

Chapter Eighteen: Atlanta

In Chapter Eighteen titled "Atlanta," John Lewis returned to Atlanta in 1980, driven by his desire to continue his public service. Although he contemplated running for mayor, he recognized his limitations and set his sights on the city council elections the following year. Meanwhile, he took on the role of director of community affairs for the National Consumer Cooperative Bank, focusing on economic development in poor neighborhoods. However, the work didn't fulfill him, particularly when he had to oversee loan terminations, leading to community backlash.

By March 1981, as city council speculation intensified, Lewis declared his candidacy for an at-large seat, challenging incumbent Jack Summers. His rigorous campaign strategy involved visiting neighborhoods of varied socioeconomic backgrounds, allowing him to adopt a critical perspective on the city's governance. His earlier optimism about Atlanta's integration faded as he addressed ongoing economic hardships and significant social issues, including crime and segregation. Lewis emphasized the interconnectedness of urban challenges, advocating for initiatives aimed at supporting marginalized communities.

During his campaign, he characterized himself as "a voice for the voiceless," endorsing typical liberal policies while also acknowledging problems within impoverished Black communities. He voiced concerns over youth engaging in crime and criticized city governance practices, especially regarding ethics and conflicts of interest among council members. His commitment to ethical governance antagonized some colleagues, particularly council chairman Marvin Arrington.

Lewis's opposition to the presidential parkway project spearheaded by Jimmy Carter became a significant controversy. Concerned about the plan's impact on historic neighborhoods, Lewis resisted pressure from peers, launched impassioned campaigns against the development, and cultivated alliances with activists. His advocacy underscored a broader fight against environmental racism, articulating the risks faced by lower-income and minority communities.

Despite losing the initial council vote on the parkway, Lewis's activism galvanized community support, leading to sustained opposition that would eventually alter the roadway's development. In a politically charged environment, Lewis navigated relationships, regrettably sometimes leading to rivalries, particularly with Julian Bond, as both ambited positions of power in Georgia's political landscape. This chapter encapsulates Lewis's growth and conflict as he transitioned from civil rights activist to an influential political figure in Atlanta.