



George Thomas (Mickey) Leland

1944–1989

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1979–1989
DEMOCRAT FROM TEXAS

Inspired by an extended stay on the continent as a young legislator, Representative Leland poured his energy into focusing attention on a disastrous East African famine and raising funds for relief efforts. Leland worked tirelessly as chairman of the House Select Committee on Hunger, which he had lobbied Congress to create. Responding to critics who felt he should focus on domestic poverty first, Leland retorted, “I am as much of a citizen of this world as I am of this country. To hell with those people who are critical of what I am able to do to help save people’s lives. I don’t mean to sound hokey, but I grew up on the Christian ethic which says we are supposed to help the least of our brothers.”¹ This statement encapsulated Leland’s career and life goals. He became a martyr for the cause of eradicating world hunger, perishing in a plane crash on a humanitarian mission to transport supplies to an Ethiopian refugee camp.

George Thomas (Mickey) Leland was born in Lubbock, Texas, on November 27, 1944, to Alice Rains.² It was Leland’s maternal grandfather who nicknamed him “Mickey.” Shortly after Leland’s birth, his parents separated. Alice Rains moved with her two sons, Mickey and Gaston, to a poor section of Houston, where she worked as a short-order cook. Rains put herself through school and became a teacher. Mickey Leland graduated from Phyllis Wheatley High School in Houston in 1963 and attended Houston’s Texas Southern University. Earning his degree in pharmacy in 1970, Leland worked as an instructor of clinical pharmacy at Texas Southern before taking a job as a pharmacist. He also served with several university organizations, setting up free clinics and other aid for the Houston-area poor.

Influenced by diverse doctrines—the writings of black activists and the emphasis of his Roman Catholic faith on helping the disadvantaged—Leland was active in the

civil rights movement as a student in the late 1960s, often participating in unruly protests, and describing himself as a “Marxist” and a “revolutionary.”³ His arrest while demonstrating against police brutality in Houston proved to be a pivotal moment in his life, persuading Leland to work within the political system rather than against it. Leland was first elected to the Texas state house of representatives in 1972 and served his polyglot Houston neighborhood from 1973 to 1979. He quickly earned a reputation as a militant, firebrand politician in the state legislature, appearing on the first day in a tie-dyed dashiki shirt, an Afro haircut, and platform shoes.⁴ While in the state legislature, Leland made his first trip to Africa. The young politician developed a deep affection for the continent, staying in Tanzania for three months rather than his scheduled three weeks.⁵ “Nobody knew where I was,” Leland recalled, “My mother thought I was dead. But the fact is that I got totally absorbed in Africa.”⁶ Leland stepped onto the national political scene by serving as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 1972. He also served as a delegate to the Texas state constitutional convention in 1974, where he helped rewrite Texas’s 97-year-old Jim Crow-Era constitution, focusing on reforming the judicial and executive branches of the state government.⁷

In 1978, three-term Houston Representative Barbara Jordan announced her retirement from Congress. The first Member to serve the newly created district, Jordan represented central city neighborhoods where the population was almost three-quarters minority, dominated by lower- and middle-class African and Mexican Americans.⁸ Leland entered the May 6 Democratic primary, garnering 48 percent of the vote against seven other candidates. Falling short of the necessary 50 percent to win the nomination, Leland faced the primary runner-



up, African-American candidate Anthony Hall, in a runoff primary on June 3. Hall had won 24 percent of the May 6 votes. Hall and Leland had remarkably parallel backgrounds: they were both age 33, grew up in similar Houston neighborhoods, and served simultaneously in the state legislature. Though Jordan refused to endorse any one candidate, Leland's ability to garner support from both the district's black and Hispanic constituents sealed his victory over Hall, with 57 percent of the vote.⁹ Without official opposition in the general election, Leland won 97 percent of the vote for the 96th Congress (1979–1981). He was re-elected five times, typically winning majorities of 90 percent or more.¹⁰

Upon his arrival in Washington, Leland won a seat on the powerful Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee (later Energy and Commerce)—often sought after by Members because of its regulatory powers across a broad swath of industry. He was also assigned to the Post Office and Civil Service Committee, where he chaired the Subcommittee on Postal Operations and Services. In addition, Leland served on the Committee on the District of Columbia and became an active member of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). Leland later chaired the CBC in the 99th Congress (1985–1987). While attending an annual CBC weekend party in 1982, Leland met 24-year-old Georgetown University Law student Alison Walton. The two married in 1983, and Alison Leland worked as an investment banker. In 1986, the couple celebrated the birth of their first son, Jarrett.¹¹

Leland proved an active advocate for all minorities, focusing particularly on the needs of his black and Hispanic constituents. To best serve the large Mexican-American population in his district, Leland learned Spanish. He once shocked his colleagues by arguing in Spanish on the House Floor in favor of maintaining the bilingual clauses in the Voting Rights Act.¹² His bilingualism allowed him to develop a controversial working relationship with Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Leland disagreed emphatically with Castro's philosophy but admired his political influence among poorer nations.

