



Harold Washington

1922–1987

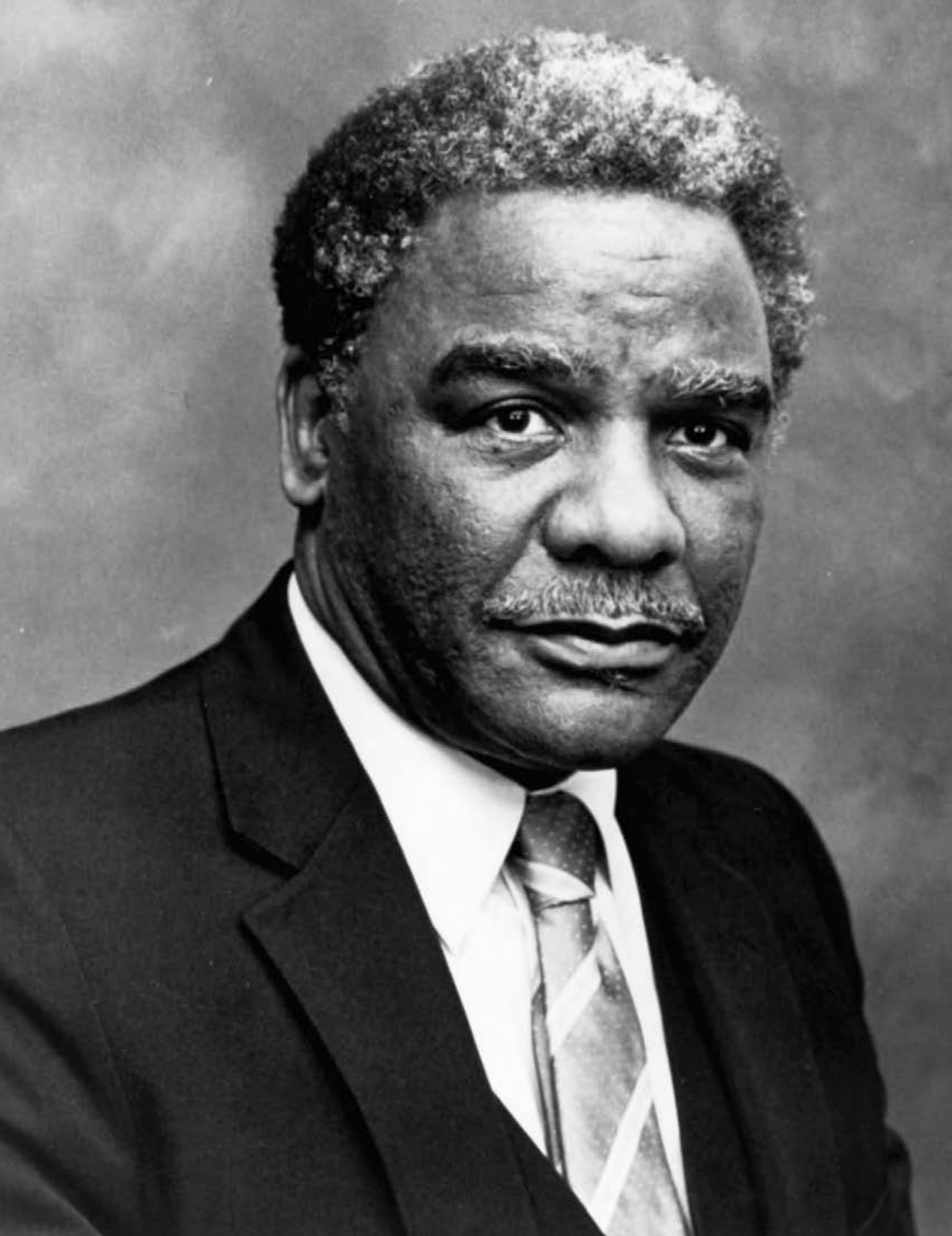
UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1981–1983
DEMOCRAT FROM ILLINOIS

