

CONGRESSMAN MELVIN L. WATT – BIOGRAPHY

Melvin L. Watt ("Mel") was born in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina on August 26, 1945. He is a graduate of York Road High School in Charlotte. He was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1967 with a BS degree in Business Administration and was the president of the business honors fraternity as a result of having the highest academic average in the Business School. In 1970 he received a JD degree from Yale University Law School and was a published member of the Yale Law Journal. He has been awarded honorary degrees from North Carolina A&T State University, Johnson C. Smith University, Bennett College and Fisk University.

Mel practiced law from 1970-1992, specializing in minority business and economic development law in a general practice law firm best known for its civil rights reputation. He has been an owner of several small businesses.

Mel was the campaign manager of Harvey Gantt's campaigns for City Council, for Mayor of Charlotte and for the United States Senate. Mel served one term in the North Carolina Senate (1985-86) where he was called "the conscience of the Senate." He did not seek a second term in the state Senate and announced that he would not consider running for elective office again until his children completed high school.

Mel is married to Eulada Paysour Watt, an educator. They have two sons, Brian and Jason, both of whom are graduates of Yale University and have earned graduate degrees.

Mel is a member of the Mt. Olive Presbyterian Church and a life member of the NAACP. He served as president of the Mecklenburg County Bar and has been a member of many professional, community and civic boards and organizations.

In 1992, Mel was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from North Carolina's 12th Congressional District and became one of only two African American members elected to Congress from North Carolina in the 20th century.

Mel is a member of the House Financial Services Committee, on which he is the Chairman of the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee and serves on the Financial Institutions Subcommittee. Mel is also on the House Judiciary Committee, on which he serves on the Subcommittee on Courts, the Internet and Intellectual Property, the Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties and the Subcommittee on Commercial and Administrative Law. Mel was unanimously elected and served as the Chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus (2005-2006).

Mel enjoys tennis, running, reading and music. Since 1995 he has been the starting pitcher for the Democratic baseball team in the annual Congressional Baseball Game and was named most valuable player in 1995, 1996 and 2000.

MEL WATT IN CONGRESS – THE PROPHECY OF GEORGE H. WHITE

On January 29, 1901 Congressman George H. White of North Carolina delivered his farewell speech on the floor of the United States House of Representatives. He had lost his election in November 1900 when 539 votes had been cast in one township in which there were only 345 registered voters and 492 more people than were registered in another township had voted against him. George H. White was the last African American Member of Congress following Reconstruction. White concluded his speech with the following historic words: “This, Mr. Chairman, is perhaps the Negroes’ temporary farewell to the American Congress; but let me say, Phoenix-like, he will rise up some day and come again.”

Over 90 years later, in 1992, Mel Watt and Eva Clayton became the first African Americans elected to Congress from North Carolina since George H. White’s prophetic speech. They were both elected from districts drawn under the Voting Rights Act – districts drawn against a historical backdrop that included the 1900 election stolen from George H. White, North Carolina’s continuing practice of depriving African Americans of the vote by sundry methods and a persistent pattern of racially polarized voting. This backdrop had made it impossible for African Americans to be elected to Congress from North Carolina for over 90 years and it insured that litigation about the legality of the districts would be immediate and protracted.

The U.S. Supreme Court finally resolved the litigation and approved North Carolina’s congressional districts in 2001. By then, Mel Watt’s district had been reconfigured in five different ways and each configuration had been subjected to extensive judicial review. Through it all, Mel had won reelection handily in each district configuration in which an election was held and he has won reelection to represent North Carolina’s 12th Congressional District in every election since.

Throughout the eight terms Mel Watt has been in Congress, he has served on the Judiciary Committee and on the Financial Services Committee, at various times serving on each of the Subcommittees of both Committees.

On the Judiciary Committee, Mel’s tenure includes service on:

- The Subcommittee on Immigration & Claims, on which Mel served as Ranking Member during the 1997-98 and 1999-2000 terms of Congress;
- The Subcommittee on the Constitution, on which Mel currently serves and has served throughout his tenure in Congress and on which he served as Ranking Member during the 2001-02 term of Congress;
- The Subcommittee on Commercial and Administrative Law, on which Mel currently serves and on which he served as Ranking Member during the 2003-04 and 2005-06 terms of Congress;
- The Subcommittee on Crime, on which Mel has served a total of six years; and
- The Subcommittee on Courts, the Internet and Intellectual Property, on which Mel currently serves.

