



Floyd Harold Flake

1945–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1987–1997
DEMOCRAT FROM NEW YORK

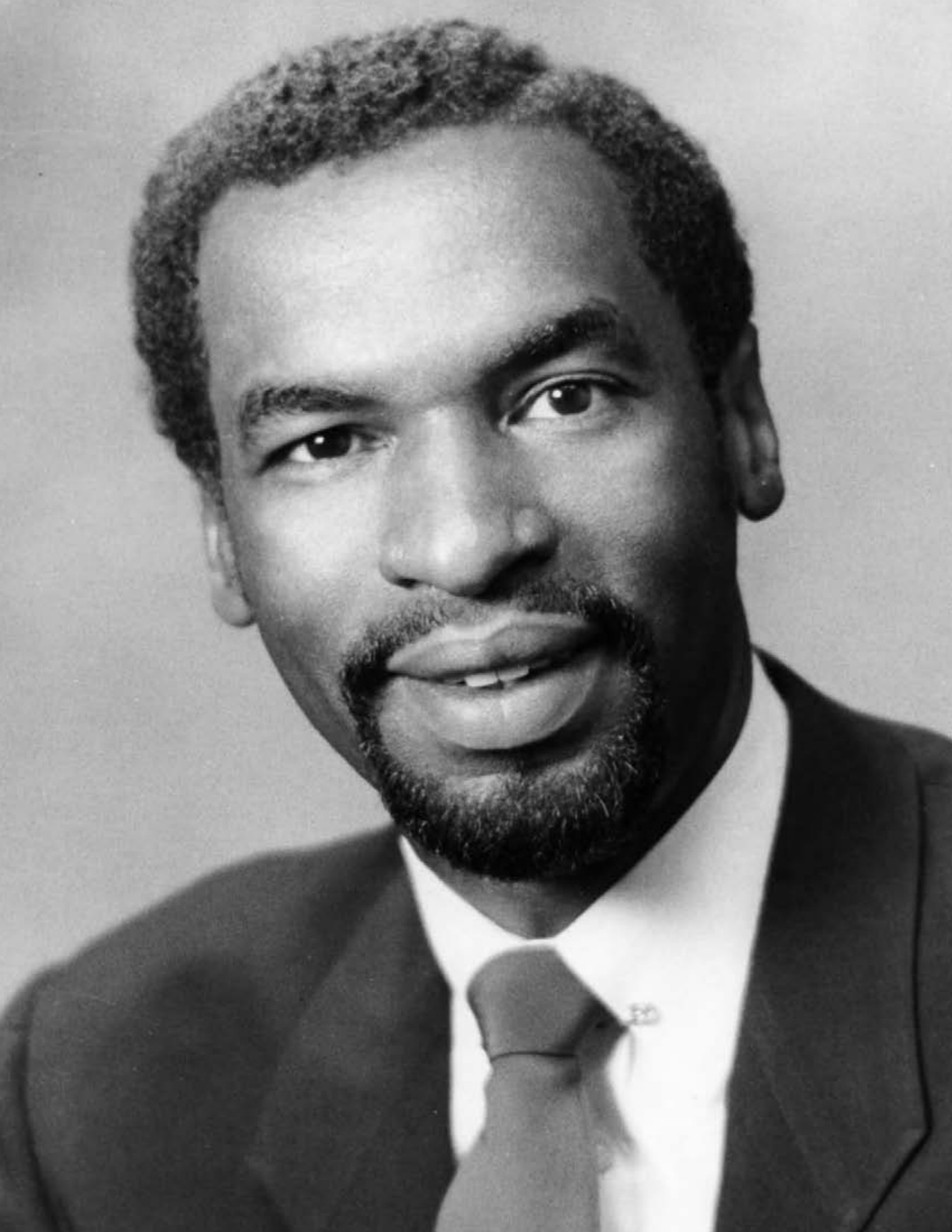
Although Floyd Flake arrived in Congress without having held public office, he was bolstered by his experience managing one of the largest churches in New York City: the Allen African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. As a provider of a broad range of social services, the church was the economic focal point of the Queens neighborhood of Jamaica. Flake was part of a new generation of black Representatives who sought to work within the congressional hierarchy and who viewed race as less important in their role as Representatives. A Democrat, Flake often found himself teamed with Republicans to fund urban renewal efforts. But Flake's calling ultimately remained his church, and halfway through his sixth term in Congress he left to return to New York. "I realize I could never be a Beltway politician," Flake noted. "[Back home] there are real people with real everyday problems that need to be addressed."¹

