



Major Robert Odell Owens

1936–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1983–2007
DEMOCRAT FROM NEW YORK

Trained as a librarian, civil rights activist Major Owens was a community reformer who went on to serve in the New York state senate and then won the seat of legendary Brooklyn Representative Shirley Chisholm—the first African-American woman elected to Congress—when she retired from the U.S. House. Owens became a significant advocate for education during his 12 terms in the House.¹ “Education is the kingpin issue,” he explained. “Proper nurturing of and attention to the educational process will achieve a positive domino reaction which will benefit employment and economic development. . . . The greater the education, the lesser the victimization by drugs, alcoholism, and swindles. . . . We have to believe that all power and progress really begins with education.”²

Major Robert Odell Owens was born in Collierville, Tennessee, on June 28, 1936, to Ezekiel and Edna (Davis) Owens. Owens’s father, a day laborer in a furniture factory who espoused President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal philosophy, shaped Owens’s political views at an early age. “I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t aware of the fact that a much bigger world than my own personal universe was out there,” Owens once remarked. “We were very poor and always had to struggle to make ends meet. Still, I was also aware that we were not alone—that millions of people, in this country and abroad, faced similar kinds of problems. I also realized that what happened in the larger world affected my family and its personal welfare.”³ He also recalled that his mother, “the scholar of the family,” influenced his approach to academics. His parents’ optimism about their children’s future left Owens with the attitude that “there was no reason why I couldn’t go out and scale life’s summits.”⁴ Early on, he aspired to be a novelist. He attended public schools in Memphis, Tennessee, graduating from Hamilton High School. In 1956, Owens earned a B.A. with high honors from

Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. A year later, he completed an M.A. in library science at Atlanta University (now Clark Atlanta). In 1956, he married Ethel Werfel. They raised three children—Christopher, Geoffrey, and Millard—before divorcing in 1985. Geoffrey, an actor, landed a regular part on *The Cosby Show*; Chris became a community activist and ran unsuccessfully for city council in 1989. Major Owens later married Marie Cuprill, the staff director of an Education and Labor subcommittee in the U.S. House.⁵ She brought two children, Carlos and Cecilia, to the marriage.

Once out of school, Owens took a job as a librarian at the Brooklyn Public Library in 1958, where he worked until 1966. He became active in the Democratic Party during that time and was involved in community organizations and the broader civil rights movement. In 1961, Owens joined the Brooklyn chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), later chairing the organization. He also was vice president of the metropolitan New York council of housing. Additionally, Owens taught as an adjunct professor of library science and was director of the Community Media Program at Columbia University. From 1966 to 1968, he served as the executive director of the Brownsville community council. One observer described him as “the most canny and capable of the community corporation directors.”⁶ That post brought widespread recognition in the borough and its president designated September 10, 1971, “Major R. Owens Day.” Based on his work on antipoverty programs in the Brownsville neighborhood, New York Mayor John Lindsay appointed Owens the commissioner of the community development agency, giving him responsibility for the city’s antipoverty programs.⁷ Owens left the post in late 1973 near the end of Lindsay’s term as mayor, charging that there was corruption within the antipoverty and school





programs in Brownsville and further asserting that newly elected African-American New York City Councilman Samuel Wright had awarded school board contracts as “political payoffs.”⁸ That episode sparked a feud between Wright and Owens that persisted into the 1980s. In 1972, Owens served on the International Commission on Ways of Implementing Social Policy to Ensure Maximum Public Participation and Social Justice for Minorities at The Hague in the Netherlands. Owens also participated in the 1979 White House Conference on Libraries.

Owens first ran for elective office in 1974, winning a seat in the New York state senate, where he chaired the senate democratic operations committee. Eventually, Owens served on the finance committee and the social services committee, and was ranking member of the chamber’s daycare task force. He also tended to back local and statewide candidates from outside the Brooklyn Democratic machine—a role he would take on in a U.S. congressional race in the early 1980s.

