

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1987-1996
DEMOCRAT FROM MARYLAND

An epiphany in his mid-20s called Frizzell Gray away from the streets of Baltimore and into politics under a new name: Kweisi Mfume, which means “conquering son of kings” in a West African dialect. “Frizzell Gray had lived and died. From his spirit was born a new person,” Mfume later wrote.¹ An admirer of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mfume followed in his footsteps, becoming a well-known voice on Baltimore-area radio, the chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), and the leader of one of the country’s oldest advocacy groups for African Americans, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Kweisi Mfume, formerly named Frizzell Gray, was born on October 24, 1948, in Turners Station, Maryland, a small town 10 miles south of Baltimore. His mother, Mary Elizabeth Gray, was employed in odd jobs that included positions as a maid and a worker in an airplane components factory. His stepfather, Clifton Gray, a truck driver, left the family in 1959.² In 1960, Mary Gray and her children moved to West Baltimore, where they struggled financially. Education was segregated, and Gray recalled being confused about having to pass three schools on the way to his own.³ The Grays drew inspiration from Martin Luther King, Jr., and President John F. Kennedy. In 1962, Gray heard President Kennedy speak in Baltimore. A year later, the Grays wanted to attend King's civil rights March on Washington but could not afford the trip.⁴

Two events changed Gray's life when he was a young man. In 1965, his mother died in his arms after battling cancer. Though the Gray children were parceled out among relatives, Gray felt responsible for the well-being of his sisters: Darlene, LaWana, and Michele. At 16, he left high school and worked as many as three jobs simultaneously, finding employment as a grocery clerk, a bread factory employee, and a shoe shiner. Eventually succumbing to

stress and frustration, Gray quit his jobs. He hung out on street corners, participated in illegal gambling, joined a gang, and fathered five sons (Ronald, Donald, Kevin, Keith, and Michael) with four different women. In the summer of 1972, Gray saw a vision of his mother's face, convincing him to leave his life on the streets.⁵ Earning a high school equivalency degree, Gray changed his name to symbolize his transformation. He adopted the name Kweisi Mfume at the suggestion of an aunt who had traveled through Ghana. An earlier encounter with future Baltimore-area Representative Parren Mitchell, who challenged Mfume to help solve the problems of poverty and violence, profoundly affected the troubled young man.⁶ "I can't explain it, but a feeling just came over me that I shouldn't be [on the streets] and I had to change. I was headed nowhere," he later told reporters.⁷ Mfume continued to provide for his sons. He married Linda Shields in July 1972, but they later divorced.

A renewed Mfume began classes at the Community College of Baltimore and served as an announcer for WEBB Radio Baltimore, which was owned by legendary singer James Brown. Mfume volunteered for Parren Mitchell's 1968 campaign. Though Mitchell lost the primary election (he was elected to Congress in 1970 and would serve 16 years in the House), the experience sparked Mfume's interest in politics. He soon went from introducing popular records on the radio to hosting his own ad hoc political talk show.⁸ From 1974 to 1976, Mfume was the dee-jay for "Ebony Reflections," a radio show that discussed African-American political concerns between musical selections and aired recordings of Malcolm X and King.⁹ Uncomfortable with the show's political content, Brown eventually dismissed Mfume.¹⁰ After transferring to Morgan State University, Mfume helped start a college radio station. By the time Mfume



earned his bachelor of science degree in urban planning in 1976, he was the program director for the station.¹¹

In 1978, Mfume ran for a seat on the Baltimore city council. Adopting the slogan “Beat the Bosses,” he conducted a massive, but disorganized, door-to-door campaign.¹² Mfume won the seat by a mere three votes.¹³ Shortly after Mfume’s razor-thin victory, a mentor encouraged him to change his attire from more-eclectic, African-inspired clothing to suits and ties. Mfume followed the advice; however, he remained outspoken and often instigated famously heated battles with Democratic Mayor William Donald Schaefer. Yet he soon tempered his confrontational style. “I realized I had to find a way to put together a majority of the votes on the council, and that meant developing a consensus,” Mfume said.¹⁴ In his eight years as a city councilman, Mfume rose to chair the city’s health subcommittee and led Baltimore’s divestment from companies doing business in South Africa. He also earned a master’s degree in liberal arts from Johns Hopkins University in 1984.

