



Alan Dupree Wheat

1951–

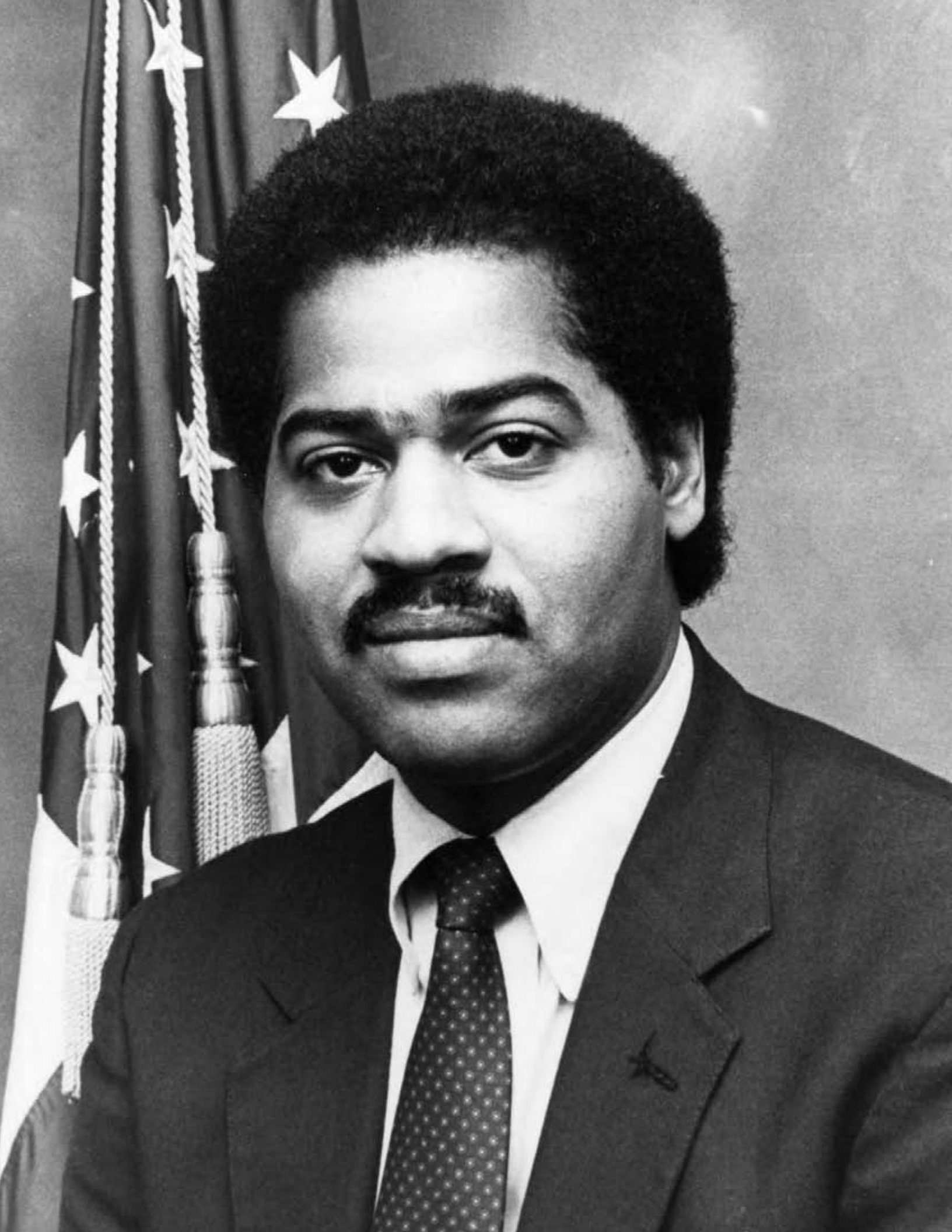
UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1983–1995
DEMOCRAT FROM MISSOURI

Alan Wheat's rare appointment as a freshman Member to the prestigious House Committee on Rules shaped his congressional career. "Rules gave me the opportunity to immediately start making an impact on the House of Representatives," the Missouri Representative once remarked. "Perhaps not so much as a sponsor of legislation but being able to have an impact on legislation as it came through the committee."¹ During his six terms in Congress, Wheat used his position on the influential panel to skillfully represent a broad constituency in his majority-white Missouri district. Known for his ability to forge alliances between African-American and white groups, Wheat wielded considerable political clout by working within the institution to push through legislation important to his district and the Democratic Party.