After Representative Shirley Chisholm announced her retirement in 1982, Owens became a candidate for her Brooklyn-based seat, which encompassed the neighborhoods of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brownsville, and Crown Heights. The district was roughly 80 percent black, overwhelmingly Democratic, and was afflicted by a high poverty rate and urban blight. Also, voter turnout was traditionally low. In the Democratic primary, Owens faced former New York State Senator Vander L. Beatty. Considered the leading reformer among local politicians, Owens had grass-roots support and the endorsement of the *New York Times*. Beatty, a wealthy African American, was backed by many top Democratic leaders, including Representative Chisholm; the Brooklyn political machine led by Borough President Howard Golden; and a patronage network Beatty had cultivated from Albany. Owens exploited Beatty’s connection to corrupt local officials, stressing his own honesty and independence from the local political machine. Winning the endorsements of the *Amsterdam News* (a well-respected newspaper in the black community) and the *Village Voice*, he prevailed in the

primary by 2,400 votes and he survived a court challenge from Beatty and his backers, who questioned the results. Six months later, Beatty was indicted on charges of election fraud.⁹ In the general election, Owens cruised to victory, defeating Republican David Katan with 91 percent of the vote.

Like his predecessor, Representative Chisholm, Owens monitored potential primary challengers, especially since he came from outside the political establishment, but he lacked significant opposition for most of his congressional career. Although he did face a serious primary challenge in 2000, Owens never stumbled in any of his general election campaigns, despite redistricting that reconfigured his district after the 1990 Census. He won each of his 10 subsequent elections with at least 89 percent of the vote.¹⁰

When Representative Owens took his seat in the House, he received assignments on the Education and Labor Committee (later Education and the Workforce) and the Government Operations Committee (later Government Reform). He remained on both panels throughout his House career. In 1987, Owens became chair of the Education and Labor Subcommittee on Select Education and Civil Rights—a position he held until the Republicans won control of the chamber in the 1994 elections and abolished the subcommittee. By the 109th Congress (2005–2007), Representative Owens was the third-ranking Democrat on the Education and the Workforce and the Government Reform committees. In addition, he served as the Ranking Minority Member on the Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on Workforce Protections. Owens also was a member of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) and the Progressive Caucus, which comprised the House’s most liberal Members.¹¹

As a junior Member in the House, surveying the effects of the depressed economy in the early 1980s, Owens explained that he planned to “push the prerogatives of a congressman to the limit” to publicize the needs of inner-city Americans. “My principal focus is on jobs and employment. From my perspective the Democratic-



controlled House has been extremely negligent in this area. It has shown little, if any, urgency about the plight of the unemployed.”¹² As a Representative, Owens focused on a cause near to his heart: advocating more federal money for education and libraries, which dovetailed with the needs of his urban district. From his post as chairman of the Subcommittee on Select Education and Civil Rights, Owens focused on restoring federal funding for library services, institutions of higher learning, and programs to alleviate the high school dropout crisis in the black community. In 1985, he wrote portions of a higher education bill that provided a fund of \$100 million to improve the programs and the infrastructure of historically black colleges. He called the measure “the payment of a long overdue debt” in response to critics who charged it was “unwarranted special treatment.”¹³ Owens also served as chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus Higher Education Brain Trust. When the Cold War ended in the early 1990s, Owens advocated that money being shifted from military to domestic programs should be appropriated for American inner cities. “We need our fair share of this peace dividend, in particular to rehabilitate crumbling and dilapidated inner-city schools, and to guarantee a first-rate education for urban youths,” he said.¹⁴ Owens criticized budgets under Republican Presidents Ronald W. Reagan and George H. W. Bush, asserting that they neglected the pressing need of minorities. On the House Floor in 1990, he belted out some lines from a rap song he wrote: “At the big white DC mansion/There’s a meeting of the mob/And the question on the table/Is which beggars they will rob.”¹⁵

