



Alphonso Michael (Mike) Espy

1953–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1987–1993
DEMOCRAT FROM MISSISSIPPI

As the only black student at a newly integrated high school, Mike Espy learned firsthand how to navigate the strict racial division between blacks and whites in his home state of Mississippi. This ability won him a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives—the first held by a black Mississippian in more than 100 years—in his first bid for elective office in 1986. “Service, service, service” was the way Espy described his legislative strategy; he focused on economic development and procuring aid for farmers in his impoverished rural district.¹ His centrist approach to politics won over constituents of both races and eventually earned him a top position in the Cabinet of his friend President William J. (Bill) Clinton.

Alphonso Michael (Mike) Espy was born in Yazoo City, Mississippi, on November 30, 1953. He and his twin, Althea Michelle, were the youngest of Henry and Willie Jean (Huddelston) Espy’s seven children. Though Yazoo City was located in an impoverished section of the Mississippi River Delta, the Espy family was affluent. Educated (along with his wife) at Alabama’s Tuskegee Institute, Henry Espy served as a county agent for the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the 1930s.² He later joined his father-in-law’s family-owned funeral home business. Mike Espy’s maternal grandfather, T. J. Huddleston, Sr., founded a chain of nursing homes and built the first black hospital in Mississippi in 1921. Huddleston, who died in the 1950s, was a local celebrity and one of the wealthiest black men in the South.³ The prosperous family business initially sheltered the Espy children from segregated public schools. Mike Espy attended a local parochial school through his first two years of high school. After the school closed, in 1969, he transferred to Yazoo City High School. Espy was the only black student, and he carried a stick to fend off racist attacks from fellow students.⁴ “Relative to the civil rights experiences of snarling dogs and whips and

things it was pretty tame,” Espy recalled of his schooldays. “But I’d always have a fight. The teacher would leave the room, and then you’re among 35 in the classroom and they’d make racial jeers.”⁵ A year later, in 1970, Yazoo City High School was fully integrated, and Espy was elected president of the black student body in his senior year. (The white students had their own president.) Espy went on to earn a B.A. in political science from Howard University in Washington, DC, in 1975. He earned a J.D. from Santa Clara University Law School, near San Jose, California, in 1978, and then returned to Mississippi to practice law. He married Sheila Bell and the couple had two children, Jamilia and Michael, before divorcing.

Espy began his political career working in several state government positions. He served as the first black assistant secretary of state, managing the Mississippi central legal services division from 1978 to 1980. For the next four years, Espy served as assistant secretary of state for the public lands division, in charge of enforcing a state law that set aside one of every 36 square miles for educational purposes. From 1984 to 1985, Espy was assistant state attorney general for the consumer protection division. Espy also drew national attention within the Democratic Party when he served on the rules committee for the 1984 national convention.

Following the 1980 Census—nearly 100 years after the last black Representative to serve Mississippi (John Roy Lynch) departed the House in 1883—a statewide redistricting effort created a majority-black congressional district that stretched along the Mississippi River on the western side of the state and encompassed the cities of Vicksburg and Greenville. In 1984, black state legislator Robert Clark came close to unseating white freshman Republican incumbent Webb Franklin in a racially charged campaign. In 1986, the U.S. Justice Department



supervised the redrawing of district lines to include more black voters in response to the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which called for higher black percentages in single districts.⁶ The new Mississippi district, with its slight black majority, was the most impoverished in the country; 42 percent of its residents lived below the national poverty line and five counties had an unemployment rate of at least 20 percent.⁷ Studying the 1984 election, Espy believed he could improve on Clark's campaign.⁸ Narrowly avoiding a runoff election, Espy won a 50 percent plurality in the Democratic primary against runner-up Paul B. Johnson, a grandson of a former Mississippi governor, and Hiram Eastland, a cousin of the late segregationist U.S. Senator James Eastland.

In the general election, Espy faced the incumbent, Franklin. Both candidates realized that voter turnout would be key since the district's population was evenly divided between blacks and whites—particularly in a state where race was still a significant dividing line.⁹ For example, Mississippi was the only state that still categorized drivers' licenses by skin color, and blacks and whites coexisted in generally peaceful, but separate worlds. Social, civic, and educational institutions practiced an almost *de facto* segregation—black churches held services down the street from white churches; black lawyers served black clients and vice versa; and black children dominated the public schools down the road from the private schools that were mostly white.¹⁰ Combating black voters' traditionally low turnout, Espy went door-to-door, calling on supporters to volunteer transportation and other services on Election Day. "I need you; I can't do it by myself," he implored. "Please sir, please ma'am, turn out, serve as a poll watcher or a driver or a food-fixer. The answer is in your hands."¹¹ A lifelong Baptist campaigning in a religious area, Espy adopted the slogan, "Stand by Me, Pray for Me, Vote for Me."¹² Espy stepped across the deep racial divide to court white voters, too. Describing the balancing act required by his strategy, Espy said, "You must excite your black voters and not incite your white voters."¹³ He promised to combat the agricultural depression that plagued his

