



Ralph Harold Metcalfe

1910–1978

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1971–1978
DEMOCRAT FROM ILLINOIS

Ralph Metcalfe achieved worldwide fame as an Olympic athlete years before he became involved in politics on Chicago's South Side. Like William Dawson, his predecessor from the predominantly black, urban Illinois district, Metcalfe rose through the ranks of the Chicago Democratic political machine before winning a seat in Congress. However, Metcalfe differentiated himself from other machine loyalists of the period by elevating race above local party interests. Metcalfe's willingness to risk his political career to follow his conscience won him loyal support among the majority of his constituents and his black colleagues in the House. "I know the political reality of what I am doing, but I am prepared to let the chips fall where they may," Metcalfe remarked. "I'm willing to pay whatever political consequences I have to, but frankly, I don't think there will be any. . . . In the caucus we have decided to put the interests of black people first—above all else, and that means even going against our party or our political leaders if black interests don't coincide with their positions."¹

Ralph Harold Metcalfe was born in Atlanta, Georgia, on May 29, 1910, to Marie Attaway, a seamstress, and Clarence Metcalfe, a stockyard worker.² As a child, he moved with his family to the South Side of Chicago. After graduating from Chicago's Tilden Technical School in 1930, Metcalfe attended Marquette University where he received a bachelor of philosophy degree in 1936. He completed his education by earning an M.A. in physical education from the University of Southern California in 1939. During high school Metcalfe began a long and successful career as a track athlete. "I was told by my coach that as a black person I'd have to put daylight between me and my nearest competitor," Metcalfe recalled. "I forced myself to train harder so I could put that daylight behind me."³ Metcalfe became a household name in the United

States when he medaled in the 1932 and 1936 Olympics. During the infamous Berlin Games of 1936, Metcalfe and Jesse Owens led the American 400-meter relay team to a world record, much to the dismay of German onlookers, especially Adolf Hitler, who expected the German athletes to prove their superiority by sweeping all the track and field events.⁴ Years later, Owens credited Metcalfe with helping his black teammates overcome the many distractions they faced. "He said we were not there to get involved in the political situation. We were there for one purpose—to represent our country."⁵

Following his retirement from competitive sports in 1936, Metcalfe taught political science and coached track at Xavier University in New Orleans until 1946. He also served in the U.S. Army Transportation Corps from 1942 to 1945, where he rose to the rank of first lieutenant and earned the Legion of Merit for his physical education training program. After World War II, Metcalfe returned to Chicago in 1945 to become director of the civil rights department of the Chicago Commission on Human Relations, a position he held until 1949. He then headed the Illinois State Athletic Commission from 1949 to 1952. In 1947, Metcalfe married Madalynne Fay Young. The couple had one child, Ralph Metcalfe, Jr.⁶

In 1952, Metcalfe began his political career by winning election as Chicago's Third Ward Democratic committeeman. Quickly earning the respect and trust of Richard J. Daley, Chicago's mayor and leader of the city's powerful political machine, Metcalfe secured more prominent positions in the local government. After becoming an alderman in 1955, he was later selected by Daley to serve as president *pro tempore* of the Chicago city council.⁷ When the powerful but aging Representative William L. Dawson, a longtime member of the Democratic machine, decided to retire from the





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House, he chose Metcalfe to replace him in Congress. In the Democratic primary, Metcalfe faced A. A. (Sammy) Rayner, an alderman and an undertaker, who blamed the predominantly white power structure of Chicago for the problems facing many African Americans in the urban district. Running on a platform of “law and order,” Metcalfe defended his ties to Daley’s machine, reassuring voters that the political organization “is structured in a businesslike manner to get things done and, therefore, it is an asset.”⁸ With the backing of Daley and Dawson, Metcalfe defeated Rayner and went on to win election to the House easily, with 91 percent of the vote against Republican Jayne Jennings, a schoolteacher, a few days before Dawson’s death in November 1970.⁹ Metcalfe entered the House on January 3, 1971, and was assigned to the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries and the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee; he served on both committees throughout his tenure in the House.

