

The Honorable G.K. Butterfield Jr.
U.S. Representative of North Carolina (2004–2022)

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript
November 29, 2022

Office of the Historian
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC

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Abstract

G.K. Butterfield Jr. represented eastern North Carolina in the U.S. House of Representatives for nearly two decades, serving on the powerful Energy and Commerce Committee and chairing the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). A longtime civil rights lawyer and state judge, Butterfield quickly adjusted to his role as a lawmaker in the House, becoming influential within the Democratic Whip operation and serving as a subcommittee chair. In this interview, Butterfield traces his political inheritance, from the activists in his mother's family in Wilson, North Carolina, to the life story and pathbreaking political career of his father, Dr. G.K. Butterfield Sr., a Bermudan immigrant and one of a small number of Black local elected officials in the South during the 1950s. Butterfield recalls his participation in civil rights protests during the 1960s and his legal career spanning three decades, including 15 years as a judge in North Carolina's state court system.

Starting with his special election victory in July 2004, Butterfield recounts his steady rise within the House Democratic Caucus, from leading the 2006 Democratic Whip election campaign for Representative James E. Clyburn of South Carolina, to his committee service, his relationship with President Barack Obama, and his term as chair of the CBC in the 114th Congress (2015–2017). He also details his efforts to generate new voting rights legislation as chair of the Committee on House Administration's Subcommittee on Elections during the 117th Congress (2021–2023). Throughout his interview, Butterfield chronicles significant developments in the history of voting rights legislation in Congress, highlighting the way federal law created new opportunities for Black candidates in southern states. In addition, Butterfield reflects on the significance of North Carolina's four Black Representatives in Congress in the nineteenth century, describing the difficulties faced by African-American candidates in the state until the 1990s.

Biography

BUTTERFIELD, George Kenneth (G.K.) Jr., a Representative from North Carolina; born in Wilson, Wilson County, N.C., April 27, 1947; graduated from Charles H. Darden High School, Wilson, N.C., 1965; B.A., North Carolina Central University, Durham, N.C., 1971; J.D., North Carolina Central University School of Law, 1974; United States Army, 1968-1970; lawyer, private practice; North Carolina resident superior court judge, 1989-2001; North Carolina special superior court judge, 2002-2004; justice of the North Carolina state supreme court, 2001-2002; elected as a Democrat to the One Hundred Eighth Congress, by special election, to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of United States Representative Frank Ballance, and reelected to the nine succeeding Congresses until his resignation on December 30, 2022 (July 20, 2004-December 30, 2022); was not a candidate for reelection to the One Hundred Eighteenth Congress in 2022.

[Read full biography](#)

Editing Practices

In preparing interview transcripts for publication, the editors sought to balance several priorities:

- As a primary rule, the editors aimed for fidelity to the spoken word and the conversational style in accord with generally accepted oral history practices.
- The editors made minor editorial changes to the transcripts in instances where they believed such changes would make interviews more accessible to readers. For instance, excessive false starts and filler words were removed when they did not materially affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.
- In accord with standard oral history practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts, although they were encouraged to avoid making substantial editorial revisions and deletions that would change the conversational style of the transcripts or the ideas expressed therein.
- The editors welcomed additional notes, comments, or written observations that the interviewees wished to insert into the record and noted any substantial changes or redactions to the transcript.
- Copy-editing of the transcripts was based on the standards set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

The first reference to a Member of Congress (House or Senate) is underlined in the oral history transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer to the online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <https://bioguide.congress.gov> and the “People Search” section of the History, Art & Archives website, <https://history.house.gov>. For more information about the U.S. House of Representatives oral history program contact the Office of House Historian at (202) 226-1300, or via email at history@mail.house.gov.

Citation Information

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Interviewer Biographies

Michael J. Murphy is a Historical Publications Specialist in the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. He earned his Ph.D. in U.S. history from Stony Brook University in Stony Brook, New York, in 2013. Before joining the Office of the Historian, he was Visiting Associate Professor at the Joseph S. Murphy Institute for Worker Education and Labor Studies at the City University of New York.

Seth LaShier is a Historical Publications Specialist in the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. He earned his Ph.D. in U.S. history from George Washington University. Before joining the Office of the Historian, he worked on several public history projects, including the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project.

—THE HONORABLE G.K. BUTTERFIELD JR. OF NORTH CAROLINA—

MURPHY: My name is Michael Murphy, and I'm joined by my colleague Seth LaShier from the Office of the House Historian. We are speaking with Representative [George Kenneth] G.K. Butterfield [Jr.] of North Carolina on November 29, 2022, in the House Recording Studio. Thank you for joining us today.

BUTTERFIELD: Thank you.

MURPHY: I wanted to start with your earlier life before you arrived in Washington, DC. Where were you born, and where did you grow up?

BUTTERFIELD: Well, my life is a very interesting story, and it takes many hours to fully explain the four corners of my life. But if I could start with my parents, my dad was a native of Bermuda. He was born in 1900. He was one of 12 children in Bermuda to a Black Bermuda family. At the age of 17, he decided that he wanted to emigrate from Bermuda to the United States to get a job and to find a prosperous way of life, so he left Bermuda in February of 1917 and came over to New York looking for a job. He could not find a job in New York City, even though his sister was there. He had connected with her, and she was trying to help him find employment and that didn't happen. So he left New York City and went to Ocala, Florida—this time to find his brother who lived in Ocala, and his brother could not help him either.

So the solution to the problem was to volunteer for World War I. My dad volunteered for the war as a noncitizen, I might say. He volunteered for World War I and received his basic training at Camp Dix, New Jersey. Two months later he was deployed to the front line of the First World War. He went over to France and spent more than a year fighting in the war, and

finally Armistice Day came, and the war came to an end. After that he returned to the United States and months later was discharged from the Army. So that was my father.

When Dad was discharged from the Army, he decided that he wanted to go to college, and so he presented himself to the registrar at Shaw University, which was and is an historically Black college and university in Raleigh, North Carolina. He presented himself to the university and asked permission to enroll in the undergraduate program. They asked for his high school credentials. My father couldn't produce any credentials because he had not finished high school. He had left Bermuda at age 17 with no high school diploma. So when the college determined and discovered that he was a war veteran, they enrolled him into the college program. And he also took high school courses during his first year, so he was off to a good start. He graduated college there at Shaw University in 1922 and decided he wanted to be a dentist.

He went over to Nashville, Tennessee, and enrolled in Meharry Medical College. Meharry allowed him to stay there and to get a dental education, and in 1927, five years later, he graduated from dental school and returned back to North Carolina and married my mother.

My mother's story was a little bit different. My mother was a native of my hometown, which is Wilson, North Carolina. My mom's father was what was referred to as a "mulatto." A "mulatto" obviously means that one of your parents was African American, the other was a White person. My grandfather, whose name was Fred Davis, his mother was an African American. Well, not an American at the time—she was an African

descendent. My grandfather's father was named Joe Davis, who was a White merchant in my hometown. And Joe Davis and Judah had come together and produced my grandfather, who was named Fred Davis.

