to fight against personal and systemic obstacles his entire life, including a speech impediment and a Southern accent that set him apart from his more polished opponent. Despite these challenges, Lewis embodies an unshakable sense of resilience and determination, using his background as a foundation for his moral compass, which makes him a champion of the people.

As their political campaigns unfold, Lewis struggles to gain the same level of support as Bond, whose campaign is bolstered by powerful backers, substantial donations, and a network of high-profile endorsements. The media, too, seems to favor Bond, often painting Lewis as unpolished and out of touch with the mainstream, reinforcing the stereotypes of class and race. However, Lewis refuses to let this dissuade him, instead doubling down on his authenticity and his connection to the everyday people he serves. His loyal supporters are drawn to his genuine commitment to public service, which contrasts sharply with Bond's elitist image, even though Bond's financial backing continues to grow. As the race heats up, personal attacks and negative campaigning begin to take center stage, with rumors of Bond's alleged drug use tarnishing his otherwise clean-cut image.

Throughout the campaign, Lewis's approach stands in stark contrast to Bond's polished presentation. While Bond can count on high-dollar fundraising events and top-tier endorsements, Lewis's strength lies in his deep connections with the people and his unyielding commitment to justice. The two men's contrasting approaches highlight

the broader issues of race and class within the political sphere, with Bond's upper-class status making him somewhat disconnected from the everyday struggles of the voters Lewis seeks to represent. As tensions rise, the race becomes more than just a political contest but a personal battle that tests both men's character, integrity, and loyalty. Bond's efforts to maintain his early lead become overshadowed by the tactics of Lewis's campaign, including a grassroots effort that connects with working-class citizens on a deeply emotional level.



The chapter also explores some of the difficult choices that Lewis faces during the race. One such decision comes with his support for the Georgia 400 highway extension, a controversial move that risks alienating some of his core supporters. Yet, this decision ultimately pays off by securing crucial contributions from local businesses and politicians, enabling him to keep pace with Bond's growing financial advantage. The strategic pivot Lewis makes underscores the complexity of political life, where compromise is often necessary to advance a broader agenda. Despite the controversies surrounding his decision, Lewis continues to focus on what he believes is best for his constituents, ultimately securing the support of those who recognize his unwavering commitment to public service.

As the election day nears, Lewis's campaign catches fire, fueled by his tireless efforts and his grassroots support. He maintains his focus on door-to-door campaigning, connecting with voters in a way that Bond cannot match. Although Bond initially has a strong lead in the polls, it becomes increasingly evident that his lack of connection with the working-class voters is his downfall. Lewis's relentless drive and personal commitment to the issues win over the hearts of many, and in the runoff election, Lewis pulls off a stunning victory. The chapter concludes with the toll this race has taken on both candidates, particularly their personal relationship, which has been deeply strained by the competitive nature of the campaign. Though their friendship is fractured, the possibility of healing remains, as both men continue on their respective political journeys. Ultimately, the chapter highlights the complexities of loyalty, ambition, and sacrifice within the political world, showing how deeply personal decisions can shape both individual careers and larger political landscapes.

Chapter 20: On the Hill

Chapter 20: On the Hill delves into John Lewis's entry into the U.S. House of Representatives, a momentous occasion marking the beginning of his influential political journey. As he and his family, including his wife Lillian and son John-Miles, make their way to Washington for his swearing-in, they bring a celebratory atmosphere to the trip. Aboard Amtrak, Lewis's journey is filled with joy, accompanied by a basket of champagne, jambalaya, and balloons, with friends joining in on the festivities. Reflecting on his past, as the train travels toward the nation's capital, Lewis takes a moment to appreciate the struggles that had brought him to this point, expressing a deep sense of gratitude for his previous hardships. The phrase, “The beatings, the arrests—it was all worth it,” captures his recognition of how those challenges had shaped his path and ultimately prepared him for the weight of the responsibilities ahead.

