



William Herbert Gray III

1941–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1979–1991
DEMOCRAT FROM PENNSYLVANIA

A third-generation pastor of a large Philadelphia-area Baptist church and community activist, William Gray defeated a longtime incumbent to take his first elected office in the United States House of Representatives. Though new to elective office, Gray proved adept at Capitol Hill politics, rising meteorically in power during his 12 years in Congress primarily because he was skilled at lobbying for top posts. “If preachers, lawyers, business entrepreneurs, and teachers can engage in politics, why not a Baptist minister?” Gray asked. “Congress needs a strong moral force within its chambers. What better person than a man of moral integrity to serve his district?”¹ Gray was the first black Member of Congress to chair the powerful and partisan Budget Committee and the first black Representative to become the third-ranking Democrat in the House. Yet, at the height of his political career, he abruptly resigned to take a position to assist historically black colleges and to return to the pulpit.

William Herbert (Bill) Gray III was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on August 20, 1941. The second child of Dr. William H. Gray, Jr., and Hazel Yates Gray, he had an older sister, Marion. William Gray spent the first nine years of his life in St. Augustine, and Tallahassee, Florida, where his father served as president of Florida Normal and Industrial College (now Florida Memorial College) and Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College (now Florida A&M University). His mother was a high school teacher and once served as dean of Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. When William Gray III’s grandfather and namesake died in 1949, the Grays moved to North Philadelphia, where William Gray, Jr., took over his father’s pastoral position at Bright Hope Baptist Church, which William Gray, Sr., had held since 1925. William Gray III graduated from Simon Gratz High School in Philadelphia in 1959 and earned a B.A. from Franklin and Marshall

College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1963. Gray majored in sociology, but one of his professors encouraged him to become involved in politics. During his senior year in college, Gray interned for Philadelphia Representative Robert N. C. Nix.²

After college, Gray followed his father and grandfather into the ministry. He received a master’s degree in divinity from Drew Theological Seminary in Madison, New Jersey, in 1966 and a master’s degree in theology from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1970. He became a community activist in 1970 while living in Montclair, New Jersey, after he won a housing discrimination suit against a landlord who denied him an apartment because of his race. The New Jersey superior court awarded him financial damages, setting a legal precedent and earning Gray national attention.³ Gray founded the nonprofit Union Housing Corporation in Montclair to build affordable homes for low- and moderate-income tenants. In 1971, he married Andrea Dash, a marketing consultant. They raised three sons: William IV, Justin, and Andrew.

After his father died in 1972, Gray assumed the pastor’s position at Philadelphia’s Bright Hope Baptist Church.⁴ The congregation swelled to more than 4,000 members, and Gray continued his community activism. In 1975, he cofounded the Philadelphia Mortgage Plan, an organization that helped people in low income communities to obtain mortgages.⁵ Concern about community housing issues and the high unemployment rate in his West Philadelphia neighborhood drew Gray back into politics in 1976. Never having held elected office, Gray took interest in the northwest Philadelphia congressional district that was represented by his former boss, Representative Nix, a longtime Representative and a Philadelphia political powerbroker. Gray had become disillusioned with what he perceived as Nix’s



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★ WILLIAM HERBERT GRAY III ★

unresponsiveness to his constituents, nearly one-third of whom lived below the poverty line. Since the registered voters in northwest Philadelphia were overwhelmingly Democratic, winning the Democratic primary was tantamount to victory in the general election.⁶ Gray narrowly lost the 1976 primary election by about 300 votes.⁷ Gray returned in 1978, dubbing Nix “the phantom” due to the infrequency of the aging Representative’s visits to his district. Gray also called attention to the district’s ailing economy, which had the highest unemployment rate in the state.⁸ Encouragement from former Representative Andrew Young of Georgia, who was serving as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, gave Gray the confidence to enter elective politics. “Bill, if you can pastor Bright Hope Baptist Church, Congress will not be difficult,” Gray recalls Young telling him. “It is essentially pastoring, ministering to the folks in your district.”⁹ Bright Hope Baptist members played an integral part in Gray’s campaign, hosting events and helping him plan strategy.¹⁰ He defeated the incumbent in the 1978 primary, with 58 percent to Nix’s 41 percent.¹¹

Unconcerned about the general election in his overwhelmingly Democratic district, Gray spent the time between the primary and the November elections lobbying for choice committee posts. His friendship with Young provided Gray with important connections in Washington.¹² After winning the general election by a wide margin (82 percent) over Republican Roland Atkins, Gray received several plum committee assignments in the 96th Congress (1979–1981) as a result of his earlier lobbying efforts. In addition to a seat on the Committee on the District of Columbia, the only post he would hold for his entire career, Gray occupied seats on the prestigious Budget and Foreign Affairs panels. The Democratic leadership as well as the leaders of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) took note of his political acumen and pegged him as a rising star. CBC Chairman Parren Mitchell of Maryland called Gray’s skills “top flight.”¹³ The caucus elected Gray as its secretary and in his second term he served as vice chairman. Also, Gray’s fellow freshman

Democrats elected him as their representative to the Steering and Policy Committee, which sets committee assignments for Democratic Members and writes party policy. Gray later served on the House Administration Committee (102nd Congress, 1991–1993) and the Joint Committee on Deficit Reduction (100th Congress, 1987–1989).

