



Oscar Stanton De Priest

1871–1951

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1929–1935
REPUBLICAN FROM ILLINOIS

Oscar De Priest was the first African American elected to Congress in the 20th century, ending a 28-year absence of black Representatives. De Priest's victory—he was the first black Member from the North—marked a new era of black political organization in urban areas, as evidenced by the South Side district of Chicago, whose continuous African-American representation began with De Priest's election in 1928. Although he made scant legislative headway during his three terms in Congress, De Priest became a national symbol of hope for African Americans, and he helped lay the groundwork for future black Members of the House and Senate.¹

Oscar Stanton De Priest was born to former slaves Alexander and Mary (Karsner) De Priest in Florence, Alabama, on March 9, 1871. His father later worked as a teamster and a farmer, while his mother found part-time employment as a laundress.² In 1878, the De Priest family, along with thousands of other black residents of the Mississippi Valley, moved to Kansas. The migrants from Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama sought to escape poor economic and social conditions after Democrats and former Confederates regained control of southern state governments at the end of Reconstruction. These families, one historian wrote, were “pushed by fears of damnation and pulled by belief” in a better life in Kansas.³ De Priest graduated from elementary school in Salina and enrolled in a business course at the Salina Normal School, where he studied bookkeeping. In 1889 he settled in Chicago before the great wave of African-American migration to northern cities during and after World War I. In Chicago, De Priest worked as an apprentice plasterer, house painter, and decorator, and he eventually established his own business and a real estate management firm. He married Jessie Williams on February 23, 1898, and the couple had one child, Oscar Stanton, Jr.⁴

De Priest's foray into politics was facilitated by Chicago's budding machine organization. Divided into wards and precincts, Chicago evolved into a city governed by a system of political appointments, patronage positions, and favors. Unable to consolidate control of the city before the 1930s, Chicago mayors nonetheless wielded considerable authority.⁵ De Priest recognized the potential for a career as a local leader in a city with few black politicians whose African-American population was experiencing dramatic growth.⁶ At first comfortable with a behind-the-scenes role, De Priest eventually assumed a more prominent political position as a loyal Republican interested in helping his party gain influence in Chicago. By 1904, De Priest's ability to bargain for and deliver the black vote in the Second and Third Wards gained him his first elected position: a seat on Chicago's Cook County board of commissioners. He retained this position for two terms, from 1904 through 1908.⁷ Caught between rival factions, De Priest failed to secure a third term as commissioner. During a seven-year break from politics, he turned his attention to real estate, and became an affluent businessman.⁸

To revive his political career, De Priest curried favor with powerful Republican officials such as Chicago Mayor William Hale (Big Bill) Thompson and longtime U.S. Representative Martin Madden. He became Chicago's first black alderman, enabling him to sit on the influential city council from 1915 to 1917.⁹ De Priest's service on the council ended abruptly; he resigned from office at the urging of local Republican leaders after being indicted for accepting money from a gambling establishment. “I shall devote myself unreservedly to proving my innocence and restoring my good name in this community,” proclaimed De Priest, announcing his decision not to seek another term in office.¹⁰ With Clarence Darrow—who later became



one of the most famous trial lawyers in the country—as his defense counsel, De Priest was acquitted of the charges, but his political future remained uncertain because of several outstanding indictments.¹¹ After failing to gain the Republican nomination in 1918, De Priest unsuccessfully attempted to regain his council seat by running as an Independent.¹² However, he recovered enough power by 1924 to be elected Third Ward committeeman.¹³

The turning point in De Priest's career occurred when Martin Madden, the influential Chicago Representative and chair of the House Appropriations Committee, died suddenly after he had secured the Republican nomination for a likely 13th term in Congress. The Republican machine, led by Mayor Thompson, selected De Priest to replace Madden as the nominee in the lakeshore congressional district encompassing Chicago's Loop business section—a cluster of ethnic white neighborhoods—and a predominantly black area that included the famous Bronzeville section of the South Side.¹⁴ Some black leaders in Chicago balked at the choice, contending that the credentials of other African-American politicians were better than De Priest's.¹⁵ In the November election De Priest squared off against Democrat Harry Baker and three Independents, including William Harrison, an African-American assistant attorney general.¹⁶ De Priest narrowly defeated his opponents with only a plurality, securing 48 percent of the vote; Harrison siphoned off some of the black votes in the district.¹⁷ In his two subsequent congressional elections, De Priest won by more sizable margins, earning 58 and 55 percent of the vote, respectively.¹⁸ As the first African American elected to Congress for nearly three decades, De Priest initiated a trend of black representation in urban northern cities repopulated by the Great Migration.