During Mel’s service on the Judiciary Committee, he has used his legal education and 22 years of legal practice and experience prior to being elected to Congress to be an active participant in shaping public policy on a broad range of important, yet often difficult and controversial, matters. These matters include:

- In the area of criminal law, efforts to craft the appropriate balance between the rights of criminal defendants and the rights of victims of crime and the public and the appropriate balance between prevention, punishment and rehabilitation;

- The impeachment of President William Jefferson Clinton;
- In the aftermath of 9/11, efforts to craft the appropriate balance between homeland security and individual liberties and personal privacy in a number of areas (e.g. the Patriot Act, presidential powers, arrests, deportations, etc); and
- Negotiating the agreement and leading the bi-partisan extension of the Voting Rights Act for an additional 25 years in 2006.

Mel's tenure on the Financial Services Committee includes service on:

- The Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, on which Mel currently serves as Chairman;
- The Financial Institutions and Consumer Credit Subcommittee, on which Mel currently serves and has served for 14 years;
- The Housing and Community Opportunity Subcommittee, on which Mel served for 6 years;
- The Capital Markets, Insurance & Government Sponsored Enterprises Subcommittee, on which Mel served for 2 years; and
- The Domestic and International Monetary Policy Subcommittee, on which Mel served for 10 years.

During his service on the Financial Services Committee, Mel has balanced the interests of his consumer constituents and the interests of his financial services/business constituents (the 12th District is home to the second largest concentration of financial services entities of any congressional district in the country, second only to the district that includes New York's Wall Street area). Important issues under the jurisdiction of the Financial Services Committee on which Mel has played an active role in shaping public policy include:

- Legislation providing for the creation of Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) to enhance community development lending*;
- The Gramm-Leach-Bliley legislation which authorized mixing banking, securities, insurance and other financial services in the same corporation, subject to certain limitations;
- Ongoing efforts to increase access to affordable housing (ownership, rental and public), including reauthorizing and improving the HOPE VI Program, Section 8 vouchers and homeownership opportunities;
- The Sarbanes-Oxley legislation which enhanced corporate responsibility (officers, directors and accounting) in response to abuses at Enron; and
- Ongoing efforts to reduce predatory, discriminatory and other unfair and abusive lending practices.

In addition to his service on the Judiciary and Financial Services Committee, Mel also served two terms (2001-02 and 2003-04) on the Joint Economic Committee, one of the few Committees in Congress with membership from the House and the Senate.

In 2005 Mel was unanimously elected Chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). During his tenure as Chair (2005-06), he successfully refined the agenda of the CBC to refocus on the CBC's historic mission of closing and eliminating disparities between African Americans and others, led the CBC in crafting the only comprehensive legislation that was introduced in response to Hurricane Katrina and led the successful effort to reauthorize, improve and extend the Voting Rights Act.

Mel's responsibilities have necessitated substantial international engagement on a broad range of matters, including governance and the rule of law, poverty and development (including Millennium Challenge matters), HIV/AIDS and other health matters, finance (monetary, accounting and international institutions), law enforcement and counterterrorism (especially issues related to money laundering and financing), protection of intellectual property, human rights and genocide, the environment and many others. This has required travel to a number of countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, South America and the Caribbean.

*A leading CDFI, Self-Help Credit Union, is based in North Carolina and is active in the 12th Congressional District. A non-profit formed by Self Help, the Center for Responsible Lending, has been a strong advocate against predatory lending.

OFFICIAL PHOTOS



Congressman Watt speaks at the opening of the Rams Common dormitory at Winston-Salem State University.



Congressman Watt explains the legislative process to 12th District students visiting Washington.



Congressman Watt works as a bank teller in Greensboro during Trading Places.



Congressman Watt tours Kurz, Inc. in Charlotte and learns how hot foil stamping can help protect against counterfeit currency. Kurz is one of many cutting-edge companies located in the 12th Congressional District.



Congressman Watt catches a ride at Concord Regional Airport during his annual Trading Places week.

ARTICLES OF INTEREST

February 27, 2007

Watt's success fulfills his mother's wish

DAVID PERLMUTT

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DAVID T. FOSTER III/Observer Staff

U.S. Rep. Mel Watt, D-N.C., of Charlotte, talks about his work as a campaign manager for Harvey Gantt, as well as his service in Congress since 1992.

In many ways, Mel Watt's life tells the story of African American accomplishment in Charlotte.

Rising from poverty to a national stage, Watt and his two brothers were raised by a single mother, Evelyn Herron, who was determined her three sons would achieve. They did. After graduating from UNC Chapel Hill, Watt went to Yale Law School and was persuaded by civil rights lawyer Julius Chambers to return home and join Chambers' Charlotte firm in 1971.

After managing Harvey Gantt's city council and mayoral races in the 1970s and '80s and Gantt's failed 1990 U.S. Senate campaign, Watt, now 61, was persuaded by Gantt to run for the U.S. House -- a seat he's held in North Carolina's 12th District since 1992.

A former chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, Watt and retired Rep. Eva Clayton were the first blacks from North Carolina to be elected to the House since 1901.