Upon his arrival in Washington, Lewis is struck with nostalgia as he gazes at the Capitol dome, reminiscent of the first time he visited in 1961. His assigned office in the Cannon Building, though modestly furnished with red carnations and typewriters, symbolizes the humble beginnings from which his political career would rise. Although his office lacks modern amenities like phones, Lewis’s unwavering determination drives him to adapt to the environment. He is surrounded by the Georgia delegation, affectionately known as "Redneck Row," and the group shares in a celebratory gathering in the Caucus Room, a moment filled with optimism and anticipation for the work that lies ahead. Lewis’s political presence begins to take shape, even in these early, seemingly unremarkable moments, laying the foundation for his ongoing fight for justice and equality.

On the day of his swearing-in, Lewis faces the chaotic nature of the Capitol building, where he gets lost navigating its corridors but is helped by Senator Sam Nunn. Amid

the hectic pace of the day, Lewis connects with fellow freshmen, such as Joseph Kennedy II and Mike Espy, who share his sense of excitement about their shared mission. These early interactions with his peers highlight the solidarity and mutual respect within the Congressional Black Caucus, which would later play a pivotal role in shaping Lewis's political vision. Meanwhile, Love Collins and Richard Ossoff are hard at work staffing Lewis's office, eager to find the right individuals to fill crucial roles. Lewis remains calm and composed despite the frenzy, focusing on securing the future of his team and setting the tone for how his office would operate moving forward. Though some of his staff initially feel overlooked, Lewis’s patient and measured approach ultimately leads to the appointment of Clarence Bishop as his chief of staff, who will go on to play a key role in balancing the demands of his political career with his vision for a more dynamic and youthful office environment.

As the chapter unfolds, it becomes clear that Lewis’s time on the Hill is not just about rising to power but also about the ongoing struggle to find his political identity. The complexities of his relationships with colleagues, friends, and family begin to surface as Lewis works tirelessly to make his mark in the political world. While navigating the challenges of race, power, and community, Lewis also faces the constant balancing act of adhering to his personal principles while fulfilling the expectations of the political establishment. His role as a congressman requires him to deal with sensitive issues surrounding legislative policy, while at the same time, he strives to stay true to the values that have always guided him. By the end of the chapter, it’s evident that Lewis has become a key figure within Congress, demonstrating the resilience and commitment to the causes he holds dear. His leadership in Congress is beginning to take shape, and this chapter marks a pivotal moment in his ongoing journey as an advocate for justice, equality, and social change in America.

Chapter 21: The Clinton Years

Chapter 21: The Clinton Years provides a detailed exploration of Congressman John Lewis's interactions with President Bill Clinton, examining the development of their professional relationship during Clinton’s early years in office. Shortly after Clinton's inauguration in 1993, he invited Lewis to the White House for a casual movie night, which was a gesture of camaraderie and a reflection of the new president's more personable and youthful style. This invitation marked a significant departure from the more formal and distant dynamics of previous Republican administrations. For Lewis, this moment of personal connection with Clinton symbolized hope, renewal, and a sense of promise for the future of the Democratic Party. It also highlighted the enthusiasm that many had for the Clinton presidency, as his leadership embodied a break from the past, offering an inclusive and forward-thinking approach to governance.

The narrative further delves into the dynamic of the Clinton administration, especially during key moments such as the 1994 State of the Union address. At this event, Lewis proudly hosted Hillary Clinton in a show of support for her husband's ambitious agenda. This period was marked by widespread optimism, as Clinton pushed for progressive reforms, including healthcare reform, higher taxes on the wealthiest Americans, and policies to address crime prevention. Lewis supported many of these initiatives but was also cautious about certain aspects of the Clinton administration's policies. He remained deeply committed to his values, particularly in regard to social justice, and was vocal about his opposition to initiatives like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Lewis feared that NAFTA would harm American manufacturing jobs, a reflection of his ongoing dedication to the working class and his skepticism about policies that he believed could potentially benefit the wealthy at the expense of the labor force.