Fred Davis, my grandfather, ended up having eight children. He married a young lady who was African American living in North Carolina. Her name was Dinah, D-i-n-a-h, Dinah. The two of them married, and together they had eight children, and my mother was the youngest girl. She was number six of eight, but she was also the youngest daughter. So my mother grew up in a household with a father who was Reverend Fred Davis, who was a descendant—he was a “mulatto.” And Reverend Fred Davis became one of the most prominent African-American ministers in the community. He was the pastor of the largest church in town, which is named Jackson Chapel First Baptist Church in Wilson, North Carolina. Obviously, it was an all-Black church, and he raised his children there.

During those days, there were no high schools in the community for African-American children. There was an elementary school called Wilson Colored Graded School—grades one through four—but no high school. About 40 percent of African-American children went to the graded school. The other 60 percent never went to school at all. They just went out into the world and began a career of working on the farm. But the 40 percent of African-American children went to the graded school, and my mother was one of those. So when she finished the graded school, she only had a basic elementary education.

In order to get fully educated, my grandfather decided to send my mother and her siblings to Shaw University. Shaw at the time was not only a college,

but it was also a high school. It was called a normal school at the time. My mom left my hometown and went to Raleigh and enrolled in Shaw University's high school program. She remained there for some time and graduated from high school. While at Shaw University—my mom being in high school, my dad being in college there at Shaw University—they met each other, and that's where they created their relationship and eventually their marriage.

When Mom finished high school, she did not go to college—she returned back to her home community, Wilson, and became a teacher at the graded school. Teachers were not required during those days to have a college degree. They could teach with a normal school certificate, a high school certificate, if you will.

So my mother returned home and became a classroom teacher at the graded school, which was the very school that she had attended as a pupil. My dad, after graduating from dental school, decided to return to North Carolina to find my mother and to locate his dental practice in my mother's hometown of Wilson. So on June 7 of 1928, my dad and my mom married in Wilson, and they stayed together for the next 50 or more years—dad as a dentist and my mom as a classroom teacher.

They began their marriage in 1928, and as you well know, that was the beginning of the [Great] Depression. The Depression started in 1929. They had no ability to support themselves, so my mom and my dad lived with my grandfather, Reverend Fred Davis. They lived in his home for the next 12 years until the Depression was over, until World War II was over. Then they decided to build a home, and they did that. They began a family. And I came

along in 1947.

I was a late bloomer. They married in 1928, but I was born in 1947. So they were married for 19 years before I was born. My mom was 45 years old when I was born. My dad was 47 when I was born.

During those years, it was a very interesting period of time. It was the Depression. It was the war. But it was also the era of Jim Crow. It was the era of segregation. When my dad came into Wilson to begin his dental practice and to marry my mother, he was summoned by the White political establishment, and he was welcomed into the community. He was told that he would be given a favor, and the favor was that he would be allowed to register to vote. They did not allow Negro people to register to vote in large numbers, but since he had come to town and married a very fine woman, who was a descendent of a White merchant in town, they thought they would do him a favor by allowing him to become a registered voter. And he did become a registered voter in 1928. He would often tell me that he was the fortieth, African-American registered voter in the town since Reconstruction—in other words, since 1900.

He was very proud of that. He did not have to take a literacy test. He did not have to prove himself to anyone. He was just given an accommodation, a favor. He was allowed to register to vote. They also told him that they were allowing him this privilege because he had fought in the war. They felt that the fact that he had volunteered for the war and was honorably discharged—they wanted him to be a registered voter.

After thanking them for that accommodation, my dad decided to go out into the community and to try to get other African Americans registered to vote.

That's where he met resistance from the White political structure. They told him very quickly that this was a personal favor—an accommodation to him. He would not be allowed to go around the community to encourage other African Americans to register to vote. And you know what he did? He stopped. Had he continued to do that, I'm sure his life would have been in danger. He discontinued any efforts to get African Americans registered to vote.

The Depression came and went, and World War II came and went. Finally, in the 1940s, my father decided he wanted to reinvigorate and relaunch this idea about voter registration for African Americans. African Americans were required to take a literacy test during those days in order to qualify as a registered voter. He would go around each weekend talking to African Americans and trying to convince them to at least attempt to become registered voters and to explain to them what a literacy test is and was and what they would be required to say and do in order to pass a literacy test. That was somewhat successful. A few African Americans became registered voters.

In 1947, the year that I was born, my dad launched and organized the local branch of the NAACP. The NAACP was launched and organized for one purpose—that was to get African Americans registered to vote—and it worked. African Americans started registering to vote in very large numbers, particularly those who were able to read and write and those who were literate enough to be able to pass this so-called literacy test.

Around 1948, my uncle—my mother's brother—decided he wanted to join up with my father in intensifying this voter registration drive. More African

Americans then became registered voters. On Saturdays, they would meet in the living room of my home to counsel and to tutor African Americans on what to expect on the literacy test.

On February 7, 1949, my uncle—his name was Fred Davis Jr.—was riding his bicycle through town. There was a motorist who was traveling from New York to Florida. During those days we didn't have interstate highways, the highways actually meandered right through the town. While he was riding his bicycle that day, a motorist from New York struck my uncle's bicycle, and he was seriously injured.

He was taken to the Black hospital named Mercy Hospital, and that's when a White physician was summoned to come to the hospital to take care of my uncle, to try to treat his injuries. The White doctor never showed up. And after three or four hours, the hospital staff again called the White doctor and urged him to come quickly because my uncle was dying. When he found out that the patient was Fred Davis Jr., he never came. At 9:15 that night—after a 3:30 in the afternoon accident—at 9:15 that night my uncle passed away. And I am satisfied that the reason the doctor did not come to treat my uncle was because of his voter registration activity. That was a very sad story.

In 1951, when dad needed another partner in this voter registration effort—my grandfather Reverend Fred Davis Sr. passed away on July 4, 1951. In July of 1951 a new pastor came in, his name was Reverend Talmage Watkins. Watkins was a young, Baptist, African-American preacher. Reverend Watkins came in and joined hands with my father to continue this voter registration drive.

They came up with a bright idea. The idea was since the town is divided into

districts for the city council election, and since one of the districts is half in the Black community and the other half in the White community, they would concentrate their voter registration efforts on the Black community in ward three. And that's what they did. Every Saturday, they would counsel and tutor African Americans to present themselves for the literacy tests and to pass the test.

The voter registration drive that was led by my father and my pastor culminated in a large number of African Americans becoming registered voters. And when the voter registration numbers were published, there was basically an equal number of Black voters to White voters in ward three. That's when my father made the decision that he would run for the city council in the May 1953 election, and so he ran. He ran in May of 1953, and guess what, there was a tie vote between my father and the White candidate, who was named Herbert Harris. There was actually a tie vote between the two gentlemen. An equal number of voter registration, and the votes were identical. That tells me that there was a very large turnout of African-American voters and a large turnout of White voters.

Voting was obviously racially polarized, and I doubt that any White voter voted for my father, and I'm certain that no Black voter voted for the White candidate. It was strictly along racial lines. After the votes were counted, my dad found himself in a tie vote.

In order to resolve the tie, the law required a child to be blindfolded and to put both names in a container, and for the child to reach into the container and to pull a name. And the child did that. Her name is Debbie Watson—she is still around. I have talked to her a couple of times. She reached in the

container and pulled out my father's name. He became the first African-American member of the board of alderman—now called city council—in my hometown of Wilson, North Carolina. That was what I would refer to as an “[Barack] Obama moment.” It was unheard of. No one ever expected an African American to win a city council seat in my hometown, but he won. He won by breaking a tie vote. It was a tiebreaker.

