

Chapter 23: In Opposition

Chapter 23: In Opposition starts with an early yet impactful moment in John Lewis's political career when he met President George W. Bush in February 2001. This meeting marked a significant point in the hopes for bipartisanship as Bush, the newly elected president, aimed to bridge the divide between political parties in an era that was already defined by partisan conflict. However, this brief sense of unity was shattered only a few months later by the devastating events of the September 11 attacks. As the horrifying news of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon spread, Lewis, deeply affected by the tragedy, insisted on stepping outside despite the advice to stay inside. He felt a strong desire to engage with those around him, hoping to offer some comfort and solace to others who were reeling from the national catastrophe.

On that fateful day, Lewis demonstrated his unwavering commitment to the American people as he connected with colleagues, friends, and citizens. Through simple acts like sharing prayers with Senator Pat Leahy, he showcased the importance of unity in the face of tragedy. His genuine appeal for solidarity across faiths and political lines stood as a reminder that, during times of crisis, it is essential to come together rather than allow divisions to deepen. Later that day, when called upon to speak at a vigil, Lewis again emerged as a figure of moral leadership, providing a sense of hope in a time of despair. His speech emphasized the importance of finding light in the darkness, which resonated deeply with those attending the vigil, and his words would continue to echo in the minds of many.

The chapter moves into the aftermath of 9/11 and the legislative responses to the tragedy. While many lawmakers and citizens rallied behind new security measures to protect the nation, Lewis remained cautious about the broader implications of such policies. Specifically, he voiced his concerns about the Patriot Act, highlighting its potential to infringe upon civil liberties in the name of security. His stance demonstrated the delicate balance between safeguarding freedom and ensuring national security, as Lewis understood firsthand the cost of sacrificing rights for the sake of safety. He ultimately supported military action against the Taliban, though with a clear acknowledgment of the complexities and consequences of using force, shaped by his own experiences with conflict and nonviolence during the civil rights movement.

As a lifelong advocate for civil rights, Lewis did not only focus on immediate responses to national crises but also worked to shape long-term policies and institutions that would benefit African Americans. One of his crowning achievements in Congress was his long-standing effort to create a National African American Museum, a project that would honor the history and contributions of African Americans. While the effort faced significant hurdles, including resistance from powerful institutions like the Smithsonian, Lewis's persistence in advocating for the museum never wavered. He gained crucial bipartisan support, including from conservative figures like Senator Sam Brownback, and fought tirelessly to ensure that the bill passed both the House and Senate, a victory that represented the culmination of years of work.

Despite the challenges, including political opposition and personal setbacks, Lewis remained focused on the broader purpose of his work. When the bill for the museum's creation was finally signed into law, Lewis celebrated the achievement but knew that this was just one step in his ongoing fight for civil rights and equality. The opening of the museum would become a symbol of his dedication to preserving the history of the civil rights movement and ensuring that future generations would understand the struggles and triumphs of African Americans. Lewis's commitment to social justice remained unwavering, and even as he celebrated this victory, he recognized that the fight for equality and justice would continue in the years to come. This chapter encapsulates the multifaceted nature of his political career, his unwavering commitment to justice, and the complex process of navigating the political landscape in pursuit of long-term change.