Throughout this chapter, Lewis’s dedication to social justice continues to shine through, particularly in his advocacy for racial equality both in the United States and abroad. His efforts against apartheid in South Africa, including his attempt to organize a congressional delegation to the country in 1994, are a testament to his lifelong commitment to fighting injustice. In the context of domestic policy, Lewis found himself at odds with the Clinton administration over the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which proposed tougher sentencing laws, including an expansion of the death penalty. While many of his colleagues supported the bill as a necessary response to rising crime rates in urban areas, Lewis could not reconcile its provisions with his personal beliefs, especially his strong opposition to capital punishment. Despite facing pressure from his party to support the bill, Lewis stood firm in his principles, illustrating his unwavering commitment to moral leadership and justice, even when it meant challenging members of his own party.

As the chapter progresses, it provides a nuanced view of the difficulties Lewis faced in navigating the intersection of personal conviction and political realities. Lewis's experiences during the Clinton years offer insight into the complexities of being an advocate for social change while simultaneously working within the established political system. Throughout his tenure in Congress, Lewis demonstrated the importance of remaining true to one's values, even when it meant going against popular opinion or political pressures. This chapter underscores his resilience and commitment to fighting for what he believed was right, whether it was opposing trade agreements that he viewed as harmful to workers, or standing against the expansion of the death penalty. It also highlights his determination to champion civil rights, both in the United States and abroad, showing that his dedication to justice and equality remained steadfast, even in the face of difficult political circumstances.

Chapter 22: Ambitions

Chapter 22: Ambitions explores the evolving political journey of John Lewis in the late 1990s as he navigates the complexities of rising through the ranks of the Democratic Party. By 1998, after over a decade in Congress, Lewis had established himself as a prominent moral figure within the House, frequently called "the conscience of the Congress." His contributions to civil rights and his unwavering commitment to social justice made him a respected and influential voice. Throughout his career, his wife Lillian was his most dedicated supporter, and her encouragement played a pivotal role in his decision to pursue a higher leadership role. Initially, Lillian pushed for him to run against Republican Senator Paul Coverdell, although polls indicated that he would face a tough challenge, making this a difficult choice for Lewis. Instead, he pivoted to focus on securing a leadership role in the House, aiming for the position of whip, which he believed would allow him to affect real change within the party.

As the Democratic Party regained ground, Lewis's chances of securing the whip position seemed more attainable. However, his candidacy faced stiff competition from Nancy Pelosi, a strong contender with a vast network of supporters. Pelosi's rise within the party made it clear that the race for the whip would be fiercely contested. Despite his longstanding reputation for moral leadership and his immense popularity, Lewis found it difficult to match Pelosi's energy and organizational strength. Although he had built an impressive coalition throughout his years of public service, his more passive approach to campaigning, coupled with a reluctance to aggressively pursue the role, ultimately put him at a disadvantage in comparison to Pelosi's high-energy, high-profile campaign. The lack of a coordinated push and his hesitation to engage more actively in the race became significant obstacles, and this political reality gradually set in as the race advanced.

John Lewis’s internal conflict during this period is explored deeply in the chapter. He struggled with his desire to continue championing civil rights while being presented with the opportunity to engage in the aggressive politics of leadership within the Democratic Party. He had a deep concern that by focusing on achieving a higher leadership position, he might diminish the legacy of his civil rights work. He feared that the aggressive pursuit of power might lead to compromising the very values that had shaped his career. These feelings of doubt were exacerbated by his staff’s observation of his reluctance and Lillian’s frustration with his lack of enthusiasm for the position. Although his wife’s ambition was a driving force behind his desire for a new role, Lewis was not fully convinced that this was the right direction for him, especially given the political landscape at the time. The growing pressure to secure the necessary endorsements from his colleagues and party members led Lewis to confront the reality of his situation. Recognizing his struggle to rally sufficient support, Lewis made the difficult decision to step back from his pursuit of the role and instead endorse his colleague Steny Hoyer for the position.

