

Black congressional leaders stand on broad shoulders of few

by *Marc_H._Morial*

This year's Black History Month arrives just as black lawmakers are expected to have their greatest influence to date within the hallowed halls of the U.S. Congress. Not only did Americans last November vote for a sea change in Washington, D.C., they also paved the way for one of the most diverse House chambers in history, as well as House leaderships.

Two of the founding members of the Congressional Black Caucus, Rep. Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., and Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., have become the chairs of two of Capitol Hill's most influential panels - the House Ways and Means Committee and the House Judiciary Committee. Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., has taken the reins of the House Homeland Security Committee, while Rep. Juanita Millender McDonald, D-Calif., is leading the House Administration Committee.

Committee chairmanships aren't completely unheard of for black U.S. representatives. From 1868 to 2005, 16 had served as committee chairs, 15 in the House and one in the Senate, according to the Congressional Research Service's report on blacks in Congress from last August. The 110th Congress adds at least two more to that list.

Both Rangel and Conyers had served as chairmen in previous Congresses - Rangel on the Select Narcotics Abuse and Control Committee and Conyers on the House Government Operations Committee, a position held in the 1950s and 1960s by the first black to chair a committee, Rep. William Dawson, D-Ill.

Blacks officially secured the right to vote and serve in Congress through the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments that were ratified following the Civil War. Under the Civil Rights Act and the Reconstruction Act, Congress dissolved governments in formerly Confederate states, required them to forfeit their representation in Washington and to ensure citizenship rights for blacks, who were the majority population in several states and had aligned with the party of President Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation.

In 1870, Hiram Rhodes Revels, R-Miss., was the first black elected to the Senate, where he served the last year of the unexpired term of Jefferson Davis. That paved the way for the election of 23 other blacks to the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate during Reconstruction. In 1868, John Willis Menard, R-La., was the first black to win a U.S. House race but did not serve because he failed to fight off an election challenge from the man who ran against him and Congress decided not to fill the seat. In 1870, Joseph Rainey, R-S.C., was officially the first black in the House, where he served until 1879.

The disputed presidential election of 1876 quickly reversed the fortunes of black officeholders and voters in the South, however. As part of the Compromise of 1877, Republicans agreed to stay out of the South's affairs as long as Democrats conceded to the election of Rutherford B. Hayes as president and agreed to respect the

political rights of blacks. Southern Democrats regained their power in state legislatures and took steps to disenfranchise black voters through literacy tests, poll taxes and white primaries. George Henry White, R-N.C., served as the last black representative elected under Reconstruction until 1901.

It took nearly three decades for another black - Republican Oscar De Priest of Chicago - to win election and another 30 years for one to win a committee chairmanship - at least in the House. And nearly another three decades for a black to become chairman of a committee as powerful as the House Ways and Means Committee or House Judiciary Committee.

With a few exceptions, blacks tended to lead the lower-profile committees - such as the House Post Office and Civil Service Committee or House Government Operations Committee - or ones that had jurisdiction over "black" issues such as the House Committee on the District of Columbia and the House Education and Labor Committee. The CBC's first chairman - Rep. Charles Diggs, D-Mich., - led the D.C. panel for two Congresses in the 1970s, and Rep. Adam Clayton Powell Jr., D-N.Y., oversaw major social reforms of the 1960s as head of the House Education and Labor Committee from 1961 to 1967. During the 103rd Congress, Rep. Ronald Dellums, D-Calif., proved an exception when he headed the House Armed Services Committee, and Rep. William Gray, D-Pa., a former president of the United Negro College Fund, chaired the House Budget Committee for two Congresses during his tenure from the late 1970s to 1991.

In the mid- to late-1970s Rep. Yvonne B. Burke, D-Calif., the first female black chair, led perhaps the most glamorous yet not the most powerful panel - the House Select Beauty Shop Committee - and also became the first female to head the CBC. Augustus F. Hawkins, D-Calif., who served in the House from 1963 to 1991, probably holds the distinction for most committees chaired in a congressional career at least among blacks, having headed up the House Education and Labor and Administration committees as well as the Joint Committee on Printing, Joint Committee on the Library and the Joint Economic Committee.

The Ways and Means chairmanship is a long time coming for Rangel, who threatened to retire if Republicans continued to control the institution in 2007. His patience won him one of the most coveted chairmanships, putting him in charge of writing the nation's tax laws. Ironically, he stands on the shoulders of the man he defeated to win election to the House back in 1970 - Powell, the second black to lead a House committee.

A prominent civil rights activist before going to Washington, Powell was a charismatic politician whose enduring catchphrase, "Keep the Faith, Baby" ended up the title of a spoken word album he released in the early 1960s. His leadership of the House Education and Labor Committee came at a critical juncture in U.S. history. At the height of the civil rights movement, he played a major role in getting important social legislation through Congress - such as President John Kennedy's "New Freedom" legislation and President Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society" social programs. His committee set a record for number of bills approved in one session - 50 - that still stands today. But his tenure in the House eventually ended in a cloud of controversy. Accused of misappropriating committee funds for his personal use, the Democratic leadership stripped him of his chairmanship and the House excluded him in 1967. The full House excluded him in 1968 but he was able through the courts to win back his seat but not his clout.

It is my hope that Rangel and Conyers, as well as Thompson and McDonald, will match the output of their predecessors as our new Congress attempts to move our country into a new direction. It is my hope that we see a black Appropriations Committee chair in the not-too-distant future.

Â© Copley News Service

Black congressional leaders stand on broad shoulders of few by Marc_H._Morial