Born and raised in a political family, Harold Washington converted his early access to prominent lawmakers and the local government structure into a memorable career as a Chicago politician. Like his early mentor Representative Ralph Metcalfe, Washington ascended the ranks of the powerful Chicago political machine, only to break with the organization later because he resented the lack of independence and power he experienced as a black politician.¹ Washington abandoned an outwardly safe congressional seat after winning a second term in the U.S. House in order to run for mayor of Chicago, and he made history when he became the first African American to hold the influential elective position. “The reason my face and my name are known all over is because of the history of the Chicago political machine and the movement that brought it down,” Washington remarked. “I just happened to be there at the right time to capitalize on it.”²

Harold Washington was born on April 15, 1922, in Chicago, Illinois. His mother, Bertha Price, left his father, Roy Lee Washington, a minister, lawyer, and Democratic politician, and her four children when Harold was a toddler.³ After his parents divorced in 1928, Washington lived with his father, who married Arlene Jackson, an area schoolteacher, in 1935.⁴ Roy Washington’s connections with the influential black Democrats in Chicago, forged while he was a precinct captain in the predominantly black South Side, provided his son with many political contacts. Accompanying his father to political rallies and meetings, Washington learned about Chicago politics by observing future Representative Arthur Mitchell, William Dawson, and Ralph Metcalfe.⁵ Harold Washington attended Forrestville School and DuSable High School in Chicago before dropping out to work in a meat-packing factory. Interested in athletics, he competed as an amateur boxer

and a hurdler.⁶ In 1941, Washington married Dorothy Finch. The couple had no children and divorced in 1951.⁷ Drafted into the military in 1942, Washington served with the U.S. Air Force Engineers in the Pacific until 1946. After World War II, he attended Roosevelt University in Chicago, one of the few integrated universities in the nation. During his senior year he was class president—the first elective position of his career. After earning a B.A. in political science in 1949, he went on to receive a J.D. from Northwestern University’s School of Law in 1952, joining his father in a private law practice in Chicago once he passed the bar in 1953.⁸

When Roy Washington died in 1953, Harold Washington succeeded him as a precinct captain in the Third Ward regular Democratic organization in 1954. He also continued practicing law, joining the city corporation counsel’s office as an assistant prosecutor from 1954 to 1958. Beginning in 1960, he served for four years as an arbitrator for the Illinois Industrial Commission.⁹ Washington bolstered his political experience and credentials by serving in the Illinois state house of representatives from 1965 to 1976 and in the Illinois state senate from 1976 to 1980.¹⁰ As a state legislator, Washington revealed an independent streak that foreshadowed his eventual rift with the Chicago machine. Although he often followed the “idiot card”—the derogatory name for the voting instructions assembled for machine candidates, Washington defied organization leaders on occasion, backing liberal agendas such as the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), a fair housing code, and the establishment of a statewide holiday honoring civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.¹¹ Despite some legal problems—Washington spent a month in jail on a 1971 conviction for failure to file income tax returns—he managed to maintain political viability.¹²



In 1977, Washington entered the special primary held to replace Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley after his sudden death. Aggravated by the Democratic organization, which he believed stifled independent black politicians, Washington decided to challenge the machine-backed candidate, Michael Bilandic, for the Democratic mayoral nomination. Unable to raise sufficient funds, he focused much of his attention on Chicago's South Side. During the campaign, he likened the city's black population to a "sleeping giant," predicting that if "the potential black vote ever woke up, we'd control the city."¹³ Washington finished a distant third, with only 11 percent of the vote, in a field of four contenders.¹⁴ Unapologetic after his failed mayoral bid, Washington went on the offensive, promising voters that his split with the machine would be permanent. "I'm going to do that which maybe I should have done 10 or 12 years ago," Washington exclaimed. "I'm going to stay outside that damned Democratic Party and give it hell."¹⁵

True to his word, Washington jumped at the chance to challenge freshman Representative Bennett Stewart, the machine incumbent in the 1980 Democratic primary for Chicago's South Side seat in the House. Well known in the majority-black district, which included middle-class and poor neighborhoods running southward along Lake Michigan as well as the downtown commercial Loop, Washington emphasized his independence from City Hall during his campaign.¹⁶ Garnering nearly 50 percent of the vote in the primary, Washington defeated Stewart, who placed third in a field of four candidates including Ralph Metcalfe, Jr. (the son of the late Representative).¹⁷ In the November general election, Washington trounced his Republican opponent, George Williams, securing 95 percent of the vote and earning a seat in the 97th Congress (1981–1983).¹⁸ Sworn in on January 3, 1981, Washington received assignments on three favorable committees: Education and Labor, Judiciary, and Government Operations.