• MEL WATT | In his own words

As told to Staff Writer David Perlmutt

My mother had her first child when she was 13, my oldest brother (Graham). She was 15 when she had her second child, my other brother (Rudy). And me when she was barely 18. By the time I was 5, she was divorced.

So basically she grew up with us.

I was born in the Dixie community, between what is now I-485 and the Catawba River. We were poor as dirt. No inside toilets. No running water, or electricity. But she always sent the message that we would make it. I never knew

we were poor until I got older because she never let us know it. She could stretch a pot of beans, and overcome obstacles, better than anybody I ever knew.

When I get faced with challenges, I say, "Hey, this is nothing compared to what my mama went through -- dropping out of school to raise three boys." She kept us focused on achieving.

She started out as a domestic, then a school janitor. She worked in a warehouse and ultimately got her GED after the three of us had graduated from high school. She had a long career working for the U.S. Postal Service.

To overcome all of her obstacles and end up with three sons who are achievers is stunning. Education was important. If she hadn't pushed us, I never would have been able to fall under the influence of Julius Chambers and Harvey Gantt.

After my first year at Carolina, I was home for the summer -- about 1964. I was at my dentist, and he wanted me to meet this young lawyer who was setting up his practice in his building.

When I walked in, Julius and his wife, Vivian, were still setting up a library. I didn't know what a lawyer was, except that my mama had to go to domestic court to try to get support from my daddy.

I started to read about Julius. He was taking on tough cases. We stayed in loose contact, but to be totally honest, I left North Carolina to go to Yale with no intention of coming back.

It was Chambers who talked me into coming back. It was Chambers who talked Harvey Gantt into coming to Charlotte. He was the black Chamber of Commerce -- talking just about every professional person of my generation into coming here.

After my second year of law school, I worked part of the summer in his firm. I think we started to assume that after I finished school I would come to the law firm. Then I started getting dollar figures in my eyes and reneged for a little bit. I had offers all over the country.

But Julius said, "You have an offer right here, and you can make an impact. Here you can help the people you grew up with and rather than separating yourself from them, you can bring them along with you."

That was a compelling, powerfully persuasive argument.

I came into politics through the back door.

Harvey Gantt had been appointed to city council to fill a seat left by Fred Alexander, who'd gone to the state Senate. There were three black factions in Charlotte who couldn't coalesce behind a candidate, so (Mayor) John Belk appointed Harvey.

Then he had to run. It was about 1974. We knew each other, and one day he called and says, "I want you to manage my campaign." I said, "Harvey, I know nothing about managing a campaign. I'm a lawyer, and if you had any sense you'd get someone from one of the factions. I'm not politically involved."

And Harvey said, "You're exactly what I want. If I get someone from one faction, I'm going to alienate the other two."

So I started managing the campaign, and we didn't have a clue what we were doing. Then a couple years later another campaign and a couple years after that another. Every two years since I managed that first campaign, I've either managed a Harvey Gantt campaign or been a candidate.

We had just lost the 1990 U.S. Senate campaign (to former Sen. Jesse Helms), and Harvey Gantt was the most popular black man in North Carolina. I called Harvey up and said, "Let's go for the U.S. House; I'm ready to manage a successful campaign."

He said, "I'm not running." He didn't want to be perceived as someone who ran for anything.

He said, "I'm not in this just to be a politician."

"You run."

BLACK HISTORY MONTH | Showing Me the Way

For 28 days, the Observer has marked Black History Month by spotlighting Charlotte-region African Americans paying homage to those who inspired or mentored them. Today's spotlight on U.S. Rep. Mel Watt is the final one.

CBC's Watt Reaches Out

Chairman Appeals to Both Parties

By Erin P. Billings
Roll Call Staff

February 14, 2005

After just five weeks on the job, the new chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus is intent on breaking down walls and proving that minority issues aren't the concern of just one party.

As leader of the CBC, Rep. Mel Watt (D-N.C.) doesn't want to see the group's issues become mired in partisanship and gain only the ear of traditionally sympathetic Democrats. Watt, an attorney long known for trying to build consensus, has a different goal for the 43-member black caucus: Promote the group's agenda with whoever is willing to listen.

"This is not about reaching out or trying to be one thing or another," Watt said in a recent interview. "I'm trying to advance an agenda."

The agenda centers around championing initiatives and legislation that close the inequality gap between white and black Americans. Whether it's jobs, education or health care, Watt said Democrats and Republicans alike must recognize and support policies that ensure everyone is treated fairly and equally.

With a laugh, Watt acknowledged he sounds like a broken record at times, but stressed that all the individual issues for which the CBC advocates fit within the framework of "closing disparities." He said he might be viewed as "articulating it more aggressively than previous chairs, but it's not inconsistent with the philosophy of the CBC."



To advance this broad theme, Watt has already met with President Bush and sought meetings with GOP Congressional leaders including Speaker Dennis Hastert (Ill.) and Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (Tenn.). Likewise, he's sat down to promote the CBC agenda with House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.).