white constituents (widely known as "planters" in local circles), touting a letter from House Speaker Jim Wright of Texas ensuring him a seat on the powerful Agriculture Committee.¹⁴ The strategy paid off. Espy won 12 percent of the white turnout, while many other white voters stayed home in a show of *de facto* support.¹⁵ Espy took 52 percent of the total returns to Franklin's 48 percent, winning his first elective office and becoming the only black Representative in the 100th Congress (1987–1989) to represent a rural district.¹⁶ Asked by a *Washington Post* reporter how he felt after his victory, Espy responded, "peaceful," belying the frenzy of national attention.¹⁷ Espy's ability as a black candidate to attract white voters was unprecedented in a Mississippi federal election.¹⁸ Espy's election, declared a state newspaper, "did more than shatter the age-old color barrier. . . . It is further evidence that Mississippi is ready for a change."¹⁹

House leaders rewarded Espy with favorable committee assignments for a freshman Representative, enabling him to look after the interests of his rural district.²⁰ He took his promised seat on the Agriculture Committee as well as an assignment on the equally prestigious Budget Committee. He also served on the Select Committee on Hunger. Espy was re-elected three times. His 1988 campaign was difficult, but he won with 65 percent of the vote. Espy's opponent, Republican attorney Jack Coleman, accused him of supporting the "radical left" and insinuated that Espy had defaced his home with racial epithets in order to elicit sympathy from voters.²¹ In Espy's next two election campaigns in 1990 and 1992, he defeated Republican Dorothy Bedford with 84 and 76 percent of the vote, respectively.²²

Espy attributed his electoral success to his focus on constituent service.²³ As a freshman, he sponsored the Lower Mississippi River Valley Delta Development Act, enlisting the aid of fellow Mississippi Democrat and powerful Appropriations Committee Chairman Jamie Whitten, who helped secure \$3 million to fund the project.²⁴ The bill established a nine-member panel to study the region's widespread poverty and created a



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plan for economic development along the banks of the Mississippi River. The governors of participating states (Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri, and Illinois) selected the commission's members. Espy also helped create the Lower Mississippi Delta Congressional Caucus, later serving as its chairman. The group persuaded Congress to pass the 1990 Housing and Community Development Act, which funneled money to underserved areas. In addition, Espy became a spokesman for the Mississippi Delta's fastest-growing enterprise: catfish farming. He sought huge federal grants for the thousand-acre pools to breed the fish and sponsored a resolution declaring June 25 National Catfish Day. He even persuaded the U.S. Army to serve soldiers catfish at least once a week.²⁵

Reflecting the nearly even racial and political divisions among his constituents, Espy embraced the political center to a greater degree than did many of his African-American colleagues in Congress.²⁶ Espy's voting record received high ratings from liberal groups. As an active member of the liberal Congressional Black Caucus, he generally disagreed with President Ronald W. Reagan's focus on the Cold War military buildup and he supported abortion rights. Yet Espy also embraced some conservative positions on social issues: For instance, he was in favor of school prayer and advocated the death penalty for those who committed drug-related crimes. A longtime member of the National Rifle Association—a conservative organization whose primary interest was to protect Second Amendment rights to gun ownership—Espy made headlines as the first federal lawmaker to appear in one of the organization's advertisements.²⁷ He also favored U.S. funding for the Nicaraguan contras, who were fighting communist insurgents.²⁸

Espy developed a close working relationship with fellow moderate, then-Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton. Both politicians served on the Democratic Leadership Council, a centrist coalition that was shunned by most

black lawmakers. In an effort to support self-reliance over welfare handouts, the coalition often sided with Republican-sponsored economic enterprises. The council also promoted "microenterprises," through which welfare recipients would receive loans from local banks to start their own small businesses. Espy endorsed the idea, noting that similar programs had been successful in developing countries such as Bangladesh and the Dominican Republic.²⁹

As one of the first Democratic lawmakers to endorse Clinton's 1992 candidacy for President, Espy benefited from his election to the presidency. Having won a fourth term in Congress, Espy sought a promotion to chair an Agriculture subcommittee or a seat on the prestigious Appropriations Committee. Receiving neither, Espy reportedly sent the President-elect a memo with the top 10 reasons he should head the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).³⁰ Clinton offered him the post, and Espy resigned from Congress on January 22, 1993, to begin his new position.

