

# 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.