

Chapter Twenty-Three: In Opposition

In Chapter Twenty-Three, titled "In Opposition," the narrative begins with John Lewis's initial meeting with President George W. Bush in February 2001 at a House Democratic retreat. The encounter sets a tone of bipartisanship as the new president attempts to bridge partisan divides. Just months later, the tragic events of September 11 occur, leaving Lewis in shock as he hears about the terror attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon while preparing for work. Concerned for the people around him, he defies attempts to keep him indoors and ventures out, wanting to connect and provide solace.

Throughout the day, Lewis engages with fellow lawmakers and constituents, demonstrating his empathetic nature. He shares prayers with Senator Pat Leahy, emphasizing unity regardless of faith or background in the face of tragedy. At a subsequent vigil, Lewis is called on to speak, reinforcing his role as a trusted voice in trying times. His appeal for divine guidance speaks to his convictions as a Baptist minister, showcasing a side of him that strives for hope amidst chaos.

The chapter delves into legislative actions following the attacks. While many rallied behind the need for new security measures, Lewis casts a critical eye on the Patriot Act, rejecting it due to concerns over civil liberties. He reluctantly supports military action against the Taliban, emphasizing his nuanced stance on the use of force, shaped by his experiences during previous international conflicts.

Lewis positions himself as a champion of civil rights history, building alliances for progressive laws. His efforts culminate in a long-standing dream for a national African American museum, which he champions tirelessly throughout his congressional career. The introduction of bipartisan support, particularly from Senator Sam Brownback, signifies a turning point in the drive for the museum's establishment.

Despite various setbacks with the museum proposal, including resistance from the Smithsonian, Lewis's persistence pays off as the bill ultimately passes both the House and Senate. He celebrates this significant victory with supporters while maintaining a humble outlook, fully aware that his mission to advance civil rights and historical understanding is ongoing. The chapter poignantly reflects Lewis's resilience in advocating for change while navigating the complexities of politics and personal loss, culminating in the eventual groundbreaking of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.