Gray typically won re-election with little opposition, garnering margins of at least 90 percent.¹⁴ Careful not to suffer the same fate as Nix, he kept in close contact with the district and remained attentive to the needs of the black community. Throughout his congressional career, Gray continued to preach two Sundays per month at Bright Hope Church. “I was elected to Congress,” he once told the *Washington Post*, “I was called to preach. One I do because people allow me to do it. The other I *have* to do.”¹⁵ In May 1985, Gray’s dedication to his constituents was tested. His district was the scene of disaster after members of MOVE, a radical, black Muslim cult, clashed with police. The violence led to 11 deaths, and several city blocks in a West Philadelphia neighborhood were burned. Gray escaped the political fallout for the massacre; Philadelphia Mayor Wilson Goode bore the brunt of the criticism. Gray responded to his constituents’ needs by touring the scene of the destruction and obtaining federal aid for the victims from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).¹⁶

Gray’s work on the Foreign Affairs Committee focused on Africa. Though he left the committee after his freshman term, throughout his career, Gray requested aid for Africa on a scale that was later compared to the Marshall Plan, which provided billions of dollars to war-torn Europe after World War II.¹⁷ In his freshman term, Gray sponsored a bill that created the African Development Foundation, which delivered U.S. aid to African villages.¹⁸ In 1983, he sponsored a series of allotments guaranteeing minority-owned businesses, private agencies, and historically black universities greater participation programs in Africa that were administered by the U.S. Agency for International Development. Gray also was one of the first politicians

in the early 1980s to predict an impending famine in Ethiopia. In 1984 he led the House in providing emergency food rations to the starving nation. Three years later, he made a rare break from his own party, supporting a Republican-sponsored bill to condemn Ethiopia's communist leaders for human rights violations and for exacerbating the famine.¹⁹ Also, Gray was a chief opponent of South Africa's apartheid system.

Gray received his initial position on the Budget Committee with the blessing of outgoing panel member Representative Parren Mitchell, who was eager to find a CBC member to replace him on the committee in 1979.²⁰ Serving his first term on the Budget Committee, Gray grew increasingly frustrated with the committee Democrats' seemingly weak defense against cuts in social spending. He was one of a few Members who regularly voted against his party's budgets. Gray left the Budget Committee in 1981 for a spot on the Appropriations panel, where he would remain for the rest of his career, and returned to the Budget Committee in 1983 at the beginning of the 98th Congress (1983–1985). With seats on the Budget and Appropriations panels, Gray occupied a position of power and was much more receptive to compromise. He began working to persuade Democrats to accept more moderate proposals, and he arbitrated differences between House and Senate versions of the federal budget.²¹ Gray's political expertise and integrity earned him a solid reputation. In 1984, conservative Democrat Charles Stenholm of Texas noted, "Bill's shown flexibility and a mastery of the budget process. He's very articulate and he's always been fair."²²

House rules allowed Members to serve on the Budget Committee for a maximum of six successive years. In 1984, sitting chairman Representative Jim Jones of Oklahoma faced the end of his allotted term. He and outgoing Representative Leon Panetta of California, who also aspired to the chairmanship, sought a change in the rule so that they could continue serving, but last-minute opposition from Speaker Thomas (Tip) O'Neill of Massachusetts thwarted their plan. Having quietly secured

support in case the rule had not changed, Gray was the only member of the panel who had enough votes for the chairmanship upon Jones's departure, despite a last-minute bid by Democratic Texas Representative Martin Frost.²³ Nearly two thousand of Gray's proud constituents organized by Bright Hope congregants flooded the Capitol to watch his swearing-in as the first black chairman of the Budget Committee.²⁴ Gray downplayed the symbolism. "There is no title here called 'Black America Budget Chairman,'" Gray declared. "It's called House Budget Committee Chairman. I happen to be black and there is no conflict in that. . . . it's been proven over the years that blacks can provide leadership in Congress."²⁵