The sixth in a succession of African-American Representatives from his inner-city district, beginning with Oscar De Priest's election in 1928, Washington differed

from his predecessors in that he lacked the backing of the Chicago political machine.¹⁹ At the Capitol, Washington continued his anti-machine posture. Of the 30 freshman Members who held positions in their respective state legislatures, the Chicago native was the only one who refused to resign his seat in the statehouse.²⁰ Furious with Chicago Mayor Jane Byrne, who inherited the Daley machine and intended to replace him with a party regular from her personal staff, Washington protested for several weeks before ultimately relinquishing his position. Conceding "I must go about my business in Congress," Washington nonetheless took the opportunity to criticize the machine organization, declaring, "I was elected to Congress because the people are sick and tired of downtown bosses who want to handpick individuals to control our political lives."²¹

Elected to office at the same time as President Ronald W. Reagan, Washington spent much of his short tenure on Capitol Hill attacking the President's proposed spending cuts for social programs and his supply-side economic plan. Fearful that reduced funding for initiatives such as college financial aid would hinder many of his urban constituents who relied upon federal assistance, the South Side Representative deemed such cuts "unfairly targeted," and predicted that diminished accessibility to a college education would have a detrimental effect on the economy.²² Washington repeatedly condemned the administration's budget and tax proposals, convinced they would help rich Americans at the expense of the poor, such as those residing in his district, and he urged his colleagues to reject proposals "to balance the budget on the backs of the poor."²³ During the 1981 budget reconciliation process, rather than agree to a proposal by the Education and Labor Committee to cut \$11.7 billion from student aid, employment training, and child nutrition programs, Washington voted "present." Washington also disagreed with much of the President's foreign policy, especially the increased production of nuclear weapons, the emphasis on defense spending, and U.S. military intervention in Central America.²⁴

Washington's most enduring influence as a Representative was his commitment to civil rights. Unlike many freshman Members, who lacked extensive legislative experience, Washington had a long career in local and state government, which paved the way for his prominent role in the effort to extend the provisions of the 1965 Federal Voting Rights Act. The Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), which Washington labeled "the one forum by which black leaders can speak to the nation," chose the Illinois Representative as its floor manager for the significant legislation.²⁵ As the CBC's representative and a member of the Judiciary Committee, Washington helped negotiate an extension of sections of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that disallowed jurisdictions with a history of voting rights abuses from using "bail-out" provisions to avoid inclusion under the measure.²⁶ During his time in the House, Washington denounced proposals to weaken the enforcement of affirmative action and reiterated one of his positions as an Illinois state legislator: endorsement of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).²⁷ After the defeat of the ERA, he expressed regret and blamed the Reagan administration for its failed ratification. "To me, the ERA is a nondebatable issue," Washington noted. "Black people have suffered from discrimination, degradation, and inequality in all areas of life. So, on this issue of peoples' rights, it is easy to identify with the inequities women are facing."²⁸

Concerned that Mayor Byrne and other local machine leaders would launch a significant challenge to his re-election bid, Washington spent considerable time campaigning in Chicago during his first term.²⁹ But despite his apprehension, he ran unopposed in the Democratic primary and easily won a second term in the House, garnering 97 percent of the vote in the general election.³⁰