In the aftermath of his withdrawal from the race, the 2000 elections marked a turning point for the Democratic Party, as they failed to regain control of the House. Despite the setbacks, Lewis continued to serve as a chief deputy whip, acknowledging that his work was far from over. Lillian remained his steadfast supporter, her ambition for him never wavering. The chapter concludes by highlighting the significance of their relationship, with Lillian playing an essential role in both his personal and professional life. Her ambition for him was not only a personal motivator but also an important factor in his perseverance to continue fighting for social justice, equality, and civil rights. The chapter ultimately underscores the complex interplay of personal relationships, political aspirations, and the ongoing dedication to public service that defined John Lewis's career, showing how even when faced with personal doubts, the drive to continue fighting for the greater good remained at the forefront of his mission.

Chapter 23: In Opposition

Chapter 23: In Opposition starts with an early yet impactful moment in John Lewis's political career when he met President George W. Bush in February 2001. This meeting marked a significant point in the hopes for bipartisanship as Bush, the newly elected president, aimed to bridge the divide between political parties in an era that was already defined by partisan conflict. However, this brief sense of unity was shattered only a few months later by the devastating events of the September 11 attacks. As the horrifying news of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon spread, Lewis, deeply affected by the tragedy, insisted on stepping outside despite the advice to stay inside. He felt a strong desire to engage with those around him, hoping to offer some comfort and solace to others who were reeling from the national catastrophe.

On that fateful day, Lewis demonstrated his unwavering commitment to the American people as he connected with colleagues, friends, and citizens. Through simple acts like sharing prayers with Senator Pat Leahy, he showcased the importance of unity in the face of tragedy. His genuine appeal for solidarity across faiths and political lines stood as a reminder that, during times of crisis, it is essential to come together rather than allow divisions to deepen. Later that day, when called upon to speak at a vigil, Lewis again emerged as a figure of moral leadership, providing a sense of hope in a time of despair. His speech emphasized the importance of finding light in the darkness, which resonated deeply with those attending the vigil, and his words would continue to echo in the minds of many.

The chapter moves into the aftermath of 9/11 and the legislative responses to the tragedy. While many lawmakers and citizens rallied behind new security measures to protect the nation, Lewis remained cautious about the broader implications of such policies. Specifically, he voiced his concerns about the Patriot Act, highlighting its

potential to infringe upon civil liberties in the name of security. His stance demonstrated the delicate balance between safeguarding freedom and ensuring national security, as Lewis understood firsthand the cost of sacrificing rights for the sake of safety. He ultimately supported military action against the Taliban, though with a clear acknowledgment of the complexities and consequences of using force, shaped by his own experiences with conflict and nonviolence during the civil rights movement.

As a lifelong advocate for civil rights, Lewis did not only focus on immediate responses to national crises but also worked to shape long-term policies and institutions that would benefit African Americans. One of his crowning achievements in Congress was his long-standing effort to create a National African American Museum, a project that would honor the history and contributions of African Americans. While the effort faced significant hurdles, including resistance from powerful institutions like the Smithsonian, Lewis's persistence in advocating for the museum never wavered. He gained crucial bipartisan support, including from conservative figures like Senator Sam Brownback, and fought tirelessly to ensure that the bill passed both the House and Senate, a victory that represented the culmination of years of work.

Despite the challenges, including political opposition and personal setbacks, Lewis remained focused on the broader purpose of his work. When the bill for the museum's creation was finally signed into law, Lewis celebrated the achievement but knew that this was just one step in his ongoing fight for civil rights and equality. The opening of the museum would become a symbol of his dedication to preserving the history of the civil rights movement and ensuring that future generations would understand the struggles and triumphs of African Americans. Lewis's commitment to social justice remained unwavering, and even as he celebrated this victory, he recognized that the fight for equality and justice would continue in the years to come. This chapter encapsulates the multifaceted nature of his political career, his unwavering commitment to justice, and the complex process of navigating the political landscape in pursuit of long-term change.

