

Patsy Takemoto Mink

1927–2002

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1965–1977 ; 1990–2002

DEMOCRAT FROM HAWAII

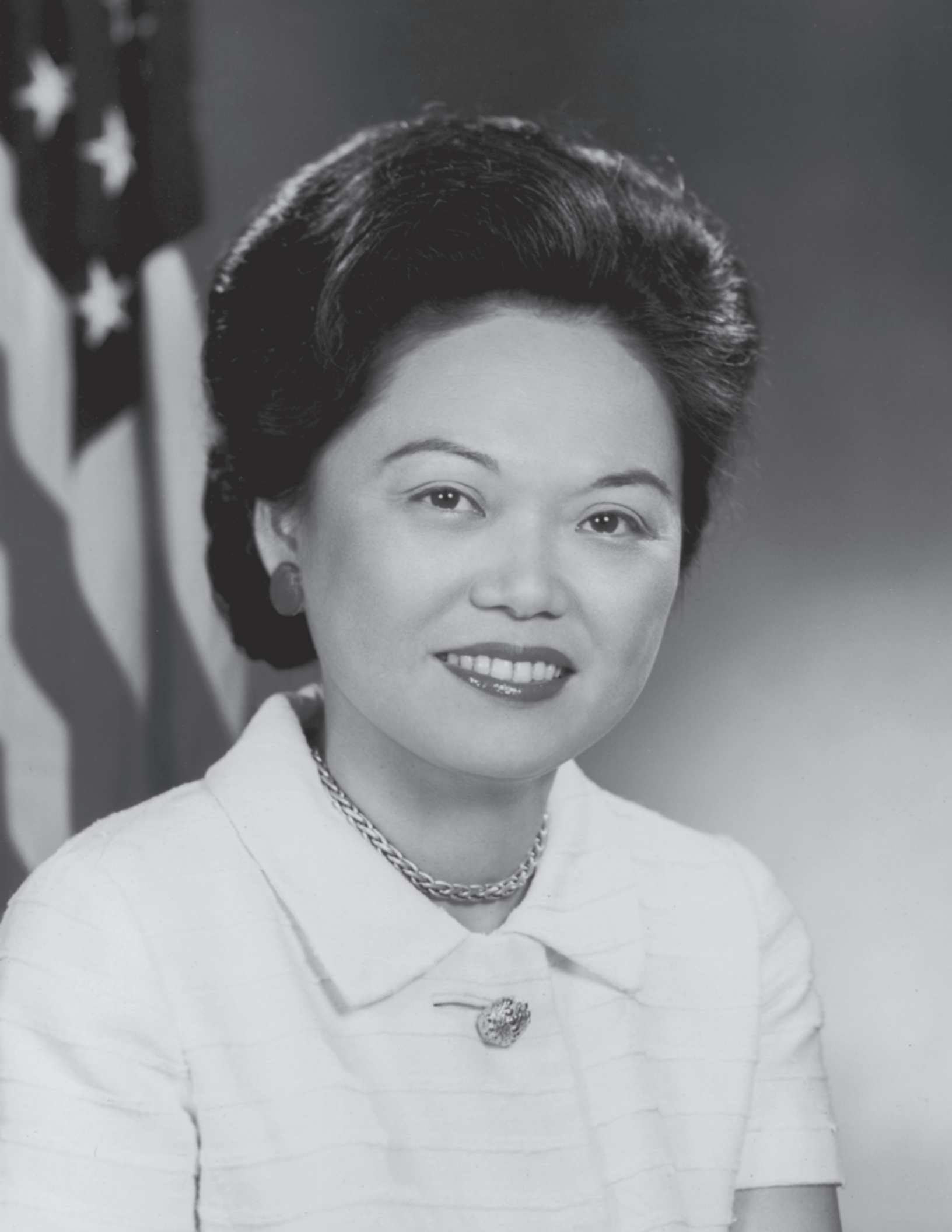
Patsy Takemoto Mink, the first woman of color elected to Congress, participated in the passage of much of the 1960s Great Society legislation during the first phase of her congressional career. After a long hiatus, Mink returned to the House in the 1990s as an ardent defender of the social welfare state at a time when much of the legislation she had helped establish was being rolled back. As a veteran politician who had a significant impact on the nation during both stints in the U.S. House of Representatives, Mink's legislative approach was premised on the belief that representation extended beyond the borders of one's congressional district. "You were not elected to Congress, in my interpretation of things, to represent your district, period," she once noted. "You are national legislators."¹