From his subcommittee post, Representative Owens was a primary backer and a floor manager of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, a landmark law Owens said set forth “clear, strong, consistent, enforceable standards addressing discrimination against individuals with disabilities.”¹⁶ Among the provisions were the first guidelines prohibiting discrimination against persons with disabilities in businesses and public spaces and the establishment of standards for accessibility to public

buildings. The measure also contained provisions to promote development programs for preschool children and to introduce new technologies to assist students with disabilities, which Owens had championed earlier.¹⁷ “A civilized and moral government which is also seeking to enhance its own self-interest must strive to maximize the opportunities for the educational development, equal access and productive employment of all its citizens,” Owens noted. “Greater than all the physical barriers are the barriers of entrenched attitudes and the silent insistence that people with disabilities should be grateful for minimal governmental protection and assistance.”¹⁸

Representative Owens was the lead sponsor of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act, providing for major reforms to the long-established Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program, which assigns volunteers to community-based aid agencies to combat urban and rural poverty. Additionally, he was a key backer of the Child Abuse Prevention Challenge Grants Reauthorization Act of 1989, which renewed a measure first passed in 1974. The bill provided states federal funding to assess, investigate, and prosecute cases of child abuse; conduct research; and compile data. The bill also defined child abuse and neglect. In the early 1990s, Owens helped reauthorize legislation that encouraged states to offer people with disabilities jobs through rehabilitation centers and homes where they could live independently. From his seat on the Education and the Workforce Committee in the late 1990s, Owens supported hikes in the federal minimum wage, opposed efforts to eliminate cash compensation for overtime work, advocated the continued need for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and defended organized labor.¹⁹ Since many of his constituents were of Caribbean descent, Owens also sponsored two pieces of legislation that were important to immigrants: a bill that prevented the Immigration and Naturalization Service from deporting the parents of American-born children under age 18 and a measure that extended citizenship to immigrant children under age 12 who were in the U.S. without their parents.²⁰



★ MAJOR ROBERT ODELL OWENS ★

Over time, the makeup of Owens's Brooklyn-based district changed. In the early 1990s, following reapportionment after the 1990 Census, blacks still made up a sizable majority of the district; 19 percent was white, and 12 percent was Hispanic. That round of reapportionment expanded the western borders of the district to take in the wealthy Park Slope neighborhood and middle-class Kensington.²¹ During the 1980s and 1990s, large numbers of Haitians began moving into the district, making it the second-largest community of Haitians in the country, second to Miami. Roughly two-thirds of the district's black population (then 55 percent) were from nations in the Caribbean Basin. Immigrant groups complained that Owens was "totally out of touch with the Haitian community," willing to support the return to power of ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, but less active regarding issues such as housing and political asylum. Owens dismissed such charges as "total distortion," ascribing them to members of the Haitian community who did not approve of his support for Aristide.²² In 2000, Owens received a stiff primary challenge from New York City Councilwoman Una Clarke, a Jamaican-born politician with roots among the growing number of Caribbean immigrants in Owens's district. A one-time political ally of Owens's, Clarke capitalized on simmering immigrant discontent and ran against the Representative, charging he had not done enough to bring federal economic aid to the district and that he was unresponsive to immigration issues. Owens relied on support from First Lady and New York Senate

candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton and other prominent Democrats. The race revealed frictions between the growing community of Caribbean blacks and African Americans. Owens eventually turned back Councilwoman Clarke's primary challenge by a 54 to 46 percent margin.

Reapportionment following the 2000 Census did not significantly reconfigure the district and increased its proportion of blacks to 59 percent. Owens cruised to re-election in 2002, but when he announced in early 2003 that he would seek re-election in 2004 and then retire in 2007, two young female New York City council members jumped into the primary. Yvette Clarke, daughter of Owens's 2000 primary opponent, drew 29 percent of the vote, while Tracy Boyland won 22 percent of the vote. Representative Owens won the primary with 45 percent of the vote and election to his final term with 94 percent of the vote. Among those who announced their candidacy for his open seat in 2006 was Owens's son Chris. Yvette Clarke eventually won the Democratic primary and the general election to succeed Representative Owens. In retirement, Owens suggested he would pursue his interest in literature. "It's something that I have always wanted to do," Owens said. "I even began writing a novel when I was younger. And that's one of the things I want very much to get back to."²³ In late 2006, Representative Owens was named a distinguished visiting scholar at the John W. Kluge Center at the Library of Congress. He is currently at work on a case study of the CBC and its impact on national politics.²⁴