Metcalfe’s appointment to the influential Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee marked the first time an African-American Member served on the panel in the 20th century.¹⁰ The Illinois Representative also served on the Post Office and Civil Service Committee during the 95th Congress (1977–1979).

Metcalfe’s legislative focus in the House, like his predecessor’s, was assisting the residents on Chicago’s South Side. Using his experience as chairman of the Chicago city council’s housing committee, Metcalfe introduced legislation to increase the availability of home improvement loans and federal housing programs to benefit the many impoverished people living in his district. He also advocated funding for security measures to protect residents in public projects and fought to eliminate “redlining,” the practice of withholding funds for home loans and insurance from low-income neighborhoods. Defending the need for such measures, Metcalfe asserted, “It is essential that individuals living in our cities, or individuals of low or moderate income residing in rural areas, be provided with the means and incentive to remain in their communities.”¹¹ As a strong

proponent of gun control, the Illinois Representative introduced legislation to prohibit the manufacture and sale of handguns, stating, “The people in the First Congressional District of Illinois know the terror of uncontrolled handguns. They know that the only solution to this epidemic of violent handgun crime is an absolute ban on the manufacture, sale, and distribution of these weapons throughout the United States.”¹²

Throughout his House career, Metcalfe also advanced issues that extended beyond his congressional district. He drafted provisions to the Railroad Revitalization and Regulatory Reform Act to combat discrimination in the industry present more than a decade after the passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964.¹³ Concerned about the quality of health care for minorities, the Illinois Representative criticized the Richard M. Nixon administration for failing to support legislation aimed at improving health services for those most in need and exhorted his House colleagues to “design a health care package which adequately meets the needs and aspirations of poor and minority groups.”¹⁴ Drawing on his own athletic experience, Metcalfe cosponsored the Amateur Sports Act of 1978, which provided federal funding for American Olympic athletes and increased opportunities for minorities, women, and disabled Americans to participate in amateur sports.¹⁵

Although his legislative agenda focused heavily on domestic issues, Metcalfe had an interest in U.S. foreign policy. As chairman of the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Subcommittee on the Panama Canal, he advocated more opportunities for education, housing, and jobs in the Canal Zone and worked to secure the passage of legislation that eventually ceded American control of the Panama Canal.¹⁶ Like other African-American Members of the era, Metcalfe called for increased U.S. involvement in African affairs, especially in South Africa. In 1975 he introduced a measure to cease American support for South Africa to protest its government-sanctioned policy of racial discrimination. Metcalfe praised the recommendations of the Organization of African Unity



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(OAU) for the South African region, which included ending apartheid in South Africa and instituting majority rule in Rhodesia. “In order to insure [*sic*] that the tremendous potential for violent conflict in southern Africa, a potential born of people’s desire to throw off the yoke of oppression and racism, is not realized, it is imperative that the United States follow the lead of the OAU and reassess its own policies in Southern Africa.”¹⁷

Metcalfe received national attention when he publicly broke ranks in 1972 with Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, his friend and political ally, and the Democratic machine. Outraged by what he perceived as Daley’s lenient stance on police brutality in the black community—specifically with regard to a violent raid of the local Black Panthers and two incidents that involved the harassment of black dentists—Metcalfe declared, “the Mayor doesn’t understand what happens to black men on the streets of Chicago, and probably never will.”¹⁸ Metcalfe used his position on the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee to conduct public hearings for victims and witnesses of police brutality and organized a citizens’ group to lobby the city government for reforms.¹⁹ “I’ve always spoken out for my people—for what I believe but in the past I’ve tried to remedy situations on a case-by-case basis, trying to work within the party or official government circles,” Metcalfe said. “In the brutality field, however, I can’t just stand by while each and every case is investigated. I want the system changed.”²⁰ When Metcalfe backed William Singer, Daley’s opponent in the 1975 Chicago mayoral primary, the powerful political boss retaliated by depriving the Illinois Representative of his Third Ward patronage positions and orchestrating a challenge in the 1976 Democratic primary for Chicago’s South Side congressional seat.²¹ In a fight against what he termed a “political dictatorship” in Chicago, Metcalfe asserted, “There is only one issue. The right of black people

