

# Chapter Fourteen: RFK

In March 1968, at a convention in Mississippi, John Lewis and friends Connie Curry and Joan Browning celebrated Robert Kennedy's announcement to challenge Lyndon Johnson for the Democratic presidential nomination. Kennedy's move followed widespread dissatisfaction among Democrats with Johnson's Vietnam War policies, notably following a strong showing by challenger Eugene McCarthy in the New Hampshire primary. While McCarthy supporters viewed Kennedy's entry as a threat, many saw hope in Kennedy, including Lewis, who had shifted his opinion of Kennedy from skepticism during the Freedom Rides to belief in his commitment to civil rights and social justice.

After watching the announcement, Lewis sent a telegram to the Kennedy campaign offering assistance. The campaign sought strong Black leadership, given the essential role of Black voters for Kennedy's success. Lewis relocated to Indianapolis to mobilize support for the upcoming Indiana primary. The campaign's kickoff rally was strategically held in a Black neighborhood, where Lewis energetically promoted the event. However, news broke of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination earlier that day, bringing shock and grief to the gathered crowd. Kennedy insisted on addressing the audience, delivering a heartfelt and sensitive speech that mourned King's death while urging unity rather than despair.

In the immediate aftermath, as riots erupted nationwide, Indianapolis remained calm. Lewis witnessed Kennedy's emotional strain as he facilitated arrangements for King's burial following a meeting with Black community leaders. Though the meeting was tense, ultimately they agreed to support Kennedy in return for campaign funds.

Moving forward, Lewis returned to campaign work, achieving significant wins for Kennedy in various primaries and building momentum. But tensions flared as he recognized shifting sentiments among young Black leaders who felt increasingly disillusioned. Despite losses in some primaries, including Oregon, Lewis remained committed to Kennedy's vision, hoping to channel the spirit of the civil rights movement into the election.

As the California primary approached, enthusiasm surged; however, on the night of victory celebrations, tragedy struck again when Kennedy was assassinated by Sirhan Sirhan. In the aftermath, Lewis felt profound despair, reflecting on the losses of both King and Kennedy. Despite personal grief, Lewis remained involved, embracing the political challenges and opportunities that lay ahead, including a potential convention challenge to ensure representation for marginalized voices.