



Cynthia Ann McKinney

1955–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1993–2003; 2005–2007
DEMOCRAT FROM GEORGIA

The first African-American woman from Georgia to serve in Congress, Cynthia McKinney was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1992. With a résumé that included graduate work in international relations, Representative McKinney’s background fit her service on the Armed Services and International Relations committees, where she addressed human rights issues. The outspoken Representative, who sometimes held polarizing views on key foreign policy issues, lost her re-election bid in 2002. Two years later, voters in her DeKalb County-centered district returned her to the House for a single term, making her one of a handful of Congresswomen who served nonconsecutive terms.

Cynthia Ann McKinney was born on March 17, 1955, in Atlanta, Georgia, to Leola Christion McKinney, a nurse, and James Edward (Billy) McKinney, a police officer, civil rights activist, and longtime legislator in the Georgia house of representatives. Joining the Atlanta police department in 1948, Billy McKinney was one of its first African-American officers. Cynthia McKinney’s participation in demonstrations with her father inspired her to enter politics.¹ While protesting the conviction of Tommy Lee Hines, a mentally handicapped black man charged with raping a white woman in Alabama, McKinney and other protestors were threatened by the Ku Klux Klan. “That was probably my day of awakening,” McKinney recalled. “That day, I experienced hatred for the first time. I learned that there really are people who hate me without even knowing me. . . . That was when I knew that politics was going to be something I would do.”² McKinney graduated from St. Joseph High School and, in 1978, earned a B.A. in international relations from the University of Southern California. She later pursued graduate studies at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. In 1984 she served as a

diplomatic fellow at Spelman College in Atlanta. She then taught political science at Agnes Scott College in Decatur and at Clark Atlanta University. Cynthia McKinney married Coy Grandison, a Jamaican politician. The couple had a son, Coy, Jr., before divorcing.

In 1986, Billy McKinney registered his daughter without her knowledge as a candidate for the Georgia state house of representatives. She lost that race to the incumbent but, without even campaigning, won 20 percent of the vote based on name recognition. In 1988, McKinney won election as an at-large state representative in the Georgia legislature, defeating Herb Mabry, who would later head the state AFL-CIO.³ The McKinneys became the first father–daughter combination to serve concurrently in the same state legislature.⁴ McKinney’s father expected her to be a close political ally, but he was soon confronted with his daughter’s independent style. “He thought he was going to have another vote,” she recalled, “but once I got there, we disagreed on everything . . . I was a chip off the old block, a maverick.”⁵

During the late 1980s, McKinney and other Georgia legislators pressed the U.S. Justice Department to create additional majority-black congressional districts so that African-American voters would have more equitable representation. In 1992, the Georgia legislature created two additional majority-black districts (Georgia already had one) and McKinney chose to run in the sprawling 260-mile-long district that included much of DeKalb County east of Atlanta to Augusta and extended southward to the coastal city of Savannah, encompassing or cutting through 22 counties.⁶ The district took in a diverse mix of constituents, ranging from inhabitants of inner cities to the residents of outlying communities in agricultural counties. McKinney moved into the new district, and her father managed her campaign. In the five-way Democratic



primary, McKinney used a strong grassroots network to place first, with 31 percent of the vote.⁷ In a runoff against second-place finisher George DeLoach—a funeral home director and the former mayor of Waynesboro, Georgia—McKinney won with 54 percent of the vote.⁸ In the heavily Democratic district, she won election to the 103rd Congress (1993–1995), with 73 percent of the vote, against her Republican opponent, Woodrow Lovett. Reflecting on an election that propelled record numbers of women and African Americans into congressional office, McKinney said shortly afterward, “Now we have people in Congress who are like the rest of America. It’s wonderful to have ordinary people making decisions about the lives of ordinary Americans. It brings a level of sensitivity that has not been there.”⁹

When McKinney was sworn in to the 103rd Congress in January 1993, she received assignments on the Committee on Agriculture and the Committee on Foreign Affairs (later named International Relations). Over the next several Congresses she received membership on several other panels. In the 104th Congress (1995–1997) she won a seat on the Banking and Finance Committee, where she served two terms. In the 105th Congress (1997–1999) Representative McKinney was assigned to the National Security Committee (later renamed Armed Services).

Representative McKinney quickly became known by her unconventional attire, including her trademark pair of gold tennis shoes and her Mickey Mouse watch. Shortly after she entered the House in 1993, one reporter described McKinney as possessing “uncommon poise and a decidedly unstriped wardrobe.”¹⁰ A member of the largest class of freshman women in congressional history, McKinney also was part of a newly elected vanguard of black Congresswomen, many from the South, who emerged from state legislatures onto the national political scene.¹¹ Her devotion to work and her courage to stand up against the traditions of the mostly male institution impressed colleagues. “She’s not a showboat, she’s a workhorse,” observed Representative Patricia Schroeder of Colorado, employing a term commonly used to describe Members

who work tirelessly behind the scenes. “She stands up to the old bulls, and is very strong in everything she does,” Schroeder added.¹²

McKinney’s confrontational legislative style, cultivated since her days as a state legislator, was congruous with her distinctive attire. In January 1991, she delivered a blistering speech attacking the first Gulf War and President George H. W. Bush: two-thirds of the legislators in the Georgia statehouse left the chamber after McKinney derided the military action as “the most inane use of American will that I have witnessed in a very long time.” She added, “America must be willing to fight injustice and prejudice at home as effectively as America is ready to take up arms to fight ‘naked aggression’ in the international arena.”¹³ In 1995, she infuriated newly installed House Republican leaders when she suggested that an independent counsel investigate Speaker Newt Gingrich of Georgia for violating the chamber’s gift rules because he accepted free air time on cable television to broadcast a college course.¹⁴ In 2000, McKinney accused then-Vice President Al Gore of having a “low Negro tolerance level” for not having more African Americans on his security detail. She later claimed the remark was part of a draft press release not intended for public distribution, though she did press the William J. (Bill) Clinton administration to investigate charges of discrimination in the Secret Service.¹⁵