to choose their own public officials and not have them picked from downtown.”²² With the outspoken support of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC)—an organization Metcalfe helped found in 1971—he handily defeated Daley aide Erwin A. France with more than 70 percent of the vote in the bitterly contested primary. “This is a people’s victory,” the Chicago Representative declared.²³ After reapportionment in 1972, the metropolitan district continued to boast a predominantly black population, even with the significant change in boundaries that included a largely white neighborhood surrounding the University of Chicago. As with the two previous general elections for the Chicago congressional district, Metcalfe faced little Republican opposition, and he easily earned a seat in the 95th Congress.²⁴

With the death of Mayor Daley in December of 1976, tensions eased between Metcalfe and the Chicago machine.²⁵ However, Metcalfe called attention to racial discrimination in Chicago and also continued to try to improve police service for his constituents residing in impoverished neighborhoods. “If we want to strengthen and rebuild Chicago, then we must help the people who are sticking it out in the inner city to survive.”²⁶ During the 95th Congress, Metcalfe demonstrated his determination to recognize the accomplishments of African Americans, sponsoring several resolutions to declare February as Black History Month.

Metcalfe’s congressional career ended when he died suddenly of an apparent heart attack on October 10, 1978, only a month before his almost certain re-election to a fifth term. Representative Louis Stokes of Ohio praised Metcalfe’s dedication to his district and the CBC. “Ralph was a man who had the ability to inspire people,” Stokes recalled. “The type of individual who, as you came to know him, you would have to admire.”²⁷

FOR FURTHER READING

“Metcalf, Ralph Harold” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=M000675>.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

The Metcalfe Collection (Chicago, IL). *Papers*: ca. 1932–1977, amount unknown. The collection documents Ralph Metcalfe’s athletic pursuits, including his Olympic track victories; his public service, including his tenure with the U.S. House of Representatives; and his involvement with the civil rights movement. The collection has not yet been processed.

NOTES

- 1 “Ralph Harold Metcalfe,” 14 October 1978, *Washington Post*: A16.
- 2 David L. Porter, “Metcalf, Ralph Harold,” *American National Biography* 15 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 386 (hereinafter referred to as *ANB*). *ANB* lists Metcalfe’s mother’s first name as Marie, whereas other sources indicate her first name was Mayme.
- 3 “Rep. Ralph Metcalfe,” 11 October 1978, *Chicago Tribune*: D2.
- 4 Jean R. Hailey, “Rep. Ralph H. Metcalfe Dies,” 11 October 1978, *Washington Post*: C8; Darius L. Thieme, “Ralph H. Metcalfe,” in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Men* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Research, Inc., 1999): 803–804 (hereinafter referred to as *NBAM*); Porter, “Metcalf, Ralph Harold,” *ANB*. For more information on the 1936 Olympics, see Alan Gould, “Metcalf Runs Second to Ohio Negro in Sprint Finals,” 4 August 1936, *Washington Post*: X15 and Shirley Povich, “What Price Olympic Glory?—America’s Sports Public Demands,” 16 August 1936, *Washington Post*: B5.
- 5 Dorothy Collin, “Jesse Owens Recalls a Beloved Teammate,” 11 October 1978, *Chicago Tribune*: 1.
- 6 Thieme, “Ralph H. Metcalfe,” *NBAM*.
- 7 Hailey, “Rep. Ralph H. Metcalfe Dies.”
- 8 Michael Kilian, “Daley Choices Win Key Tests,” 18 March 1970, *Chicago Tribune*: 1; Norman C. Miller, “A Primary in Chicago Between Two Blacks Is Big Test for Daley,” 24 February 1970, *Wall Street Journal*: 1.
- 9 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html; Maurine Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976): 264.
- 10 Charles Stewart III, “Committee Hierarchies in the Modernizing House, 1875–1947,” *American Journal of Political Science* 36 (1992): 845–846.
- 11 *Congressional Record*, House, 93rd Cong., 2nd sess. (30 April 1974): 12437–12438; *Congressional Record*, House, 93rd Cong., 2nd sess. (20 May 1974): 15592.
- 12 *Congressional Record*, House, 94th Cong., 1st sess. (26 February 1975): 4491; Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 265.
- 13 *Congressional Record*, House, 94th Cong., 1st sess. (17 December 1975): 41339; *Congressional Record*, House, 94th Cong., 2nd sess. (28 January 1976): 1357; Porter, “Metcalf, Ralph Harold,” *ANB*.
- 14 *Congressional Record*, House, 93rd Cong., 1st sess. (31 January 1973): 2845–2846; C. Gerald Fraser, “Wider Health Care Urged for Blacks,” 12 December 1971, *New York Times*: 77.



