



Image courtesy of the Member

Silvestre Reyes

1944–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1997–
DEMOCRAT FROM TEXAS

Representative Silvestre Reyes went from the cotton fields of West Texas to popular Border Patrol chief before heading to Congress and becoming the first Hispanic chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. Throughout his U.S. House career, Reyes has advocated for border security and a strong national defense. “Imagining that I would one day be in politics and Congress never occurred to me,” Reyes once said. “All my life, I’ve focused on the tasks in front of me.”¹

The oldest of 10 children, Silvestre Reyes was born on November 10, 1944, to Rafael and Estela Reyes in Canutillo, Texas. He was raised in a farming community and did not learn English until age six. Reyes graduated from Canutillo High School in 1964 and attended the University of Texas at Austin on a debate scholarship.² He interrupted his studies in 1965 to help take care of the family farm, but soon enrolled at Texas Western College (now the University of Texas at El Paso). Reyes again returned to help run the family farm but was drafted by the U.S. Army in 1966. For more than a year, he served as a helicopter crew chief in Vietnam, returning to Canutillo after his father died.³ He married Carolina Gaytan in 1968, and they raised three children.⁴

In 1969 Reyes became a United States Border Patrol agent in Del Rio, Texas. He earned an associate’s degree in criminal justice from El Paso Community College in 1976, and eight years later he became the country’s first Hispanic sector chief in the Border Patrol. Reyes achieved national recognition for clamping down on illegal immigration and related crime near El Paso. In 1993 he implemented “Operation Hold the Line,” which increased the Border Patrol’s presence in West Texas and lowered the crime rate there.⁵ In 1995 he ended his 26½-year career in the Border Patrol to run for Congress.⁶

Campaigning in 1996 on his tough immigration record, Reyes ran in a five-way Democratic primary for the El Paso House seat that opened when Representative Ron Coleman retired. On March 12, 1996, Reyes placed first in the close party contest and defeated his strongest Democratic opponent, former Coleman aide Jose Luis Sanchez, with 51 percent of the vote in the runoff election.⁷ In the largely Hispanic and heavily Democratic district, Reyes defeated Republican Rick Ledesma and a third-party candidate in the general election with more than 70 percent of the vote, becoming the first Hispanic to represent the district in the U.S. House.⁸ Reyes won by large margins in his seven subsequent general election campaigns.⁹

During his first term, in the 105th Congress (1997–1999), Reyes served on the National Security and Veterans Affairs Committees.¹⁰ He worked to keep Fort Bliss, located outside El Paso, from planned military cuts and advocated for increased immigration security, sponsoring a bill to make the Border Patrol a stand-alone agency in the Department of Justice.¹¹ In the 107th Congress (2001–2003), Reyes was appointed to the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence in addition to his assignments on Armed Services and Veterans Affairs. He also assumed the chairmanship of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC). Reyes was an outspoken critic of the Iraq War and helped organize the CHC’s unanimous opposition to the use of force there.¹²

After Democrats won the House majority in the 110th Congress (2007–2009), Reyes became chairman of the Intelligence Committee; he was the first Hispanic to serve in that role and the seventh to chair a full House committee.¹³ Reyes had been an outspoken critic of the intelligence failures in the run-up to the Iraq War, and he put oversight of intelligence agencies at the top of his agenda. “One of the first things we’re going to have to do is reclaim our turf,” Reyes said at the time. “We have ceded and abdicated our role as a co-equal branch of government.”¹⁴ In 2010 Reyes shepherded into law the first intelligence reauthorization bill in six years, expanding what spy agencies are required to disclose to Congress.¹⁵ When Democrats returned to the minority in the 112th Congress (2011–2013), Reyes gave up his seat on the Intelligence Committee but continued to serve on Armed Services and rejoined Veterans Affairs.¹⁶

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, “Silvestre Reyes,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

NOTES

- 1 Ramón Rentería, “Reyes Poised for Real Power in New Position,” 9 December 2006, *El Paso Times*.
- 2 Suzanne Gamboa, “Rep. Reyes: 1st Hispanic Intel. Chairman,” 2 December 2006, Associated Press; Nicholas W. Malinowski, “Reyes, Silvestre,” *Current Biography* (New York: H. W. Wilson Company: 2007): 417.
- 3 “Official Biography of Congressman Silvestre Reyes,” <http://reyes.house.gov/Biography> (accessed 8 May 2012); Malinowski, *Current Biography*: 417.

- 4 *Congressional Directory*, 112th Congress (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2011): 259; “Official Biography of Congressman Silvestre Reyes,” <http://reyes.house.gov/Biography> (accessed 8 May 2012).
- 5 Malinowski, *Current Biography*: 417; Tim Golden, “U.S. Blockade of Workers Enrages Mexican Town,” 1 October 1993, *New York Times*: A3; Joel Brinkley, “A Rare Success at the Border Brought Scant Official Praise,” 14 September 1994, *New York Times*: A1.
- 6 “Official Biography of Congressman Silvestre Reyes,” <http://reyes.house.gov/Biography> (accessed 8 May 2012); Malinowski, *Current Biography*: 417.
- 7 Eduardo Montes, “Popular Ex-Border Chief Makes Congressional Run,” 6 April 1996, Associated Press; Office of the Secretary of State (Texas), “1996 Democratic Party Primary Runoff Election Race Summary Report,” 9 April 1996, <http://elections.sos.state.tx.us/elchist.exe> (accessed 9 May 2012).
- 8 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>; *Politics in America, 1998* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1997): 1405.
- 9 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>. Reyes lost the Democratic primary in May 2012.
- 10 The Committee on Armed Services was renamed the Committee on National Security during the 104th and 105th Congresses.
- 11 “Official Biography of Congressman Silvestre Reyes,” <http://reyes.house.gov/Biography> (accessed 8 May 2012); *Politics in America, 2000* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1999): 1328.
- 12 Malinowski, *Current Biography*: 419.
- 13 Mark Mazzetti and Jeff Zeleny, “Next Chairman for Intelligence Opposed War,” 2 December 2006, *New York Times*: A11.
- 14 David Montgomery, “The Chairman’s Turf,” 4 January 2007, *Washington Post*: C01.
- 15 *Politics in America, 2012* (Washington, D.C.: CQ-Roll Call, Inc., 2011): 949.
- 16 *Politics in America, 2012*: 949. Reyes left the House Committee on Veterans Affairs during the 110th and 111th Congresses (2007–2011) while he was chairman of the intelligence panel.