



Charles Coles Diggs, Jr.

1922–1998

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1955–1980
DEMOCRAT FROM MICHIGAN

Elected to the House of Representatives in 1954 at age 31, Charles C. Diggs, Jr., was the first African American to represent Michigan in Congress. Despite his reserved demeanor, Diggs served as an ardent supporter of civil rights and an impassioned advocate of increased American aid to Africa. As a principal architect of home rule for the District of Columbia and the driving force behind the formation of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), Diggs crafted a national legacy during his 25 years in the House. John Conyers, Jr., of Detroit, Diggs's House colleague of many years said, "Congressman Diggs paved the way for an entire generation of black political leaders, not just in his home state, but through the nation."¹

Charles Coles Diggs, Jr., the only child of Charles Diggs, Sr., and Mamie Ethel Jones Diggs, was born in Detroit, Michigan, on December 2, 1922. Prominent in Detroit, the Diggs family owned a local mortuary, a funeral insurance company, and an ambulance service. In the 1920s, the city that would become the hub of the U.S. automobile industry underwent a massive transformation as southern blacks streamed northward in search of wage labor. Between 1920 and 1930, Detroit's black population tripled—growing at a faster rate than any other major northern city.² Charles Diggs, Sr., personified rising black influence in Detroit, becoming the first African-American Democrat elected to the Michigan state senate.³ After graduating from Detroit's Miller High School in 1940, Charles Diggs, Jr., enrolled at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. After two years, Diggs transferred to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. While still an undergraduate in Tennessee, he entered the United States Army Air Forces as a private on February 19, 1943. During World War II, Diggs was a member of a segregated unit that trained at an airstrip in Alabama. Commissioned a second lieutenant in 1944,

Diggs was discharged from the military on June 1, 1945. Diggs resumed his academic career, enrolling in Detroit's Wayne College of Mortuary Science. After graduating in June 1946, the newly licensed mortician joined his father's funeral business, serving as chairman of the House of Diggs, Inc. Diggs also delivered commentary on current affairs (interspersed with gospel music) as part of a weekly radio show sponsored by his business. Married four times, Charles Diggs, Jr., had six children.⁴

Although it was not his original intent, Diggs ultimately followed in his father's political footsteps. Elected to the Michigan state senate in 1936, Charles Diggs, Sr., was caught up in a legislative bribery scandal in 1944, bringing his public service to a grinding halt.⁵ Upon his release from prison in 1950, Diggs, Sr., sought to reclaim his position in the legislature. He won his election bid, but in an unprecedented move, the Republican-controlled Michigan senate refused to seat him and another member-elect because of their criminal records.⁶ Outraged by the events that prevented his father from resuming his political career, Charles Diggs, Jr., interrupted his studies at the Detroit School of Law to enter the special election for his father's seat. Diggs won the election and served in the Michigan senate for three years before setting his sights on the United States Congress.⁷ Using the campaign slogan "Make Democracy Live," he defeated incumbent Representative George D. O'Brien by a two-to-one margin in the August 1954 Democratic primary in the overwhelmingly Democratic, majority-black Detroit district.⁸ Building on the momentum from the primary, Diggs easily bested Republican Landon Knight—the son of John S. Knight, editor and publisher of the *Detroit Free Press*—in the general election, capturing 66 percent of the vote to become Michigan's first African-American Representative.⁹ After winning a seat in the 84th Congress (1955–1957),





Diggs remarked, “This is a great victory for the voters of the Democratic Party, and it also settles deeper issues—the racial issue. This is proof that the voters of the Thirteenth District have reached maturity.”¹⁰ Diggs rarely faced serious opposition in subsequent elections, typically winning by more than 70 percent in an impoverished urban district that saw a rapid decline in population and a substantial rise in black residents during his House tenure.¹¹

Diggs began his congressional career on January 3, 1955, as a member of the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs and the Veterans’ Affairs Committee. But Diggs’s committee service did not follow the upward trajectory to which many Members aspired.¹² Rather than seeking out high-profile posts on top-tier panels as he accrued seniority, Diggs chose assignments that allowed him to positively influence African-American lives, and international human rights issues. In 1959, Diggs joined the Foreign Affairs Committee (later International Relations Committee), remaining there until he left Congress in 1980. Diggs became a member of the Committee on the District of Columbia (with jurisdiction over the nation’s capital, which had undergone a shift from a majority-white population to majority-black after schools were desegregated in the 1950s) in 1963 and was on the panel for the remainder of his congressional tenure.

