

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.