As De Priest prepared to take his seat in the 71st Congress (1929–1931) on April 15, 1929, he faced a potential obstacle. After his election in November, the local press speculated that the House might attempt to exclude De Priest because of an investigation involving outstanding “charges of sponsoring and protecting vice and gambling in

the colored section of Chicago's South Side.”¹⁹ Although he had been cleared of the charges a few days before the start of the new Congress, Ruth McCormick, another newly elected Republican from Illinois, enlisted the assistance of Speaker Nicholas Longworth of Ohio to thwart potential challenges by southern Democrats to De Priest's seat.²⁰ Allegedly at the request of his wife, Alice, a personal friend of Representative-elect McCormick's, the Speaker dispensed with the traditional procedure for swearing in Members by state delegation and administered the oath of office simultaneously to prevent Members sworn in before De Priest from disputing the legality of his joining the 71st Congress.²¹ De Priest's first day in Congress attracted the interest of the press and of many African Americans, some of whom watched the proceedings from the segregated visitors' gallery.²²

The election of the new black Representative challenged the segregation pervasive in the nation's capital in the early 20th century. One of the most publicized incidents involving De Priest's arrival in Washington, DC, was the First Lady's White House tea for congressional wives. First Lady Lou Hoover's invitation to Mrs. Jessie De Priest provoked a wave of condemnation across the South. Several southern state legislatures, including Mississippi's, passed resolutions imploring the Herbert Hoover administration to give “careful and thoughtful consideration to the necessity of the preservation of the racial integrity of the white race.”²³ The First Lady divided the reception into four separate sessions in an attempt to avoid a boycott by the wives of southern Members; Mrs. De Priest attended the smallest of the four gatherings with a few women who had been “screened” by the administration.²⁴ De Priest called the southern legislators cowards. “I've been elected to congress the same as any other member,” he exclaimed. “I'm going to have the rights of every other congressman—no more and no less—if it's in the congressional barber shop or at a White House tea.”²⁵ Nevertheless, he sought to make the most of the publicity resulting from the White House tea. Less than two weeks later, De Priest sponsored a noteworthy

fundraiser in the nation's capital for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The Illinois Representative invited all his Republican colleagues in the House except the two he believed had slighted him because of his race.²⁶

Discriminatory practices existed in the Capitol as well. Many southern Democrats, in particular, resented De Priest's presence on the Hill and found ways to express their displeasure—such as refusing to accept offices near the newly elected black Representative.²⁷ Representative Fiorello LaGuardia of New York rebuked his colleagues, asserting, “It is manifestly unfair to embarrass a new member and I believe it is our duty to assist new members rather than humiliate them.”²⁸ In January 1934, Representative Lindsay C. Warren, a Democrat from North Carolina and chairman of the House Committee on Accounts, ordered De Priest's secretary, Morris W. Lewis, and Lewis's son expelled from the House's whites only public restaurant. (There was a separate public facility for black customers next to the kitchen in the basement of the House.) The incident made headlines when De Priest introduced a resolution calling for an official investigation.²⁹ On the House Floor he refuted Warren's claim that African Americans had always been banned from the restaurant, recalling that he and other black patrons had frequented the Capitol establishment. De Priest implored his colleagues to support his resolution, remarking, “If we allow segregation and the denial of constitutional rights under the Dome of the Capitol, where in God's name will we get them?” He later said, “If we allow this challenge to go without correcting it, it will set an example where people will say Congress itself approves of segregation.”³⁰ With his resolution referred to the hostile Rules Committee, which controls the flow of legislation in the House (then chaired by southern Democrat and future Speaker William Bankhead), De Priest kept his measure alive by using a parliamentary procedure: The Illinois Representative collected 145 Member signatures on a discharge petition to bring his legislation to the floor for a vote. The House ultimately

voted in favor of De Priest's call for an investigatory committee, but the panel created to study the House Restaurant's policy of segregation split along party lines (three Democrats, two Republicans), refusing to recommend any revisions.³¹ During his tenure, De Priest also lobbied for equality in the daily protocol of the House Chamber. In 1934, he requested that an African-American preacher be allowed to offer the opening prayer.³²