Patsy Matsu Takemoto was born in Paia, Hawaii Territory, on December 6, 1927, one of two children raised by Suematsu Takemoto, a civil engineer, and Mitama Tateyama Takemoto. She graduated from Maui High School in 1944 as class president and valedictorian and went on to attend Wilson College in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, and the University of Nebraska at Lincoln before graduating with a BA in zoology and chemistry from the University of Hawaii in 1948. Mink originally planned to pursue a medical degree, but turned to law school after several medical schools turned down her application. Three years later, she earned a JD from the University of Chicago Law School, the first Hawaiian *nisei* woman to do so. In 1951 she married John Francis Mink, a graduate student in geology at the university. The couple had one child, a daughter named Gwendolyn, and moved to Honolulu. Facing discrimination from bigger firms due to her interracial marriage, Patsy T. Mink went into private law practice and lectured on business law at the University of Hawaii.² In 1954 Mink founded the Oahu Young

Democrats and worked as an attorney for the territorial house of representatives in 1955. Mink won election to that body in 1956 and 1958 before winning a seat in the territorial senate, where she served from 1958 to 1959.

In 1959, when Hawaii achieved statehood, Mink set her sights on the new state's lone At-Large seat in the U.S. House of Representatives and began to campaign for the post. Hawaii's Delegate and Democratic "boss," John Burns, remained in Washington, DC, until June, when he suddenly began working behind the scenes to rearrange the Democratic ballot to his liking. He convinced Daniel K. Inouye to abandon his Senate campaign and file for the House seat instead, frustrating Mink's efforts and forcing a primary. Though Mink was also one of Burns's protégés, she frequently broke with party leadership in the territorial legislature. Throughout her career, Mink never had a warm relationship with the state leaders of her party; she attributed their lack of support to her unwillingness to allow the party to influence her political agenda.³ Additionally, Burns viewed Inouye as his successor, and the two worked together atop the state Democratic Party for many years. The famously liberal International Longshore and Warehouse Union switched their endorsement from Mink to Inouye, who won by a 2 to 1 margin in the primary, leaving Mink to focus on her legal career.⁴ Mink returned to politics in 1962, winning a seat in the Hawaii state senate, where she served from 1962 to 1964 and eventually chaired the education committee.

In 1964, after reapportionment created a second seat for Hawaii in the U.S. House, Mink again mounted a grassroots campaign that relied on a staff of unpaid volunteers; her husband, John, served as her campaign manager, "principal sounding board," and "in-house critic."⁵ She ran without the blessing of the state Democratic Party leadership, raising campaign funds





largely in small individual contributions. Mink barely edged out two other Democrats in the October primary to secure her spot on the ballot alongside Spark M. Matsunaga, Daniel Inouye's successor in the House. Mink stressed her independence in the general election even as many Democrats arranged deals to support one of the Republican nominees to defeat her.⁶ With help from President Lyndon B. Johnson's landslide victory in the presidential race, Mink and Matsunaga were elected as the state's two At-Large Representatives. In a four-way race, she received 27 percent of the total to become the first Asian-American woman and just the second woman from Hawaii to serve in Congress.

In her subsequent five campaigns for re-election, Mink faced a number of difficult primaries in which the local Democratic Party tried to oust her, twice by running women candidates, which Mink interpreted as an effort to deprive her of the gender issue.⁷ She proved a durable candidate in the general elections, however, despite being viewed initially as a presidential coattail rider. In 1966 and 1968, in a four-way race for the two House seats, she garnered slightly more than 34 percent of the vote. In the 1966 race, she collected more votes than any of the other three candidates. In 1970 Hawaii was divided into two congressional districts. Representing the outer islands and suburban Oahu, Mink began traveling back to her district every other week to combat the notion that she was a purely national figure with little interest in the local needs of her constituents. The configuration of the new district also forced Mink to shift her campaigning methods, since she could no longer rely on the Honolulu media market to spread her message.⁸ Her efforts paid off, however; Mink ran unopposed in 1970 and won 53 percent of the vote in 1972 and 63 percent in 1974.⁹

In the House, Mink successfully sought a seat on the Committee on Education and Labor, on which she served from the 89th Congress (1965–1967) through the 94th Congress (1975–1977). In her second term, she also joined the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs and, in the 93rd (1973–1975) and 94th Congresses, served on the Budget Committee.

