



Craig Anthony Washington

1941–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1989–1995
DEMOCRAT FROM TEXAS

Elected to fill the House seat of the late Mickey Leland, Craig Washington proved to be a staunch supporter of civil rights and the rights of criminal defendants. However, his career in a downtown Houston district that boasted African-American representation since its creation in 1973 ended abruptly when constituents eventually rejected his maverick and often-erratic voting record. Washington frequently voted with the minority in lopsided roll call votes and he took pride in his independence. “I did this my way,” he said, conceding his loss in the 1994 Democratic primary to future Representative Sheila Jackson Lee. “There are a lot of easier ways to be a congressman or run for Congress. I wanted people to hear the truth.”¹

Craig Anthony Washington was born to Roy and Azalea Washington on October 12, 1941, in Longview, Texas. He received a bachelor of science degree in 1966 from Prairie View A&M University, a historically black college located 40 miles northwest of Houston. In 1969, he received a J.D. from Texas Southern University. Washington was on the law school faculty from 1969 to 1970, before opening his own criminal defense practice in Houston.² In 1973, Washington was elected a Texas state representative in a freshman class that included future U.S. Representative Mickey Leland. In 1983, Washington moved to the Texas state senate, where he proved to be a commanding orator and legislative strategist. Washington soon became one of the foremost faces in the Texas civil rights movement. He worked to increase the participation of minorities and women in state government, supported Texas divestment from South Africa, and coordinated his state’s fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS. Washington married twice and raised five children.³

On August 7, 1989, popular Houston Representative Mickey Leland died in a plane crash in Ethiopia while en route to a United Nations’ refugee camp. Leland’s district

had been served by an African American since its creation. (Representative Barbara Jordan preceded Leland, deciding not to run for re-election in 1978.) A longtime Leland ally, Washington entered the primary election to succeed him after Leland’s widow, Alison, declined to run.⁴ Under the campaign slogan, “Pass the Torch,” emphasizing the Leland family’s support of his candidacy, Washington was the top vote-getter in the nonpartisan primary. In a December 9 special election, Washington easily defeated Houston City Councilman Anthony Hall (who had lost to Leland in 1978) with 56 percent of the vote.⁵ Washington invoked Leland’s memory in his victory speech: “I claim this victory not for myself,” he told reporters, “but for our brother who died on the side of a hill in Ethiopia.”⁶ Taking his oath of office on January 23, 1990, on the opening day of the second session for the 101st Congress (1989–1991), Washington said, “I could never replace Mickey Leland. I’m merely his successor.”⁷ Washington filled Leland’s vacant seat on the Select Committee on Hunger, which the former Representative had created. Continuing his predecessor’s focus on world hunger, Washington admitted, “I may not be a champion on the issue of hunger. But I will be a drum major.”⁸ Washington’s legal background won him appointments to the Judiciary Committee and the Committee on Education and Labor. After easily winning two re-election campaigns in his liberal district—running unopposed in 1990 and capturing 65 percent of the vote in 1992—Washington traded his seat on the Education and Labor Committee for a place on the highly desirable Energy and Commerce Committee in the 103rd Congress (1993–1995).⁹

Whereas Leland had made his name as an advocate for hunger, Washington earned a reputation as an independent politician. Compiling a solid liberal record, Washington frequently voted with the handful of Members





in the minority of a one-sided vote. He was one of five Representatives (all African-American) who opposed sending U.S. troops into Kuwait in 1991 to drive out Iraqi forces under President Saddam Hussein.¹⁰ Instead, Washington proposed a resolution calling for an up-or-down vote on the use of force against Iraq. “Either you are for war or you are against war,” Washington declared on the House Floor. “Let it be said by history that the Congress of the United States saw its duty and we did it.”¹¹ He also cast some perplexing votes against proposed projects that would have benefited his state and district. Washington was one of two Texans to vote against continuing funding for the superconducting super collider in 1993. The project, which would enable scientists to study small particles of matter, was sited for East Texas and would have brought the state millions of federal dollars. Washington was also the only Texan to vote against building a space station whose construction and maintenance would have employed constituents of his Houston district, which was home to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s (NASA) Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center. Washington justified both votes by asserting that federal dollars would be better spent on more-basic needs, such as education, health care, and social services.¹² Yet at other times he voted in favor of his district’s interests. Washington was one of seven Texans to vote against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), despite its support by Houston-area businesses, arguing that the measure would ship 3,000 jobs from his district to Mexico.¹³