Watt said he's trying to work within all political circles to "build coalitions and mobilize forces."

"I'm saying I'm not going to measure you on whether you are a Democrat or a Republican," Watt said. "I'm going to measure you on your willingness and commitment to closing these disparities.

"It's not a Democrat or Republican agenda, it's an American agenda," he added.

And don't think for one minute that even though he wants to work with both sides, he won't call Republicans or Democrats to the carpet if and when they fall short of advancing minority rights, Watt said. He noted that after meeting with Bush late last month, he made it clear that the CBC expected more from the president than lip service.

As evidence of that, Watt slammed Bush's State of the Union speech for failing to "acknowledge the dramatic extent to which disparities continue to exist in every area of our lives." He also called Bush's budget resolution "insulting" to the needs of black Americans and has criticized the president's Social Security reform plans as likely to increase poverty rates for black Americans.

"I'm not making a conscious effort to change perceptions," Watt said, acknowledging that all current CBC members are Democrats. "And I'm certainly not trying to change realities."

In a lot of ways, Watt's approach fits well with the long-standing motto of an organization: "No permanent enemies, no permanent friends, just permanent interests."

Watt succeeded Rep. Elijah Cummings (D-Md.) on Jan. 4 and immediately convened a retreat with CBC members to put together their plan for the 109th Congress, hoping to rally support around an agenda for the next two years.

The North Carolina Democrat said beyond achieving results for the CBC on its agenda, he wants to build internal unity among the members to build their influence. He said a key is recognizing that members all have individual goals and they are lawmakers, not just CBC members.

"I'd like us to see us be unified, voting together, messaging together, educating together," Watt said. "I'm not saying to any member that you must talk about the CBC agenda, solely. But when we're acting in the interests of the CBC to keep those interests uppermost in their minds."

Cummings said Watt is not ego-driven, but willing to delegate duties and tap into members' strengths to best promote CBC issues. He added that Watt is cautious and calm, and viewed within the group as "fair and sensitive to all of our concerns."

“We know he’s going to do the right thing,” Cummings said.

Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.) said Watt has “the right temperament and ability to give us the kind of leadership we need to bring us to a unified position.”

“He has that reach-out quality,” Conyers said. “That’s critical because it would be very easy for us to become insular and antagonistic. Watt’s style will work to our benefit.”

New York Times

April 29, 2000

PUBLIC LIVES; He Has Reason to Ponder the Shape of Things to Come

By KEVIN SACK

SITTING in his nondescript office, stealing bites of a turkey club between his 1 o'clock with the editorial board and his 2:30 with the bank president, Representative Melvin Watt begins to wonder whether his district office here is still within his Congressional district. It used to be. That much he knows. But now? There's no telling.

Mr. Watt, a black Democrat from nearby Charlotte, can be forgiven his confusion. His district, North Carolina's 12th, has been drawn three different ways in four years, thanks to a protracted court battle that has made it one of the most litigated gerrymanders in history. While Americans fill out their census forms to help determine the shape and allocation of Congressional districts for 10 years to come, the courts are still trying to decide how the North Carolina 12th should have been configured for the last eight.

More than any of his 434 colleagues in the House, Mr. Watt has been caught between the Voting Rights Act's prohibition against the dilution of minority voting strength and the Supreme Court's 1995 edict that race cannot be used as a predominant factor in designing legislative districts.

Though he regrets the instability and feels that the case has dragged on far too long, Mr. Watt said it had been important to battle those who argue that minority candidates no longer need special help in overcoming racial voting patterns. Even he agrees that the North Carolina General Assembly, the state's legislature, went too far in 1992 when it created a bizarrely shaped district where 53 percent of the voting-age population was black. But the playing field still needs leveling, he said, because even now many whites refuse to consider black candidates.

"There are still whites who under no circumstance will vote for a black person," he said. "They're never going to touch me, they're never going to be in a room with me. As far as they're concerned, I'm not their congressman."

Under pressure from the Bush administration to create majority-black districts in 1992, the General Assembly concocted a 165-mile-long district that connected black population centers in Charlotte, Greensboro and Durham with a tether that was often no wider than Interstate 85. One of Mr. Watt's opponents that year observed that he could "drive down I-85 with both car doors open and hit every person in the district."

That map was rejected by the Supreme Court in 1996 as an unconstitutional racial gerrymander. A new plan was drawn in 1997 but was struck down by a federal district court before it could be used in 1998. The legislature then devised a third plan, which was used that year but was thrown out by the district court last month. The Supreme Court ordered that the never-used 1997 plan be dusted off for the primaries next Tuesday, while holding out the remote possibility that the lines will be redrawn again before the general election in November. Understand?