In 1985, Representative Parren Mitchell announced his retirement after more than a decade and a half in the House. Rooted in inner-city Baltimore, Mitchell’s district was overwhelmingly black (73 percent) and Democratic presidential candidates regularly received 80 percent of the vote throughout the 1980s.¹⁵ Mfume entered a crowded 1986 Democratic primary to succeed Mitchell as a dark horse among well-recognized names. Front-runner Clarence Mitchell III (Parren Mitchell’s nephew), a 24-year state senate veteran, entered the race. Wendell H. Phillips, a civil rights activist and pastor of a large Baltimore church, proved to be Mitchell’s closest rival. Phillips had the full support of former Mayor Schaefer, who was running for governor. As Phillips and Mitchell attacked one another, Mfume emerged as a viable compromise and unexpectedly won the nomination with 47 percent of the vote.¹⁶ In the general election, Mfume faced Republican Saint George I. B. Crosse III. Crosse attacked Mfume by drawing attention to his former life on the street. In front of a

media entourage, Crosse held up a cup and challenged Mfume to take a drug test.¹⁷ Mfume deflected the attacks by pointing to his changed life and easily won the election, with 87 percent of the vote. Though redistricting in 1993 added some rural communities west of the city to his constituency, the district remained predominantly black (71 percent) due to African-American migration to the suburbs.¹⁸ Mfume won all of his subsequent elections by margins greater than 80 percent, and he ran unopposed in 1988.¹⁹

Mfume’s background led him to focus on urban economic renewal, and his committee assignments reflected this emphasis. Mfume received assignments on the Banking, Finance, and Urban Affairs Committee and the Small Business Committee. He also received an assignment on the Select Committee on Hunger. In 1990, he convinced the Subcommittee on Housing of the Banking, Finance, and Urban Affairs Committee to include an amendment that would prorate rents in public housing on the basis of real income—less alimony and child support payments—rather than net income.²⁰ Mfume presided over a debate that preceded the passage of the civil rights bill by the House in 1991; the measure facilitated the collection of damages by victims of job discrimination based on race, sex, disability, or national origin.²¹ In 1993, Mfume teamed with Connecticut Republican Christopher Shays on a bill to create enterprise zones and provide tax breaks for minority businesses.²² “People are being discriminated against by mortgage lenders based on the color of their skin,” Mfume told the *New York Times*. “Banks have a long way to go for meeting the legitimate needs of neighborhoods.”²³ Mfume’s experience on the streets motivated him to craft legislation to help inner-city youth and he proposed the Youth Employment Services Act, which sought to connect local businesses and governments with teenage workers.²⁴ Mfume also received national attention in the 101st Congress (1989–1991) when he attempted to restrict the sale of beepers to young people, claiming the devices made drug transactions

easier.²⁵ In the 102nd Congress (1991–1993), Mfume earned an additional assignment on the Joint Economic Committee. He continued to advocate urban renewal projects as chairman of the Small Business Committee in the 103rd Congress (1993–1995). To revitalize urban areas, Mfume unveiled a seven-point plan that included the expansion of the enterprise zones program and the development of nationally sponsored service projects for urban youth.

