

Chapter 14: RFK

Chapter 14: RFK takes us through John Lewis's involvement in the 1968 presidential campaign of Robert F. Kennedy, a journey that profoundly shaped both his personal and political life. The chapter begins with Lewis, along with his friends Connie Curry and Joan Browning, celebrating Kennedy's decision to challenge President Lyndon Johnson for the Democratic nomination. This decision came after widespread frustration over Johnson's handling of the Vietnam War, which had been exacerbated by Eugene McCarthy's strong performance in the New Hampshire primary. While Lewis had been initially skeptical of Kennedy during the Freedom Rides, he had grown to believe in his commitment to civil rights and social justice, seeing in him a figure who could bring about meaningful change.

In response to Kennedy's announcement, Lewis wasted no time in offering his support. He quickly sent a telegram to Kennedy's campaign, volunteering to help in any way he could. Knowing that Black voters would be critical to Kennedy's success, Lewis moved to Indianapolis, where he worked tirelessly to energize voters and promote the Indiana primary. One of his most significant contributions was organizing a rally in a predominantly Black neighborhood, aiming to galvanize the local electorate. However, tragedy struck when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on the same day as the rally. Despite the immense grief, Kennedy chose to address the crowd, delivering an emotional speech that both mourned King's death and called for unity, urging the audience not to let anger and violence take hold.

As riots erupted across the United States, Indianapolis remained largely peaceful, a testament to the calming influence of Kennedy's speech. In the aftermath of King's assassination, Lewis was profoundly affected, and he witnessed the toll that the event had on Kennedy as he worked with the community to arrange King's funeral. Tensions ran high when Lewis and other campaign staffers met with Black community leaders, but despite the fraught atmosphere, they managed to secure support for Kennedy in exchange for campaign funds. Over the following months, Lewis remained deeply involved in Kennedy's campaign, working to secure victories in the primaries. However, a shift began to emerge among younger Black leaders, who became increasingly disillusioned with the political system and began questioning the direction of the movement. They were not as easily persuaded by Kennedy's message, leading to challenges in maintaining a united front within the campaign.

Despite these setbacks, including losses in some key primaries such as Oregon, Lewis continued to fight for Kennedy's vision. He saw Kennedy's candidacy as a natural extension of the civil rights movement, one that would bring real change to the country. As the California primary approached, enthusiasm for Kennedy's campaign reached its peak, and supporters believed that victory was within reach. But on the night of his victory celebration, tragedy struck once more when Kennedy was shot by Sirhan Sirhan, throwing the campaign and the nation into further turmoil. Lewis, who had become deeply invested in Kennedy's campaign, was devastated by the assassination, grieving not only the loss of a leader but also the loss of a man who embodied hope for the future of racial equality and social justice. Despite the profound sorrow, Lewis remained engaged in the political process, recognizing that the fight for civil rights and equality was far from over. His resilience in the face of such loss illustrated his unwavering commitment to the ideals of justice, equality, and the power of community involvement. This chapter serves as a powerful reminder of the personal sacrifices made by those who fought for civil rights, as well as the enduring impact of Kennedy's campaign on Lewis and the broader movement for social change.