Chapter 24: “Because of You”

Chapter 24: "Because of You" delves into the deepening relationship between John Lewis and Barack Obama, which began with a significant moment during Lewis’s 65th birthday celebration in February 2005. Lewis, at the time, invited Obama, who had recently gained national attention after delivering a powerful keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. Obama, still a newly elected senator, realized the importance of increasing his visibility in the Southern United States and accepted the invitation. The birthday event, which included notable figures such as Coretta Scott King and Harry Belafonte, was marked by a palpable sense of excitement surrounding Obama's potential as a future presidential candidate. Lewis had been a tremendous source of inspiration to Obama over the years, with Obama recalling a pivotal moment when Lewis had offered words of encouragement after Obama’s early public speaking engagement. This mutual respect and admiration were evident, marking the beginning of their strong political and personal bond.

As the 2007 Democratic primaries approached, both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama launched campaigns that would require the endorsement of influential figures like John Lewis. The competition between the two candidates grew increasingly tense, and both sought Lewis’s endorsement to solidify their positions. One particularly intense moment occurred during a Bloody Sunday commemoration when both Clinton and Obama scheduled speeches at nearly the same time and location. This situation created significant tension for Lewis, who was caught between his long-standing relationship with Clinton and his desire for a new direction in American politics. While Lewis held deep respect for Clinton and their historical ties, he was also drawn to Obama’s campaign, which embodied the values of hope, change, and progress that were reminiscent of the civil rights movement. This internal struggle became a pivotal point for Lewis as he contemplated the future of leadership and what kind of political

change the country needed.

As the primary season progressed, Obama’s campaign became increasingly aggressive in challenging Clinton’s political credibility, a strategy that initially caused friction among her supporters. Despite the challenges, Obama’s campaign gained momentum, and he began to dominate the conversation in the Democratic race. Meanwhile, Lewis faced intense pressure from younger activists, many of whom criticized his loyalty to the Clintons, questioning whether he could truly support the future of the Democratic Party without embracing Obama’s candidacy. After careful reflection, Lewis decided to switch his endorsement from Clinton to Obama, which he communicated privately to both Bill and Hillary Clinton. Though this decision was emotionally complex, Lewis felt that Obama’s campaign symbolized a movement that reflected the same principles of equality and justice that he had fought for during the civil rights era. This turning point in Lewis’s political journey underscored the need for generational change and the power of new leadership in shaping the nation’s future.

The announcement of Lewis’s endorsement of Obama was met with both excitement and controversy. While his decision was celebrated by many, it also faced backlash from those who saw it as a betrayal of the Clintons. However, Lewis’s endorsement came to symbolize the evolution of political loyalty and the ability to adapt to changing political landscapes. For many, it was a reminder that political alliances are not static; they evolve as the needs and aspirations of the nation change. In the aftermath, Lewis’s endorsement helped fuel Obama’s momentum in the Democratic primaries, showing how even the most steadfast political relationships can shift when confronted with a vision for a better future. Ultimately, Lewis’s decision highlighted the importance of standing for justice, equality, and progress, just as he had done throughout his distinguished career, and it helped pave the way for Obama’s eventual victory in the race for the presidency.

Chapter 25: Rock Star

Chapter 25: *Rock Star* delves deeply into the transformative period in American history following Barack Obama's historic election, focusing on the profound shift in racial reconciliation and healing. The chapter begins with a pivotal moment in the life of Elwin Wilson, a former Klansman who had participated in violent attacks against civil rights protesters, including notable figures such as John Lewis and Albert Bigelow. After witnessing the unity and hope ignited by Obama’s inauguration, Wilson experienced a shift in his views and publicly expressed regret for his past actions. His apology, stating, “I need to tell people I’m sorry,” was an emotional and courageous step towards redemption, symbolizing the possibility of change even for those who had once been entrenched in hatred. This gesture of contrition marked a significant moment not only in Wilson’s life but also in the broader American narrative of racial healing.