Leland continued to look abroad, focusing on international cooperation and exchange. One of his first acts in Congress was to fund a six-week trip to Israel to allow underprivileged black teenagers from the Houston area to learn about Jewish culture and to create a cross-cultural dialogue between the youths in the two countries.¹³ Leland also led the demand for increased hiring quotas for women and minorities at telecommunications companies, taking on television executives and advocating more minority hires for on and off screen positions. In 1984 Leland supported the presidential candidacy of his longtime friend Vice President Walter Mondale over that of black civil rights activist Jesse Jackson, angering several of his African-American colleagues. However, Leland returned as Jackson's lead fundraiser for the 1988 presidential campaign.¹⁴

Leland's greatest passion developed from his three-month stay in East Africa. He spent most of his congressional career attempting to redirect American foreign policy away from the military imperatives of the Cold War confrontation between superpowers toward examining the inequalities between rich and poor nations. When famine struck East Africa in the mid-1980s, Leland was an outspoken advocate for alleviating hunger on the continent. Throughout his first two terms, he lobbied for the creation of a congressional committee to focus on world poverty and hunger. While sympathetic to his cause, many Members provided less support than Leland requested, as they believed it would only add to the institution's mounting bureaucracy.¹⁵ While critics claimed Leland should focus on domestic hunger before turning his attention abroad, he also involved himself in domestic poverty and hunger issues, proposing tax exemptions for American companies that donated to food banks. In 1987, he spent a night on a Washington, DC, steam grate to emphasize the plight of the homeless.¹⁶ Leland regularly raised aid for Houston-area food banks, which provided him with greater leverage for creating a committee on hunger.¹⁷ Leland often invoked two images from his frequent trips to Ethiopian refugee camps: a throng of

starving people rubbing their stomachs and pleading for food and an Ethiopian girl who died in his arms as he turned to ask her caretakers about her condition. “Every day I see her face,” Leland said.¹⁸

After gathering 258 cosponsors and the support of 60 national organizations, Leland realized his goal in 1984 of creating a congressional committee to examine global hunger and poverty.¹⁹ Leland’s Hunger Committee resolution passed on February 22 by a vote of 309 to 78.²⁰ He was appointed the first chairman of the Temporary Select Committee on Hunger in the 98th Congress (1983–1985). Modeled after a similar panel (the Committee on Children, Youth and Families), the Hunger Committee studied the effects of domestic and international hunger and poverty. In 1984, partially aided by publicity from American and British musicians, Leland’s committee pushed through Congress an aid package for famine relief of nearly \$800 million.²¹ Though successful in raising awareness about hunger, Leland complained of his congressional colleagues’ lack of interest.

Leland traveled frequently to Africa, often guiding Members and their staffs to refugee camps so they could witness firsthand how aid money was being used in Africa. On August 7, 1989, he took advantage of the congressional summer recess to check on the progress of a refugee camp near the Sudanese–Ethiopian border. Shortly after his plane took off from Addis Ababa, it crashed over a mountainous region in Ethiopia while navigating a storm. All 15 people aboard were killed, including Leland

and three congressional aides. Out of mutual respect for Leland, the United States and Ethiopia temporarily repaired their strained diplomatic relations, and Ethiopian military leader Mengistu Haile Mariam allowed American military spy planes to search for Leland’s downed aircraft.²² The U.S. military discovered the wreckage after seven days of searching, and a congressional delegation accompanied Leland’s remains to Texas for burial.

