

Chapter Twelve: Revolt at Kingston Springs

In May 1965, John Robert Lewis wrote an influential essay for the *New York Herald Tribune*, urging the civil rights movement to become politically focused. He drew on Bayard Rustin's call for political power to address systemic inequalities regarding jobs, education, and housing. Lewis cited the historical backdrop of the unfulfilled Third Enforcement Act and argued that meaningful change would come only when Black individuals held political office, positing that the conscience of political parties must include Black perspectives and struggles.

While some members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) shared his views, they pursued political power through various initiatives, such as the voter registration efforts in Lowndes County, Alabama, led by Stokely Carmichael, Bob Mants, and Judy Richardson. The most high-profile effort was Julian Bond's campaign for the Georgia legislature, which divided opinions within SNCC. Lewis supported Bond, hoping his victory would inspire further Black political engagement.

Lewis's optimism was rewarded when the Senate passed the Voting Rights Act on August 4, 1965, a milestone for the movement. Lewis attended the signing ceremony and had a memorable meeting with President Lyndon B. Johnson, who emphasized the necessity of voter registration and enforcement of the new law. However, Lewis was aware that the Act would succeed only through vigorous enforcement.

Challenges followed, as Lewis later faced arrest while protesting for Black voter registration in Georgia. Simultaneously, urban riots erupted in several cities, stemming from frustration over police brutality and socioeconomic disparities. Lewis empathized with the grievances of rioters but condemned the violence, advocating for organized, peaceful protest instead.

Discussions arose about the direction of the movement post-Voting Rights Act, leading to philosophical and tactical rifts within SNCC. The war in Vietnam also became a contentious issue among activists, with debates on how it intersected with the civil rights struggle. Amidst this turbulence, Lewis began to contemplate the direction of the movement, especially as more militant factions gained traction.

As tensions mounted at the SNCC meeting in Kingston Springs, Tennessee, Lewis was challenged in his leadership by Carmichael, who championed a more aggressive approach. Following a contentious election, Lewis was shocked to lose his chairmanship to Carmichael. The feeling of betrayal lingered as SNCC's focus shifted towards a more radical stance, diverging from the ideals that had previously united them.

In the aftermath of his ousting and the rising influence of Black nationalism, Lewis grappled with his future, reflecting on his role in a movement that was evolving rapidly and uncertainty over his place within it.