A natural politician who was comfortable on the House Floor, Chairman Gray tactfully managed the often-explosive, partisan Budget Committee. Gray's congressional colleague Washington Democrat Mike Lowry speculated about the origins of Gray's ability to broker compromises: "It's maybe his professional training as a minister. He's a great judge of knowing how far he can push his members. He never gets mad."²⁶ Gray often was successful in unifying an increasingly diverse Democratic Party—and some Republicans—around a budget that incorporated his commitment to social spending. He also quelled initial Democratic concerns about the message a liberal northeastern African American in his powerful position would send to more-moderate voters by forging a strong coalition that spanned the party's broad fiscal spectrum. Surprisingly, Gray found strong allies in the "boll weevils," southern Democrats who tended to support the Ronald W. Reagan administration's cuts in social spending; two boll weevils, Representatives Marvin Leath and Stenholm, both from Texas, were among Gray's biggest supporters.²⁷

Despite his reputation for compromise, Gray did not back down from creating a budget that was consistent with his liberal Democratic ideals. He guided four successive Democratic budget resolutions through the House—often over vehement protests from many committee Republicans. One observer remarked, "Gray treated the

budget process as a political puzzle, not an economic problem; he saw the budget for what it is: a political statement rather than a blueprint for fiscal governance.”²⁸ However, the increasing federal deficit became a sticking point. Gray battled Republican attempts to reduce deficit spending. His focus was preserving funding for social programs, and he believed efforts to reduce the deficit should not override compassionate spending.²⁹ “A balanced budget is good for the country, the affluent and poor alike,” Gray noted. “I seek [a budget] that doesn’t sacrifice programs for the poor and minorities, one that is fair and equitable.”³⁰ The Budget Committee under Gray virtually ignored the Gramm–Rudman–Hollings Act of 1985 (revised in 1987), which demanded automatic budget cuts across the board if the President and Congress were unable to cap the deficit at a specific annual level.³¹ As a result, Gray oversaw the first trillion-dollar budget in U.S. history for fiscal year 1988. The Democratic Party’s show of unity regarding the Gray budgets was impressive, especially in view of the party’s growing fiscal diversity. Few of the Democratic rank and file voted against Gray’s budgets. A record low of 15 Democrats refused to support their party’s budget resolution in Gray’s first year as chairman. His first three budget resolutions combined totaled 53 “nay” votes from Democrats; previously, this figure was more typical for a single year.³²

Capitalizing on his favorable reputation in Democratic circles, Gray sought to move up in the party leadership. In 1987, Gray began lobbying to succeed Representative Richard Gephardt of Missouri as Chairman of the House Democratic Caucus in order to head party efforts to develop a consensus and dole out committee assignments. Though his work on the Budget Committee reflected Gray’s ability to unite Democrats, it was his efforts as chairman of the committee drafting the party platform for the 1988 Democratic Convention that truly shone. Gray’s committee brought together the broad

coalition of Democrats under a platform of “that which uniquely binds us together as Democrats.”³³ The House Democratic Caucus overwhelmingly elected Gray to Gephardt’s former position in December 1988. Again, Gray downplayed the milestone he had achieved as the first African-American chairman of the House Democratic Caucus, noting that his new position called for building coalitions, not representing one arm of the Democratic Party. “I hope we can tie our ropes together so we can be one party and show the nation what we stand for as Democrats,” Gray declared.³⁴ Just six months later, Gray took one more step up the leadership ladder when he succeeded Representative Tony Coelho of California as Majority Whip. In this position Gray was responsible for determining and coalescing votes from the Democratic Members for issues of party interest. With his ascent to Majority Whip, the third-ranking leadership position in the House, Gray became the highest-ranking African American in congressional history.

At the peak of his political power, Gray abruptly announced his resignation from Congress on June 20, 1991, effective the following September 11. He outlined his plan to head the United Negro College Fund (later known as the College Fund/UNCF)—which allocates federal money to augment the facilities, programs, and faculty at historically black colleges and universities—saying his new duties were “just as important as being a member of the leadership in Congress.” Gray’s departure sent shockwaves through the political community.³⁵ Gray served as President and CEO of the College Fund/UNCF until March 2004.³⁶ In 1994, President William J. (Bill) Clinton asked Gray to serve as his special adviser on Haiti, which was then embroiled in civil war. Gray’s efforts to restore democracy to the island nation won him a Medal of Honor from Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

FOR FURTHER READING

“Gray, William Herbert, III,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=G000402>.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

The New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (New York, NY). *Papers*: 1979–1991, 90 feet. The congressional papers of William Herbert Gray III have not yet been processed.

