



Lucien Edward Blackwell

1931–2003

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1991–1995
DEMOCRAT FROM PENNSYLVANIA

A long-time resident of West Philadelphia, Lucien Blackwell appealed to his primarily African-American, blue-collar constituents because of his image as a “common man.” The popular former city councilman successfully navigated Philadelphia’s Democratic Party machinery, emerging as one of the city’s most recognized politicians. Making his congressional debut in a special election to succeed powerful Representative William (Bill) Gray III, the former union president focused on helping working-class Americans who were suffering from the recession of the early 1990s. “The American worker is marching down the street asking for unemployment compensation because he has lost his job,” Blackwell said to his colleagues. “I ask every Congressman who does not vote for unemployment compensation tonight, give up your wages, give up your employment, give up what you’ve earned here, and then tell me it is all right to live off nothing.”¹ However, Blackwell’s congressional career, marking a transitional phase in Philadelphia politics, proved to be short as the 73-year-old machine politician contended with a new generation of black leaders.

Lucien Edward Blackwell was born on August 1, 1931, to Thomas and Mary Blackwell in Whiset, Pennsylvania. He had at least one sibling, a sister named Audrey.² As a young child, Lucien Blackwell moved to a West Philadelphia neighborhood known as “the Bottom,” where his father opened a grocery store. He lived in that neighborhood all his life. Lucien Blackwell dropped out of West Philadelphia High School in 1947 to take a job as a dockworker on the Philadelphia waterfront. He briefly pursued a boxing career, winning a novice Diamond Belt Championship in 1949 before being drafted into the United States Army in 1953 to fight in the Korean War. During his military service, he was awarded a unit commendation, two bronze stars, and a good conduct

medal.³ After returning to civilian life, he joined the International Longshoreman’s Union, serving as president of its Philadelphia branch from 1973 to 1991. Blackwell married and divorced at a young age. He met his second wife, Jannie, while she was teaching at a school attended by his sons, Lucien, Jr., and Thomas W. Blackwell IV.⁴ The couple married in 1972 and had four daughters: Patricia, Barbara, Brenda, and Audrey.

Blackwell’s union work introduced him to politics. Living in a predominantly black, liberal neighborhood, he was a self-described Democrat “from the tip of my head to the bottom of my feet.”⁵ Blackwell first served in the Pennsylvania house of representatives from 1973 to 1975, but he made his mark as a Philadelphia city councilman, holding the office from 1975 to 1991. Blackwell earned the nickname “Lucien the Solution” for his attention to the needs of his constituents in West and South Philadelphia. He ran unsuccessfully for Philadelphia mayor as the Consumer Party candidate in 1979 against controversial incumbent Frank Rizzo, who was under investigation for fostering police brutality in Blackwell’s Ward. Both Rizzo and Blackwell lost to Democrat William J. Green. In 1986, Blackwell lost a bid for the Democratic city committee chairmanship to future Representative Robert A. Brady. He nevertheless held key chairmanships of two Philadelphia political groups: the Black Elected Officials and the United Black Ward Leaders. In 1991, Blackwell made his second mayoral run, finishing second to eventual winner Edward Rendell in a hotly contested Democratic primary. Blackwell’s first taste of national politics came through his work on Jesse Jackson’s presidential campaigns in 1984 and 1988.

In June 1991, Representative Bill Gray, the House Majority Whip and third-ranking Democrat, retired abruptly from his seat encompassing West Philadelphia,



which boasted a black majority (82 percent) and a long Democratic voting record. Believing that the special election would take place on November 5—the same day Philadelphia voters would select a new mayor and a United States Senator—Blackwell declared his intention to run for the vacant seat and quickly became the front-runner. However, Gray postponed his resignation until September, citing the need to train the new House Majority Whip, Representative David Bonior of Michigan. According to Pennsylvania state law, special elections could take place no sooner than 60 days after a former Member resigned. Gray's late departure pushed the special election back to early 1992, leaving Blackwell's rivals a chance to organize their campaigns. Blackwell supporters accused Gray of thwarting their candidate's chances, as the two had previously been political rivals.⁶ A federal court denied Blackwell's request to return the election date to November 5; however, he subsequently appealed to the Pennsylvania state court, which ruled in his favor on October 1. During a whirlwind campaign the following month, Democratic ward leaders overwhelmingly supported Blackwell, as many district residents voted a straight Democratic ticket. Blackwell's closest rivals included the young, charismatic state senator Chaka Fattah, a Democrat who was running as a Consumer Party candidate; and the former head of the Pennsylvania welfare department, John F. White, Jr., who was running as an Independent. Drawing upon the strength of the Democratic machine and his rapport as councilman with the city's working class, Blackwell prevailed with 39 percent of the vote. Fattah and White each won 28 percent.⁷ Blackwell took his seat in the 102nd Congress (1991–1993) on November 13, 1991.