Representative McKinney also displayed a readiness to speak out on issues ranging from human rights abuses abroad to social inequities at home. As an advocate for poor and working-class Americans, McKinney opposed federal efforts to restrict abortions—particularly a long-standing measure known as the Hyde Amendment that largely eliminated Medicaid coverage for abortions. In a debate on the House Floor, McKinney described the amendment as “nothing but a discriminatory policy against poor women, who happen to be disproportionately black.”¹⁶

A court challenge shortly after McKinney’s 1994 re-election (with 66 percent of the vote) placed her at the epicenter of a national debate over the constitutionality

of minority-conscious redistricting. Five voters from the rural parts of her district (including her former opponent in the Democratic primary, George DeLoach) filed a suit claiming they had been disfranchised because the state drew “an illegally gerrymandered district to benefit black voters,” as one critic noted. McKinney claimed she had made great efforts to reach out to her rural constituents but that her entreaties had been met with “resistance” or “silence.”¹⁷ A U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1995 invalidated Georgia’s congressional district map as a “racial gerrymander” that violated the 14th Amendment’s guarantee of equal protection under the law. A panel of federal judges from three courts remapped the district before the 1996 elections, and the black population of McKinney’s district dropped from 64 percent to about 33 percent. Although McKinney was forced to run in a majority-white district, the loyal political network that figured heavily in her previous campaigns helped her prevail against Republican challenger John M. Mitnick, with 58 percent of the vote.¹⁸ McKinney won her two subsequent re-election bids by comfortable margins of about 60 percent. Reapportionment in 2002 placed McKinney in a district that again was predominantly African American (roughly 53 percent of the population).¹⁹

On the International Relations Committee, where she eventually served as the Ranking Member on the International Operations and Human Rights Subcommittee, McKinney tried to curb weapons sales to countries that violated human rights—sponsoring the Arms Transfers Code of Conduct, which passed the House in 1997, to prevent the sale of weapons to dictators. In 1999, she partnered with a Republican colleague to insert a similar provision into a State Department reauthorization bill. A year later, she voted against granting full trade relations with China, citing Beijing’s poor human rights record. McKinney frequently challenged American foreign policy during this period, including the 1999 bombing campaign in Kosovo, long-standing U.S. sanctions against Iraq, and much of U.S. policy in the Middle East.

Representative McKinney’s actions after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks caused her political difficulty. First, she offered to accept a check from a wealthy Saudi prince after then-New York City Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani rejected it because the prince said the September 11 attacks were a response to U.S. policies in the Middle East.²⁰ Then, in a 2002 radio interview, McKinney suggested that officials in the George W. Bush administration had prior knowledge about the attacks but remained silent because they stood to gain financially from military spending in the aftermath of the attacks. Alluding to the still-contentious recount of votes in Florida in 2000, and the Supreme Court ruling that resulted in the Republican presidency, McKinney said, “an administration of questionable legitimacy has been given unprecedented power.”²¹ At a time when much of the nation was supportive of the administration in the wake of the September 11 attacks, McKinney’s comments were met with a torrent of criticism.²²

In the 2002 primary McKinney faced a little-known newcomer to electoral politics, Denise Majette. An African American and a former state judge, Majette ran on a platform contrasting her moderation and centrism with McKinney’s rhetoric, which Majette’s campaign implied had gone too far. Majette achieved a two-to-one advantage in campaign funding, raising another issue when it became evident that national Jewish and Muslim groups were funding Majette and McKinney, respectively.²³ In the August 20, 1992, primary, Majette prevailed by a 58 to 42 percent margin and went on to win the general election.

Two years later, when Majette made an ultimately unsuccessful bid for the U.S. Senate, McKinney entered the race to reclaim her old congressional seat. Benefitting from a divided Democratic field in the party primary, she won the nomination with 54 percent of the vote. McKinney ran an understated campaign that steered clear of extensive media coverage and, as in her earlier runs for Congress, relied on a vigorous grass-roots effort. In the general election, for the 109th Congress (2005–2007), McKinney won easily, with 64 percent of the vote against

Republican candidate Catherine Davis.²⁴ McKinney regained her assignment on the Armed Services Committee and also received a seat on the Budget Committee.

In late March 2006, McKinney allegedly hit a Capitol Hill police officer who stopped her at the entrance to one of the House office buildings and asked for identification. McKinney claimed she was a victim of racial profiling and, according to news accounts, described the police officer who stopped her as “racist.” A grand jury investigated the incident but declined to indict McKinney.²⁵ Noting that McKinney’s base of support in her predominantly African-American district remained strong, pundits predicted her renomination. Yet in the July 18, 2006, Democratic primary, DeKalb County Commissioner Hank Johnson, Jr., an African-American lawyer whose simple campaign message was “Replace McKinney,” held the incumbent to just 47 percent of the vote (Johnson received 45 percent). Short of the majority required by state law, McKinney was forced into a runoff. Johnson prevailed by a 59 to 41 percent margin, garnering 60 percent of the vote in McKinney’s former stronghold in DeKalb County.²⁶

After leaving the House in January 2007, McKinney remained active in national politics. In December 2007 she announced her candidacy as the Green Party nominee for the 2008 presidential election.²⁷

FOR FURTHER READING

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NOTES

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