Floyd Harold Flake was born in Los Angeles, California, on January 30, 1945, one of 13 children of Robert Flake, Sr., a janitor, and Rosie Lee Johnson-Flake, a homemaker. Both his parents had only an elementary school education.² The Flakes moved to Houston, Texas, where Floyd Flake attended public schools and joined the AME church at the age of ten. Flake was the first in his family to attend college. He graduated from Ohio's historically black college, Wilberforce University, with a B.A. in psychology in 1967, and subsequently did graduate work at Payne Theological Seminary at Wilberforce before earning his master's degree in divinity at the United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, in 1995.³ Flake later studied business administration at Northeastern University in Boston. Between his studies, he was employed as a social worker in Dayton, Ohio, a salesman for a large tobacco company, and a marketing analyst for an international technology and document management company. Flake

eventually drew on his background in religious studies and education, working as the director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Afro-American Center and the chaplain at Boston University. Flake married Margaret Elaine McCollins, also an ordained minister, and they raised four children: Aliya, Nailah, Robert Rasheed, and Harold Hasan.

In 1976, Flake and his wife took over the Allen AME Church in Jamaica, a primarily black neighborhood and one of the poorest sections of the mostly middle-class Queens Borough in New York. Named for Richard Allen of the Free African Society, Flake's church was the oldest AME church in Queens, dating back to the 1860s.⁴ Under Flake's leadership, Allen AME became the second-largest black church in New York City, swelling from 1,000 to more than 5,000 members in a little more than a decade.⁵ As a provider of community outreach services such as a health clinic, a primary school, and affordable housing, Allen AME became the economic focal point of the Jamaica neighborhood.⁶ Other local black pastors spoke highly of Flake's ministry. "He is a master builder," noted a local Pentecostal reverend. A regional Baptist leader called him "a role model for the clergy."⁷

Flake did not consider running for public office until Joseph Addabbo, a longtime Representative from southeastern Queens, died in April 1986, opening a House seat. Democratic leaders sought a black man to replace Addabbo, whose constituency had changed dramatically during his 25-year career—from a large, middle-class Irish and Italian majority to one that was 65 percent black. Excluding Flake's impoverished neighborhood in Jamaica, the district constituted one of the largest black middle-class communities in the nation.⁸ Flake lost the party's nomination for the seat to Alton Waldon, Jr., a black community lawyer and a former police officer. In a crowded special election, Flake ran on the Unity Party



platform. Several other Democrats also joined the race on third-party tickets, providing Waldon with competition in the overwhelmingly Democratic district. Flake was Waldon's chief opponent; he enjoyed the endorsement of the *New York Times* as well as the powerful support of local clergy.⁹ Flake won the initial canvass in June by a mere 197 votes, but Waldon took the lead by 276 votes after the absentee ballots were counted. Flake's name was not on the absentee ballots, due to a filing error that occurred shortly before the election. Although Flake attempted to nullify the absentee ballots in federal court, he was unsuccessful.¹⁰ "It was mindboggling," Flake noted of his loss to Waldon. "One day you go to bed having won an election. A week later you discover you've lost because of absentee ballots."¹¹ Flake returned three months later to face Waldon for the Democratic nomination for the 100th Congress (1987–1989). In addition to his Jamaica base, Flake also enjoyed an endorsement from New York City Mayor Edward Koch, who delivered him some of the heavily Jewish and Italian neighborhoods that remained in the district. Flake defeated the incumbent in the primary by 3,000 votes.¹² Tantamount to a win in the Democratic district, Flake's nomination propelled him into the general election, where he won with 68 percent of the vote.

Flake won re-election five times, typically garnering between 60 and 70 percent of the vote in somewhat-crowded general elections.¹³ In 1992, a well-publicized legal controversy catapulted Flake into a primary battle. Black Democrat Simeon Golar, a local judge, challenged his nomination.¹⁴ Golar claimed that Flake focused more on his church and its surrounding neighborhood than on his congressional duties and neighborhoods outside Jamaica.¹⁵ The Democratic establishment in Queens chose to support Golar in the primary.¹⁶ Flake retaliated by providing a slate of candidates for local elections who were loyal to him and running against the party's handpicked candidates. Election officials threw several of Flake's candidates off the ballot for failure to observe filing rules.¹⁷ Despite the Democrats' anger at his defiance, Flake remained on the primary ballot and emerged victorious.