"It's a nuisance," said Mr. Watt, who is running this year for a fifth term. "I guess if I hadn't practiced law for 22 years and didn't understand exactly what was happening each time, I could get exasperated by it."

CLEARLY, Mr. Watt's constituents are exasperated. They write him letters of utter puzzlement, and he has devoted much of his breakneck Easter recess schedule to explaining the changes. It took more than an hour to fashion a written explanation to one woman.

"I'm currently her representative but I'm not going to be running in the same district that I currently represent so next year I can't be her representative because the district lines will have changed and she's going out," he said, sucking in air. "I mean, you know, it's almost impossible to explain that to somebody."

Mr. Watt, 54, has learned to tailor his community presentations, depending on whether he is speaking on old turf or new. He has had to resist the temptation to shun areas where those he helps will no longer be eligible to return the favor by voting for him in November. On Tuesday night, Democratic officials held a "Welcome Back Mel" reception in Greensboro, a city that was originally in his district, then was out, and now is back in again.

The endless redistricting has also confounded the three candidates vying in the Republican primary to challenge Mr. Watt. All three spent time campaigning in areas where, as things have turned out, there are now no votes. One of them, Chad Mitchell, has discovered that he no longer lives in the district, but is running anyway. (Members of Congress do not have to live in the districts they represent.)

Mr. Watt was born just outside Charlotte on Aug. 26, 1945, and grew up in a house without electricity or running water. He became one of the first black students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, got a law degree from Yale and then established a civil rights law practice in Charlotte.

His introduction to politics came as a strategist, not a candidate. He ran the groundbreaking mayoral campaign of his friend Harvey Gantt, who became Charlotte's first black mayor, and then managed Mr. Gantt's storied 1990 challenge to Senator Jesse Helms.

After that hardball campaign, in which he and Mr. Gantt failed to anticipate Mr. Helms's racially divisive tactics, Mr. Watt decided to move out of the back rooms and into the spotlight. As both a candidate and a congressman, he has been known for a courtly manner, dapper dress and a continuing passion for civil rights and other traditionally liberal causes.

The district that Mr. Watt will run in this year is actually better for him than the previous one, though not so advantageous as the 1992 lines. The voting-age population will be 43 percent black and 71 percent Democratic, as opposed to 33 percent black and 65 percent Democratic in 1998, when his share of the vote dropped.

As the shape of his district has changed, Mr. Watt has had to shift some priorities and study issues once unfamiliar. Because the 1998 plan added large parts of rural Rowan County, site of a V.A. hospital, he found himself taking aggressive stands in favor of veterans' programs and dairy price supports. Sometimes, he says, his district's rural interests collide with its urban interests.

"You water down your primary focus," he said. "But you've got to get re-elected, and so you've got to advocate the issues of those who send you to represent them."



The State of the Community: A Democrat's Perspective

Written by

MELVIN L. WATT

U.S. Congressman, North Carolina

Melvin L. Watt ("Mel") was born in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina on August 26, 1945. He is a graduate of York Road High School in Charlotte. He was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1967 with a BS degree in Business Administration and was president of the business honors fraternity as a result of having the highest academic average in the Business School. In 1970 he received a JD degree from Yale University Law School and was a published member of the Yale Law Journal. He has been awarded honorary degrees from North Carolina A&T State University, Johnson C. Smith University, Bennett College and Fisk University.

Mel practiced law from 1970-1992 and has been a small business owner. In 1992, Mel was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from North Carolina's 12th Congressional District and became one of only two African American members elected to Congress from North Carolina in the 20th century.

Mel is a member of the House Financial Services Committee where he serves on the Financial Institutions Subcommittee, the Domestic and International Monetary Policy Subcommittee and the Capital Markets, Insurance and Government Sponsored Enterprises Subcommittee. Mel is also on the House Judiciary Committee on which he is the Ranking Member on the Subcommittee on Commercial and Administrative Law. In December of 2004, Mel was unanimously elected Chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus.



hen U. S. Representative

George H. White of North Carolina rose to address the House on January 29, 1901 he was the last African American remaining in Congress following Reconstruction. By then all other African-American members of Congress had been defeated or turned away by the systematic removal of Black voters from the voting roles or by the refusal to allow Black citizens to register through such racist means as poll taxes, literacy tests, fraud, intimidation and other overt and covert tactics. Making it clear that his election had been stolen from him, Representative White cited voting returns from his election defeat confirming that in one township where only 345 voters were registered 539 voters had voted against him and in another township 492 more votes had been cast against him than

there were registered voters. White climaxed his speech to the House with these historic words: "This, Mr. Chairman, is perhaps the Negroes' temporary farewell to the American Congress; but let me say, Phoenix-like, he will rise up some day and come again."