So he took the oath of office as a member of the city council. They had two-year terms—this was not four years or eight years. This was a two-year term. So my father served from 1953 to 1955. He was the only African American, obviously, on the city council, and he would present some novel ideas, like building a recreation center for African Americans, like paving the streets for African Americans. All of these ideas fell on deaf ears.

In 1955, it was time for re-election, and my dad decided to form a coalition with the White mayor who was running for re-election as mayor. The mayor felt that he was not going to be re-elected unless he had some African American support. So my dad cut a political deal with the White mayor that African Americans would support Mayor John D. Wilson for mayor, and some of John D. Wilson—incidentally, he has the last name as the city, so don't get confused by that—Mayor John D. Wilson promised my father that he would deliver some secret White votes for my father's re-election. And the political deal worked. The mayor was re-elected. My father was re-elected in 1955.

Well, this time around my dad was in good standing with the mayor, and the mayor appointed him as the chairman of the finance committee for the city council—unheard of. So my father in 1955 was responsible for preparing the

city's budget. That was a big deal. He put in the budget funds for a Black recreation center and other projects for the African-American community.

By the time 1957 came along, the White power structure was determined to defeat my father in the next election, but he had gained so much popularity in the town—even among a few White voters—that the power structure felt that he would be re-elected in 1957. They had to use what I call the nuclear option—that is to change the method of election from district elections to at large. In 1957, while my father was away on a family trip, the city council called an emergency meeting to change the method of elections from district elections to at large. My father rushed back to try to oppose the idea of at-large elections but to no avail. The city council passed it.

My father, at the end of the day, decided that he would vote for it. That confused me for some years why he would vote for it, but I have kind of figured that out. He wanted to try to endear himself—he knew it was going to pass. He wanted to endear himself to a few people in hopes that it would be for his political advantage. Well, it didn't work. It didn't work. The city moved from district elections to at-large elections, and my father lost the election in 1957. That was very traumatic.

In 1957, I was 10 years old and watching all of this unfold. I don't fully understand it. But I understand that it was because of my father's race that he was defeated, and I didn't like it. My father didn't like it. He was very angry about it. He was a very passive man, so he didn't express his anger, but I could determine very quickly that he was very upset about the way this thing went down. So in 1959, two years later, the Black community came back to my father and asked him to run again for the city council, and he declined.

In 1961, my pastor was asked to run for the city council, and he agreed to do it. So in 1961, there was another election for the city council, and my pastor ran at large, citywide—not from ward three but at large—and of course he lost. He came in last place. And because of that, the Black community in the city decided to challenge the at-large election system in the city and decided to challenge the way the districts changed from district to at large. So a lawsuit was filed. The NAACP came in and filed a lawsuit against the city claiming that the change was unlawful.

But what really upset the African-American community wasn't only because it changed from district elections to at large but because of another provision that you had to vote for a full slate. You couldn't vote for just one or two. You had to vote for the full slate of six in order for your ballot to count. And there was a reason for that because it prevented the African-American community from single-shot voting for their preferred candidate: the African-American candidate. And because of that, the lawsuit was filed.

The NAACP handled the case. It was called *Watkins v. City of Wilson*. The case first went to the state supreme court. It was lost. Then to the U.S. Supreme Court, and the U.S. Supreme Court issued a very short opinion, declining to take up the case of *Watkins v. City of Wilson*. So, because of that, at-large elections continued in the city for the next 18 years—actually, for more than that. At-large elections continued, and no African American could win.

All of that to say these were my formative years. This was when I was 10 years old and 14 years old. I'm sitting on the sidelines. I'm watching these acts of overt discrimination being inflicted on the African-American

community. And then I watch the NAACP come into the community and to file a lawsuit that goes to the state supreme court and U.S. Supreme Court, and these events made a very profound impression on me. It made me want to be a lawyer—made me want to be a judge, and certainly to go into politics. And I've been able to accomplish all three.

MURPHY: Well, you anticipated a lot of our questions.

BUTTERFIELD: Yes.

MURPHY: And that was a nice way of laying out those formative experiences. I wonder if you could also talk about becoming active as a young person in these struggles on the local level?

BUTTERFIELD: Sure. Well, having watched my dad and his civic activities and political activities during the 1950s, it laid upon me a desire to go into civil rights activism. In the early 1960s, not only was my father active in voter registration activities, but he was also active in trying to get African Americans employed at the telephone company. He was also active in trying to get the lunch counters at our department stores integrated. It didn't work until the civil rights bill was passed in 1964, but he was active in trying to get lunch counters desegregated before the civil rights bill. That made me want to get involved in civil rights.

I formed protest movements in the 1960s to demonstrate in front of the local theaters. We had four local theaters. Two were absolutely segregated and didn't allow African Americans at all. The other two were willing to allow African Americans to come into the theater, but they had to sit on the upper level and not the lower level. The upper level was 10 cents in order to gain

admission. The lower level was 15 cents. These two local theaters segregated by race, and because of that, every Sunday afternoon I would lead civil rights demonstrations in front of these two theaters, and eventually the demonstrators numbered into the hundreds. We started off with 15 or 20 demonstrators—as the months went on the numbers grew to two or three hundred. So I got the credit, if you will, of being one of those who envisioned and created and led the civil rights movement in my hometown.

But I was not alone. My best friend, Toby Fitch, who is now [state] senator Toby Fitch in my hometown, he and I together led these civil rights marches. But then after we left the movie theaters, we thought it would be a good idea to try to integrate the swimming pool at the recreation center. On successive afternoons, we would go over to the recreation center—the White recreation center, if you will, it's called Sunset Recreation Center—we would go over and try to integrate the swimming pool. We would be met with resistance at the door and not allowed to come in. One day, we managed to get in and jump into the water, and they drained all of the water out of the pool when we did that.

I remember the head of the recreation department coming out. His name was Burt Gillette. Mr. Gillette was a very nice man. He pulled us to the side—this must have been early 1964. He pulled us to the side and said, “Look, I know what you kids are trying to do. You are trying to get equal opportunity. You're trying to get civil rights, and I understand that. If you could please wait a few months until Congress passes the civil rights bill, then you're welcome to come into our swimming pool.” So we did that.

Then we decided to go inside of the recreation center and try to use the

basketball court. And again, the basketball court was chained, and locks were placed on the door so we couldn't come into the gym. But all of that changed on July 2, 1964, when the civil rights bill was signed into law by President Lyndon [B.] Johnson. That's when the walls of segregation came tumbling down, and African Americans were free to go to places of public accommodation. We were not always welcome, but most of the establishments in my hometown were law-abiding establishments, and they had to abide by the law of the land.

I recall going to one hot dog restaurant where you can only take hot dogs away. You couldn't sit down and eat them, whether you were Black or White. It was a takeout stand. Fitch and I went to this hot dog stand, and we ordered six hot dogs. They were 10 cents each, and so the proprietor told us that our bill was 60 cents. We paid him the 60 cents, and when he took our money, he looked at us and said, "I'm serving you these hot dogs because the law requires me to do it. But let me promise you one thing, your money is going to the Ku Klux Klan. Have a nice day." And he gave us the six hot dogs, and we walked out of the establishment. We were fearful that some type of poison or some type of substance would have been placed in our food, and we threw it in the trash can.

