



Julia May Carson

1938–2007

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1997–2007
DEMOCRAT FROM INDIANA

Overcoming poverty and racism, Julia Carson served nearly two decades in the Indiana legislature and in an Indianapolis administrative office before winning election to the U.S. House in 1996. Representative Carson, the first African American and woman to represent the Indiana state capital, focused on issues that affected working-class Americans, many with which she was personally familiar. “The only thing some people learn from oppression and hatred is revenge. Others learn compassion and empathy,” said former Representative Andy Jacobs, Carson’s political mentor. “From the physical pain of material poverty and the mindlessly cruel persecution of nitwit racism, Julia Carson made her choice of hard work, compassion, and a pleasing sense of humor.”¹

Julia May Porter was born in Louisville, Kentucky, on July 8, 1938. Her single mother, Velma Porter, moved to Indianapolis, Indiana, to find work as a domestic. Julia Porter grew up poor, attended the local public schools, and worked part-time, waiting tables, delivering newspapers, and harvesting crops, among other jobs. In 1955, she graduated from Crispus Attucks High School in Indianapolis. Shortly thereafter she was married, and had two children, Sam and Tonya. She divorced while they were still young. She later studied at Martin University in Indianapolis and Indiana University in Bloomington. In 1965 she was working as a secretary at a local chapter of United Auto Workers when she met newly elected Representative Andy Jacobs. Jacobs was looking for a caseworker and district aide, and he hired Carson. She worked for Jacobs for seven years until 1972, when he encouraged her to run for office in the Indiana legislature. He recalled sitting in Carson’s living room for an hour, trying to convince her to run. “Come on, kid,” Jacobs encouraged. “This is the time to step up.”² From 1973 to 1977, Carson served in the state house of representatives,

serving as the assistant minority caucus chair, before winning election to the Indiana senate. She served in the upper chamber until 1990, sitting on its finance committee and eventually holding the minority whip position. Throughout her service in the state legislature, Carson was employed as the human resources director at an electric company—a job she held from 1973 to 1996. In 1991, Carson won election as a Center Township trustee. In that post, she administered welfare payments in central Indianapolis, earning a reputation for defending the poor that would last throughout her career.³ Carson successfully erased the agency’s crippling debt—a \$20-million deficit—leaving \$7 million in the bank prior to winning a seat in Congress. “Julia Carson,” observed the county’s auditor, a Republican, “wrestled that monster to the ground.”⁴

Representative Jacobs retired in 1996 after 15 terms representing a district encompassing greater Indianapolis. Traditionally moderate, the district was 68 percent white and 30 percent black. With Jacobs’s endorsement, Carson topped the former district party chair, Ann DeLaney, in the Democratic primary with a margin of 49 to 31 percent. Political observers maintained that Carson was at a disadvantage in the general election against Republican Virginia Blankenbaker, insisting she could not win in the conservative-leaning, majority-white district. Both candidates were more liberal than their respective party’s general positions, supporting abortion rights and opposing the death penalty. Carson sought to deflect attention from racial issues, insisting, “I am not your African American candidate. I am the Democratic candidate for Congress. I don’t allow my opponents to stereotype me and confine me to a certain segment of the population.”⁵ She prevailed, with 53 percent of the vote to Blankenbaker’s 45 percent.

Carson underwent heart surgery shortly after her election and was sworn in to office from her hospital



bed on January 9, 1997. She was unable to travel to Washington, DC, until early March. Her health problems led to speculation she would not return for re-election in 1998, but Carson quickly quelled the rumors.⁶ Carson won her four re-election campaigns by slightly larger margins in her competitive district. Reapportionment in 2001 added more than 100,000 constituents, many of them Republican. Nevertheless, Carson was re-elected in 2004 and 2006, both times with 54 percent of the vote.⁷

When Representative Carson claimed her seat in the 105th Congress (1997–1999), she received posts on the Banking and Financial Services Committee (later renamed Financial Services) and the Veterans’ Affairs Committee. In the 108th Congress (2003–2005) she left Veterans’ Affairs to accept an assignment on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

Representative Carson had varied legislative interests, ranging from national issues affecting children and working Americans to local programs of particular interest to her Indianapolis constituency. From her seat on the Financial Services Committee, Carson authored legislation to reform the debt consolidation industry. Boosting the “financial literacy” of average Americans was one of her chief goals. To that end, she helped create the Indiana Mortgage and Foreclosure Hotline to counsel homeowners and potential buyers about the mortgage process. Carson noted that Indiana residents had one of the country’s highest rates of homeownership in 2001, only to see a record number of foreclosures in 2004. “Homeownership,” Carson declared, “is the cornerstone of a healthy thriving city.”⁸ Carson was a regular sponsor of children’s safety, health, and nutrition legislation. In 1999, she submitted comprehensive gun safety legislation, including a provision requiring safety locks on handguns. “Kids and guns are a deadly combination,” she noted in 1999. “It makes no sense that it is easier for kids to operate a handgun than it is for kids to open an aspirin lid.”⁹

Representative Carson’s work on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee also allowed her to support local Indiana businesses. In 2003, Carson helped win \$11

million in federal funding for transportation initiatives in Indianapolis, including highway expansion, street improvements, and augmented public transportation.¹⁰ In 2005, she sponsored the largest Amtrak re-authorization bill in history—the National Defense Rail Act. The \$40 billion bill provided for the development of new rail lines including high-speed rail corridors, and Carson supported the bill partially because Amtrak’s largest repair facility was located near Indianapolis. In 2000, Carson was one of the last House Members to support the extension of permanent normal trade relations with China. Intensely lobbied by President William J. (Bill) Clinton’s administration to support the bill, Carson hesitated because of China’s questionable human rights record and organized labor’s opposition to the measure. “I feel like I have been put in a Maytag washer and put on the spin cycle,” she noted before the vote. She reluctantly voted in favor of the legislation, believing that increased foreign trade would benefit Indianapolis businesses.