John Lewis, known for his commitment to justice and equality, accepted Wilson’s apology with a deep sense of grace and compassion. In doing so, he recognized the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation, not just as personal virtues but as societal necessities. Wilson's emotional journey of regret and redemption became a beacon of hope, demonstrating the potential for healing even among those who had once stood on the wrong side of history. Their meeting, marked by a heartfelt embrace and exchange of forgiveness, embodied the healing power of confronting past wrongs and moving forward. Over the years, John Lewis had been approached by others seeking similar acts of reconciliation, and his ability to forgive and help others grow is a testament to his unwavering belief in the power of compassion.

Despite the moments of progress symbolized by such events as Wilson’s apology, Lewis’s experiences also shed light on the more subtle, yet persistent, forms of racism that continued to exist in American society. As an esteemed congressman, Lewis was

often confronted with unconscious biases, which starkly contrasted with the overt racism he had fought against in his earlier years. This duality in American attitudes towards race—the visible change in laws and policies versus the lingering prejudices in everyday interactions—became a recurring theme in Lewis's life. The chapter also highlights the resurgence of racial hostility during political disputes, especially when the Affordable Care Act was being debated. Lewis, who had already experienced much of this animosity during the civil rights movement, found himself once again confronted with the bitter vitriol that had defined the 1960s. Yet, despite the challenges, he responded with his characteristic dignity, maintaining his commitment to nonviolent resistance and moral leadership.

Furthermore, the chapter provides insight into Lewis’s continued advocacy for economic equality, with his active involvement in movements like Occupy Wall Street. These movements underscored the ongoing fight for equality in not only racial terms but also economic terms, reflecting the deeper structural inequities that plagued American society. The chapter also delves into the personal struggles Lewis faced as his wife, Lillian, battled with health issues. His strength as a politician and as a husband was tested, yet he found solace in his work and his ongoing activism. After Lillian’s passing, Lewis’s resolve remained unshaken, and he continued to be a force for change, contributing through writing, public speaking, and maintaining his advocacy for civil rights. The narrative concludes by reflecting on the immense emotional and professional toll Lewis endured, showcasing how his unwavering commitment to justice and equality defined his legacy, even in the face of personal loss. This chapter ultimately highlights how, even as the fight for racial and economic justice continues, Lewis’s life remains a symbol of resilience, courage, and unyielding dedication to the cause.

Chapter 26: Conscience of the Congress

In Chapter 26: *Conscience of the Congress*, the author reflects on the political turbulence at the end of Barack Obama's presidency. Although his administration had revived the economy and addressed key social issues like healthcare and LGBTQ+ rights, the nation was still grappling with racial tensions, ongoing gun violence, and an immigration crisis. John Lewis, a strong advocate for Obama during his presidential campaigns, found himself reflecting on his previous support. He had initially backed Obama over Hillary Clinton, but by 2016, Lewis was filled with regret and decided to support Clinton. This endorsement took place during a charged event at Clark Atlanta University, where Clinton faced protests, particularly over her role in the 1994 crime bill, which had been a source of contention among many of the more progressive voters in the Democratic Party.

Meanwhile, the 2016 Democratic primaries were significantly impacted by Bernie Sanders, whose campaign stirred considerable frustration among Clinton supporters, especially from the younger, more radical factions of the left. Sanders presented himself as a longtime advocate of civil rights, but Lewis, who had a long history of activism, was skeptical of his self-proclaimed status. Lewis’s public questioning of Sanders's involvement in the civil rights movement highlighted the differences in their political approaches. As Sanders’s supporters clashed with Clinton’s, Lewis found himself in a difficult position, trying to support the unity of the party while reconciling his own frustrations with the direction the Democratic Party was taking. The primaries brought to the forefront the ideological divides within the Democratic Party, something that would continue to shape the political landscape in the years to come.

The chapter also delves into one of the most emotional and powerful moments of Lewis’s career: the sit-in on the House floor in response to the tragic mass shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida. This event, which took place in June 2016, was a

pivotal moment in the fight for gun control. After the shooting, which claimed 49 innocent lives, Lewis, alongside a group of passionate Democrats, staged an impromptu sit-in, demanding action on gun violence. The sit-in became a significant piece of political theater, drawing national attention to the need for legislative action. Although the action was met with resistance from leadership, it was successful in elevating the conversation around gun control. The media coverage of the event helped to rekindle a sense of urgency around an issue that had long been ignored by many lawmakers, with the actions of Lewis and his colleagues reminding the country of the importance of addressing violence and the need for a more comprehensive approach to gun regulation.