Mfume was an active member of the CBC from the beginning of his congressional career. As a freshman in the 100th Congress (1987–1989), he served as CBC treasurer. The following Congress, he was vice chairman. In the 103rd Congress, he sought the caucus chairmanship. Mfume’s promise of bold leadership helped him prevail against Representative Craig Washington of Texas, and he won the chairmanship by a vote of 27 to 9.²⁶

As CBC chairman, Mfume quickly established that the caucus would not automatically support the policies of Democratic President William J. (Bill) Clinton. In April 1993, Mfume led the CBC and a handful of other Democrats in a threat to join Republicans in blocking Clinton’s request for a line-item veto (the ability to strike certain provisions of an appropriations bill without vetoing it). Explaining his stance as a “pure position of principle,” Mfume argued that granting the President’s request would give him too much power. “Even the most naïve student of constitutional history knows that no legislator since the beginning of this nation has come to the point that we are at today, to cede unto the executive branch, those powers,” he declared. Mfume and other liberals were also uneasy about the power that could be given to a future conservative executive.²⁷ Realizing they were hemorrhaging votes, Democratic leaders quickly pulled the measure from the floor. After several weeks of cajoling black Members to get on board with the line-item veto, the leadership managed to pass the measure; Mfume voted against it.²⁸ Under Mfume’s leadership the CBC also challenged the Clinton administration’s budget-cutting priorities as it

scaled back welfare and other entitlement programs.²⁹

The CBC also weighed in on foreign affairs. The caucus’s pressure on the Clinton administration affected the President’s policies toward former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. The CBC wanted to help reinstate the exiled leader and change American policy toward Haitian refugees, many of whom were sent back to Haiti when they arrived in the United States.³⁰ In April 1994, Mfume was one of six Members of Congress—five of them CBC members—who were arrested after a sit-in at the White House to protest the Clinton administration’s Haitian policy.³¹ Mfume and the caucus pushed the Clinton administration to turn its attention to Africa’s problems: war, famine, and slow development.³² Additionally Mfume and the CBC denounced the North American Free Trade Agreement, a Clinton proposal to relax trade restrictions with neighboring countries.

Mfume stepped down as CBC chairman after one term in December 1994, per caucus tradition, though he remained active in a supporting role. In December 1994, Mfume unsuccessfully campaigned for chairman of the Democratic Caucus—an organization that set congressional party policy—for the 104th Congress (1995–1997) against Representative Vic Fazio of California.³³ The “Republican Revolution” in the 1994 election, which ushered in the first GOP majority in 40 years, also discouraged Mfume and reduced the political power of the liberal CBC.³⁴ In December 1995, he announced his retirement from his safe congressional seat to head the NAACP, whose headquarters are in Baltimore. Mfume faced the daunting task of revitalizing an organization that was beset by financial difficulties, internal bickering, and scandal.³⁵ By February 1997, Mfume had nearly erased the organization’s \$3 million debt and had rekindled interest in the association.³⁶ Mfume left the NAACP after nine years of service to spend time with his sons. (He adopted a sixth son, four-year-old Christopher, in 2004.³⁷) Reflecting on his political career, Mfume mused, “I could just stand on the side and be a spectator.

But politics is not a spectator sport. And in Washington, it's a contact sport. I don't play to tie, I try to play to win. But you can only win if you are in the game."³⁸ Mfume attempted a return to elective political office in 2005, when he announced his candidacy to succeed retiring U.S. Senator Paul Sarbanes in the 2006 election. In a crowded Democratic primary, Mfume lost by a narrow four-point margin to Maryland Representative Ben Cardin, taking 40 percent of the vote.³⁹

FOR FURTHER READING

"Mfume, Kweisi," *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=M000687>.

Mfume, Kweisi with Ron Stodghill II. *No Free Ride: From the Mean Streets to the Mainstream*. (New York: One World, 1996).