So that was the environment, that's the type of segregation and Jim Crow that we faced as young people. So to be able to look back now on those years and to see how far we have come over the last 60 years is just—it's heartwarming just to see the progress that we have made. For me to be able to have served as a judge in my home community for 15 years, and now having served as the Congressman for not only my home community but 18 or 19 counties in eastern North Carolina—including the county where I

went to college and law school, Durham County. For me to be able to have that on my résumé and to be able to say that I have been able to accomplish these things has just been really reassuring and leaves a legacy that I'm very proud of.

MURPHY: Yes, I think we wanted to talk about the expansive nature of that legacy, especially at the local level. A few more questions about your activism in the '60s—we had a question about organizing workers at Duke University Hospital.

BUTTERFIELD: Yes.

MURPHY: How did you find yourself involved in a situation like that?

BUTTERFIELD: Well, I was obsessed with activism during the civil rights days. It started in my hometown of Wilson with the movie theaters and the swimming pool and all of the other places of public accommodation. When I left high school and went to Durham and enrolled at North Carolina College at Durham [now North Carolina Central University], it was only natural that I carry that same activism to Durham. I got involved in voter registration drives in Durham and other civil rights activities, but then I found out about the workers at Duke University Hospital who were being underpaid for their work. White workers were being paid more for the same work than were African-American workers. There was a great protest there in Durham. I joined the workers several times in demonstrating—I was not one of the leaders, but I certainly joined in those protests and marches. And Duke Hospital did the right thing. They equalized the pay and made sure that this was corrected. Eventually, I would work at Duke Hospital. I developed an interest in Duke Hospital, and so while I was in college, I wanted part-time

employment. Where did I go for a job? I went to Duke Hospital and applied for a job as an orderly room clerk. In 1967, I was hired as an orderly room clerk and left that job in 1968 after [Dr. Martin Luther] King [Jr.] was assassinated.

LaSHIER:

After the Voting Rights Act passed in 1965, there's a dramatic increase in registration of Black voters throughout the South. Could you talk about some of your efforts at registering voters? Were you involved with early efforts to run Black candidates in North Carolina at the time?

BUTTERFIELD:

I can tell you a lot about voting rights, beginning with my father's experience in the 1950s. A lot of people don't fully understand what voting rights are all about. Many people don't understand what the voting rights movement is all about. And let me just share that with you, if I can. If we had a race-neutral society and voters would vote for candidates regardless of race, then we would not need a Voting Rights Act because candidates would be selected based on merit. Unfortunately, that's not always the case. There's what we call racially polarized voting. A lot of people miss the point.

In some communities it is more severe than other communities. But in the Deep South, racially polarized voting is very prevalent, which means that the preferred candidate of the African-American community starts off with a disadvantage because there is a predetermined number of White voters who will absolutely refuse to vote for the Black candidate—or the preferred candidate of the Black community—purely because of race. Because of that, we have been at a huge disadvantage over the years.

What Congress decided to do in 1965 was to pass legislation that would try to remedy racially polarized voting. One thing Congress did in passing the

Voting Rights Act was to create a Section 2. Section 2 gives to minority communities the right to litigate any grievances they have against an election system or an election practice or anything else that affects voting. It gives the minority community the right to litigate their grievances against the system. Section 2 has been used very effectively over the years in dismantling election systems and election practices to try to offset racially polarized voting. That's called Section 2.

Congress also included a Section 5. Section 5 singles out certain jurisdictions, mostly in the South, who had a history of voter discrimination prior to 1964, and singles those jurisdictions out for what is called "preclearance." In other words, before these jurisdictions can change any of their election laws or anything that affects voting—even if it's a practice, it doesn't have to be an election law, if it's been an election practice over the years—and the jurisdiction wants to change that practice or that law, and you are one of those jurisdictions that has been singled out in the Voting Rights Act, then the law required that jurisdiction, before implementing this new change, had to receive preclearance from the Department of Justice.

Southern states hated Section 5. They felt that it was an encroachment upon their states' rights. They felt that it was a violation of principles of federalism and that they did not want to abide by the mandate of Section 5. So, in the early years of Section 5, southern states—many of them refused to abide by federal law and refused to submit their election changes for preclearance. But during the [Ronald] Reagan years, that began to change. President Reagan had a voting rights chief and a civil rights chief named William Bradford Reynolds. Attorney General Reynolds decided to vigorously enforce Section 5 and require jurisdictions to start sending these changes in for preclearance.

And, because of that, we began to see election systems change. We began to see the preferred candidate of the African-American community get elected—more times than not it was the African-American candidate, but not always. So things began to change, but it was because of the Voting Rights Act.

The third provision of the Voting Rights Act that a lot of people don't realize is that it also outlawed the literacy test—the literacy test that was enacted in 1900 in North Carolina and in other southern states as well. The literacy test was eliminated as a prequalification for registering to vote.

So, because of the Voting Rights Act, we've seen a sea change—monumental change in the number of African Americans getting elected to elective office in North Carolina and throughout the South. Hundreds are now elected. Fifty-eight African Americans now serve in the U.S. House of Representatives [in 2022]. That was not possible 50 years ago. It was not possible 40 years ago. But it's been possible because civil rights groups and voting rights groups have vigorously—and the federal government, I might say—have vigorously enforced and sought to enforce the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Because of that, states have been required to draw majority-minority districts so that African Americans could get elected to Congress, to state legislatures, and even to local commissions and councils. There has been a sea change, but it's been because of the Voting Rights Act.

MURPHY: When did you decide to take that step towards running for public office?

BUTTERFIELD: When I returned to my hometown in 1974 to practice law, the first thing I wanted to do was to run for the city council and possibly to challenge the method of electing the city council because of what had happened to my father in 1957. In 1977, I ran for the city council under this at-large

system—the same system that my father had been defeated with in 1957. I ran in 1977, and I lost. I didn't come in last place, but I lost under an at-large system by some 170 votes. Immediately, I went to the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and asked them if they would consider litigating the at-large system of electing city council members. They didn't have the capacity to do it in the 1970s. In 1982, I again approached the Legal Defense Fund and asked them again if they would litigate the election system for city council. They told me they couldn't do it because they felt that they didn't have a perfect case, but they wanted to concentrate on the method of electing county commissioners in my home county.

The reason for that was that the county commissioners had changed their method of election three times since the passage of the Voting Rights Act, and neither change had been submitted to the Department of Justice for preclearance. [The NAACP] felt that they had them red-handed because they had refused to send in these changes. So instead of litigating against the city council, we decided to challenge county commissioners. And the Department of Justice, at my urging, came in and launched an investigation into the board of county commissioners and eventually told the county, "In order to continue with your elections, you've got to get these three changes approved." The changes for the most part included a change to staggered terms. Another change was the dates and the years that members of the county commission would come up for re-election.

The county submitted those three changes for preclearance, and surprisingly, the federal government approved all three. We were left with no alternative but to accept the at-large system as it was or to challenge the at-large system under Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act.