FOR FURTHER READING

“Owens, Major Robert Odell,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=O000159>.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

University at Albany, SUNY (Albany, NY). M. E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives. *Papers*: ca. 1983–2006, 106 cubic feet. The collection includes the office files and personal papers of Representative Major Owens from his 24 years in the U.S. House of Representatives.

NOTES

- 1 Quoted in “Major R. Owens: The Predicament of Power,” in Jeffrey M. Elliot, *Black Voices in American Politics* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986): 68.
- 2 Quoted in “Major Owens,” *Contemporary Black Biography*, Volume 6 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1994) (hereinafter referred to as *CBB*).
- 3 “Biography of Congressman Major R. Owens,” undated (c. 1990) official news release from the Office of Representative Owens, files of the Office of History and Preservation, U.S. House of Representatives.
- 4 Elliot, *Black Voices in American Politics*: 56–57.
- 5 *Politics in America, 1994* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc. 1993): 1052.
- 6 Charles R. Morris, *The Cost of Good Intentions: New York City and the Liberal Experiment, 1960–1975* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1980): 65.
- 7 Peter Kihss, “Brooklyn Negro Leader Named Head of a City Poverty Agency,” 13 March 1968, *New York Times*: 38.
- 8 Peter Kihss, “Community Aide Charges Corruption in Brownsville,” 29 November 1973, *New York Times*: 48.
- 9 Beatty was found guilty of forgery and conspiracy in December 1983. See Joseph P. Fried, “Beatty Is Guilty of a Conspiracy in Vote Forgery,” 23 December 1983, *New York Times*: A1; *Almanac of American Politics, 1984* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1983): 811–812; Ronald Smothers, “2 Ex-State Senators Vie for Rep. Chisholm’s Job,” 16 September 1982, *New York Times*: B8; “Primary Day Choices,” 23 September 1982, *New York Times*: A26; *Almanac of American Politics, 1988* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1987): 1036.
- 10 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/election.html; for the 2000 primary, see Jonathan P. Hicks, “Bitter Primary Contest Hits Ethnic Nerve Among Blacks,” 31 August 2000, *New York Times*: A1.
- 11 “Official Biography of Major Owens,” at <http://www.house.gov/owens/biography.htm> (accessed 17 May 2006); Mildred L. Amer, “Black Members of the United States Congress, 1870–2007,” 27 September 2007, RL30378, Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- 12 Quoted in Elliot, *Black Voices in American Politics*: 68–69.
- 13 *Politics in America, 1988* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1987): 1036.
- 14 “Major Owens,” *CBB*.
- 15 “Colorful Characters,” 22 May 1994, *New York Times*: CY13.
- 16 Stephen W. Stathis, *Landmark Legislation, 1774–2002* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2003): 336.
- 17 *Politics in America, 1994*: 1052.
- 18 *Congressional Record*, House, 101st Cong., 1st sess. (2 August 1989): E2814.
- 19 *Politics in America, 2006* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2005): 717–718; “Official Biography of Major Owens.”
- 20 *Politics in America, 2006*: 718.
- 21 *Politics in America, 1994*: 1053.
- 22 Garry Pierre-Pierre, “Haitians Seek New Influence in Local Politics,” 7 August 1994, *New York Times*: CY7.
- 23 Jonathan P. Hicks, “Congressman From Brooklyn Will Seek One Final Term,” 23 November 2003, *New York Times*: 33.
- 24 “U.S. Congressman Major Owens Named Distinguished Visiting Scholar at John W. Kluge Center,” 26 December 2006, Library of Congress press release, at <http://www.loc.gov/today/pr/2006/06-237.html> (accessed 20 September 2007).