Surely Representative White could not have imagined that his prophesy would take so long. But after his historic speech and departure from Congress in 1901, it was 1927 before the next African American (Oscar DePriest) was elected to Congress and only four African Americans were elected to the House over the next 50 years and none were elected to the Senate. It was not until the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965 established national legal protections against discriminatory election practices that African Americans started to be elected to Congress in larger numbers and not until 1993, when Representative Eva Clayton and I were elected to Congress, that Representative White's prophetic

words would apply to the election of another African-American member of Congress from his home state of North Carolina.

While there are now 43 African-American members of Congress (42 in the House and one in the Senate), Caucus in the 2005 – 2006 term of Congress.

On May 2, 2006, after months of behind-the-scenes negotiations and drafting, a broad array of members and all the leaders of the House and Senate, Republicans and Democrats alike, gathered at a press conference on the East steps of the U.S. Capitol to announce the introduction of bipartisan and bi-cameral legislation to reauthorize the expiring provisions of the Voting Rights Act. The legislation was entitled the Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King Voting Rights Reauthorization and Amendments Act of 2006 as a fitting tribute to these great heroines of the voting rights and civil rights movement.

The Act extends for 25 more years provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that would have expired in 2007.

The provisions that were set to expire included the requirement that states with a long history of discouraging citizens from voting obtain judicial or Justice Department “preclearance” of any changes proposed to voting procedures before implementing the changes and the requirement that, under certain circumstances, bilingual language assistance be provided to citizens who do not speak English.

The Act also clarifies the conditions under which the Justice Department may send federal observers when there are reasonable grounds to believe that violations of voting rights are about to occur and clarifies language in the progress toward the fulfillment of Representative George H. White’s prophesy has been long and hard. Much of this progress would certainly not have occurred without the passage and implementation of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and subsequent extensions of this landmark law.

Important provisions of the Voting Rights Act were scheduled to expire in

2007. As a beneficiary of the Voting Rights Act and as a North Carolina successor to Representative George H. White, I could not have been more keenly aware of how important extending these expiring provisions of the Voting Rights Act would be to continuing the progress that had been made. I could never have imagined, however, how personally fulfilling it would be to be directly involved in every aspect of the process that led to the passage of this historic extension and to do so during my tenure as Chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus in the 2005 – 2006 term of Congress.

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Supreme Court.

The Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King Voting Rights Act Reauthorization and Amendments Act of 2006 passed the House on July 13 by a vote of 390 – 33, passed the Senate on July 20 by a vote of 98 – 0, and was signed into law by the President on July 27, 2006.

As I stood behind President Bush at the White House the day he signed the legislation into law, I could not help but feel a touch of vindication for the many African American voters who had been deprived of their most basic rights as citizens – the right to vote. I also could not help but lament the fact that it had taken 92 years to fulfill Rep. George H. White's prophesy that African Americans would "rise up some day and come again" from North Carolina and how ironic it was for me to be actively involved in the reauthorization process.

The November 2006 elections, like many prior elections, provided fresh evidence of the importance of continuing to work to secure equal voting rights for all Americans. By going to the polls, African American voters helped elect the first African American governor of Massachusetts and were instrumental in helping the Democratic Party recapture voting majorities in the U.S. House and Senate. This change in leadership paved the way for senior members of the Congressional Black Caucus to become Chairs of important House committees (Ways and Means, Judiciary, Homeland Security, House Administration and Ethics) as well as numerous subcommittees. From these posts, African Americans will have unprecedented influence and ability to affect federal policies in virtually every area of everyday life.

While African Americans can boast of much progress in the area of voting rights, efforts to discourage, suppress or dilute minority votes are still all too common. Passage of the Voting Rights Reauthorization Act of 2006 paid some well-deserved tribute to Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King, for whom the extension

legislation was named. Passage also paid tribute to former Representative George H. White and his 1901 prophesy and to current Representatives John Lewis (a brave leader of the civil rights movement that led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act) and John Conyers (a member of the House who served on the Judiciary Committee in 1965 when the Voting Rights Act was originally enacted and each time the Voting Rights Act has been extended since then and will now serve as Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee). We must continue to honor the sacrifices of these leaders and the many others who fought, struggled and died for equal voting rights throughout the history of this country. The most important way to honor them is by reaffirming our commitment to assuring that every citizen has an equal opportunity to participate in the political process and by reaffirming our commitment to vote in every election.



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WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL

By Mary M. Shaffrey
JOURNAL WASHINGTON BUREAU
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2006

WASHINGTON - At the end of President Bush's State of the Union Address on Tuesday night, Rep. Mel Watt raced from the House chamber to Statuary Hall, where reporters and television crews swarmed, waiting to get congressional reaction to the speech.

"Have you seen him yet?" Watt's press secretary asked as he frantically tried to find his boss and make sure that Watt's views on the speech were heard.

As the chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, Watt, D-12th, has the responsibility to try to make black Americans' concerns audible above the din of Washington politics.