And that's what we did. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund—I was co-counsel in the case. I was a lawyer. We challenged the method of election in what is referred to *Haskins v. County of Wilson*, which was one of the early voting rights cases in North Carolina challenging at-large elections. We filed the case. Then the Legal Defense Fund came to the conclusion that they probably would not win the case because the federal courts were beginning to require plaintiffs to prove intentional discrimination in order to win these cases, and we could not prove that the county had intentionally created at-large elections to discriminate against African-American voters. The case was not dismissed, but it was suspended for a few months.

Then we got word in 1982 that Senator Orrin [Grant] Hatch, Senator [Robert Joseph] Bob Dole, Senator [Edward Moore "Ted"] Kennedy, and Senator [Joseph R.] Biden [Jr.] were putting together an agreement to change the standard for proving Section 2 cases from intentional discrimination to discriminatory result. That's huge. In the legal profession, that is huge. If you had to prove intentional discrimination in a federal courtroom, it would be nearly impossible, but to prove discriminatory effect or discriminatory result is easier. You had to show one of seven factors or a series of seven factors that had a bearing on discrimination, and you could win the case. Congress passed the revision to Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act in 1982. I was in the Senate Gallery during that debate, and I saw Senator [Jesse] Helms and Senator [John Porter] East and Senator [James Strom] Thurmond and other southern Senators vigorously arguing against changing the standard of proof in Section 2 cases, but Senator Joe Biden from Delaware, Senator Orrin Hatch from Utah, Senator Bob Dole from Kansas, Senator [Ted] Kennedy from Massachusetts—these four Senators combined their political skills to

get an amendment passed in the Voting Rights Act that changed the standard of proof from intentional discrimination to discriminatory result.

And it passed. It passed. Not only did it pass, but Congress also extended for another 10 years the provisions that pertain to Section 5 and included more jurisdictions that would be required to preclear their election changes.

Because of the change in law, we were now able to fully litigate the county commissioner case in my home county and countless other cases all across the country. And we began to win these cases on what us lawyers call summary judgment. In other words, the judge didn't even want it to go to trial—it was a sure victory. Because of that, at-large elections were dismantled all across the South. North Carolina created single-Member, majority-minority districts so that African Americans could get elected to Congress. That's why we now have two majority-minority congressional districts in North Carolina and many more at the legislative level. The Voting Rights Act has been very profound, very powerful in forcing local jurisdictions to change their methods of election so that the preferred candidate of the African-American community can be elected. And now we see African Americans serving at all levels of government.

MURPHY: You served as a judge in the state courts and the state supreme court and then after a decade and a half you decided to run for a House seat.

BUTTERFIELD: Let's break those up into three parts.

MURPHY: Yes.

BUTTERFIELD: In 1988, we decided to file another Section 2 case against the state of North Carolina challenging the method of electing superior court judges. Many of

the judicial districts comprised two and three judges. There were very large judicial districts. We made the argument that if you would take these large judicial districts and break them up into smaller districts, then some of those districts could be majority-minority, and we could elect African-American judges in our state. We made the case that Black lawyers, regardless of how well qualified they were, had no chance—because of racially polarized voting—no chance at all of being elected superior court judge. We pleaded with the legislature to break up these large judicial districts into smaller parts. They refused to do it.

A lawsuit was filed in 1987 to require the state to dismantle some of the large judicial districts, and in 1988, the state decided to settle the case. So some of the judicial districts were dismantled, and smaller districts were created. Some of those were majority African American. There were eight across the state.

One of those eight judicial districts included my home community. In fact, I sort of helped draw the district—I'll admit that 30 years later. I helped draw the district, and so the district included the Black community of Wilson County—my home county—and also the African-American community of Rocky Mount, which is the adjoining county. The district ended up being about 72 percent African American. In 1988, it won't surprise you that I decided to run for superior court judge in district 7B and won overwhelmingly. And on January 1 of 1989, I took the oath of office as a resident superior court judge. I am now in a position to adjudicate legal controversies. The bad news was that judges could not participate in politics. So I had to resign myself to the fact that I could not be involved in political affairs in my community. I could not get involved in controversies that would be an embarrassment to the judiciary.

For the next 15 years, I found myself not involved in political affairs in my state and that was very painful because I enjoy politics. I enjoy the give-and-take of political discourse, but I had to resign myself to the fact that, as a judge, I could not get involved in politics. I was determined to be the best possible judge that I could be. I read everything that could be read. I tried to use every skill set that I had available to me, and I went into the courtroom every day and presided over thousands of civil and criminal cases in 46 counties of North Carolina.

In my state, superior court judges do not stay in their home county to preside over cases—they rotate. Some states call it the circuit. We don't call it circuits. We call it rotation in my state. I would rotate from county to county. And every now and then you would rotate back to your home county to preside for six months. I did that for 12 years.

After being a superior court judge for 12 years, I received a call one day from my governor. Governor Michael Easley told me that there was a vacancy, which I knew, on the state supreme court. He wanted to know if I would consider going to the supreme court. I told the governor that I didn't have to think about it. That was a no-brainer. I would certainly be honored to serve on the state supreme court. Then my friend Michael Easley—Governor Easley—reminded me that the last four Democrats who had served on the supreme court had lost their seat because voters preferred Republican judges as opposed to Democratic judges.

I told the governor, notwithstanding that history, I still wanted an opportunity to serve on the court and that I would give it all that I had to offer. I would be the best justice that I could possibly be, and I would be the

best politician that I could possibly be and try to hold onto the seat in the next election.

In February of 2001, the governor appointed me, and I took the oath of office as associate justice of our state supreme court, realizing that I had to run in the November of 2002 general election. So I would do my work every day as an associate justice. I would drive from my home community to Raleigh, and I'd go to the Justice Building. I would work with my clerks and my staff, and I would leave the court at 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon. I would drive to some distant location to campaign for election. North Carolina is a very large state, so it was not uncommon for me to leave the court at 3:00 in the afternoon and drive 150 miles to some political event and then back home later that evening.

Well, the governor was right. Democrats at that time did not win judicial elections. And after almost two years on the court, when I ran in November of 2002, even though I received the endorsement of every former justice of the supreme court, Democrat and Republican—I was endorsed by every former chief justice of the court. I was opposed in the 2002 election by a lawyer who no one had heard of before. He was a small-town lawyer from Fayetteville, North Carolina—actually, a decent man, I got to know him later. His name was Ed Brady. Brady had never had an appellate case, had never really handled cases outside of the trial court in his home community, but because he was a Republican, and because Elizabeth [Hanford] Dole was on the ballot running for the U.S. Senate—and because we had straight-ticket voting in North Carolina, when Republican voters went into the voting booth to vote for Elizabeth Dole, they simply voted a straight-ticket ballot so every Republican down ballot was voted for. And because of that, I

was defeated in the 2002 election.

I received the endorsement of every newspaper in North Carolina—every newspaper that endorsed. All the newspapers don't endorse, but every major newspaper that endorsed candidates endorsed me in that election. Every former justice of the court endorsed my election. But, nevertheless, because of straight-ticket voting and because of preferences for Republican judges, I was defeated in November 2002, so my last day on the supreme court was December 31, 2002.