Mink's committee assignments allowed her to concentrate on the same issues that had been the focus of her attention in the Hawaii legislature. Among the education acts Mink introduced or sponsored in the U.S. House were the first childcare bill and legislation establishing bilingual education, student loans, special education, professional sabbaticals for teachers, and Head Start. Starting in 1967, she also put significant effort into passing a bill to institute a national daycare system to support low-income households. The Comprehensive Child Development Act was folded into the Economic Opportunity Act (S. 2007) in 1971. But it failed to become law, in part, because opponents objected that it offered too many incentives for mothers to work outside the home and that it promoted a "communal" approach to rearing children. Though the Economic Opportunity Act passed both houses of Congress, President Richard M. Nixon vetoed it in December 1971.¹⁰ Mink later called the bill's failure "one of the real disappointments" of her political career.¹¹

Mink maintained a focus on national issues, especially those affecting Asian Pacific Americans (APA) and the Pacific region. She fought to preserve family reunification provisions in several proposed immigration reform bills and worked alongside Representative Matsunaga to educate Americans about the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.¹² As a member of the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee, she supported the economic and political development of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. As chair of the Subcommittee on Mines and Mining, she helped author the landmark Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1975, and in the following year helped to pass a major overhaul of the Mineral Leasing Act of 1920. The House failed to override President Gerald R. Ford's veto of the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act, though a similar measure was eventually signed into law in 1977.

During the Johnson presidency, Mink strongly supported the administration's domestic programs that were part of the Great Society legislation, but she was a critic of America's increasing involvement in the Vietnam



War. In September 1967, she refused to support the President's request for an income tax increase because she feared that the new revenues would be used for military action rather than the expansion of social programs. It was, she said, like "administering aspirin to a seriously ill patient who needs major surgery."¹³ If inflation threatened the economy, she suggested, the administration should raise taxes on big business and not just the average working taxpayers.¹⁴ In April 1972, she cosponsored Massachusetts Representative Michael Harrington's concurrent resolution (H. Con. Res. 589) calling for an immediate termination of military activity in Vietnam, but the House took no action on it. Her views clashed with those of the three other Members of the Hawaii congressional delegation as well as with those of many of her constituents in a state with a heavy military presence. Years later, however, Mink recalled, "It was such a horrible thought to have this war that it really made no difference to me that I had a military constituency. It was a case of living up to my own views and my own conscience. If I was defeated for it, that's the way it had to be. There was no way in which I could compromise my views on how I felt about it."¹⁵

Mink also advocated many women's issues in Congress, including equal rights. One of her great legislative triumphs was the Women's Educational Equity Act, passed as part of a comprehensive education bill in 1974. It provided \$30 million a year in educational funds for programs to promote gender equity in schools, to increase educational and job opportunities for women, and to excise gender stereotypes from textbooks and school curricula. She realized early in her House career that "because there were only eight women at the time who were Members of Congress, that I had a special burden to bear to speak for [all women], because they didn't have people who could express their concerns for them adequately. So, I always felt that we were serving a dual role in Congress, representing our own districts and, at the same time, having to voice the concerns of the total population of women in the country."¹⁶

Working with Representative Edith Green of Oregon and Senator Birch Bayh of Indiana, Mink built critical

support for Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (S. 659), which barred sexual discrimination in institutions receiving federal funds and opened up opportunities for women in athletics. Though the broad strokes of the legislation were relatively noncontroversial at passage, the House and Senate worked for several months to hammer out more than 250 differences—11 of which dealt specifically with sexual discrimination—between their bills.¹⁷

As enforcement of Title IX took effect, the full ramifications of the act became clear and many supporters of public school men's sports programs objected to it, believing that their funding was being cut in favor of women's sports under the new statute. In 1975 opponents filed an amendment to the appropriations bill (H.R. 5901) for the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare that would exempt school athletics from Title IX. Despite heavy lobbying by Mink, the amendment survived the House version of the bill. After the Senate struck the amendment in conference, the House faced a tight vote on whether to stand by its position. Just before voting, Mink received an emergency call informing her that her daughter had been in a life-threatening car accident in Upstate New York. Mink rushed to her daughter's side while the voting commenced, ultimately ending in a narrow 212 to 211 victory for Title IX opponents. When newspapers characterized Mink's tearful exit as a result of the vote, her allies leapt to the Congresswoman's defense. Speaker Carl Albert of Oklahoma and Representative Daniel Flood of Pennsylvania explained the circumstances of Mink's absence the following legislative day, and the House voted to "recede and concur" with the Senate, with Mink in attendance. Mink's daughter (and Title IX) survived.¹⁸