Just five months later, Blackwell faced C. Delores Tucker in the Democratic primary for the 103rd Congress (1993–1995). Having been considered by the Democratic machine the previous November, Tucker—a black woman who was formerly the secretary of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania—proved a formidable opponent. Redistricting had cut the black majority in the district to 62 percent, forcing both candidates to broaden their appeal

to a bloc of wealthier white voters in the northwestern section of the city. Well funded by national women's groups and civil rights leaders, Tucker accused Blackwell of being a “puppet” of the Philadelphia party bosses. Blackwell emphasized his party and union support. Although Tucker won favor in the district's new neighborhoods, Blackwell defeated her with 54 percent of the vote. He went on to defeat Republican Larry Hollin with a sound 77 percent in the general election.⁸

In the House, Blackwell received appointments to the Public Works Committee and the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee. Blackwell also served as a member of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). In the 103rd Congress, overwhelming turnover allowed him to make the largest jump in seniority of any returning Member.⁹ Blackwell traded his assignment on Merchant Marine and Fisheries for a coveted position on the Budget Committee, formerly chaired by his predecessor, Representative Bill Gray, in the 99th and 100th Congresses (1985–1989). Yet Blackwell retained his “common man” appeal. He claimed he was not seeking powerful committee or leadership posts, saying, “I come here not in a braggadocio way.”¹⁰ Instead, his focus throughout his congressional career was improving the quality of life of his Philadelphia neighbors. He was known for bringing federal dollars to the district.¹¹

Blackwell's constituent-centered agenda—and the focus of the 102nd and 103rd Congresses as well as that of President William J. (Bill) Clinton—included lifting the national economy out of a recession. He agreed with Democratic colleagues who opposed an amendment to the Constitution requiring a balanced federal budget. Blackwell feared most politicians “believe that a balanced budget amendment is a magic wand. One quick wave over the document that represents the heart and soul of this nation, and the budget will be balanced, the economy restored, and the recession shattered by this almighty amendment.”¹² He asserted that reducing the deficit was necessary to improve the economy and recommended that Congress take steps toward this goal by providing new jobs, creating fair trade, changing tax laws, enacting



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national health insurance legislation, and improving life in American cities. Blackwell also joined fellow Democrats in supporting the Clinton administration's economic initiatives, proposed in February 1993, which called for reduced federal spending and tax increases for the wealthy.¹³

Drawing on his union experience, Blackwell acted as an advocate for unemployed laborers. He introduced a bill in the 102nd Congress to protect the credit ratings of employees who had lost their jobs because their employers relocated overseas. Blackwell backed the Clinton reform package guaranteeing all Americans basic health coverage, and he supported family medical leave to care for family members who were unwell. He also sponsored a bill to protect job applicants from discrimination based on genetic factors, such as vulnerability to certain diseases. Blackwell favored extending the amount of time benefits were paid under the Emergency Unemployment Compensation Act, citing his concern for the high rate of unemployed workers in his district.¹⁴

In the May 1994 Democratic primary, Blackwell faced his former opponent Chaka Fattah. Blackwell appeared strong enough to defend his seat, receiving an endorsement from Mayor Rendell as well as the nominal endorsement of the local Democratic Party. However, individual Democrats were divided between Blackwell and Fattah. One ward leader observed, "Lu's in the fight of his life and Chaka's right on his heels."¹⁵ Though immensely popular among his black, working-class neighbors, voters from the wealthier northwestern section of the district abandoned the incumbent because of his

inability to connect with the district's white voters. Among a younger generation of black politicians, the youthful community activist Fattah proved better able to bridge the gaps between the city's races.¹⁶ The challenger defeated Blackwell with 58 to 42 percent of the vote. In his concession speech Blackwell said, "What I have to do now is take a look at Lucien Blackwell and see what God has in store for him. And I'll show you that God isn't through with me yet."¹⁷