Representative Leland was widely eulogized. Visitors poured into his Capitol Hill office to offer their condolences. Staff in the neighboring office occupied by Representative George Crockett of Michigan helped field the overwhelming number of phone calls.²³ Communities touched by Leland were quick to honor him: The CBC renamed its humanitarian award for him in 1989, Houston International Airport named its largest terminal for him, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People sponsored a project to plant trees in Africa in his name.²⁴ The tragedy of Leland’s death was compounded when Alison Leland gave birth in January 1990 to premature twin sons, Cameron George and Austin Mickey, five months after her husband’s death. Democratic leaders in the House led a fundraiser to collect donations for Leland’s three children. Alison Leland declined an offer to run for her husband’s vacant House seat. With her support, Houston-area legislator Craig Washington succeeded Leland in the December 9 special election. Without Leland’s forceful support and leadership, the Select Committee on Hunger was eventually eliminated in the 103rd Congress (1993–1995).

FOR FURTHER READING

“Leland, George Thomas (Mickey),” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=L000237>.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

Texas Southern University (Houston, TX). The Leland Archives, The Mickey Leland Center on World Hunger and Peace. *Papers*: 1970–1989, 653 boxes. The collection documents Mickey Leland’s public service career as a Texas state representative and as a U.S. Representative from Texas. Materials include correspondence, news clippings, artifacts, photographs, audio and videotapes, speeches, news releases, committee testimony, and casework. Topics include health care rights for the poor, prison reform, police harassment and brutality, racial discrimination, affirmative action, budget discrimination in higher education, labor legislation, political election organization, infant mortality, minority rights in business, health education, parks and recreation for the indigent, apartheid and racial discrimination issues worldwide, Third World development, emergency shelters for the homeless, nutrients for the malnourished, and food security for victims of hunger. A finding aid database is available in the repository.

NOTES

- 1 Lisa Belkin, “Representative Mickey Leland, 44, Dies in Crash,” 14 August 1989, *New York Times*: D9.
- 2 Leland’s father is unknown.
- 3 Stephen Chapman, “Mickey Leland: Good Intentions, Serious Errors,” 17 August 1989, *Chicago Tribune*: 29C.
- 4 *Politics in America, 1984* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1983): 1495.
- 5 Shirley Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress* (Washington, DC: United States Capitol Historical Society, 1998): 56.
- 6 Belkin, “Representative Mickey Leland, 44, Dies in Crash.”
- 7 Molly Ivins, “Constitution Time Again in Texas,” 20 January 1974, *Washington Post*: C3.
- 8 *Almanac of American Politics, 1986* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1985): 1327.
- 9 *Politics in America, 1982* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1981): 1191.
- 10 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/election.html.
- 11 Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 57.
- 12 *Congressional Record*, House, 97th Cong., 1st sess. (5 October 1981): 23187.
- 13 “Mickey Leland,” *Contemporary Black Biography*, Volume 2 (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1992).
- 14 Jacqueline Trescott, “Leland and the War on Hunger,” 27 September 1985, *Washington Post*: B1.
- 15 Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 57.
- 16 Chapman, “Mickey Leland: Good Intentions, Serious Errors.”
- 17 Lori Rodriguez, “Leland’s Legacy In Need of Boost,” 28 March 1992, *Houston Chronicle*: A25; “Select Committee on Hunger,” in Garrison Nelson, *Committees in the U.S. Congress, 1947 to 1992*, Volume 2 (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1994): 1035; *Congressional Record*, House, 98th Cong., 2nd sess. (22 February 1984): 2967–2968.
- 18 Belkin, “Representative Mickey Leland, 44, Dies in Crash.”
- 19 *Congressional Record*, House, 98th Cong., 2nd sess. (22 February 1984): 2967; “Select Committee on Hunger,” in Nelson, *Committees in the U.S. Congress, 1947 to 1992*, Volume 2: 1035.
- 20 *Congressional Record*, House, 98th Cong., 2nd sess. (22 February 1984): 2986–2987.
- 21 Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 57.
- 22 *Politics in America, 1986* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1985): 1524.
- 23 Richard L. Berke, “Friends and Relatives Mourn Texas Lawmaker,” 14 August 1989, *New York Times*: A10.
- 24 “NAACP Launches African Tree-Planting: To Honor Congressman Mickey Leland,” 6 July 1991, *Michigan Citizen*: 2.



“I AM NOW AN ACTIVIST
ON BEHALF OF HUMANITY
EVERYWHERE, WHETHER IT IS
ETHIOPIA. . . SOUTH AFRICA
. . . ANY PART OF THE WORLD
WHERE PEOPLE ARE DESPERATE
AND HUNGRY FOR FREEDOMS
AND RIGHTS THEY [DESERVE]
AS HUMAN BEINGS. THAT IS
MY COMMUNITY, THAT IS
MY BATTLEGROUND,” LELAND
TOLD THE *WASHINGTON POST*
IN 1985.