The only African American in Congress during his three terms, De Priest discovered that in many respects he represented not only his Chicago district, but the entire black population of the United States. His entry into the national spotlight established a pattern for future black Representatives, who typically found their legislative records scrutinized in terms of their effectiveness in advancing African-American rights. Mindful of such expectations and eager to use his position to promote racial equality, De Priest proposed a reduction in the number of seats for states that disfranchised blacks, legislation originally introduced more than 30 years earlier by George White of North Carolina. In 1932, he introduced a bill to provide monthly pensions for former slaves older than 75 “to give recognition and do justice to those who are now living who were emancipated by the Emancipation Proclamation issued by Abraham Lincoln in 1863.”³³ A response to the acute economic problems of the Great Depression, rather than the chronic problem of economic disparity between races, this proposal echoed social welfare plans advanced by Dr. Francis Townsend and Father Coughlin.³⁴ De Priest introduced a joint resolution in 1933 authorizing federal courts to change the location of a trial if a defendant's right to impartiality was compromised by consideration of race, color, or creed. This move was prompted by the infamous Scottsboro, Alabama, case in which nine African-American boys were sentenced to death by an all-white jury for the alleged rape of two white women, despite a lack of credible evidence.³⁵ Outlining several high-profile cases involving unfair treatment of African Americans in the judicial system, De Priest said in a speech, “I am making these remarks because I want you

to know that the American Negro is not satisfied with the treatment he receives in America, and I know of no forum where I can better present the matter than the floor of Congress.”³⁶ De Priest also backed a measure to hold states and counties responsible for the prevention of lynching. The unsuccessful legislation he introduced in 1934 would have fined and imprisoned local authorities if prisoners in their jurisdiction were lynched. In 1931 De Priest introduced a bill to make Abraham Lincoln’s birthday a legal holiday—a symbolic gesture for African Americans.³⁷

Although most of his legislative efforts to promote civil rights were unsuccessful, De Priest had a few victories. His most notable triumph occurred in March 1933, when he succeeded in adding an antidiscrimination rider to a \$300 million unemployment relief and reforestation measure.³⁸ The final version of the bill, which launched the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), incorporated De Priest’s amendment outlawing “discrimination because of race, color, creed, or criminal records” in the selection of workers for the program. Nevertheless, discrimination in the CCC remained rampant. By 1934 only 6 percent of CCC enrollees were African Americans, and the figures were disproportionately low even in majority-black states, such as Mississippi. That figure increased to almost 10 percent by the end of the decade, and while roughly a quarter million African Americans served in the CCC, only one in 10 was based in an integrated camp.³⁹ While in the House, De Priest nominated several African-American men from his district to the military academies—a practice replicated by his black successors from the Chicago area.⁴⁰ De Priest exclaimed proudly, “I’ve done more for the Negroes than any congressman since the time of Washington.”⁴¹

De Priest did not inherit the favorable committee assignments of his predecessor, Representative Madden. During his three terms in the House he served on the Indian Affairs, Invalid Pensions, and Enrolled Bills committees. De Priest also was a member of the Post Office and Post Roads Committee during the 73rd Congress (1933–1935). Though the Post Office and Post Roads assignment ranked just outside the top

third of desirable House committees (14th overall), it was significant for a black Member. The year De Priest first won election to the House, the U.S. Post Office Department employed 45 percent of the federal government’s African-American workers.⁴²

In many respects, De Priest adhered to the general policy of the national Republican Party of the era. Like other Republicans, De Priest generally opposed federal programs for economic relief in the Depression, preferring to focus on such efforts at the state and community levels. Foreshadowing its importance in Congress in the coming years, De Priest denounced communism and warned of its spread in urban areas experiencing the acute effects of the Great Depression. Fearful that communists would spread propaganda among disgruntled African Americans, he lobbied unsuccessfully for a special House committee to investigate the leftist party.⁴³

De Priest’s refusal to support Roosevelt’s remedial economic measures alienated many voters in his inner-city district. Ultimately, his loyalty to the Republican Party and his inability to provide economic relief for his constituents cost him his seat in the House. In the November 1934 general election, De Priest faced a formidable challenge from Arthur Mitchell, a former Republican lieutenant in Chicago’s political machine who switched to the Democratic Party and became an ardent supporter of Roosevelt and the New Deal. In a campaign that received national attention because both candidates were African American, Mitchell attacked De Priest’s refusal to vote for emergency federal aid to the poor and criticized his ineffective protest of segregation in the House Restaurant.⁴⁴ De Priest earned just 47 percent of the vote in a losing cause, paving the way for Mitchell to become the first black Democrat elected to Congress.⁴⁵ The De Priest–Mitchell contest reflected a larger political trend occurring in Chicago and many other northern cities: African Americans were changing their allegiance from the Republican Party to the Democratic Party because of dissatisfaction with the GOP response to the plight of Black Americans during the Depression and because of New