In the 84th Congress, Diggs joined black Representatives Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., of New York and William L. Dawson of Illinois. For a young Representative learning the institutional ropes, Powell and Dawson could not have provided two more different role models.¹³ Flamboyant and flashy, Powell was a leading civil rights figure who grabbed headlines while constantly challenging the status quo. Dawson, reserved and businesslike and ever the party and machine man, used his chairmanship on the Government Operations Committee to exert influence from the inside. Diggs drew upon both these legislative styles throughout his career.

While a freshman Member of the House, Diggs demonstrated his commitment to ending racial discrimination. In September 1955, the Michigan Representative

garnered attention from the national media when he attended the trial of two white Mississippians accused of murdering Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African-American boy, for allegedly whistling at a white woman.¹⁴ When Diggs discovered that the county where the trial was being held had no registered black voters, he suggested that Mississippi’s representation in Congress should be reduced—echoing Members from earlier decades who called for the enforcement of Section Two of the 14th Amendment, requiring reduced congressional representation for states that discriminated against qualified voters.¹⁵ Two months later, Diggs proposed that President Dwight D. Eisenhower convene a special session of Congress to consider civil rights issues. He also was an outspoken advocate of the Civil Rights Act of 1957.¹⁶

Representative Diggs frequently participated in events to attract publicity for the civil rights movement. In February 1965, he interviewed residents of Selma, Alabama, in an attempt to expose discrimination in federally funded programs in the South. Diggs also marched with 12,000 people in Charleston, South Carolina, in May 1969 to support black hospital workers who were seeking the right to organize and bargain collectively.¹⁷ A leader in the fight to desegregate public schools, Diggs, as well as Powell, believed schools that refused to abide by the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* should lose federal funding.¹⁸ During a speech aimed at promoting civil rights in Jackson, Mississippi, Diggs confidently proclaimed, “integration is as inevitable as the rising sun—even in Mississippi.”¹⁹

Nearly a decade after he joined the Committee on the District of Columbia, Diggs ascended to the chairman’s post when the former head, South Carolina segregationist John L. McMillan, failed to win renomination to his House seat. “I don’t plan to be the unofficial mayor of Washington,” Diggs said about his new position. “The city already has a mayor and City Council. I don’t intend to become involved with the day-to-day operations of the city government.”²⁰ Instead, Diggs sought to increase the autonomy of the District of Columbia by continuing to



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fight for home rule for the nation's capital. In 1973 he succeeded in bringing a bill to the House Floor authorizing partial self-government for Washington, DC. Before the legislation was voted on, he reminded his colleagues, "When we talk about self-determination for the District of Columbia we are not only talking about a matter of local interest, but because of the unique role of this capital community, it is of concern to each one of the Members of the 435 districts across this country."²¹ Under the direction of Chairman Diggs, the House overwhelmingly passed the measure; on December 24, 1973, President Richard M. Nixon signed the District of Columbia Self-Government and Governmental Reorganization Act, enabling residents of the nation's capital to elect their mayor and city council for the first time since 1874. During his tenure as chairman of the Committee on the District of Columbia, Diggs also helped establish the University of the District of Columbia and led the movement to make Frederick Douglass's historic house in Anacostia a national monument.²²

Throughout his career in Congress, Diggs looked for ways to forge connections with other black Members. Dissatisfied with the typically informal bonds between African-American Representatives, Diggs organized the Democratic Select Committee (DSC) in 1969 to promote the exchange of ideas between black Members. Black Representatives newly elected to the 91st Congress (1969–1971), such as Shirley Chisholm of New York, William Clay, Sr., of Missouri, and Louis Stokes of Ohio, embraced the idea of a network for African Americans in the House but pressed for a more formal organization with political clout. This transformation occurred in 1971 when the DSC was reorganized into the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). The first chair of the CBC (1971–1973), Diggs called the new caucus "the first departure from the individualistic policies that characterized black congressmen in the past."²³ Also, Diggs's involvement in the Michigan redistricting after the 1960 Census helped increase black representation in the House; the subsequent reapportionment created another majority-black district in Detroit. With the congressional election

of John Conyers, Jr., in 1964, Michigan became the first state since Reconstruction with two African-American Representatives.²⁴