The governor felt very sorry for me. He had warned me that this would happen, and so the governor then gave me another opportunity, this time to serve as a special superior court judge. My original seat as the resident superior court judge had already been filled—actually, by my best friend Toby Fitch—the same name that I mentioned to you earlier. Toby took my judgeship when I went to the supreme court, and so that seat was not available. The governor appointed me as a special judge—same salary, same authority, same jurisdiction, except that each week you were filling in for another judge who was sick or on vacation. But I was honored to do that as well.

While serving as a special superior court judge in 2004, there became a vacancy for the First Congressional District for the U.S. House of Representatives. My predecessor in this position [Frank W. Ballance Jr.] was a friend. Ballance was being investigated for alleged offenses while he served in the state senate. Ballance informed me that possibly he could be resigning from Congress. He had some legal issues that he had to confront and that required him leaving Congress, so I decided to run for Congress. This was

2004. Because of the necessity for a special election, the governor called for the election on July 20, 2004. Several people ran in the special election, and on July 20 of 2004, I was overwhelmingly elected in the special election and nominated for a full term the following session.

On the following day, I was administered the oath of office as the Representative for the First Congressional District. I received word from the Clerk of the House and from then Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi that I needed to get to Washington pretty quickly—the 700,000 people in the First District were without a Representative. There was no dispute as to my election the previous day—even though the governor had not certified the election. There was indisputable evidence that I had been elected, and based on that and based on the fact that there was no contest to my election, I could receive the congressional oath. On the afternoon of July 21, 2004, I presented myself to the well of the House, was administered the oath, and now we are 18 years later.

MURPHY: You took office in the middle of the term. You were elected to the next term as well in November. Typically, at the beginning of one’s congressional career, you start thinking about committee assignments. What did you desire when you got to Capitol Hill in terms of committee service? How did that play out over the next few years?

BUTTERFIELD: The special election happened very quickly. I had to assemble a political team, a campaign team. I had to establish a campaign office, and I had to campaign in 20 counties in North Carolina. Not one minute did I ever think about committee assignments. I was preoccupied with winning the election. I did not know that I would be sworn in the day following my election. Just

think about it—I am declared the winner in the special election at 10:00 p.m. on a Tuesday night. On Thursday, I’m standing on the floor of the House of Representatives preparing to take the oath of office. Nancy Pelosi walks up behind me as I’m preparing to take the oath and says, “Congressman Butterfield, the Clerk of the House needs to know what committees you want to serve on. What committees do you have in mind?” I’m embarrassed to say I had not even thought about committee assignments.

So out of convenience, I said to Ms. Pelosi that I would simply take the committees of my predecessor. Those committees were Agriculture and Small Business. She immediately told me, “Those are two very good choices. Consider it done.” She submitted my name to serve on those committees. Well, it was good to serve on the Agriculture Committee because I’m from an agricultural district. The Small Business Committee was also an honor because there are a lot of small businesses in my district, but I really wanted to serve on other committees once I found out the committee structure and how committees work in Congress.

So I had a desire to serve on different committees. Having come in the middle of a term—and remember, 2004 was also a presidential cycle, so not much was happening in the fall of 2004. My committees didn’t even meet. I may have gone to one or two committee meetings, Agriculture and Small Business. I think I went to two Agriculture Committee meetings and one Small Business Committee meeting, but the committees really didn’t function in the latter part of 2004 because we were in election season.

When 2005 came—and after the election was over—I decided that I wanted to surrender my position on Small Business and go to the Armed Services

Committee. I felt that Armed Services was an important committee. First of all, I was a veteran. And, secondly, because we were going through BRAC, the Base Realignment and Closure process, whereby certain bases in the United States were being eliminated for efficiency reasons. I wanted to make sure that North Carolina did not lose its military presence. I did not want Fort Bragg to be eliminated. I didn't want Fort Pope, Seymour Johnson Air Force Base to be eliminated—didn't want Camp Lejeune to go. I felt by serving on the Armed Services Committee I would have some influence on those decisions. I cannot look into this camera and say that I am the reason why bases continue to be open in North Carolina. I think that would be dishonest, but I did have some say and some influence, and because of that we kept Fort Bragg. We actually increased the footprint at Fort Bragg. We did lose Pope Air Force Base, but we were able to keep North Carolina's military presence.

So all of that went very well, and the Agriculture Committee was very good. We had the farm bill to come through, and I participated in the 2005 farm bill reauthorization. But as we got toward the end of that term of Congress, the rumor was that Democrats were going to become the majority in the next Congress. We were excited about that.

Then I looked at the number of people running for Congress, and I didn't see anyone running against me in the 2006 election. So I came up with an idea that instead of using my campaign resources for a campaign that I did not need in 2006, I would use those resources in giving to other Democratic candidates who were running across the country. I would use some of that money in donating to the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. And that's what I did. I gave a very large sum of money—almost all of the

campaign funds that I had on hand—to other Democrats who were at risk so that we could be in a position to win the majority in 2006.

I also went to my friend, Congressman [James Enos] Jim Clyburn, and said that, based on my analysis, I thought that he was in a good place to become the Majority Whip if Democrats went into the majority. He was the Democratic Caucus chair at the time, and I suggested to him that he should consider running for Democratic Whip. And he looked at me in amazement and said, “Don’t you think I already have planned to do that? What makes you think that I would not run for Whip?” We had a big laugh about it.

He then told me that he wanted me to be his campaign manager for the Whip position—if we indeed went into the majority. We shook hands on it, and we made a deal. I created a database of all the Democratic Members and all of those who were soon-to-be freshman Democratic Members and we got on the telephone. We started calling each one of those Members and to-be Members to line up support for the Whip position if Democrats went into the majority.

Sure enough, Democrats won the majority in 2006, and Clyburn found himself running for Democratic Whip. We also learned that two other Democrats were planning to run for Whip. So we envisioned a contested election between Congressman Clyburn and two other well-respected Democrats. We were gearing up for a contest, and we continued to make the telephone calls. I continued to be at Clyburn’s side. And everywhere he went I was giving him a cell phone to call some of our colleagues, and he lined up all of these votes. Sure enough, we had enough votes in order to win, and the other two individuals who had planned to run for the Whip position decided

not to run. So Clyburn won the Whip race without any opposition at all. Clyburn really appreciated my willingness to help him with the effort. He may have won without my help, but I certainly gave all that I had to give to his election to be the Democratic Whip, and he won.

That's when I decided that I wanted to make a major change in committee assignments—I wanted the Appropriations Committee. I wanted Appropriations because I'm no longer a freshman Member of Congress. I am now an advanced Member of Congress, not a senior Member, but I'm more than a freshman Member. So I went to Speaker Pelosi, met with her one on one, and explained to her that I wanted to be on the Appropriations Committee. She shared with me that it's very difficult to put two people from the same state on the Appropriations Committee, that she is an appropriator and she had been on the Appropriations Committee, and that you have to spread it around based on regional representation. Since Congressman David [Eugene] Price is from North Carolina, and he is an appropriator, that it was not likely that I would be able to secure a seat on the Appropriations Committee.

Then she encouraged me to go for the Energy and Commerce Committee. She explained that we needed more African-American Members on the Energy and Commerce Committee, that my region needed more representation on that committee, and that she thought I would be a perfect fit for the Energy and Commerce Committee. So I set my sights on a committee change from Agriculture and Armed Services to the exclusive committee of Energy and Commerce. I campaigned for it. I knew that I had the support of Speaker Pelosi. I knew I had the support of Congressman Jim Clyburn. I knew I had the support of Steny [Hamilton] Hoyer, who was the

number two Democrat in our caucus, and I felt like I was in a very good place. The Steering and Policy Committee met, and I was unanimously elected to the Committee on Energy and Commerce. I was very appreciative of the help that I received from Nancy Pelosi, Steny Hoyer, and from Jim Clyburn.