In May 1995, Blackwell joined the Washington-based lobbying firm Whitten & Diamond, which boasted the City of Philadelphia as one of its largest clients. Blackwell used his congressional connections, particularly through the CBC, to work on defense conversion as well as welfare reform.¹⁸ He also acted as a consultant for a Philadelphia debt collection company. In 1996, Blackwell successfully fought the disintegration of the Philadelphia branch of the International Longshoreman's Association, led by his son Thomas W. Blackwell. He also served as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention that same year. In 1997, Blackwell considered running in a special election to replace Philadelphia Representative Thomas Foglietta, who was appointed U.S. Ambassador to Italy. Blackwell was inspired by the fact that Foglietta's district contained some areas that he had lost in the 1992 redistricting. However, Blackwell later bowed out of the race, claiming he had "just decided it was time to go."¹⁹ On January, 24, 2003, after returning home from a morning walk, Blackwell suddenly died of a heart attack. The City of Philadelphia hosted a funeral that drew nearly 3,000 mourners.²⁰



FOR FURTHER READING

“Blackwell, Lucien Edward,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=B000517>.

NOTES

- 1 *Congressional Record*, House, 102nd Cong., 1st sess. (2 June 1992): H4414.
- 2 Blackwell paid tribute to his sister, Audrey Blackwell Farthing, in the *Congressional Record*. There is no mention of other siblings. See *Congressional Record*, Extension of Remarks, 103rd Cong., 1st sess. (15 June 1993): E1508.
- 3 *Congressional Directory*, 103rd Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1993): 250–251.
- 4 The only information available about Blackwell’s first wife is that she was the mother of Lucien, Jr., and Thomas W. Blackwell IV.
- 5 “Former ILA Local 1332 President, U.S. Congressman and Philadelphia City Councilman Lucien Blackwell Passes,” *ILA Newsletter*, Spring 2003, at http://ilaunion.org/news/nlp_spr03_page16.htm (accessed 13 September 2004).
- 6 *Politics in America, 1994* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1993): 1293.
- 7 Michael J. Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998): 774.
- 8 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 9 Peter H. Spiegel, “Seniority Lineup in the 103rd,” 18 January 1993, *Roll Call*.
- 10 *Politics in America, 1994*: 1292.
- 11 James J. Kilpatrick, “Excise Pork From Federal Budget,” 25 April 1992, *Chicago Sun-Times*: 19.
- 12 *Congressional Record*, House, 102nd Cong., 1st sess. (10 June 1992): H4511.
- 13 *Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 1995* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1996): 7D–12D; Jennifer Babson, “Blackwell Summoned to White House for Clinton Talk,” 13 February 1993, *State News Service*.
- 14 *Congressional Record*, House, 103rd Cong., 1st sess. (24 February 1993): H832.
- 15 Nicole Weisensee, “Blackwell, Fattah Too Close to Call?” 29 April 1994, *Philadelphia Daily News*: 13.
- 16 Ronald A. Taylor, “Power of Incumbency Wanes for Blacks Too,” 14 May 1994, *Washington Times*: A1; Richard Fenno, *Going Home: Black Representatives and Their Constituents* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press): 114–115, 124–125.
- 17 “Lucien Blackwell,” *Associated Press Candidate Biographies, 1994*.
- 18 Dave Davies, “Lucien Blackwell’s Back on Taxpayers’ Payroll,” 5 May 1995, *Philadelphia Daily News*: 5.
- 19 “Blackwell Ends Run, Decides It’s ‘Time to Go,’” 2 February 1998, *Roll Call*.
- 20 Dave Davies, “Farewell, Mr. Blackwell,” 25 January 2003, *Philadelphia Daily News*: 3.



IN CONGRESS,
BLACKWELL RETAINED HIS
“COMMON MAN” APPEAL.
HE CLAIMED HE WAS NOT
SEEKING POWERFUL COMMITTEE
OR LEADERSHIP POSTS, SAYING,
“I COME HERE [TO THE HOUSE]
NOT IN A BRAGGADOCIO WAY.”