As 2016 drew to a close, Lewis found himself increasingly engaged in Clinton's campaign, hoping to secure her presidency against the rising tide of Donald Trump's populist message. The election was nothing short of a national crisis, with Trump's divisive rhetoric causing deep rifts in the fabric of American society. Despite the challenges of a bitter and polarizing election season, Lewis remained hopeful that the country could remain united. His efforts included advocating for Clinton's campaign, speaking at rallies, and promoting the importance of voter participation, particularly among marginalized communities. Even as racial divisions deepened and the future of the nation seemed uncertain, Lewis remained determined, knowing that the fight for equality, justice, and democracy was far from over. His activism in this final chapter underscored the ongoing relevance of his work and his unshakeable commitment to the cause of civil rights.

This chapter further highlights the emotional toll of the 2016 election, and how the divisive nature of Trump's campaign affected not only the political climate but also the personal lives of many Americans. Throughout the campaign, Lewis’s sense of duty was evident in his tireless efforts to maintain peace, unity, and social justice amidst a sea of political chaos. The emotional strain was particularly apparent in Lewis’s reflections on his past achievements and the future of the nation. The chapter explores how his dedication to his cause remained resolute, even as he contended with the rise of extremism and the challenges that came with being an unwavering voice of justice.

The legacy of Lewis’s work continued to resonate, even in the face of adversity, reminding the country of the importance of fighting for the values of democracy, equality, and justice.

Chapter 27: Lion in Winter

Chapter 27: Lion in Winter depicts a poignant and deeply personal chapter in the life of Congressman John Lewis, exploring his battle with cancer and the unwavering dedication he exhibited to his work and ideals. The chapter highlights the enduring relationship between Lewis and his longtime aide, Michael Collins, who had been a pillar of support for two decades, managing not just his professional commitments but also offering vital personal assistance. As fall 2019 set in, Collins became increasingly concerned about Lewis's deteriorating health, noticing drastic changes in his appearance and energy levels, such as significant weight loss and exhaustion. This raised red flags, prompting him to gently encourage Lewis to seek medical attention, although both had hoped the issue would resolve with some simple dietary changes.

When Lewis confided in his former scheduler Jacob Gillison about not feeling well, Gillison immediately expressed his concerns and urged Lewis to undergo a medical examination. Despite Lewis's initial resistance, he agreed to the tests, and Dr. Brian Monahan was soon brought in to conduct further assessments. The hope was that the issue could be addressed easily with changes to his lifestyle, but unfortunately, the results proved far graver than anyone could have imagined. The diagnosis of Stage 4 pancreatic cancer was a devastating blow to both Lewis and Collins, but Lewis's strength and determination to remain active in his work remained unshaken. Even as he learned of his condition, he resolved to continue his congressional duties, giving impassioned speeches on key issues such as civil rights, justice, and impeachment proceedings.

Throughout this challenging period, Lewis remained an indomitable force in politics and social justice, and his resilience served as an inspiration to everyone around him. As the holiday season arrived, Lewis, despite his declining health, still found joy in creative outlets such as painting, using art as a form of therapy to cope with the

emotional weight of his diagnosis. However, breaking the news to his colleagues, friends, and family proved to be a deeply emotional experience. The outpouring of love, support, and admiration for his life’s work was overwhelming, demonstrating how deeply connected he was to the people he had fought for and worked alongside throughout his career.

With the new year came the commencement of chemotherapy, which significantly impacted his physical well-being but not his commitment to the causes he had always championed. Despite his personal struggles, Lewis remained actively engaged in political discourse, offering his support for Joe Biden’s presidential campaign and participating in vital public conversations. He celebrated significant milestones, including his 80th birthday and the anniversary of Bloody Sunday, though his declining health required assistance for participation. His ability to keep his spirit alive, even in these physically challenging times, showcased his deep dedication to the legacy of his activism and his mission to bring about social change.