Deal relief policies. Two years later De Priest failed to regain his congressional seat. In 1943, De Priest again was elected Third Ward alderman and served once more on the Chicago city council. Defeated for re-election in 1947, De Priest remained active in his real estate business until he died in Chicago on May 12, 1951, of complications after he was hit by a bus.⁴⁶

FOR FURTHER READING

Day, S. Davis. "Herbert Hoover and Racial Politics: The De Priest Incident," *Journal of Negro History* 65 (Winter 1980): 6–17.

"De Priest, Oscar Stanton," *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=D000263>.

Rudwick, Elliott M. "Oscar De Priest and the Jim Crow Restaurant in the U.S. House of Representatives," *Journal of Negro Education* 35 (Winter 1966): 77–82.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

Chicago Historical Society (Chicago, IL). *Papers*: 1871–1951, approximately 60 items. The Oscar De Priest papers contain condolence letters and materials relating to the death of Oscar De Priest's son. Also included are an application to place the De Priest home on the National Register of Historic Places (1974), De Priest family genealogical information, and various news clippings about Representative De Priest. *Photographs*: In the Oscar De Priest Photograph Collection, ca. 1900–1949, 10 photographic prints and one photomechanical print, including portraits and group portraits of Oscar De Priest and his family. *Prints*: In the Visual Material Relating to Oscar Stanton De Priest, ca. 1910–1949, 17 photographic prints, three drawings, and one photomechanical print, including photoprints primarily relating to the political career of Oscar De Priest and three original editorial cartoons relating to African-American Representative William Dawson.

NOTES

- 1 Carol M. Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests: The Representation of African Americans in Congress* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993): 29.
- 2 Harold F. Gosnell, *Negro Politicians: The Rise of Negro Politics in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967): 164.
- 3 Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1986): 140–159, 184–201; quote on page 184.
- 4 Robert L. Johns, “Oscar S. De Priest,” in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Men* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Research, Inc., 1999): 295 (hereinafter referred to as *NBAM*); Maurine Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976): 168–169.
- 5 For more about the Chicago political machine, see David Fremon’s *Chicago Politics, Ward by Ward* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) or William F. Gosnell’s *Machine Politics, Chicago Model* (New York: AMS Press, 1969; reprint of 1937 edition).
- 6 In 1920 approximately 110,000 African Americans resided in Chicago. See James R. Grossman, *The Encyclopedia of Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004): 357.
- 7 William L. Clay, *Just Permanent Interests: Black Americans in Congress, 1870–1991* (New York: Amistad Press, 1992): 62.
- 8 Clay, *Just Permanent Interests*: 62–63; Gosnell, *Negro Politicians*: 168–169.
- 9 Clay, *Just Permanent Interests*: 63–64; Parke Brown, “De Priest Put on Ballot for Madden Place,” 2 May 1928, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 1.
- 10 “De Priest Quits Election Race at G.O.P. Order,” 27 January 1917, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 12.
- 11 Kristie Miller, “De Priest, Oscar Stanton,” *American National Biography* 6 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 461–463 (hereinafter referred to as *ANB*); Gosnell, *Negro Politicians*: 172–174; “Jury Acquits De Priest,” 9 June 1917, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 1.
- 12 “De Priest Files His Petition as an Independent,” 9 March 1918, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 4.
- 13 Miller, “De Priest, Oscar Stanton,” *ANB*; “Negro for Madden’s Seat,” 2 May 1928, *New York Times*: 27.
- 14 “Seat in the House Won by Chicago Negro,” 8 November 1928, *Washington Post*: 3; Fremon, *Chicago Politics, Ward by Ward*: 29.
- 15 Parke Brown, “De Priest Put on Ballot for Madden Place,” 2 May 1928, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 1; “Rivals Divided; Machine Backs Oscar De Priest,” 13 May 1928, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 24.
- 16 “Rivals Divided; Machine Backs Oscar De Priest.”
- 17 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html; “Chicago Negro Elected,” 8 November 1928, *Los Angeles Times*: 2.
- 18 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 19 “De Priest Wins Congress by Slim Margin,” 8 November 1928, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 14.
- 20 “Drops De Priest Charges,” 11 April 1929, *New York Times*: 38.
- 21 *Congressional Record*, House, 71st Cong. 1st sess. (15 April 1929): 25; Gosnell, *Negro Politicians*: 183–184; Clay, *Just Permanent Interests*: 65–66.
- 22 Carlisle Barger, “Crowds Watch Congress Open Extra Session,” 16 April 1929, *Washington Post*: 1.
- 23 “Pass De Priest Resolution,” 26 June 1929, *New York Times*: 9; “Mrs. De Priest Visit Stirs Mississippian,” 26 June 1929, *Washington Post*: 2.
- 24 Davis S. Day, “Herbert Hoover and Racial Politics: The De Priest Incident,” *Journal of Negro History* 65 (Winter 1980): 9.
- 25 “De Priest Calls Legislators of Dixie Cowards,” 2 July 1929, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 1.
- 26 Day, “Herbert Hoover and Racial Politics: The De Priest Incident”: 11–12; “Two Congressmen at De Priest Party,” 22 June 1929, *Washington Post*: 1.
- 27 Shirley Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress* (Washington, DC: U.S. Capitol Historical Society, 1998): 25.
- 28 “Acts for Negro in the House,” 9 April 1929, *New York Times*: 64.