Washington’s experience as a defense lawyer and a civil rights activist influenced his work on the Judiciary Committee. He was one of the more vocal opponents of the 1991 Civil Rights Bill, which was backed by President George H. W. Bush. Bush had vetoed a 1990 bill seeking to reverse a series of Supreme Court decisions that narrowed the scope of laws against employment discrimination based on race, sex, or ethnicity. The 1990 bill required employers to meet controversial racial quotas, whereas the 1991 compromise focused less on racial quotas

than on greater gender equity in the job market.¹⁴ From his seat on the Judiciary Committee, Washington argued for the return of racial quotas, calling the compromise measure a “hollow shell of a civil rights bill.”¹⁵ “Where did the quotas go?” he asked on the House Floor. “They swam upstream like red herrings often do.”¹⁶ Washington was the only Democrat to vote against the 1991 compromise bill.

Washington was also a strict defender of Members’ rights and privacy within Congress. In 1992, he came out strongly against a federal subpoena for House “Bank” records, despite a public outcry following the revelation that Members had overdrawn their accounts. Also, Washington was one of two Members who voted against restricting franking privileges from within Members’ districts. “I don’t have a right to tell other members of Congress where they should mail,” he declared. “If the people don’t like [the mailing practices] they will respond in kind at election time.”¹⁷ The former criminal defense lawyer also upheld the rights of those accused of crimes. Washington argued against the 1994 Omnibus Crime Bill, which he deemed overly punitive, calling for a greater focus on crime prevention. Washington was particularly concerned about trying juveniles as adults. As a member of the Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime and Criminal Justice, Washington quipped, “Certifying 13-year-olds as adults is an oxymoron.” Though the final bill classified young teenagers participating in violent criminal activity as adults, it attempted to balance prevention programs with harsher punishments for particularly violent crimes.¹⁸

In January 1991, Washington filed for bankruptcy, admitting he owed \$250,000 in federal taxes and \$65,000 in local taxes. Yet in spite of personal financial trouble, he ran for chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) in 1992. The 103rd Congress (1993–1995) was pivotal for the CBC, whose membership skyrocketed by 50 percent following the 1992 elections. Washington proposed assigning a caucus member to every House subcommittee and cited his independent voting record as proof of his commitment to bold leadership. However, he lost the bid to Maryland Democrat Kweisi Mfume.



★ CRAIG ANTHONY WASHINGTON ★

Washington faced further difficulty when *Congressional Quarterly* reported that he was absent from nearly 25 percent of the votes during the 102nd Congress (1991–1993), giving him the worst attendance record in the Texas delegation and the second-worst record of any Representative.¹⁹ Washington expressed exasperation with the lengthy voting process, claiming he skipped votes that had no bearing on his Houston districts so he could meet with constituents and focus on projects closer to home.²⁰ Washington began logging his missed votes and recording his alternative activities. “When it comes to a choice between form and substance, I choose substance,” he declared.²¹

In 1994, Washington’s district was redrawn. The new boundaries included a few wealthier Houston suburbs but retained a predominantly minority constituency that was 51 percent black and 15 percent Hispanic.²² Washington’s financial troubles, poor attendance, and maverick voting record inspired a strong challenge from Houston City Councilwoman Sheila Jackson Lee, a Democrat who ran under a slogan “Representation

You Can Be Proud Of,” an allusion to Washington’s controversial positions. Houston-area businessmen rallied around Jackson Lee, upset that Washington had voted against NASA projects and against NAFTA. Six of Washington’s congressional colleagues flew to Houston to show their support for his re-election. Charlie Rose of North Carolina noted re-electing Washington would add to his power in Congress by increasing his seniority. “Texas is not powerful in Washington because it changes its congresspeople every two or three terms,” Rose advised.²³ Nevertheless, Washington lost the nomination to Jackson Lee, who handily defeated the incumbent with 63 percent of the vote. Easily winning the general election, Jackson Lee continued the district’s trend of African-American representation.