In addition to promoting a civil rights agenda on the domestic front, Diggs focused on legislation shaping U.S. policy toward Africa. Eventually dubbed "Mr. Africa" because of his dedication to and knowledge of African affairs, Diggs accompanied Vice President Nixon on a tour of Africa two years after taking office, and in 1958 he attended the All-African Peoples Conference in Ghana. In February 1969, he headed a fact-finding mission to civil war-torn Nigeria to investigate relief programs for civilians and to explore a possible cease-fire. After being named chair of the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa in 1969, Diggs continued to pursue his goal of making Africa a higher priority in American international relations. In his new leadership role, which he held for a decade, he emphasized the importance of increased American aid to the newly independent African countries.²⁵

Diggs led the early charge by African-American Members to denounce the apartheid regime in South Africa. He conducted a series of hearings to investigate how some American businesses and government programs helped the economy of South Africa, despite the official U.S. opposition to the country's racist policies. In 1971 he oversaw a bipartisan delegation to South Africa to observe firsthand its business practices and apartheid system.²⁶ The Michigan Representative directed a study of the Civil Aeronautics Board's decision to provide South African Airways with landing rights in the United States.²⁷ His aggressive stance and outspoken criticism of apartheid led the South African government to bar him from the country during a trip in 1975.

Diggs also demonstrated his commitment to influencing U.S.–African relations during the political controversy involving Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). In response to the United Nations's 1968 trade embargo against Southern Rhodesia, in southeast Africa, Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia drafted an amendment that would except strategic materials. Since



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the bulk of U.S. trade with Southern Rhodesia involved chrome, the Byrd Amendment effectively stated that the United States would not abide by the embargo. Diggs led an unsuccessful charge against the amendment in the House.²⁸ In December 1971, he resigned from the U.S. delegation to the United Nations—a position he held for only a few months—to protest what he perceived as the continued “stifling hypocrisy” of U.S. government policy toward Africa.²⁹ At Diggs’s urging, the CBC later filed suit against the American government for continuing to import Rhodesian chrome. Diggs and the CBC argued that the government had no basis for categorizing chrome as strategic since American companies used chrome for consumer supplies.³⁰

In the early 1970s Diggs emerged as the leading House critic of continued Portuguese colonialism in Angola and Mozambique. During his brief stint as a U.N. delegate, he urged the United States to stop opposing U.N. resolutions condemning Portugal’s policy. In 1975, after a new regime took power in Portugal, Angola and Mozambique were given their independence, but a civil war erupted in Angola between communist forces backed by Cuba and the Soviet Union and noncommunists (UNITA) supported by South Africa. After press reports revealed the CIA was covertly assisting UNITA, Diggs used his position as chairman of the Africa Subcommittee to help win House support to cut off funding for the operation. The Senate’s adoption of the Clark Amendment, a rider attached in early 1976 to legislation concerning foreign aid, officially banned covert aid to Angola.³¹

Diggs’s political fortunes declined when he became the focus of a federal investigation. In March 1978, a grand jury indicted Diggs on multiple charges, including taking kickbacks from his congressional staff.³² After a nine-day trial, he was convicted on October 7, 1978, in a Washington, DC, district court of committing mail fraud and falsifying payroll forms.³³ Throughout the trial and

the appeals process, he asserted his innocence, claiming he was a victim of “selective prosecution” because of his race.³⁴ Despite the controversy surrounding his candidacy, voters from Diggs’s Michigan district demonstrated their resounding support by re-electing him in November with 79 percent of the vote.³⁵ After his re-election, Diggs, voluntarily relinquished his committee and subcommittee chairmanships because of his conviction but voiced his determination to vote on the floor.³⁶ The CBC did not discourage him, not wishing to deprive Diggs’s constituents of their guaranteed representation.³⁷ Diggs’s decision to serve out his term until his appeals were exhausted aroused the indignation of many in the House, especially freshman Representative and future Speaker Newt Gingrich of Georgia, who spearheaded an unsuccessful effort to expel Diggs from Congress.³⁸ Ultimately, based mainly on a report by the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, the House unanimously censured Diggs on July 31, 1979. After the Supreme Court refused to review his conviction, Diggs resigned from the 96th Congress (1979–1981) on June 3, 1980. One month later, he entered a minimum-security prison in Alabama; he served seven months of a three-year federal sentence.³⁹ In a 1981 interview, Diggs stated, “I considered myself a political prisoner during my incarceration. I was a victim of political and racist forces. I will go to my grave continuing to profess my innocence.”⁴⁰