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- 29 “De Priest Heads House Into Race Question Clash,” 25 January 1934, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 4; *Congressional Record*, House, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess. (21 March 1934): 5047.
- 30 *Congressional Record*, House, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess. (21 March 1934): 5047–5048.
- 31 “Bar on Negroes in Restaurant in House Is Upheld,” 10 June 1934, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 3; Elliott M. Rudwick, “Oscar De Priest and the Jim Crow Restaurant in the U.S. House of Representatives,” *Journal of Negro Education* 35 (Winter 1966): 77–82.
- 32 “De Priest Adds Racial Demand,” 28 January 1934, *Washington Post*: 7.
- 33 *Congressional Record*, House, 72nd Cong., 2nd sess. (19 March 1932): 6508. In the 51st Congress (1889–1891), Representative William J. Connell of Nebraska introduced an ex-slave pension bill. According to a 2007 Congressional Research Service report, during the late 19th century, several bills were put forth to provide financial compensation for older freedmen; none of the bills passed. Garrine P. Laney, “Proposals for Reparations for African Americans: A Brief Overview,” 22 January 2007, Report RS20740, Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC.
- 34 For more on economic recovery plans that competed with the New Deal during the 1930s, see Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Knopf, 1982). For more on Townshend and his plan for elderly pensions, see the Social Security Administration Web site at <http://www.ssa.gov/history/towns5.html> (accessed 10 December 2007).
- 35 For more on the national dimensions of the Scottsboro case, see Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969).
- 36 *Congressional Record*, House, 73rd Cong., 1st sess. (3 May 1933): 2823; Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 27; Miller, “De Priest, Oscar Stanton,” *ANB*.
- 37 “Holiday on Lincoln’s Birthday Is Asked in Bill by De Priest,” 12 December 1931, *New York Times*: 6; Clay, *Just Permanent Interests*: 69.
- 38 Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 27.
- 39 “Forestry Bill Is Voted Amid Hubbub,” 30 March 1933, *Washington Post*: 1; “House Passes Bill for Forestry Jobs,” 30 March 1933, *New York Times*: 1. For figures on African Americans and the CCC, see Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue: The Depression Decade* (New York: Oxford, 1981): 51, 74–75.
- 40 “Negro Congressman Names Two of Race for Naval Academy, One for West Point,” 7 May 1929, *New York Times*: 1.
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- 43 “De Priest Warns of Reds’ Menace,” 23 February 1931, *Washington Post*: 3; Johns, “Oscar S. De Priest,” *NBAM*: 295.
- 44 “Negro Opposes De Priest,” 29 October 1934, *New York Times*: 2.
- 45 “Election Information, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 46 “Oscar De Priest Dies; 1st Negro in City Council,” 13 May 1951, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 40; “O.S. De Priest Dies; Ex-Congressman,” 13 May 1951, *New York Times*: 88; “Oscar De Priest, 79, South Side Political Figure, Hit by Bus,” 17 January 1951, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 1.