Shortly after his victory in November 1982, Washington announced his candidacy for mayor of Chicago. Approached by several African-American groups interested in fielding a strong black candidate to oppose Byrne, Washington, who was content with his position in Congress, agreed to run only after a campaign to register

voters added more than 100,000 blacks to Chicago's rolls.³¹ Throughout his campaign in the Democratic primary against the incumbent mayor and Richard M. Daley, the son of the late former mayor, Washington used a grass-roots approach, emphasizing his anti-machine record, especially when courting African-American voters. "It's our turn," Washington said repeatedly. "We're not going to apologize for it and we're not going to waste a lot of time explaining it. It's our turn—that's all."³² Drastically outspent by both his opponents, Washington nonetheless stunned the nation by emerging victorious in the competitive Democratic primary, which boasted its largest turnout in 25 years—bolstered by thousands of newly registered black voters.³³ In the general election, Washington narrowly defeated former Illinois state legislator Republican Bernard Epton to become Chicago's first African-American mayor. Aware of the magnitude of his victory, Washington commented shortly after his election that "the whole Nation was watching and Chicago sent a profound message out of the crucible of our city's most trying election."³⁴ On April 30, 1983, a little more than two weeks after the election, he resigned his House seat.³⁵

Washington struggled to reform the Chicago political scene, but he eventually experienced some success in weakening the power of the machine. Seven months after winning election to a second term, Washington died suddenly of a heart attack on November 25, 1987.³⁶ "Losing our mayor is like losing a black folk hero," noted a Chicago constituent. Even the *Chicago Tribune*, which had at times criticized Mayor Washington, observed that few people "have made quite so powerful an impact" on the city. The newspaper also noted that though he experienced discrimination, "Harold Washington did not neglect white Chicago the way his predecessors neglected black Chicago, and let that be a permanent part of his legacy and a lasting tribute to him."³⁷ During a salute to his former colleague on the House Floor, Mervyn Dymally of California recognized Washington's political legacy: "He was purposeful and constantly focused, for his battle did

not begin and end with the roll call, but extended into a crusade to heal the cancerous lesions of race hatred and generations of divisive political warfare.”³⁸

FOR FURTHER READING

Levinsohn, Florence Hamlish. *Harold Washington: A Political Biography* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1983).

Rivlin, Gary. *Fire on the Prairie: Chicago's Harold Washington and the Politics of Race* (New York: Henry Holt, 1992).

Travis, Dempsey. *Harold: The People's Mayor: An Authorized Biography of Mayor Harold Washington* (Chicago: Urban Research Press, 1989).

“Washington, Harold,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=W000180>.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

Chicago Public Library, Harold Washington Archives & Collections, Special Collections & Preservation Division Reading Room (Chicago, IL). *Papers*: 1981–1983, 54 linear feet. The congressional records of Harold Washington document his promotion and sponsorship of legislation, his committee work, and his involvement with the Congressional Black Caucus. The papers contain correspondence and other contacts with his constituents, including casework, fundraising, and the organization of task forces for such issues as housing and health. A finding aid is available in the repository.

NOTES

- 1 Paul Taylor, “Washington: A Thoughtful Legislator,” 24 February 1983, *Washington Post*: A7.
- 2 Quoted in a December 1987 *Ebony* article that was entered into the *Congressional Record* as part of a tribute to Harold Washington after his death in 1987. See *Congressional Record*, House, 100th Cong., 1st sess. (2 December 1987): 33747.
- 3 Florence Hamlish Levinsohn, *Harold Washington: A Political Biography* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1983): 23.
- 4 Jessie Carney Smith, ed., “Harold Washington,” *Notable Black American Men* (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1998).
- 5 Shirley Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress* (Washington, DC: U.S. Capitol Historical Society, 1998): 73; Taylor, “Washington: A Thoughtful Legislator”; Levinsohn, *Harold Washington: A Political Biography*: 20–21.
- 6 Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 73.
- 7 “Harold Washington,” *Contemporary Black Biography* (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1994). Several sources refer to his wife as Dorothy Finch; however, one source, *Notable Black American Men* (1999), mentions Harold Washington’s meeting and later marrying Nancy Dorothy Finch, who lived in the same building as the Washington family after 1935.
- 8 Thaddeus Russell, “Washington, Harold” *American National Biography* 22 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 768–769 (hereinafter referred to as *ANB*).
- 9 Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 74.
- 10 William E. Schmidt, “Leader Who Personified Black Rise to Urban Power,” 26 November 1987, *New York Times*: 19D.
- 11 Gary Rivlin, *Fire on the Prairie: Chicago's Harold Washington and the Politics of Race* (New York: Henry Holt, 1992): 55–56; Levinsohn, *Harold Washington: A Political Biography*: 101.
- 12 Neil Mahler and David Axelrod, “Blacks Favor Mayor Bid by Washington,” 20 January 1977, *Chicago Tribune*: 10.
- 13 Roger Biles, *Richard J. Daley: Politics, Race, and the Governing of Chicago* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1995): 234.
- 14 Rivlin, *Fire on the Prairie*: 56–57; Taylor, “Washington: A Thoughtful Legislator.”
- 15 Vernon Jarrett, “For Washington, the Party’s Over,” 11 May 1977, *Chicago Tribune*: A4.