Alan Dupree Wheat was born in San Antonio, Texas, on October 16, 1951, to James Wheat, an officer and civil engineer in the U.S. Air Force, and Emogene (Jean) Wheat, a teacher. Wheat grew up on military bases and attended schools in Wichita, Kansas, and Seville, Spain, before graduating from Airline High School in Bosier City, Louisiana, in 1968. After earning a B.A. in economics from Grinnell College, in Iowa, Wheat joined the Department of Housing and Urban Development as an economist in 1972. He worked in the same capacity for the Mid-America Regional Council in Kansas City from 1973 to 1975. Wheat then served as an aide to Jackson County, Missouri, executive Mike White in 1975 and 1976 and won election to the Missouri general assembly in 1976 at age 25. Wheat served three terms in the Missouri state legislature, where he chaired the urban affairs committee. On August 11, 1990, Wheat married Yolanda Townsend, a lawyer; the couple had two children: Christopher and Nicholas. Wheat also had another daughter, Alynda, from a previous relationship.²

When longtime Missouri Representative Richard W. Bolling announced his retirement in August 1981, Wheat joined seven other candidates in the Democratic primary to represent the majority-white, predominantly Democratic district encompassing much of Kansas City, including the downtown area, and Independence, Missouri, hometown of President Harry S. Truman. The only African-American candidate in the crowded field, Wheat narrowly earned the Democratic nomination, with 31 percent of the vote. He went on to win the general election against Republican Missouri State Representative John Sharp, with 58 percent of the vote, by appealing to middle- and working-class voters with his criticism of President Ronald W. Reagan's economic policies and his promise to continue the legislative agenda of Representative Bolling.³ Wheat became the first African-American Member to represent Kansas City and the second black Representative in Congress from Missouri.⁴

Elected to the 98th Congress (1983–1985) in November 1982 at age 31, Wheat received a spot on the House Rules Committee (previously chaired by his predecessor, Dick Bolling), which controls the flow of legislation on the House Floor. He used his committee assignment to secure federal funding for a series of projects affecting his district, ranging from flood control initiatives to highway and transit spending and the building of a new Kansas City courthouse. He also played a significant role in the passage of legislation to prohibit the foreign servicing of American planes—which saved the jobs of hundreds of Kansas City-based airline employees—as well as the passage of legislation to expand the Harry S. Truman National Historic Site.⁵ Wheat's seat on the Rules Committee was instrumental in allowing him to push contentious legislation through the House. In 1989, he helped institute a ban on smoking on most domestic flights



by attaching the bill to a routine procedural measure so as to avoid undue attention from tobacco lobbyists and other opponents.⁶ From the 99th to the 103rd Congresses (1985–1995), Wheat served on the District of Columbia Committee, chairing the Government Operations and Metropolitan Affairs Subcommittee during his final four terms in office. Wheat was also a member of the House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families and a member of the Select Committee on Hunger.

Wheat's legislative approach in Congress appealed to a broad voting base. "My job is to do what's best for my country and district," he noted. "What I do legislatively has ramifications for both."⁷ By focusing attention on issues affecting his Missouri district and the domestic front, he effectively balanced the interests of African-American and white voters. In 1994, Wheat responded to constituent concerns about neighborhood violence with his enthusiastic backing of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act.⁸ His consistent votes along party lines resonated with the constituents in his Democratic district. However, Wheat eschewed the political labels (mainly liberal) his opponents used to categorize his outspoken support for issues such as free speech and gun control and his opposition to the death penalty. "The only label I'd accept is Democrat," he asserted. "That's because I believe Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy and Johnson did a pretty damned good job."⁹

Throughout his tenure in the House, Wheat advocated a strong stance on civil rights. In his position on the Rules Committee he played an integral part in the passage of the Civil Rights Bill of 1990, a comprehensive measure to combat employment discrimination—Wheat called it "the single most important civil rights legislation since the 1964 Civil Rights Act"—ensuring that the version that reached the House Floor retained much of its original language.¹⁰ In the 102nd Congress (1991–1993) he joined fellow Missouri Representative William (Bill) Clay, Sr., in co-sponsoring legislation to provide financial assistance to historically black colleges and universities; the measure became part of the Higher Education Act of 1992.¹¹ As

vice chair of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) during the 100th and 101st Congresses (1987–1991), Wheat instituted a policy that allowed whites to join the organization as associate members, reflecting his ability to address the interests of both black and white constituents. Although he was a vocal supporter of the CBC, Wheat emphasized his political independence: "I apply the same standard to the activities of the Black Caucus as to the activities of other groups. If I agree, I participate. If not, I don't."¹² Additionally, Wheat served as president of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, an independent, nonprofit organization geared toward public policy analysis.

Also concerned with civil rights abroad, Wheat denounced South Africa's apartheid regime. The Missouri Representative was a member of a congressional delegation that visited the African nation in 1990. After meeting with South African President Frederik de Klerk, and touring the country, Wheat remarked, "It is true that a start has been made, but it is only a start down the long road that must be trod toward freedom in South Africa."¹³ He urged his colleagues to maintain economic sanctions against South Africa until the country instituted full demographic reforms.¹⁴ Wheat's interest in foreign affairs extended beyond Africa. He opposed the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983 and President Reagan's decision to furnish military aid to the contras in Nicaragua. In 1991, Wheat joined the Democratic majority in condemning the Persian Gulf War resolution.¹⁵

Wheat's commitment to the constituents of his district paid off at the polls, where he enjoyed comfortable margins of victory. During his re-election bids he reminded voters of his valuable position on the Rules Committee and employed clever campaign advertisements with wheat stalks—a play on his name and a symbol of midwestern agriculture.¹⁶ Wheat suffered a temporary political setback in 1992 when his name appeared on a list of dozens of Members who overdrew their accounts at the informal House "Bank" managed by the Sergeant at Arms. Records revealed that Wheat had many overdrawn checks.

