

Chapter Seven: The March on Washington

Chapter Seven of the book focuses on John Lewis's significant role in the civil rights movement during the period leading up to the March on Washington in 1963. Following a breakthrough in Nashville, where nonviolent protests led to promises of desegregation, Lewis continued his advocacy by organizing a swim-in at a segregated swimming pool and a human barricade at a local supermarket. This blockade gained significant media attention, reflecting a broader shift in civil rights activism, which included increasing unrest and a rise in "militancy" across American cities. In June, President Kennedy introduced a civil rights bill in response to the mounting pressure from activism, especially after the University of Alabama standoff.

By mid-June, Lewis received an invitation from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) chairman to attend an emergency meeting in Atlanta, where Lewis was unexpectedly elected as SNCC's new chairman. This marked a transition as SNCC shifted its focus from college campuses to rural Southern communities. Under Lewis's leadership, the organization sought to address broader social and economic injustices, moving beyond desegregation.

Discussions regarding a march on Washington began to form, largely led by civil rights veterans A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, aimed at addressing job and freedom issues. Many leaders were initially skeptical, fearing the march would lack a clear, militant message. Rustin and his team worked to include various civil rights, labor, and religious organizations, eventually enticing SNCC into the fold.

In preparation, Lewis faced the challenge of wanting to express the urgent demands of his organization in his speech while navigating the expectations of the broader coalition, which included accommodating President Kennedy's civil rights agenda. As the march date approached, tensions escalated regarding the content of Lewis's speech, which was expected to critique the president's bill. Lewis fought to maintain the speech's integrity despite pressure from other leaders to dilute its urgent message.

On the day of the march, Lewis delivered a speech that articulated the demands of the civil rights movement, emphasizing the necessity for immediate change and expressing the frustrations of the Black community. His powerful delivery and content resonated with a massive audience gathered in Washington, elevating the movement's narrative and Lewis's significance within it. The chapter concludes with the successful outcome of the march and its role in furthering civil rights, setting a pivotal moment in American history.