After his release from prison, Diggs opened a funeral home in suburban Maryland and resumed his education, earning a bachelor’s degree in political science from Howard University in 1983.⁴¹ Diggs launched a brief and unsuccessful political comeback in 1990, losing a bid for a seat in Maryland’s house of delegates.⁴² On August 24, 1998, Charles Diggs, Jr., died of complications from a stroke in Washington, DC.

FOR FURTHER READING

“Diggs, Charles Coles, Jr.,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=D000344>.

DuBose, Carolyn P. *The Untold Story of Charles Diggs: The Public Figure, the Private Man* (Arlington, VA: Barton Publishing, Inc., 1998).

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Howard University (Washington, DC), Manuscript Division, Moorland–Spingarn Research Center. *Papers*: 1920–1998, approximately 1,000 linear feet. The Charles Diggs Collection includes personal, business, and congressional papers, as well as correspondence, photographs, motion picture film, videotape, sound recordings, and memorabilia. The collection is unprocessed, and prior arrangements are required for access. *Oral History*: In the Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, 1970, 34 pages, including an interview of Charles Diggs conducted by Robert Wright on January 28, 1970. Diggs discusses his visit to South Africa, the plight of black Africans, and the relationship of the U.S. civil rights movement to their situation. Also discussed are the causes of the 1967 Detroit riot, the Black Panther Party, home rule for Washington, DC, and the Inner City Business Improvement Forum, a Detroit group that provides services for black entrepreneurs.

Lyndon B. Johnson Library (Austin, TX). *Oral History*: 1969, 13 pages. An interview with Diggs conducted on March 13, 1969. Diggs discusses civil rights, the 1967 Detroit riots, Vietnam bombing policy, and the reorganization of the District of Columbia. A transcript of the interview is available at: http://webstorage4.mcpa.virginia.edu/lbj/oralhistory/diggs_charles_1969_0313.pdf.

NOTES

- 1 Francesca C. Simon, “Diggs Dies of a Stroke at the Hospital; Ex-Lawmaker Lauded as Home-Rule Author,” 26 August 1998, *Washington Times*: C4.
- 2 For more on Detroit and the Great Migration, see Elizabeth Anne Martin, *Detroit and the Great Migration, 1916–1929* (Ann Arbor, MI: The Bentley Historical Library, 1993): statistics from page 3.
- 3 “Four-Story Plunge Is Fatal to Michigan Negro Leader,” 26 April 1967, *New York Times*: 34; Egan Paul, “Minorities Make a Mark,” 26 March 1999, *Lansing State Journal*: 12TAB; Niraj Warikoo, “Advocate of Civil Rights in Congress,” 26 August 1998, *Detroit Free Press*: 1C; Carolyn P. DuBose, *The Untold Story of Charles Diggs: The Public Figure, the Private Man* (Arlington, VA: Barton Publishing, Inc., 1998): 184. Sources conflict as to whether Charles Diggs, Sr., was the first African American or the first African-American Democrat to hold this position.
- 4 Maurine Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976): 212; Thura Mack, “Charles C. Diggs, Jr.,” in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Men* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Research, Inc., 1999): 304 (hereinafter referred to as *NBAM*); Irvin Molotsky, “Charles Diggs, 75, Congressman Censured Over Kickbacks,” *New York Times*, 26 August 1998: 18D.
- 5 Paul, “Minorities Make a Mark”; Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 209.
- 6 “Two Senators-Elect Ousted in Michigan,” 15 January 1951, *Christian Science Monitor*: 3; “Sets Elections to Fill Seats of 2 in Senate,” 13 January 1951, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 10.
- 7 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 209–210; Mack, “Charles C. Diggs, Jr.,” *NBAM*: 301–302; “Diggs, Charles C(ole), Jr.,” *Current Biography, 1957* (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1957): 144.
- 8 “Diggs, Charles C(ole), Jr.,” *Current Biography, 1957*: 145.
- 9 Michael J. Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998): 599; “Michigan’s First Negro Congressman Elected,” 4 November 1954, *Los Angeles Times*: 6.
- 10 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 210.
- 11 *Almanac of American Politics, 1974* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1973): 497–499; *Almanac of American Politics, 1978* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1977): 425–426.
- 12 For a perspective on the relative strength of Diggs’s early and latter committee assignments, see Bruce A. Ray, “Committee Attractiveness in the U.S. House, 1963–1981,” *American Journal of Political Science* 26 (August 1982): 610.