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- 15 *Congressional Record*, House, 95th Cong., 2nd sess. (26 September 1978): 31671.
- 16 *Congressional Record*, House, 95th Cong., 2nd sess. (18 April 1978): 10453–10454; Porter, “Metcalf, Ralph Harold,” *ANB*; “Ralph Metcalfe,” *Contemporary Black Biography*, Volume 26 (Detroit, MI: Gale Group, 2000).
- 17 *Congressional Record*, House, 94th Cong., 1st sess. (8 May 1975): 13646.
- 18 R. W. Apple, Jr., “Black Leader’s Rebellion Is Hurting Daley Machine,” 10 May 1972, *New York Times*: 36; Nathaniel Sheppard, Jr., “19 Seeking House Seat Vacated by Chicago Mayor,” 8 July 1983, *New York Times*: A7.
- 19 *Congressional Record*, House, 93rd Cong., 1st sess. (6 December 1973): 39929–39930; Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 264.
- 20 “Police Acts Create New Daley Critic,” 7 May 1972, *Washington Post*: A14.
- 21 As was the case with other machine politicians, Metcalfe retained his local leadership positions in Chicago until his death. See Hailey, “Rep. Ralph H. Metcalfe Dies”; Barbara Reynolds, “Track Star Metcalfe Running Hard,” 7 March 1976, *Chicago Tribune*: 28.
- 22 Vernon Jarrett, “Ralph Metcalfe Comes Out Fighting,” 23 January 1976, *Chicago Tribune*: A4; Barbara Reynolds, “Metcalf Seeks New Term, Rips ‘Dictator,’” 12 November 1975, *Chicago Tribune*: 3.
- 23 Barbara Reynolds, “Metcalf Victory Seen as Freedom From Daley,” 17 March 1976, *Chicago Tribune*: 3; Reynolds, “Track Star Metcalfe Running Hard”; Vernon Jarrett, “France Has Bitter Taste of Politics,” 9 April 1976, *Chicago Tribune*: A4; “5 Congressmen Here to Aid Rep. Metcalfe,” 15 February 1976, *Chicago Tribune*: 20.
- 24 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 25 “Ralph Metcalfe Is Dead at 68,” 11 October 1978, *Los Angeles Times*: E11.
- 26 The *Chicago Tribune* printed an article based on a speech by Metcalfe that outlined his goals for improvements in law enforcement in Chicago. See “Police Protection Is Everyone’s Right,” 11 June 1977, *Chicago Tribune*: S10.
- 27 *Congressional Record*, House, 95th Cong., 2nd sess. (11 October 1978): 35723.