Mink garnered national attention for her fervent support of liberal causes. In 1971 she received an invitation from Oregon Democrats to appear on the Democratic presidential primary ballot in that state in order to draw attention to the anti-war movement. Mink committed to the symbolism of her place in the race with seven weekend visits to Oregon. "My candidacy offers a real and tangible alternative," she said, "based—if any one word can be singled out—on humanism." Ultimately,



Mink received only 2 percent of the vote and withdrew her candidacy afterward. However, she continued to receive votes in Wisconsin and Maryland even after she had ceased campaigning.¹⁹

In 1976, passing up a bid for what would have been certain re-election to a seventh term in the House, Mink sought the Democratic nomination for a seat in the U.S. Senate. She lost the nomination to fellow House Member Spark Matsunaga.²⁰ Her supporters criticized Mink for not running a more aggressive campaign, but Mink insisted she had been running for the nomination and not against Matsunaga, a respected colleague.²¹ She remained active in politics, serving as Assistant Secretary of State for Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs from 1977 to 1978. For the next three years, she was president of the Americans for Democratic Action, a liberal political lobbying organization founded in 1947 by an array of scholars, activists, and politicians.²² Mink returned to Hawaii and was elected to the Honolulu city council, serving there from 1983 to 1987 (from 1983 to 1985 as its chair). She ran unsuccessfully for governor in 1986 and then for mayor of Honolulu in 1988. “Life is not based on being an elected politician,” she said during this period. “Politics is a constant involvement in the day-to-day working of society as a whole, one part of which is government.”²³

Despite these electoral setbacks, Mink kept her sights set on returning to public office. An opportunity to return to Congress arose in 1990 when Hawaiian Governor John Waihee III appointed Representative Daniel Akaka to replace the recently deceased Senator Matsunaga. Mink announced her intention to seek both the Democratic nominations for the special election to fill Akaka’s vacancy and the November general election for the new term in the 102nd Congress (1991–1993), though she was not the party’s choice in either case. Hawaii Democratic Party leaders backed Mufi Hannemann, whose youth and business connections they found appealing. Mink countered by using the campaign slogan “The Experience of a Lifetime,” a message that resonated with Hawaiian voters who tended to prioritize seniority and expertise

in their representatives. Both the special election and the primary for the new term were held on September 22, 1990, and Mink edged out her nearest competitor, Hannemann, in both contests by less than 3 percent.²⁴ She easily won the November general election to the full term in the 102nd Congress and was re-elected comfortably to five subsequent terms with winning percentages ranging from a high of 73 percent in 1992 to a low of 60 percent in 1996.²⁵

Mink was once again appointed to the Committee on Education and Labor (later Education and the Workforce) and also was assigned to the Government Operations (later Government Reform) Committee. During the 103rd Congress (1993–1995), she was on the Natural Resources and Budget Committees, serving on the latter through the 105th Congress (1997–1999).

Mink continued to pursue legislative reform in health care and education. Believing that voters cared more about quality health coverage than any other domestic issue, she advocated a universal health care plan that would allow people of all economic backgrounds to receive medical treatment. Mink combined two of her long-standing interests when she cosponsored the Gender Equity Act in 1993. Disturbed that gender discrimination still persisted in the United States 20 years after the passage of Title IX, Mink asserted that targeting gender bias in elementary and secondary education would help reduce inequalities between the sexes. She told the House, “We must assure that schools all across this country implement and integrate into their curriculum, policies, goals, programs, activities, and initiatives to achieve educational equity for women and girls.”²⁶ Mink continued to crusade for women’s rights by cochairing the Democratic Women’s Caucus in 1995.

