

# Chapter Sixteen: The First Race

In December 1976, Atlanta politics transformed following Jimmy Carter's election. Immediately after his victory, Carter appointed Andrew Young as ambassador to the United Nations, sparking a scramble for Young's congressional seat. Among the potential candidates were Ralph Abernathy, Joseph Lowery, and John Lewis, who initially hesitated about running, fearing Young's resignation would endanger African American representation in Congress.

However, as time passed, Lewis recognized the opportunity alongside his wife Lillian, who believed he had the potential for higher office. Their adoption of a newborn son, John-Miles, further ignited her ambitions for John, who had already gained a good reputation through his work with the VEP. Lillian became actively involved in his political ambitions, urging him to seize this chance and pursue a congressional seat.

As Lewis's campaign commenced, he enjoyed respect from both Black and white power structures in Atlanta, earning praise for his integrity amidst strife in the SCLC following Martin Luther King Jr.'s death. Lewis was viewed as the natural successor, evident at a December gathering at Paschal's, where Young expressed his intentions to remain neutral while subtly supporting Lewis.

On December 21, Lewis officially declared his candidacy. Though his uplifting message of racial harmony resonated in a city coming to terms with its history, he did not lead the polls. His main opponent was Wyche Fowler, the more established white city council president who had previously lost to Young. The complicated dynamics of race and representation loomed large in the context of the Fifth District, comprised of 60 percent white voters. Sustaining Black representation became imperative in light of Young's previous successes.

As the campaign progressed, Lewis faced significant challenges, notably a lack of financial support and experience in political office. While he focused on policy differences with Fowler, he struggled to connect with voters, revealing a perceived lack of charisma and oratory skills. His initial missteps included an ill-fated press event for Black reporters that attracted little attention, highlighting the campaign's inexperience.

Simultaneously, Lewis encountered resistance from rival Black candidates, including Abernathy and voters questioning his ties to established Black leadership. Despite these pressures, Lewis aimed to demonstrate he represented all constituents by promoting an inclusive agenda while navigating the complex racial landscape of his candidacy.

Ultimately, electoral intricacies and public perceptions shaped Lewis's path, with his campaign marked by hard work and earnestness. He aimed to prove himself as a unifying candidate who could bridge divides. As the final vote approached, the campaign faced several adversities, including burglaries and struggles to mobilize white voters.

While Lewis's message of unity and inclusivity positioned him as a contender, it was evident that challenging Fowler in a predominately white district posed significant obstacles. In the end, despite an uphill fight and a spirited campaign, Lewis finished with nearly 29 percent of the vote, falling short to Fowler's gain of over 60 percent on Election Day. Though disappointed, Lewis remained optimistic about future opportunities.