So I began my service on the Energy and Commerce Committee as the most junior member of Energy and Commerce. Over the years, I've been able to work my way up in seniority, and now I am one of the senior members of the Committee on Energy and Commerce. It's a very important committee in the Congress. Over 50 percent of the legislation that works its way through the House has some connection with the committee. We deal with energy and the environment, hazardous materials and health policy, and Medicare, Medicaid, consumer protection, and renewable energy—the list just goes on and on and on. Energy and Commerce being the oldest [standing] committee in the House of Representatives, it is a very important committee. I've had the privilege and honor of serving on Energy and Commerce for the last 14 years. I'm really going to miss my colleagues on that committee, but it's been a wonderful, wonderful experience.

Let me also say on the subject of committees, that I also had an interest in serving on the Committee on House Administration. It is not common for members of an exclusive committee to get a second committee. I went to Zoe Lofgren, who is a senior Democrat on House Administration, and again, I went back to Pelosi, Hoyer, and Clyburn and expressed an interest in serving on House Administration, and they agreed. I was given the honor of serving on the Committee on House Administration. I was on the committee with Zoe Lofgren and Jamie [Ben] Raskin and [Peter Rey] Pete Aguilar and

Marcia [L.] Fudge. We all served on the committee together. And Speaker Pelosi decided to activate the Subcommittee on Elections. It was a dormant subcommittee for many years. Speaker Pelosi activated the Elections Subcommittee and placed Marcia Fudge to be the chair of the Subcommittee on Elections.

Marcia did a very good job in that position. We went around the country holding field hearings on the reauthorization of Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act and was very effective. Well, we all know that Congresswoman Marcia Fudge became Secretary [of Housing and Urban Development] Marcia Fudge in the Biden Administration, which created a vacancy for the Elections Subcommittee.

That's when Zoe Lofgren recommended to Speaker Pelosi that I become the chair of the Elections Subcommittee, and that's the position that I've held in addition to my seat on Energy and Commerce. Of course, I did the same thing that Marcia Fudge did. I also went around the country and held field hearings to build a congressional record to support reauthorization of Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act. We all know that the Supreme Court, in 2013, invalidated a piece of the Voting Rights Act which suspended the use of Section 5. The court did not dismantle Section 5, the preclearance section. It simply suspended the use of Section 5 until Congress could update the formula which determines which jurisdictions are included and not included in the coverage. The court said that the formula used by Congress to update the Voting Rights Act was outdated—that Congress was operating on a 1964 formula, and we needed a modern-day formula. In order to update the formula, you have got to have the evidence—you've got to have the record. During my two years as chairman, I've gone around and held hearings to

create a record that would support updating Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act.

So I conclude my 18 years in Congress having served on some very important committees, starting with Small Business and Agriculture, the Armed Services Committee, and then the Energy and Commerce Committee and the House Committee on Administration. Oh, yes—I left out having served four years on the House Committee on Ethics. Having a legal background, Nancy Pelosi came to me and asked one day if I would—and we were in the majority at the time—asked me if I would serve on the Ethics Committee. That’s a very thankless committee to serve on because you have to hold your colleagues and your peers accountable. But I accepted the appointment and served on the Ethics Committee for four years, as I recall. We had some very difficult cases that I had to participate in.

MURPHY: We are running a little short on time, so we want to get to a couple other topics.

BUTTERFIELD: Sure.

LaSHIER: So in the 114th Congress [2015–2017], you became chair of the Congressional Black Caucus [CBC].

BUTTERFIELD: Yes.

LaSHIER: Could you describe your experience as chair?

BUTTERFIELD: I’ve always liked belonging to organizations and caucuses. I guess it started with my father and the NAACP years ago. My father was active in dental organizations and civic organizations, so I grew up in a household looking at

parents who belonged to professional organizations. When I came to Congress, the first thing I was determined to do was to affiliate with the Congressional Black Caucus. I knew the history and the legacy of the CBC, and I wanted to be a part of it. So I joined the Congressional Black Caucus, and it was a wonderful experience. I created friendships and relationships that will endure for a lifetime.

Early on in my service in the CBC, there was a vacancy for parliamentarian. I decided to run for parliamentarian of the CBC and was elected without opposition. And then the next two years there may have been a position for secretary of the CBC, and I ran for that unopposed. Then I ran for second vice chair of the CBC and was pleasantly surprised that I was unopposed—but unopposed for second vice [chair]. I decided to run for first vice [chair] two years later and was elected that.

It became clear to me that I was positioned to become the chairman of the legendary, powerful Congressional Black Caucus, the “conscience of the Congress.” When that opportunity presented itself, I told the outgoing chair, Marcia Fudge, that I wanted to succeed her. Marcia was the chair. I’m the first vice chair. We then prepared for an election. There were some who felt that Marcia needed to stay on for another two years—she had done such an outstanding job. And Marcia Fudge declined to run for re-election for a second term. No chair has ever run for re-election before. There has always been two-year turnovers for the chair of the CBC. So Marcia declined any opportunity to run for re-election and supported me to become chair of the caucus.

I ran for and was unanimously elected as the chair of the CBC. That was a

moment in my life that I shall never forget. Just one of the highest honors that any Member of Congress, particularly an African-American Member of Congress, could ever experience, and that is to be elected unanimously by your peers to serve as the chairman of the Congressional Black Congress.

Now, keep in mind that each member of the CBC is a politician. Each one of us has a different approach to lawmaking and to the whole political system. So as chair of the CBC, you have to navigate through different personalities within the caucus and try to reconcile differences and to bring competing interests together so that you can be united when it's time to vote on legislation of importance. I would like to think that I was successful in doing that.

We were able to get a lot of things passed. This was during the final two years of [the] Obama [administration]. And so I was a frequent visitor at the Obama White House. I was invited frequently to travel with President Obama. I went with him four or five times on various trips, including to the Clementa Pinckney funeral in Charleston, South Carolina, with the Charleston 9.¹ I accompanied him on Air Force One to that funeral. I went with President Obama to Kenya and to Ethiopia, which is his ancestral home. I had the high honor of traveling with the President on Air Force One to those two countries, and it was because of my involvement with the Congressional Black Caucus and my personal relationship with President Obama.

Barack Obama and I came to the Congress about the same time. I was elected in the special election in July of '04. Barack Obama came on January 3 of '05. So we would like to say that we came at the same time. We sat next

to each other at the Congressional Black Caucus, and any time we were involved in programs with the CBC, we would always be seated together and have an opportunity to speak to each other.

I might say—and I know we’re running out of time—I might say that when Barack Obama decided that he wanted to run for President, he told me I was one of the first persons he talked with. He came to me and said that he wanted to run for President and that he had the financial resources, he thought, in place to be a viable candidate. He thought he had a path to victory, and he needed my support. I explained to Barack that I thought John Edwards, the U.S. Senator from my state, would also be running for President and that I had a conflict. I had a conflict between a dear personal friend named Barack Obama, who could become the first African-American President of the United States, and the Senator from my home state becoming President, and that I had a dilemma. He needed to be patient with me and let me work through it.

