

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.