However, Wheat was elected to a sixth term in the House, with 59 percent of the vote (the lowest percentage since his first run for Congress), avoiding the fate of some other Representatives whose careers were ended by the controversy.¹⁷

When Republican Senator John Danforth announced his decision to retire at the conclusion of the 103rd Congress (1993–1995), Wheat entered the race to fill the vacant Senate seat. “I want my career to be meaningful,” he stated. “I don’t want to look back after 30 or 40 years’ service and have nothing to say except that I grew in seniority and inherited a committee chairmanship.”¹⁸ Wheat narrowly earned the Democratic nomination, with 41 percent of the vote, against Jackson County executive Marsha Murphy, becoming the first African American in Missouri to be nominated for statewide office. In the general election he faced an uphill battle against former Missouri Governor John Ashcroft. The competitive primary had depleted Wheat’s campaign funds, and a rising anti-incumbent sentiment put Wheat on the defensive. In an election year in which the GOP gained control of the House and the Senate for the first time since the Eisenhower Era, Ashcroft soundly defeated Wheat, who garnered only 36 percent of the vote.¹⁹

After his congressional service, Wheat served as vice president of SmithKline Beecham pharmaceutical company and as vice president of public policy and government relations of the global relief organization CARE. In 1996 he resumed his political career, accepting a position as deputy campaign manager for the Clinton-Gore presidential re-election campaign. Two years later in 1998, he founded Wheat Government Relations, a political consulting firm in Virginia.²⁰

FOR FURTHER READING

“Wheat, Alan Dupree,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=W000326>.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

University of Missouri-Kansas City, Western Historical Manuscript Collection (Kansas City, MO). *Papers*: ca. 1982–1994, 257 cubic feet. The papers of Alan Dupree Wheat consist of his congressional files, including press releases, newsletters, correspondence, individual voting records, office files, calendars, speeches, photographs, and videotapes.



★ ALAN DUPREE WHEAT ★

NOTES

- 1 Andrew C. Miller, "Wheat's Influence Felt Behind the Scenes," 25 September 1994, *Kansas City Star*: A23.
- 2 Jon Sawyer, "Wheat Answers Critics, Touts Record in Senate Race," 15 July 1994, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*: 1C; "Alan Wheat," *Who's Who Among African Americans* (New York: Gale Research, 2002); "Alan Wheat," *Contemporary Black Biography* Volume 14 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1997) (hereinafter referred to as *CBB*). The *CBB* entry lists Wheat's father as James Weldon.
- 3 Carol M. Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests: The Representation of African Americans in Congress* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993): 120–121; "Alan Wheat," *CBB*; "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html; *Politics in America, 1994* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1993): 881–882.
- 4 Mark Schlinkmann, "Broad Support Gives Wheat 5th District Win," 3 November 1982, *Kansas City Times*.
- 5 Miller, "Wheat's Influence Felt Behind the Scenes"; Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests*: 125; Katherine Tate, *Black Faces in the Mirror: African Americans and Their Representatives in the U.S. Congress* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003): 101.
- 6 Miller, "Wheat's Influence Felt Behind the Scenes."
- 7 Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests*: 127.
- 8 "Alan Wheat," *CBB*.
- 9 Sawyer, "Wheat Answers Critics, Touts Record in Senate Race."
- 10 Robert Shepard, "House Debates Civil Rights Bill," 2 August 1990, United Press International; William L. Clay, *Just Permanent Interests: Black Americans in Congress, 1870–1991* (New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1992): 392; Richard L. Berke, "House Approves Civil Rights Bill; Veto Is Weighed," 4 August 1990, *New York Times*: 1. The 1990 civil rights legislation also passed the Senate but was vetoed by President George H. W. Bush.
- 11 *Politics in America, 1994*: 881.
- 12 Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests*: 127.
- 13 *Congressional Record*, House, 101st Cong., 2nd sess. (6 February 1990): 1283.
- 14 *Politics in America, 1994*: 881.
- 15 Sawyer, "Wheat Answers Critics, Touts Record in Senate Race;" Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests*: 126.
- 16 Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests*: 122, 124.
- 17 Miller, "Wheat's Influence Felt Behind the Scenes"; Robert L. Koenig, "303 Lawmakers Wrote Bad Checks," 17 April 1992, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*: 1A; *Politics in America, 1994*: 882–883.
- 18 Miller, "Wheat Answers Critics, Touts Record in Senate Race."
- 19 "Alan Wheat," *CBB*; "Former Governor Wins Missouri G.O.P. Primary for Governor," 3 August 1994, *New York Times*: A22; Richard L. Berke, "Blow for Clinton: Democratic Mainstays Ousted in Big Upsets Around the Nation," 9 November 1994, *New York Times*: A1; "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 20 "Alan Wheat," *CBB*; "The Honorable Alan Wheat: Wheat Government Relations, Inc.," at <http://www.wheatgr.com/alanwheat.html> (accessed 21 March 2007); Philip Dine, "Wheat May Be Compromise for Labor Department Post," 19 December 1996, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*: 13C.



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