That's no easy task. Watt leads a minority group within the minority political party. Though the caucus is technically nonpartisan, all its members are Democrats, and their politics tend to be more liberal than the party as a whole.

"They (Republicans) have pretty much ignored them, and it's not Mel's fault," said Ronald Walters, the director of the African-American Leadership Institute at the University of Maryland.

"They exist as Democrats in a parliamentary body that is totally controlled by Republicans. (The caucus) is minimally influential," he said.

Watt acknowledged the problem during his first weekly caucus radio speech on Jan. 6.

"Last year was an extremely busy year. Unfortunately the CBC spent a disproportionate part of our time fighting against proposals, policies and events that would increase, not close the gaps our agenda (focuses) on eliminating," Watt said.

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The caucus consists of 43 members representing 19 states, the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The members' districts are diverse, ranging from urban downtown Los Angeles, to rural Eastern North Carolina, and literally everything in between. All but one member - Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois - is in the House of Representatives.

Watt said he tries to balance the needs of the diverse coalition by staying focused on the areas on which members agree - among them a strong federal reaction to Hurricane Katrina, reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act and opposition to judges who they believe will erode civil rights.

"On our agenda, there is not an ounce of dissent. There are other issues out there, but they are not inside the core of our agenda," Watt said.

His approach to issues

Over his career, Watt, 60, has learned to pick his battles carefully. It is a skill that his friends say serves him well as the leader of the black caucus.

"He has an analytical mind, and he instantly looks at the commonalities instead of the divergent interests," said James Ferguson II, the president of the Charlotte law firm where Watt worked for more than 20 years before winning his congressional seat in 1992.

Even people who don't share Watt's political ideology believe that he is the right man for the caucus job because of his analytical approach to issues.

"Mel is a leader," said U.S. Sen. Richard Burr, R-N.C. "You can't fight every battle you'd like to and still be a leader," Burr said.

For 10 years, Burr represented the 5th Congressional District, which is adjacent to Watt's. Both districts include parts of Forsyth County.

At a town hall meeting in High Point last summer Watt told constituents that he wouldn't take potshots at President Bush or Republicans, but instead would focus on issues and ideas.

"I am unhappy with what the president is doing, but I am going to resist the temptation to criticize," Watt said, noting that he had Republican constituents too.

Though he says he hates the culture of partisanship in Washington, he has never backed away from a fight when he thinks Republicans have gone too far, and he did not shy away from criticizing the president's State of the Union Address last week.

"It's quite obvious that this man lives in a different world than I do and my constituents do. The State of the Union Address has become an excuse to paint a rosy picture, instead of how things really are," Watt said Tuesday night.

District of poor, wealthy

For all but two years of his tenure, Watt has been in the minority party in Congress. He was elected in 1992, and is the only person to have represented the 12th Congressional District, which was formed after the 1990 census.

The district snakes from Greensboro to Charlotte, roughly following Interstate 85.

In the 1990s, a series of lawsuits challenged the district as unconstitutional. The Almanac of American Politics called the original district "a series of black precincts connected in some places by nothing wider than the lanes of Interstate 85."

The current district lines were drawn in 2001. Watt has comfortably won re-election against his Republican opponents, garnering more than 65 percent of the vote. John Kerry won the district in 2004, with 63 percent of the vote.

Watt may face a vigorous Republican challenge this year: Vernon Robinson, a former Winston-Salem City Council member, filed paperwork with the Federal Election Commission last month signaling his interest in the seat.

In some ways, the 12th Congressional District is a study in dichotomies: More than one-quarter of its residents live below the poverty level, but it also contains the second-highest concentration of banking interests in the country.

Banks have been generous donors to Watt's campaign, according to campaign-finance data collected by the Center for Responsive Politics. In 2004, Watt's top corporate donors were Wachovia Corp., Bank of America and the American Bankers Association. He sits on the House Finance Services committee.

"Mel Watt doesn't fit into any cubby-holes," said Paul Stock, the executive vice president of the N.C. Bankers Association.

Stock said that Watt's record and philosophy is more liberal than that of the association, but that they have always found him willing to listen and to work with them when he could. And when they don't agree on something, Stock said that they are often left wondering why.

"He's a very smart guy, and he's always willing to listen ... and when you fail to convince him of something, he almost has you convinced when you leave his office that he is right."

Watt has had little success sponsoring legislation that made its way into law, but his voting record clearly reflects his liberal politics.

According to the Almanac of American Politics, Watt had an 8 percent approval rating from the American Conservative Union and a 95 percent rating from Americans for Democratic Action, a liberal organization, in 2004, the most recent year on record.

In 1996 he was widely criticized for being the only member of Congress to vote against a law requiring convicted sex offenders to register once they were released from prison.

Watt was certain that the Supreme Court would declare the law unconstitutional.