NOTES

- 1 Luix Overbea, “Pennsylvania’s Gray—Budgeteer, Congressman, and Minister,” 21 October 1985, *Christian Science Monitor*: 11.
- 2 “William H. Gray III,” in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Men* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1999): 478–481 (hereinafter referred to as *NBAM*).
- 3 “William H. Gray III,” *NBAM*; Ronald Sullivan, “Negro, Denied Apartment, Wins \$50 Court Award for ‘Trauma,’” 6 May 1970, *New York Times*: 1.
- 4 Gray served as pastor of Bright Hope Baptist Church until 2007. The position of head pastor was filled by a member of the Gray family for more than 80 years; see Philadelphia Baptist Association, “Our Churches” at <http://www.philadelphiabaptist.org/PBACHurches.htm> (accessed 27 February 2006).
- 5 “William H. Gray III,” *NBAM*.
- 6 *Politics in America, 1988* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1987): 1284; Brooks Jackson, “Many Blacks Show Little Urge to Vote,” 3 October 1980, *Wall Street Journal*: 1.
- 7 “William H. Gray III,” *NBAM*.
- 8 “Gray, William H., 3d,” *Current Biography, 1988* (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1988): 198.
- 9 Carla Hall, “Bill Gray, Baron of the Budget,” 24 May 1985, *Washington Post*: B1.
- 10 Hall, “Bill Gray, Baron of the Budget.”
- 11 *Politics in America, 1988*: 1285.
- 12 Hall, “Bill Gray, Baron of the Budget.”
- 13 Mary Russell, “Minister Proves Skillful Politician,” 21 January 1979, *Washington Post*: A3.
- 14 The only exception was in 1982, when Republican activist Milton Street ran as an Independent because he missed the filing date. However, Street’s misconduct, which included assault charges and unpaid taxes, boosted support for Gray, and he won easily, with 76 percent of the vote. See “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/election.html.



- 15 Hall, "Bill Gray, Baron of the Budget" (author's emphasis).
- 16 "Gray, William H., 3d," *Current Biography, 1988*: 200; Hall, "Bill Gray, Baron of the Budget."
- 17 "Gray, William H., 3d," *Current Biography, 1988*: 200.
- 18 Though Gray's bills (H.R. 5509 and H.R. 6288) did not pass, his measure was folded into a successful omnibus international development bill (H.R. 6942), which Gray cosponsored. See *Congressional Record*, 96th Cong., 2nd sess.
- 19 "William H. Gray III," *Contemporary Black Biography* Volume 3 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1992) (hereinafter referred to as *CBB*).
- 20 Shirley Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress* (Washington, DC: United States Capitol Historical Society, 1998): 34.
- 21 "Gray, William H., 3d," *Current Biography, 1988*: 198.
- 22 Dan Balz, "Minister May Head Budget Panel; Rep. Gray Has Quietly 'Done All the Right Things,'" 6 December 1984, *Washington Post*: A4.
- 23 Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 35; *Politics in America, 1988*: 1284.
- 24 Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 36.
- 25 Hall, "Bill Gray, Baron of the Budget."
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 36.
- 28 *Politics in America, 1990* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1989): 1273.
- 29 "William H. Gray III," *NBAM*; Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 36.
- 30 Overbea, "Pennsylvania's Gray—Budgeteer, Congressman, and Minister."
- 31 See James A. Thurber, "Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act," in Donald C. Bacon et al., *The Encyclopedia of the United States Congress*, Volume 1 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995): 129–130.
- 32 *Politics in America, 1988*: 1283.
- 33 "Gray, William H., 3d," *Current Biography, 1988*: 200. See also Herbert S. Parmet, "Election of 1988," in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., ed., *History of American Presidential Elections, 1789–2001*, Volume XI (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2002): 4229–4239.
- 34 Elaine S. Povich, "Black Democrat Gets No. 4 Post in House," 6 December 1988, *Chicago Tribune*: 4.
- 35 "Gray Tells Colleagues His Reasons for Resigning," 20 June 1991, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*: A3; quoted in "William H. Gray III," *NBAM*. A 1989 Justice Department probe into Gray's office staff as well as his personal and congressional finances fueled rumors that fiscal misconduct spurred his resignation. Accusations against Gray weakened when a top aide for U.S. Attorney General Dick Thornburgh was charged with leaking information on the investigation. Thornburgh repeatedly denied that Gray was the specific target of an investigation, and charges against Gray were never filed. See Paul M. Rodriguez and Jerry Seper, "Gray Quit After Start of Probe in FBI," 21 June 1991, *Washington Times*: A1; Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 37; "William H. Gray III," *CBB*; "Outgoing House Whip Says Financial Probe Just a Rumor," 22 June 1991, Associated Press.
- 36 See Michael Anft, "A Politician and Fund Raiser Returns to the Ministry," 30 October 2003, *The Chronicle of Higher Philanthropy*, at <http://www.philanthropy.com/free/articles/v16/i02/02006201.htm> (accessed 18 April 2008).



“THERE IS NO TITLE HERE CALLED
‘BLACK AMERICA BUDGET
CHAIRMAN,’” GRAY DECLARED.
“IT’S CALLED HOUSE BUDGET
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IT’S BEEN PROVEN OVER THE
YEARS THAT BLACKS CAN PROVIDE
LEADERSHIP IN CONGRESS.”