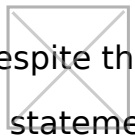
Even as his health continued to decline, with hospital visits becoming more frequent and interruptions from chemotherapy treatments impacting his daily routine, Lewis’s concern for others never wavered. His empathy remained one of his defining characteristics, as he continued to ask about the well-being of his visitors, even as he himself fought a fierce battle against cancer. The chapter offers a deep reflection on the life of a man who, despite facing terminal illness, maintained his commitment to his work and legacy. Lewis’s battle with cancer serves as a powerful testament to his lifelong pursuit of justice and equality, reminding readers of the remarkable resilience he exhibited in the face of life’s harshest trials. His unwavering spirit, focus on community, and tireless advocacy for civil rights endure as part of his profound impact on the world.

Chapter 28: Invictus

In Chapter 28: Invictus, the profound efforts surrounding the memorial services for Congressman John Lewis are meticulously detailed, showcasing the dedication of those closest to him, especially his longtime aide, Michael Collins. Collins, having worked with Lewis for years, was tasked with leading the planning for his memorial, gathering a diverse group of people, including his congressional staff, close friends, and communications professionals. The memorial services were meticulously organized over the span of several days, with Collins and his team addressing the challenges that arose during the preparation process. They met virtually through Zoom calls, discussing various logistics, from crowd management to coordinating with media outlets to ensure that every aspect of the tribute was handled with the care and reverence it deserved. An important moment in the process was the arrangement of an honor guard, which was orchestrated by Speaker Nancy Pelosi to oversee the ceremonial transport of Lewis’s casket. Stephen McDaniel, reflecting on the fast-paced nature of the planning, expressed awe that such a grand and intricate memorial could be prepared so quickly, considering the massive scale and emotional depth involved.

The ceremonies honoring Lewis were groundbreaking, marking a monumental event that spanned over six days and traversed five cities, creating an unparalleled tribute to his life and legacy. The services not only attracted numerous mourners but also garnered the attention of the media, highlighting how deeply Lewis had impacted American society and politics. Several key figures, including former Presidents, Lewis’s family members, and many of his closest colleagues, shared moving reflections on his dedication to justice, equality, and civil rights. The journey began in Troy, Alabama, where the first public ceremony took place at Troy University, the very institution where Lewis had once been denied admission due to racial segregation. This symbolic act began a series of commemorative events that paid tribute to his courage and his

long battle for civil rights. The following day, the “Final Crossing” ceremony took place in Selma, Alabama, where his casket was carried over the Pettus Bridge—a poignant location tied to the historical significance of the Civil Rights Movement. The procession continued with another significant stop in Montgomery, Alabama, where Lewis lay in state at the Alabama State Capitol, before making its way to Washington, D.C., where his casket was placed on the Capitol’s catafalque.



In Washington, despite the gravity of the occasion, President Trump chose not to attend or make a statement regarding Lewis’s death, which stood in stark contrast to the deep respect shown by so many others. The ceremony culminated in Atlanta, where Lewis’s final resting place was prepared beside his late wife, Lillian, at South-View Cemetery. The funeral service at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta was attended by numerous dignitaries, including former Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, who each shared heartfelt eulogies for Lewis, highlighting his legacy as one of the defining figures of the 20th century. A particularly emotional moment occurred when twelve-year-old Tybre Faw, a young man who admired Lewis’s life and work, recited Lewis’s favorite poem, *Invictus*, symbolizing the enduring resilience that defined Lewis’s character. The ceremony was not only a farewell to a national hero but also an urgent reminder of the ongoing struggle for civil rights and voting equality, a cause that had been dear to Lewis’s heart throughout his life. As the funeral service concluded, the outpouring of support, love, and remembrance reflected a collective determination to honor Lewis's work and continue his fight for equality and justice. Even in his passing, Lewis's legacy remained potent, shaping the way future generations would engage with the pressing social issues of the time.