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- 14 "Boy's Mother 'Not Surprised,'" 24 September 1955, *New York Times*: 38.
- 15 Mack, "Charles C. Diggs, Jr.," *NBAM*: 302. See the second contextual essay in this book, "The Negroes' Temporary Farewell," covering the period from 1887 to 1929.
- 16 Arthur Kranish, "House Ends Debate on Rights Bill," 11 June 1957, *Washington Post*: A15; *Congressional Record*, House, 85th Cong., 1st sess. (10 June 1957): 8704–8705.
- 17 "Charles Diggs," in Harry A. Ploski, ed., *The Negro Almanac* (New York: Bellwether Company, 1971): 322.
- 18 For more on the *Brown* decision, see James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Michael J. Klarman, *Brown v. Board of Education and the Civil Rights Movement*, an abridged edition of *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 19 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 211–212.
- 20 Stephen Green, "Diggs Wants New Look at Home Rule," 26 September 1972, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 21 *Congressional Record*, House, 93rd Cong., 1st sess. (17 December 1973): 42036.
- 22 Richard Pearson, "Charles Diggs Dies at 75; Former Congressman From Mich.," 26 August 1998, *Washington Post*: B06; DuBose, *The Untold Story of Charles Diggs*: 188–190.
- 23 Robert Singh, *The Congressional Black Caucus: Racial Politics in the U.S. Congress* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.): 54–55, 73; DuBose, *The Untold Story of Charles Diggs*: 79–80. See also Molotsky, "Charles Diggs, 75, Congressman Censured Over Kickbacks."
- 24 John Flesher, "Ex-Congressman Seeks One-Time Return to Politics," 16 April 1990, Associated Press; Pearson, "Charles Diggs Dies at 75."
- 25 Molotsky, "Charles Diggs, 75, Congressman Censured Over Kickbacks."
- 26 "Black Legislator to Continue His Tour of South Africa," 14 August 1971, *New York Times*: 28; Paul Dold, "Congressman Jolts Along on African Visit," 14 August 1971, *Christian Science Monitor*: 1; DuBose, *The Untold Story of Charles Diggs*: 122–127.
- 27 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 212–213.
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- 29 "Rep. Diggs Resigns as a U.N. Delegate"; "Diggs Hits U.S. Stand, Quits Post on U.N. Unit," 18 December 1971, *Washington Post*: A18; William Fulton, "Rep. Diggs Quits U.S. Delegation to U.N.," 18 December 1971, *Chicago Tribune*: A8.
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- 31 Robert David Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 223.
- 32 Jo Thomas, "Rep. Diggs of Michigan Indicted on 35 Counts in Kickback Case," 24 March 1978, *New York Times*: 11; DuBose, *The Untold Story of Charles Diggs*: 198–200.
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- 34 Pearson, "Charles Diggs Dies at 75; Former Congressman From Mich."
- 35 Dubin et al., *United States Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*: 710.
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- 40 Warikoo, "Advocate of Civil Rights in Congress."
- 41 DuBose, *The Untold Story of Charles Diggs*: 218; James M. Manheim, "Charles C. Diggs," *Contemporary Black Biography 21* (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1999).
- 42 "Ex-Rep. Diggs Back in Politics," 8 March 1990, *New York Times*: B9; Warikoo, "Advocate of Civil Rights in Congress."



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CAPITAL COMMUNITY, IT IS OF
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