Flake's background in business and urban redevelopment won him appointments to the Banking and Small Business committees. Following the loss of several incumbents on the Banking Committee in the 1992 elections, Flake rose to chair the panel's Subcommittee on General Oversight.¹⁸ Flake effectively used his committee assignments to help steer federal money toward urban renewal projects in his district. In 1995, a New York publication cited him as one of the most effective downstate New York Representatives regarding the procurement of federal funds.¹⁹ Flake's willingness to work with Republicans and their traditional corporate constituents often helped him to meet his goals. In 1993, taking advantage of his new chairmanship on a Banking subcommittee, Flake introduced a comprehensive community development plan that outwardly opposed a plan advanced by Democratic President William J. (Bill) Clinton. Along with the Ranking Member on the Banking Committee, Representative Jim Leach of Iowa, Flake crafted legislation that redirected one-third of the funding for the Clinton proposal from local community development banks to large lending institutions.²⁰ According to Flake, this move provided incentives for big banks to lend to poor communities—first, by underwriting local lenders in order to help small businesses get off the ground and second, by encouraging larger lenders to take on the businesses as they matured. Parts of Flake's legislation were later incorporated into the Community Development Banking and Financial Institutions Act, which was signed into law in 1994.²¹

Flake's support for portions of the GOP's Contract With America was controversial. House Democrats almost unanimously opposed the 1994 list of campaign promises for reform legislation, but the contract helped vault Republicans into power in the House in 1995. Flake's support was not without reservation; he informed new GOP Speaker and Contract With America champion Newt Gingrich of Georgia that the legislative agenda ignored urban America. Gingrich later took note of Flake's work at Allen AME and brought him on in

1997 to cosponsor another Republican reform bill, the Community Renewal Act, which offered tax breaks and school vouchers to poor urban neighborhoods.²² Flake's support of school vouchers—tax credits given to parents so their children could attend private schools—drew the most criticism from within his party. Citing the successful Allen AME Christian School, Flake argued that private schools used fewer tax dollars per student annually and graduated more students than did public schools. He also believed that vouchers would motivate public schools to better manage their finances and curricula.²³ Most Democrats viewed the program as an across-the-board abandonment of the public school system. Foes included the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) and a powerful lobby composed of many New York City teachers and administrators. Many of these teachers were members of Allen AME. House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt of Missouri noted, "I've been to Floyd Flake's school, and I've seen how truly remarkable it is. But if we're going to rip the rug from underneath public schools, we've made a grave error."²⁴

Yet Flake voted with the Democrats more often than not. Though wary of dependence on government assistance, the passage of a 1996 welfare reform bill caused Flake to rail against the slashes in programs, which he noted would cost New Yorkers \$750 million in lost federal benefits. Flake noted the role of the federal safety net in keeping the poor in major cities afloat.²⁵ He also was an active member of the CBC and supported its broad mission. "With those 39 votes, we were able to do a very effective job of lobbying the President and Congress

because those votes made a big difference," Flake noted after an increase in the caucus membership following the 1992 elections. But he cautioned against the CBC's leftward lean in the face of the increasingly conservative Congress. The caucus should "become more bipartisan," Flake concluded, as well as "work with [President Bill Clinton with the] understanding that he, as the leader of the nation, cannot afford to make policies that were effective for us in the 1970s."²⁶

Allen AME remained a significant part of Flake's life, and in July 1997 he announced that he was resigning from Congress to concentrate on his pastoral duties. "My calling in life is as a minister," Flake told reporters, "so I had to come to a real reconciliation . . . and it is impossible to continue the sojourn where I am traveling back and forth to DC."²⁷ Flake served out the remainder of the session, officially leaving on November 15. Candidates who hoped to succeed Flake immediately sought his endorsement, recognizing the local political power of Allen AME's thousands of congregants.²⁸ Flake backed the eventual winner, former state assemblyman Gregory Meeks.

Flake continued to be politically active following his departure from Congress, writing op-ed pieces for the *New York Post* and working for various conservative think tanks to promote school vouchers. "The best thing that's happened to me is getting out of Congress," Flake declared in a 1997 interview, "Because I'm going to be a real hell-raiser from now on!"²⁹ In addition to fulfilling his duties as head pastor at Allen AME, Flake also was appointed president of Wilberforce University in October 2002, after serving six months as interim president.

FOR FURTHER READING

“Flake, Floyd Harold,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=F000184>.