Following his departure from Congress, Washington resumed practicing law and bought a farm outside Houston. He expressed no interest in returning to politics. “I loved it when I did it, but there’s not a snowball’s chance in hell that I’d ever run again,” he remarked in 2001. “It’d be like putting my hand back in the meat grinder.”²⁴



FOR FURTHER READING

“Washington, Craig Anthony,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=W000177>.

NOTES

- 1 Todd Ackerman, “Election ’94: Craig Washington Goes Down to Defeat Fighting,” 9 March 1994, *Houston Chronicle*: A21.
- 2 While a defense attorney, Washington faced possible jail time for failing to appear for two of his clients’ court dates. He claimed he was not aware of the court dates; however, he was sentenced for contempt of court. Washington settled the matter without serving the prescribed jail time. See Karen Timmons, “Facing Jail, Washington Becomes Congressman,” 24 January 1990, United Press International; *Politics in America, 1994* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1993): 1502.
- 3 Based on a c.v. provided by the Honorable Craig Washington’s law firm, the names of his children are: Craig Anthony, II; Chival Antoinette; Alexander Haller; Cydney Alexandra; and Christopher Alfred. For additional information, see *Who’s Who Among African-Americans*, 15th Ed. (Gale Group, 2002).
- 4 Craig Winneker, “Washington Wins Last Special of ’89,” 14 December 1989, *Roll Call*.
- 5 “Craig Anthony Washington,” Associated Press Candidate Biographies, 1992.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Quoted in “Craig Anthony Washington,” Associated Press Candidate Biographies, 1994.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/election.html; Garrison Nelson, *Committees in the U.S. Congress, 1947 to 1992*, Volume 2 (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1994): 916.
- 10 Six Members, several of them African-American, also voted “present.” Twenty-four Members were recorded as absent. See “Final Vote Results for Roll Call 10,” Office of the Clerk, available at <http://clerk.house.gov/evs/1991/roll010.xml>.
- 11 *Congressional Record*, House, 102nd Cong., 1st sess. (10 January 1991): H115.
- 12 Alan Bernstein, “U.S. Representative, District 18,” 25 October 1992, *Houston Chronicle*: 3.
- 13 Alan Bernstein, “U.S. Representative, District 18,” 27 February 1994, *Houston Chronicle*: 4.
- 14 *Congress and the Nation, 1989–1992*, Volume 8 (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1993): 780–785.
- 15 Quoted in *Politics in America, 1994*: 1500.
- 16 *Congressional Record*, House, 102nd Cong., 1st sess. (7 November 1991): H9538.
- 17 Alan Bernstein, “Washington, Blum Spar Over Free Stamps,” 26 June 1992, *Houston Chronicle*: A22.
- 18 “Jesse Jackson Says Crime Bill Is ‘Fascist,’” 23 February 1994, *The Record*: 8; *Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 1994* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1995): 278–279; 287–294.
- 19 Jim Simmon, “The New Year Rings With . . . Politics,” 4 January 1994, *Houston Chronicle*: A11; Washington’s 74 percent voting record tied that of Representative Joseph McDade of Pennsylvania and was second only to that of Representative Harold Ford, Sr. of Tennessee, who had a 69 percent attendance record; see *Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 1993* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1994): 34C–35C. The *Washington Post* vote database lists Washington as having the most absences in the 103rd Congress. See “The U.S. Congress Votes Database,” 103rd Congress, House: <http://projects.washingtonpost.com/congress/103/house/> (accessed 26 July 2006).
- 20 Bernstein, “U.S. Representative, District 18” (1994).
- 21 *Politics in America, 1994*: 1501.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Jennifer Leinhart, “Rep. Washington Gets ‘Fly-In’ Help From Capitol Hill Peers,” 6 March 1994, *Houston Chronicle*: A31.
- 24 Brian D. Sweany, “Craig Washington,” *Texas Monthly* (September 2001): 51.



WASHINGTON WAS ONE OF FIVE
REPRESENTATIVES (ALL AFRICAN-
AMERICAN) WHO OPPOSED
SENDING U.S. TROOPS INTO
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