

Chapter 17: ACTION

Chapter 17: ACTION takes the reader through a pivotal chapter in John Lewis's life, where he transitions into a new role after the defeat of his congressional bid. In April, an offer from President Jimmy Carter changes the course of his journey. Carter, known for his complex blend of Southern populism and technical expertise, appointed people from diverse backgrounds to serve in his administration. Sam Brown, a notable advocate for anti-war efforts, was tasked with leading ACTION, a new umbrella agency that combined several volunteer programs. After recognizing the potential of John Lewis following his unsuccessful congressional run, Brown and his team recommended Lewis for the position of associate director for domestic operations, offering him an opportunity that would shape his future.

Initially, Lewis contemplated taking a different path, such as writing a memoir or simply enjoying some time fishing. However, the prospect of working with ACTION was exciting, offering him not only a substantial salary but also the chance to continue his lifelong mission. His goal had always been to foster community building based on the ideals of love and peace. By accepting the position, he was given a platform to further those ideals on a national stage. Unfortunately, just after his acceptance, Lewis experienced profound personal loss with the death of his father, Eddie Lewis. This marked a somber moment in his life, with his father's funeral in Pike County drawing a significant crowd of mourners. During the ceremony, Lewis honored his father with a deeply moving eulogy.

By July, the Senate confirmation hearings for his new role proceeded smoothly, with Lewis confidently handling questions from the committee. He was well-prepared, which became apparent as he navigated the process with ease. Even Georgia's own senator, Herman Talmadge, who had once been a staunch segregationist, praised him as "eminently qualified." During the hearings, Lewis outlined his vision for ACTION, emphasizing its potential to replicate his grassroots work on a much larger scale. His aim was to bring community involvement and engagement into the national dialogue, making it central to the agency's operations. By August, as he began transitioning into the role, Lewis noticed how ACTION's environment carried a youthful, casual energy reminiscent of the 1960s, a time that had shaped much of his own activism.

Despite settling into office life and managing a new home in a challenging neighborhood, the political landscape was far from easy. His wife, Lillian, and their son, John-Miles, remained in Atlanta as Lewis worked to foster a close-knit, family-like atmosphere within his staff. Though the work was fulfilling, controversies began to mount. The organization faced constant criticism from Republican figures who claimed ACTION was too radical and aligned with the ideas of the War on Poverty era. These attacks reminded Lewis of the scrutiny he faced during his time with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The tension only grew as the agency's direction and funding came under fire, putting immense pressure on Lewis.

Things worsened when internal disputes emerged within the Peace Corps, with some questioning whether traditional service roles were at odds with activism. Lewis, ever compassionate, sought to mediate these conflicts, but his involvement only added to the mounting ideological divides. His leadership style—patient, compassionate, and grounded in his moral convictions—won him many admirers within the agency. However, these challenges were exacerbated by the political tensions of the time, especially with a GOP that continued to attack his every move. As Lewis wrestled with these issues, he faced deep personal and political questions, particularly about returning to Georgia, where his sense of purpose had originally been shaped.

By the end of the chapter, Lewis's experience with ACTION was a blend of fulfilling work and navigating political strife. His time with the agency was marked not only by his enduring dedication to civil rights and community work but also by the increasing frustration with political battles. Despite the challenges, he continued to make significant contributions to the field, driven by the lessons learned from his past and the hope of shaping a better future. His tenure in ACTION, with all its difficulties and triumphs, would prove to

be a formative chapter in his lifelong fight for justice and equality.