NOTES

- 1 Kweisi Mfume with Ron Stodghill II, *No Free Ride: From the Mean Streets to the Mainstream* (New York: One World Books, 1996): 187.
- 2 Family friend Rufus Tate later revealed that he was Mfume's biological father. Damien Bayard Ingram, "Kweisi Mfume," in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Men* (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1999): 809 (hereinafter referred to as *NBAM*).
- 3 "Kweisi Mfume," *Contemporary Heroes and Heroines*, Volume 3 (Detroit, MI: Gale Group, 1998) (hereinafter referred to as *CHH*).
- 4 Mfume, *No Free Ride*: 109.
- 5 "Kweisi Mfume," *CHH*; Ingram, "Kweisi Mfume," *NBAM*; Mfume, *No Free Ride*: 176–177. See also "Kweisi Mfume," *Contemporary Black Biography*, Volume 6 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1994) (hereinafter referred to as *CBB*).
- 6 Mfume, *No Free Ride*: 165–166.
- 7 Kent Jenkins, Jr., "Mfume on the Move," 8 December 1992, *Washington Post*: D1.
- 8 "Kweisi Mfume," *CBB*.
- 9 Ingram, "Kweisi Mfume," *NBAM*.
- 10 Mfume, *No Free Ride*: 210.
- 11 Jenkins, "Mfume on the Move."
- 12 "Kweisi Mfume," *CBB*; "Mfume, Kweisi," *Current Biography*, 1996 (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1996): 368.
- 13 Jenkins, "Mfume on the Move."

- 14 Quoted from *Washington Post* profile on the Representative in “Mfume, Kweisi,” *Current Biography*, 1996: 368.
- 15 *Politics in America*, 1990 (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1989): 671.
- 16 Mfume, *No Free Ride*: 268.
- 17 Sandra Sugawara, “Maryland Democrats Talk of Sweeping 8 Races for U.S. House,” 1 November 1986, *Washington Post*: D11.
- 18 *Politics in America*, 1994 (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1993): 703.
- 19 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 20 “Mfume, Kweisi,” *Current Biography*, 1996: 369.
- 21 Adam Clymer, “17 Short of Goal,” 6 June 1991, *New York Times*: A1.
- 22 “Mfume, Kweisi,” *Current Biography*, 1996: 369.
- 23 “Blacks’ Woes in Borrowing,” 8 May 1992, *New York Times*: D13.
- 24 *Politics in America*, 1990: 670.
- 25 Paul W. Valentine, “Law Urged to Curb Sale of Beepers to Youths,” 14 March 1989, *Washington Post*: A6.
- 26 “Mfume, Kweisi,” *Current Biography*, 1996: 369; *Politics in America*, 1994: 702.
- 27 *Politics in America*, 1994: 702; Clifford Krauss, “A Line-Item Veto Is Passed, But It Has Key Restrictions,” 30 April 1993, *New York Times*: A14.
- 28 *Politics in America*, 1994: 702.
- 29 Neil A. Lewis, “Says He Had Not Read Her Academic Writings,” 4 June 1993, *New York Times*: A1.
- 30 “Mfume, Kweisi,” *Current Biography*, 1996: 369.
- 31 Steven Greenhouse, “U.S. Says Later That It Will Pressure His Foes; Six Lawmakers Arrested During Protest,” 22 April 1994, *New York Times*: A1.
- 32 Steven A. Holmes, “Administration Seeks Ways to Ease Africa’s Wars and Debt Burden,” 18 May 1993, *New York Times*: A9.
- 33 Adam Clymer, “Congress Returns to Select Leaders for the New Term,” 28 November 1994, *New York Times*: A1.
- 34 “Kweisi Mfume,” *CHH*.
- 35 Rob Howe et al., “The Bootstrap Method; Having Salvaged Himself, Kweisi Mfume Strives to Revive the NAACP,” 26 February 1996, *Time*: 55.
- 36 “Kweisi Mfume,” *CHH*.
- 37 Christopher’s mother was an employee of the NAACP with whom Mfume reportedly had a relationship. See Matthew Moss and Cheryl W. Thompson, “Mfume Accused of Favoritism at NAACP,” 28 April 2005, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 38 Quoted in “Kweisi Mfume,” *CHH*.
- 39 Maryland State Board of Elections, “Official 2006 Gubernatorial Primary Election Results for U.S. Senator,” at http://www.elections.state.md.us/elections/2006/results/primary/office_US_Senator.html (accessed 15 November 2007).