In May 1994, Mink joined Representative Norman Mineta of California and other colleagues in forming the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus. “We have felt that we have not been consulted on important steps taken by this administration and ones in the past,” Mink declared. With so few APA Members of Congress, the caucus welcomed Representatives and Senators as full members, regardless of ethnicity, as long as they



represented a district with a large APA constituency.²⁷ Mink won election as chairwoman of the caucus when Mineta resigned from Congress the following year, and she served in that capacity through 1997.²⁸

Throughout her political career, Mink remained true to her liberal ideals. Previously in the majority both in her party affiliation and her political ideology, she often found herself in the minority during her second stretch in the House. During the 1990s, Mink expended considerable effort opposing conservative legislation that challenged the agenda she had promoted in the 1960s and 1970s. An outspoken critic of the welfare overhaul legislation that the Republican-led Congress and the William J. (Bill) Clinton administration agreed upon in 1996, Mink exclaimed, “Throwing people off welfare and forcing them to take the lowest-paying jobs in the community has created a misery index for millions.”²⁹ As Ranking Member of the Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations during the 105th Congress, Mink butted heads with conservative Republicans regarding a proposed \$1.4 million investigation of alleged fraud within the Teamsters union. As a loyal supporter of organized labor, Mink accused Republican leadership of sponsoring a “fishing expedition” that wasted “taxpayers’ money for sheer partisan political purposes.”³⁰

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Mink also raised concerns about the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2002. Created in response to the perceived failures of various U.S. intelligence agencies to uncover plots against the homeland, DHS was charged with preventing further domestic terrorist strikes. Mink feared the sprawling new agency might undermine civil liberties by violating the privacy of American citizens in the name of national security. In favor of full disclosure of government attempts to safeguard the nation from international threats, she proposed that no secrets be kept from the public.³¹ “She had already been through that as a Japanese American, seeing people put into detention camps on the basis of what they supposedly were as opposed to what they had actually done,” said fellow Hawaii Representative Neil Abercrombie.³²

On September 28, 2002, after a month-long hospitalization with pneumonia, Patsy T. Mink died in Honolulu, Hawaii. Her name remained on the November ballot, and she was re-elected by a wide margin. Democrat Ed Case defeated Patsy Mink’s husband and more than 30 other candidates in the special election to succeed her in the remainder of the 107th Congress (2001–2003) and later won election to the 108th Congress (2003–2005).³³ Shortly after Mink’s death, John Boehner of Ohio, chairman of the Education and the Workforce Committee, reflected upon Mink’s congressional service: “Patsy Mink was a vibrant, passionate, and effective voice for the principles she believed in. Her passing is a significant loss for our committee, the people of Hawaii and the people of the United States.”³⁴ Norman Y. Mineta, her colleague and a co-founder of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, called Mink “an American hero, a leader and a trailblazer who made an irreplaceable mark in the fabric of our country.”³⁵

FOR FURTHER READING

Davidson, Sue. *Jeannette Rankin and Patsy Takemoto Mink: A Heart in Politics* (Seattle, WA: Seal Press, 1994).

Mink, Patsy T., “Energy and Environment: Which is Undermining Which?” *Natural Resources Lawyer* 9 (1976): 19–39.

U.S. Association of Former Members of Congress, Patsy T. Mink, Oral History Interview (1979), Manuscript Room, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

Library of Congress Manuscript Division (Washington, DC). *Papers: 1883–2005* (bulk 1953–2002), 1,530 linear feet. The papers of Patsy T. Mink contain correspondence, memoranda, writings, speeches, notes, interviews, questionnaires, legislative files, testimony, casework, law practice client files, court documents, statements, press releases, appointment books, scheduling files, travel itineraries, campaign files, card files, biographical material, student papers, family papers, scrapbooks, news clippings, printed matter, awards and honors, political ephemera, maps, photographs, and other papers relating chiefly to Mink’s service in the U.S. House of Representatives. Subjects include gender equity, Title IX, Women’s Educational Equity Act, education, women’s rights, welfare, environment, U.S. territories in the Pacific, Asian-American affairs, consumer affairs, civil rights, labor, immigration, health care, Vietnam, and nuclear weapons testing. The collection also



documents Mink's private law practice in Honolulu, involvement in Hawaii and national Democratic politics, service in Hawaii's territorial and state legislatures, activities as Assistant Secretary of State for Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs. Her work as president of Americans for Democratic Action and chairmanship of the Honolulu city council also are represented. A finding aid is available in the repository.