"We hadn't asked people to register since the Japanese (during World War II), and that's what Megan's Law required people to do," Watt said.

The Supreme Court later said that the law passed constitutional muster, a decision that Watt says he accepts.

"I said, 'OK, they are the ultimate authority,'" Watt said.

Rep. Bobby Scott, D-Va., said that Watt believes that "if you are going to protect civil rights, you have to protect everyone's civil rights."

Watt says that his reverence for constitutional law stems from law classes at Yale University with Robert Bork, a former Supreme Court nominee and noted conservative scholar.

When his House colleagues have a question about constitutional law, they frequently turn to him.

After Republicans won control of the House in 1994, Watt waged a miniwar against what he saw as their assault on the Constitution. On one occasion, when they proposed

a bill allowing warrantless searches, he offered as a replacement bill the text of the Fourth Amendment, which bars unreasonable searches. The maneuver put Republicans in the uncomfortable situation of voting against the Constitution.

There are signs that Watt may be mellowing. When the Judiciary Committee was debating a bill last fall that essentially would have allowed the government to skirt international law by basing American law only on the U.S. Constitution, Watt speculated that if the bill had been before him 10 years ago, he would have railed against it.

Grew up in segregated South

As chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, a group focused on civil rights, Watt is a long way from the young man who didn't question segregation as he was growing up in a segregated Charlotte neighborhood.

"That was the social mores of the times," Watt said. "There has always been a fight out there, but you kind of pick your fights and figure out which ones you are going to fight about and which ones you ain't."

Watt grew up in a section of Charlotte known as Dixie. His mother was a single parent, and they lived in a house with one room and a tin roof and without indoor plumbing or electricity. He drove a school bus to make money, and attended segregated schools.

"The great thing about, if you can say there was anything great about segregated education, is that teachers in segregated schools forced you to do everything. We did not have any options," Watt said.

He says he never thought much about what he was going to do when he grew up. He says he was a "smart aleck," and in ninth grade a teacher suggested that he should take up law as a career.

"She said to me, 'You question everything, you don't take anything at face value, you must be planning on being a lawyer,'" he recalled.

"I didn't know what the hell a lawyer was, but it sounded good. The only exposure I had to lawyers was when my mama took my daddy to court to get child support."

Watt excelled, and set his sights on studying law. He attended UNC Chapel Hill, one of 17 black students in the class of 1963.

He says that the indignities of racism - when he was a freshman, several white students refused to share a room with a black student - taught him about the importance of individual attitudes.

When Watt was cut from the UNC baseball team because he was black - though a white player with a broken leg made the team - Watt says that he simply buckled down and studied more.

Marvin Mood, Watt's freshman roommate at UNC, says that he remembers the incident as a turning point for Watt.

"I think a lot about him goes back to that. He's a very competitive person, and he wanted to succeed so bad," said Mood, who is now a senior budget analyst with U.S. Department of Agriculture.

As a student at UNC, Watt saw the civil-rights movement unfolding before his eyes, but remained on the sidelines.

"For some of us that were not as active in the civil-rights movement, there is a lot of guilt.... It's not that I didn't care what was going on in the civil-rights movement, but it was also obvious to me that the reason it was going on was so that opportunities that were being provided to some of us were taken advantage of," he said.

Exceeded his goal

Watt graduated from Yale University's law school in 1970 and became a successful civil-rights and business lawyer. "The only goal I ever set in my life, I have exceeded," he said.

Watt has been married to his high-school sweetheart, Eulada, for 38 years.

Watt served one term in the N.C. Senate in the 1980s, and said that he decided against running for office again until his two sons, who were teen-agers at the time, had graduated from high school.

"I was so pleased when he decided to run for Congress because I thought he had decided politics was not for him," said Harvey Gantt, a longtime friend of Watt's and two-time Democratic nominee for U.S. Senate.

Watt ran Gantt's first campaign against incumbent Sen. Jesse Helms in 1990.

The campaign was bruising, and Watt said it taught him a valuable lesson - he will never run for statewide office because there are some parts of the state that would never vote for a black man.

Watt has one year remaining in his term as chairman of the black caucus, and he says he worries about neglecting the needs of the 12th Congressional District. He was among the first members of Congress to tour areas of the Gulf Coast devastated by Hurricane Katrina, and he spends many of his weekends traveling around the country.

"The biggest change (since he became chairman) is the travel," Eulada Watt said, noting that her husband hates to fly. "It seems like every weekend he will be somewhere."

"It gets frustrating for him because he likes to spend time in the district."

Watt said he doesn't think about what is next, after his tenure at the caucus is over or once he leaves Congress.

"People always ask me, 'What are you going to do next?'...I don't know. I have not lived my life that way," he said.

"I live my life pretty much one day at a time, but I live it as rigorously and precisely as possible. I don't worry much about what is going to happen next."

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