One of Carson’s crowning legislative achievements was the bill she authored and introduced during the 106th Congress (1999–2001) to award the Congressional Gold Medal to civil rights activist Rosa Parks. It was while reading Parks’s autobiography, *Quiet Strength*, in early 1998, that Carson decided the civil rights activist—whose refusal to move to the back of a segregated bus in 1955 galvanized the modern civil rights movement—should be awarded the highest civilian honor bestowed by Congress.¹¹ “I had a lingering kind of adoration in my own soul for Rosa,” Carson noted. “I always believed in my heart that it was Rosa who paved the way for me to go to Congress and to other places. I felt like it then became my purpose to give her some honor, to repay her.”¹² The Representative introduced a resolution to honor Parks with the medal on February 4, 1999—Parks’s 86th birthday. Knowing the civil rights icon was watching House proceedings on her television, Carson ignored a House rule requiring Members to address only the Speaker *pro tempore*. “Mrs. Parks, I am grateful for your steadfastness,” she declared. Initially, the bill attracted only 40 cosponsors—primarily

Members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). Carson began a media campaign on nationally syndicated radio and television programs, eventually netting 329 cosponsors. On April 20, the House passed the bill, 424 to 1. The Senate unanimously followed suit.¹³ “This is one of the best days of my life,” declared a tearful Carson. “Not for anything I have done to honor her, but the honor Rosa Parks brought to this whole nation.”¹⁴ On June 15, 1999, visitors packed the Capitol Rotunda to attend the Congressional Gold Medal ceremony. Carson was among the dignitaries who spoke at the ceremony, along with President Clinton, who presented the medal to Parks. Carson later helped her colleagues pass legislation allowing Parks to lie in honor in the Capitol Rotunda when she died in October 2005. Parks was the first woman to be given this honor.¹⁵

In late 2007, Carson’s health once again became a concern. The Representative expressed frustration with her regular battle with asthma and diabetes. After missing an important vote due to health problems, Carson noted, “I understand how an athlete feels when they sit one out to recover from an injury. The minutes move slowly, and you want nothing more than to be in for the big game.”¹⁶ In October, Carson took a two-week leave of absence to recover from a leg infection that had forced her to traverse the Capitol in a wheelchair.¹⁷ One month later, Carson announced that she had been diagnosed with terminal lung cancer during a follow-up examination of her leg. Carson succumbed to the disease on December 15 in her Indianapolis home. She lay in state in the statehouse in Indianapolis on December 21. “Let’s remember Congresswoman Carson by doing the people’s work and fighting for those who don’t have a voice,” said her grandson, André Carson. “When you talk about Julia Carson, you’re talking about an American icon. The people’s champ,” he concluded.¹⁸

FOR FURTHER READING

“Carson, Julia May,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=C000191>.

NOTES

- 1 “Official Biography of Julia Carson,” <http://www.juliacarson.house.gov/display2.cfm?id=778&type=news> (accessed 14 June 2002).
- 2 Rob Schneider, “Carson Remembered: Congresswoman Gave Voice to Disadvantaged,” 16 December 2007, *Indianapolis Star*.
- 3 “The Quotable Julia Carson,” 15 December 2007, *Indianapolis Star*.
- 4 “Julia Carson,” *Contemporary Black Biography*, Volume 23 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1999).
- 5 *Almanac of American Politics, 1998* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1997): 552.
- 6 See “The Quotable Julia Carson.”
- 7 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/election.html.
- 8 “Hotline May Help Homeowners,” 2 March 2004, *Noblesville Ledger* (Noblesville, IN).
- 9 “Rep. Carson to Introduce Gun Safety Bill,” 29 January 1999, Associated Press.
- 10 Anthony Shoettle, “Carson Steps to Plate for Local Transportation Projects,” 24 March 2003, *Indianapolis Star*.
- 11 George Stuteville, “Carson’s 1st Bill Pays Tribute to Civil Rights Pioneer,” 19 April 1999, *Indianapolis Star*. See also Office of the Clerk, “Congressional Gold Medal Recipients,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/art_history/house_history/goldMedal.html.
- 12 Rob Schneider, “She Never Forgot,” 16 December 2007, *Indianapolis Star* (quotation from April 1999).
- 13 Carson’s House bill (H.R. 573) was eventually supplanted by a Senate version (S. 531), sponsored by Senator Spencer Abraham of Michigan. The Senate bill became law.
- 14 “The Quotable Julia Carson.”
- 15 “Individuals Who Have Lain in State or in Honor,” Office of the Clerk, available at http://clerk.house.gov/art_history/house_history/lieinstate.html.
- 16 “The Quotable Julia Carson.”
- 17 Maureen Groppe, “Carson to Miss Two More Weeks,” 3 October 2007, *Indianapolis Star*.
- 18 Bill Ruthhart, “Farewell, Friend,” 22 December 2007, *Indianapolis Star*; Ken Kusner, “Mourners Bid Adieu to ‘People’s Champ,’” 22 December 2007, *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*.