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- 16 William L. Clay, *Just Permanent Interests: Black Americans in Congress, 1870–1991* (New York: Amistad Press, 1992): 262; Levinsohn, *Harold Washington: A Political Biography*: 135–136.
- 17 Aldo Beckman, “Campaign ’80: The Illinois Primary,” 20 March 1980, *Chicago Tribune*: B6; “Election 80—New Faces in the House,” 23 November 1980, *Washington Post*: A15.
- 18 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 19 Even though Ralph Metcalfe ultimately severed ties with Mayor Daley’s organization, his initial election owed much to machine support.
- 20 T. R. Reid, “New House Member Won’t Yield State Senate Seat to Byrne Machine,” 18 January 1981, *Washington Post*: A7; Sam Smith, “Washington Won’t Resign His Seat in State Senate,” 18 January 1981, *Chicago Tribune*: 16.
- 21 Robert Benjamin, “Rep. Washington Resigns His Seat in Illinois Senate,” 21 January 1981, *Chicago Tribune*: D1.
- 22 *Congressional Record*, House, 97th Cong., 1st sess. (11 March 1981): 4075.
- 23 *Congressional Record*, House, 97th Cong., 1st sess. (24 February 1981): 2945.
- 24 Russell, “Washington, Harold,” *ANB*.
- 25 “The Power Seekers: Chicago’s Mayoral Races,” 13 February 1983, *Chicago Tribune*: A1; Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 76.
- 26 Levinsohn, *Harold Washington: A Political Biography*: 171; Schmidt, “Leader Who Personified Black Rise to Urban Power”; Russell, “Washington, Harold,” *ANB*; Taylor, “Washington: A Thoughtful Legislator.”
- 27 John C. White, “Rep. Washington Criticizes Plans to Relax Affirmative Action Rules,” 27 August 1981, *Chicago Tribune*: A13.
- 28 *Congressional Record*, House, 97th Cong., 2nd sess. (14 July 1982): 16116.
- 29 William J. Grimshaw, *Bitter Fruit: Black Politics and the Chicago Machine, 1931–1991* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992): 169.
- 30 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 31 Kevin Klose, “Chicago Mayoral Primary; Rep. Washington Leads Byrne,” 23 February 1983, *Washington Post*: A1; David Axelrod, “Washington Key Black in Mayor Race,” 26 July 1982, *Chicago Tribune*: A1; “The Power Seekers: Chicago’s Mayoral Race,” 13 February 1983, *Chicago Tribune*: A1.
- 32 Taylor, “Washington: A Thoughtful Legislator.”
- 33 Frederick C. Klein, “Chicago Is Likely to Get First Black Mayor After Rep. Washington’s Primary Victory,” 24 February 1983, *Wall Street Journal*: 19; Kevin Klose, “Black Turnout, Split White Vote Aided Rep. Washington,” 24 February 1983, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 34 Quoted in a tribute to Washington’s victory delivered by fellow Chicago Representative Gus Savage. See *Congressional Record*, House, 98th Cong., 1st sess. (13 April 1983): 8369.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 Bob Secter and Wendy Leopold, “Washington, 1st Black Mayor of Chicago Dies,” 26 November 1987, *Los Angeles Times*: 1.
- 37 “Harold Washington and Chicago,” 26 November 1987, *Chicago Tribune*: 30; Jerry Thornton and Cheryl Devall, “It’s ‘Like Losing a Black Folk Hero,’” 26 November 1987, *Chicago Tribune*: 6.
- 38 *Congressional Record*, House, 110th Cong., 1st sess. (2 December 1987): 33746.