Most occupants of the USDA's top post had been Midwesterners, and Espy was the first African American and the first Mississippian to receive the appointment. As the fourth-largest federal department, the USDA oversaw services ranging from the administration of food stamp programs to farm subsidies. The agency also had a reputation as a top-heavy bureaucracy. Espy directed several noteworthy achievements at the USDA, including improved meat inspections after an outbreak of illness caused by the bacterium *E. coli* in fast-food hamburgers. He also trimmed the agency's bureaucracy and provided relief for farming areas following devastating Mississippi River floods in 1993. However, his career in the Clinton Cabinet ended prematurely when he resigned on December 31, 1994, after being charged with ethics violations. Although he was indicted on federal bribery and fraud charges, Espy was acquitted.³¹ He returned to Jackson, Mississippi, to practice law.³²

FOR FURTHER READING

“Espy, Alphonso Michael (Mike),” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=E000218>.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

Mississippi State University Libraries, Congressional and Political Research Center (Mississippi State, MS). *Papers*: ca. 1987–1994, 100 cubic feet. The collection includes papers, publications, photographs, and memorabilia documenting Mike Espy’s tenure on the following House committees: Agriculture, Budget, and the Select Committee on Hunger. The collection is closed pending processing.

NOTES

- 1 Robin Toner, “Real-Life Politics in Deep South,” 30 March 1989, *New York Times*: B7.
- 2 “Mike Espy,” *Contemporary Black Biography* Volume 6 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1994) (hereinafter referred to as *CBB*).
- 3 Carla Hall, “Espy’s Mississippi Milestone,” 19 December 1986, *Washington Post*: C1.
- 4 “Espy, Mike,” *Current Biography, 1993* (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1993): 184.
- 5 Quoted in Hall, “Espy’s Mississippi Milestone.”
- 6 Kenneth Martis, *The Historical Atlas of Political Parties in the United States Congress: 1789–1989* (New York: Macmillan, 1989): 235–239; *Almanac of American Politics, 1988* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1987): 655.
- 7 *Current Biography, 1993*: 185; James R. Dickerson, “House Rivals Tread Fine Line in Race-Conscious Mississippi,” 29 October 1986, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 8 *Current Biography, 1993*: 185.
- 9 Dickerson, “House Rivals Tread Fine Line in Race-Conscious Mississippi.”
- 10 See Hall, “Espy’s Mississippi Milestone” for a summary of racial divisions in Espy’s Mississippi district.
- 11 Dickerson, “House Rivals Tread Fine Line in Race-Conscious Mississippi.”
- 12 *Current Biography, 1993*: 185.
- 13 Quoted in “Mike Espy,” *CBB*.
- 14 Dickerson, “House Rivals Tread Fine Line in Race-Conscious Mississippi”; Marshall Ingwerson, “In Deepest of Deep South, Black Lawmaker Wins Many Whites,” 21 October 1988, *Christian Science Monitor*: NL7.
- 15 Ingwerson, “In Deepest of Deep South, Black Lawmaker Wins Many Whites.”
- 16 Robin Toner, “Real-Life Politics in Deep South.”
- 17 Hall, “Espy’s Mississippi Milestone.”
- 18 Marshall Ingwerson, “Espy’s Mississippi Victory,” 22 December 1986, *Christian Science Monitor*: 1.
- 19 Quoted in Hall, “Espy’s Mississippi Milestone.”
- 20 Bruce A. Ragsdale and Joel D. Treese, *Black Americans in Congress, 1870–1989* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990): 50.
- 21 *Current Biography, 1993*: 185.
- 22 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/election.html.
- 23 Toner, “Real-Life Politics in Deep South.”
- 24 Helen Dewar, “For Impoverished Mississippi River Delta, Change Is in the Air,” 17 April 1988, *Washington Post*: A3.
- 25 *Current Biography, 1993*: 186.
- 26 Toner, “Real-Life Politics in Deep South.”
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 “Mike Espy,” *CBB*.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 *Current Biography, 1993*: 185.
- 31 “The Dizzying Fall of Mike Espy,” 5 October 1994, *Chicago Tribune*: 20. Espy was indicted on felony bribery and fraud charges when it was discovered that various food companies had paid his way to sporting events and awarded his girlfriend a scholarship. Also, Espy drove a car leased with government funds on non-work-related visits to Mississippi. He was acquitted in 1998. See, for example, Bill Miller, “Espy Acquitted in Gifts Case,” 3 December 1998, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 32 Lori Michelle Muha, “Mike Espy,” in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Men* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Research, Inc., 1999): 380.



ESPY'S ABILITY AS A BLACK
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