NOTES

- 1 Patsy T. Mink, oral history interview by U.S. Association of Former Members of Congress, 6 March 1979, 26 March 1979, 7 June 1979, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, DC: 74.
- 2 Don T. Nakanishi and Ellen D. Wu, "Patsy T. Mink," in *Distinguished Asian American Political and Governmental Leaders* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002): 129.
- 3 Mink, oral history interview: 16.
- 4 John S. Whitehead, *Completing the Union: Alaska, Hawai'i, and the Battle for Statehood* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004): 315–317; Raymond Moley, "Hawaiian Primaries Show ILWU Power," 11 July 1959, *Los Angeles Times*: B4.
- 5 Mink, oral history interview: 31.
- 6 "Fong, Gill Win Hawaii Races; Woman Captures Spot in House Contest," 5 October 1964, *Chicago Tribune*: A6; Mink, oral history interview: 15–16.
- 7 Mink, oral history interview: 25.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 22–23.
- 9 Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/Institution/Election-Statistics/Election-Statistics/>.
- 10 Nancy S. Gates, "Patsy T. Mink, Democratic Representative from Hawaii" in *Ralph Nader Congress Project: Citizens Look at Congress* (Washington, DC: Grossman Publishers, 1972): 9; "Sharpening Day-Care Debate," 11 December 1971, *Christian Science Monitor*: 18.
- 11 Mink, oral history interview: 46.
- 12 Diwata Fonte, "For Asian-Americans, Mink's Death Hits 'Deeply,'" 7 October 2002, *Roll Call*: A20.
- 13 *Current Biography, 1968* (New York: H.W. Wilson Company, 1968): 255.
- 14 *Current Biography, 1968*: 255.
- 15 Mink, oral history interview: 98.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 17 "Title IX: A Sea Change in Gender Equity in Education," 10 July 1997, U.S. Department of Education, <https://www2.ed.gov/pubs/TitleIX/part3.html> (accessed 1 September 2016).
- 18 *Congressional Record*, House, 94th Cong., 1st sess. (18 July 1975): 23504–23506; *Congressional Record*, House, 107th Cong., 2nd sess. (17 July 2002): 13370–13371; "Gwendolyn Mink Oral History Interview," Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives, 14 March 2016.
- 19 Hope Chamberlain, *A Minority of Members: Women in the U.S. Congress* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973): 313.
- 20 *Politics in America, 2002* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2001): 290–291.
- 21 Wallace Turner, "Ex-Gov. Quinn to Face Matsunaga in Hawaii," 4 October 1976, *New York Times*: 10.
- 22 James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945–1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): 146.
- 23 Patsy Sume Saiki, *Japanese Women in Hawaii: The First 100 Years* (Honolulu, HI: Kisaku, Inc., 1985): 132.
- 24 Tania Cruz and Eric K. Yamamoto, "A Tribute to Patsy Takemoto Mink," *Asian-Pacific Law & Policy Journal* 4, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 594–595.
- 25 Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/Institution/Election-Statistics/Election-Statistics/>.
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- 27 David S. Broder and Kenneth J. Cooper, "Asian Pacific Caucus," 22 May 1994, *Washington Post*: A10.
- 28 Alethea Yip, "Mink Leads APA Caucus: Hawaii Representative Warns of Tough Times Ahead," 6 October 1995, *AsianWeek*: 6.
- 29 *Politics in America, 2002*: 290–291.
- 30 *Politics in America, 2000* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1999): 403–404.
- 31 *Congressional Record*, House, 107th Cong., 2nd sess. (26 July 2002): 5852.
- 32 Elissa Gootman, "Patsy Mink, Veteran Hawaii Congresswoman, Dies at 74," 30 September 2002, *New York Times*: B10.
- 33 James Gonser, "Case Wins; Set Sights on Jan. 4," 2 December 2002, *Honolulu Advertiser*: 1A.
- 34 Erin P. Billings, "Rep. Mink, First Asian-American Woman Elected to the House Dies," 30 September 2002, *Roll Call*: n.p. See also Gootman, "Patsy Mink, Veteran Hawaii Congresswoman, Dies at 74."
- 35 Martin Weil, "Rep. Patsy Mink Dies; Hawaiian Pushed Liberal Causes," 29 September 2002, *Washington Post*: A9.



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Patsy Takemoto Mink
oral history interview, 1979