NOTES

- 1 Robert M. Garsson, “Rep. Flake, a New York Liberal—a Bank Defender,” 2 August 1993, *The American Banker*: 15.
- 2 James Traub, “Floyd Flake’s Middle America,” 19 October 1997, *New York Times*: 245.
- 3 Whether Flake received his graduate degree at the Payne Theological Seminary of Wilberforce, Ohio, or at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, is unclear. According to Flake’s Allen AME biography, he received his degree from United and did some graduate work at Payne. See “Professional Profile: Rev. Dr. Floyd H. Flake,” *The Greater Allen A.M.E. Cathedral of New York*, <http://www.allencathedral.org> (accessed 5 April 2006).
- 4 Josh Barbanell, “Congressman Flake’s Indictment: Good Works or Greed?” 6 August 1990, *New York Times*: B1.
- 5 The congregation of Allen A.M.E. has grown significantly since the 1980s. In a 2004 interview, Flake claimed more than 18,000 members. See Public Broadcasting System (PBS), “Interview: Floyd Flake,” 24 September 2004, *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week804/interview.html> (accessed 5 April 2006).
- 6 Barbanell, “Congressman Flake’s Indictment: Good Works or Greed?”
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 “Good—and Better—in Queens,” 5 June 1986, *New York Times*: A26; Traub, “Floyd Flake’s Middle America.”
- 9 Dan Jacobson, “Queens Elects First Black Congressman,” 11 June 1986, United Press International; “Good—and Better—in Queens.”
- 10 “Election Laws on Trial in Queens,” 20 June 1986, *New York Times*: A30; “Man in the News; After Court Victory, A Congressman-Elect: Alton Ronald Waldon Jr.,” 26 July 1986, *New York Times*: 31.
- 11 Ken Fireman, “The Crazy Case of Floyd Flake,” 12 September 1988, *Newsday* (New York): 22.
- 12 Esther B. Fein, “Flake Defeats Waldon; Abzug Leading Teicher,” 10 September 1986, *New York Times*: B5.
- 13 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/election.html.
- 14 In 1990, Floyd and Elaine Flake were charged with income tax evasion and embezzlement of federal funds appropriated to build the church’s senior citizen housing complex in 1981. The Flakes maintained their innocence, and their supporters claimed the charges were politically and racially motivated. Following a well publicized, three-week trial in March 1991, a judge dismissed the charges against the Flakes, declaring the prosecution’s evidence insufficient. See “Floyd H. Flake,” Associated Press Candidate Biographies, 1996; “Floyd H. Flake,” *Contemporary Black Biography* (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, Inc., 2002) (hereinafter referred to as *CBB*); Susan B. Glasser, “Rep. Flake Is Indicted in Church Fraud Plot,” 6 August 1990, *Roll Call*; Joseph P. Fried, “Flake Pleads Not Guilty to All Charges,” 21 August 1990, *New York Times*: B1; Murray Kempton, “The Quiet Trial of U.S. Rep. Flake,” 13 March 1991, *Newsday* (New York): 11; Barbanell, “Congressman Flake’s Indictment: Good Works or Greed?”; M. A. Farber, “U.S. Dismisses Charges Faced by Rep. Flake,” 4 April 1991, *New York Times*: A1.
- 15 Joseph P. Fried, “Rep. Flake Is Fighting Hard Race in Queens,” 24 August 1992, *New York Times*: B3.
- 16 *Politics in America, 1996* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1995): 897.
- 17 “Rev. Flake Loses Bid for District Leader in Queens,” 26 August 1992, *New York Voice* (Volume 34, Number 20): 1.
- 18 Though Flake also sought more powerful assignments on the Budget and Appropriations committees, the Democratic leadership passed him over. This snub was attributed to his reputation as an independent lawmaker. See *Politics in America, 1990* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1989): 1014; Jack Sirica, “Dems Bypass Flake,” 8 December 1992, *Newsday*: 106.
- 19 Traub, “Floyd Flake’s Middle America.”
- 20 *Politics in America, 1996*: 895.
- 21 See 103rd Cong., 1st sess., H.R. 2707 and H.R. 3474.
- 22 “Floyd H. Flake,” *CBB*; Jonathan P. Hicks, “Rep. Flake Breaks With Party to Back School Vouchers,” 12 March 1997, *New York Times*: B3.
- 23 “Floyd H. Flake,” *CBB*.
- 24 Terry M. Neal, “Ex-Lawmaker Refuses to Be Boxed In; The Rev. Flake Left Congress to Pursue Urban Renewal Beyond Party Lines,” 10 January 1998, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 25 Ralph Roach, “A Conversation With Cong. Floyd Flake,” 10 August 1996, *New York Amsterdam News*: 11.
- 26 Ed Laiscell, “Congressman Floyd Flake Prepares to Leave Congress,” 17 September 1997, *Washington Informer*: 18.
- 27 Laiscell, “Congressman Floyd Flake Prepares to Leave Congress.”
- 28 Jonathan P. Hicks, “Flake to Leave Congress to Devote Time to Church,” 1 August 1997, *New York Times*: B3.
- 29 Ronald Powers, “Flake Leaves Congress to Work at His Church,” 15 November 1997, *Telegraph Herald* (Dubuque, IA): B10.



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