So we had an understanding that he would be patient, but he would always joke with me about it. Anytime Barack would see me he would say, “Have you resolved your conflict? You ready to support me?” And I would say, “I need a little bit more time.” Well, eventually I did endorse John Edwards, and weeks later I saw that Edwards was not getting the traction that I thought he was going to get in the presidential primary, so I abandoned John Edwards and embraced Barack Obama—one of the best decisions I could have ever made.

When I became CBC chair and President Obama occupied the White House, we continued that friendship and relationship. I found myself

frequently speaking with the President and his senior staff. Valerie Jarrett—we were talking weekly about important matters, including judgeships and other legislation that is important to America. So the CBC experience was very profound. It's one that I shall never forget.

MURPHY: And Representative Karen Bass once called you “the CBC’s resident historian,” and we wanted to ask you a little bit about what you see as Congress’s role in commemorating African-American history?²

BUTTERFIELD: The Congressional Black Caucus is the conscience of the Congress, and as far as I’m concerned, the conscience of America. You have 58, soon-to-be 59, very strong thought leaders in this country who are not only politicians, but they are thought leaders. They represent their constituents with distinction. They have great experience and vast experiences in the private sector and the public sector and in elected office at the local level. They bring all of these experiences to Congress. I would like to think that the Congressional Black Caucus—which is now about 20 percent of the Democratic Caucus—that we bring value to the Democratic Caucus and we bring a vision to Democratic policies as we go forward. Democrats are in the minority in the 118th Congress [2023–2025], so even more now than ever Democrats are going to have to be united, and the CBC will be an integral part of the unity of the Democratic Caucus.

But there’s a lot of history involved with the Democratic Caucus and the Congressional Black Caucus. Karen Bass is right. I have a keen sense of history, of African-American history, and it starts in 1870 with the election of the first African American to Congress—I don’t have time to go into that—in South Carolina. But 20 African Americans in Congress during

Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction and many more in the twentieth century.

MURPHY: In February 2021, you spoke on the House Floor about your family’s interesting connection in Bermuda to that first Black Representative, Joseph [Hayne] Rainey.

BUTTERFIELD: Yes, I had forgotten about that. Joseph Rainey was the first African American to serve in Congress. He was from South Carolina. In 1862, Joseph Rainey and his family lived in St. George, Bermuda. My grandfather, James Peter Butterfield, also lived in St. George from 1853 to 1927. So even though I don’t have proof of it, I am confident that since it’s such a small village in Bermuda that their paths crossed.

MURPHY: We are running out of time, but we wanted to wrap up with some retrospective questions—there’s so much we wanted to cover with you because of your interesting legislative career. In terms of pushing for change in the many levels of government that you have served in, can you reflect on the possibilities for effecting change at each level: state, local, federal?

BUTTERFIELD: Over the 18 years that I’ve served in Congress, I’ve seen a dramatic change in partisanship in Congress. When I first came, [J. Dennis] Denny Hastert was the Speaker, and even though it was a partisan environment, it was respectful. But over the years, partisanship has become more intense. And now it’s so intense that our democracy is at stake. We went through four years of [President] Donald [J.] Trump, and that has left a stain on our democracy. I’m not going to go into that. This is a nonpartisan environment, but it’s just my opinion that Donald Trump did a disservice to the country, and now our democracy is feeling the effects of it. But we’re trying to rebound. We had

some good productive years during the [President] George W. Bush years, the [President] George H.W. Bush years, during the [President William J.] Clinton years and certainly during Obama. But now we're trying to get our democracy back on solid ground. Many of our citizens have lost faith in the institutions, American institutions. They are losing faith in our political system, judicial system, and so we've got to be very cognizant, as Members of Congress, to do everything within our power to restore the confidence of the American people in its institutions.

And it starts with each individual Member of Congress making a commitment that partisanship has its limits. We are a partisan institution by nature, but it does not have to be extreme. Members are so busy in this work thinking about the next election. While the next election is important, democracy is more important. We have to govern. We have to legislate in a bipartisan manner, and those in the middle must come together and form coalitions, Democrat and Republican. We must form coalitions in order to pass legislation that will not only serve the American people but restore confidence of the American people in their political institutions.

MURPHY:

One final thing, talking about African-American history—you proposed a lot of interesting measures, initiatives, bills to commemorate the life of individuals or workers here in the Capitol building. And North Carolina has a very particular history of Black representation in Congress, especially during Reconstruction, as we talked about. Four Black Members served from North Carolina, but not again until the 1990s, mainly after all of the changes that you discussed. How did this history of Black representation shape your perspective on your role in the House?

BUTTERFIELD: The first Black Congressman in North Carolina was John [Adams] Hyman from Warren County in 1872. He was followed by Henry Plummer Cheatham, James Edward O’Hara, and then the final African-American Congressman was George H. [Henry] White. George H. White was elected after Reconstruction, but it was during what was called the fusion period of the 1890s.

George H. White, elected in 1896, took office March 3, 1897. He was the only African American in Congress at the time, and he served with distinction. His number one legislative agenda was to make lynching a federal crime. That was his number one legislation—making lynching a federal crime. He did not get it passed. But he ran for re-election in 1898, and he won re-election. And by this time the Ku Klux Klan was running rampant, and White supremacy was the law of the land, and so what the North Carolina legislature did in 1900—in order to defeat George H. White, in order to defeat any other African American desiring to run for elective office—was to create a literacy test and a poll tax. In other words, you had to pay money in order to vote. You had to be able to satisfy a White registrar that you were literate—and even those who were literate, it was impossible for them to pass the literacy test.

Starting in 1900, George H. White knew that he could not get re-elected in North Carolina because of the literacy test and the poll tax. So in early 1901, as George H. White was leaving Congress, he made a very impassioned speech from the House Floor. “Phoenix-like, Mr. Speaker, one day the Negro will rise again.” That was his farewell speech to Congress, and I would urge anyone watching this video to read at their leisure—because it’s a little lengthy—George H. White’s farewell speech to the American Congress on

January 29 of 1901.³ It was very powerful.

North Carolina enjoyed the service of four African-American Members of Congress during Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction. But it was not until years later, in 1992, that another African American was elected to Congress. And it would not have happened but for strict enforcement of the Voting Rights Act. And that's why Eva [M.] Clayton and [Melvin L.] Mel Watt were able to get elected to Congress in 1992, because the Department of Justice insisted that North Carolina create two majority-minority congressional districts in the state. So those two individuals took office—actually, Eva Clayton took office in November of 1992, Mel Watt in January of 1993—and we have had continuous representation since then.

MURPHY: Well, I think that's a good way to tie it all together, and I think we'll have to end for today. But we really want to thank you for joining us and telling us these stories from your lengthy and impressive career. Thanks a lot.

BUTTERFIELD: Thank you, and there's so much more that I can add to it.

NOTES

¹ On June 7, 2015, a White supremacist murdered nine African Americans at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

² *Congressional Record*, Daily, House, 116th Cong., 2nd sess. (7 December 2020): H6889.

³ *Congressional Record*, House, 56th Cong., 2nd sess. (29 January 1901): 1634–1638.