



Walter Edward Fauntroy

1933–

DELEGATE ★ 1971–1991

DEMOCRAT FROM THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Walter Fauntroy's leadership in the civil rights movement paved the way for his two-decade career as the District of Columbia's Delegate in the House of Representatives. While he was concerned with many issues during his tenure, Fauntroy dedicated much of his career to attaining home rule (a municipal government elected by the people) for Washington, DC, and to ending apartheid in South Africa. "When you carry a big stick you can walk quietly," Fauntroy once remarked, revealing his political strategy, which embraced compromise and coalition-building to accomplish his legislative goals.¹

Walter Edward Fauntroy was born in Washington, DC, on February 6, 1933, the fourth of seven children of Ethel (Vine) and William Fauntroy, a U.S. Patent Office clerk. Fauntroy graduated from Dunbar High School in Washington, DC, in 1952 and earned a B.A. from Virginia Union University in 1955. On August 3, 1957, Fauntroy married Dorothy Simms. The couple had a son, Marvin, and later adopted a baby girl, Melissa Alice. After receiving a bachelor of divinity degree from Yale University Divinity School in 1958, Fauntroy became pastor of Washington's New Bethel Baptist Church.²

Through his ministry and his devotion to improving conditions for African Americans, Fauntroy, like many other black clerics of the era, became actively involved in the civil rights movement. Impressed by the DC minister's organizational skills and commitment to the movement, civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., appointed Fauntroy director of the Washington bureau of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).³ After honing his political skills as the SCLC's lobbyist in Congress, Fauntroy urged President Lyndon B. Johnson and Congress to pass civil rights legislation. President Johnson subsequently appointed Fauntroy vice chairman of the 1966 White House Conference "To Fulfill These

Rights," which focused on recommendations for improving the lives of African Americans after the passage of the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act.⁴ Fauntroy also served as the District of Columbia coordinator for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963. In preparation for the Washington march, Fauntroy and other leading civil rights activists, such as future Representative Andrew Young of Georgia, assisted King with his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. When Fauntroy learned that King would have only eight minutes to speak, he indignantly told his mentor, "They can't limit you—the spokesman of the movement—to that."⁵ Fauntroy also helped organize the 1965 march from Selma, to Montgomery, Alabama, and was national coordinator of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign, an extended vision of King's plan to draw attention to poverty and force government action to combat it.⁶

Fauntroy centered many of his civil rights, antipoverty, and neighborhood revitalization activities on the nation's capital as the founder and director of the Shaw Urban Renewal Project, an economic initiative to restore the historic African-American neighborhood of Washington, DC, where Fauntroy grew up.⁷ He served as vice chair of the District of Columbia Council from 1967 until he resigned in 1969 to spend time with the Model Inner City Community Organization, a neighborhood planning agency he founded with other Washington ministers. The following year, Fauntroy's political fortunes advanced when Congress passed the District of Columbia Delegate Act. The legislation reinstated a nonvoting Delegate to represent the nation's capital in the House of Representatives, a position last held by Norton Chipman from 1871 to 1875.⁸ In the crowded January 1971 Democratic primary, Fauntroy ran on a platform of instituting home rule for the District, eliminating job





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discrimination for African Americans, and providing federally funded daycare.⁹ With the help of campaign appearances by Coretta Scott King, the widow of the famous civil rights leader, and strong support from local black churches, Fauntroy orchestrated a surprising upset over six opponents, garnering 44 percent of the vote.¹⁰ Overwhelmingly elected in the March general election with a 59 percent majority, Fauntroy routed his closest opponent, Republican John Nevius, a white lawyer with a strong civil rights record, to become the first African American to represent the District of Columbia.¹¹ “It was an exhilarating experience in learning the ways of politics, in being Americans for the first time,” Fauntroy exclaimed after his victory.¹² Fauntroy won by comfortable margins in his subsequent re-election bids in the predominantly African-American and Democratic city.¹³

Sworn in to the House of Representatives on April 19, 1971, Delegate Fauntroy immediately began work on accomplishing his major campaign promise: achieving home rule for the District of Columbia. Although as a Delegate Fauntroy was unable to vote on the House Floor, he could serve on and vote in committees and introduce legislation. Fauntroy used his seat on the District of Columbia Committee—a position he retained throughout his tenure in the House—to build support among his colleagues and in the capital for a measure that would provide self-government for the residents of the District, who had lacked the ability to choose their own municipal government since a failed experiment during the Reconstruction Era.¹⁴ “The election of a congressman is but the first step toward full self-government for the District,” Fauntroy commented. “The immediate next step is that of organizing the people for political action to make their congressman effective.”¹⁵ Only a few months after becoming a Delegate, Fauntroy introduced a home rule bill to expand the independence of the District by removing some of Congress’s oversight authority and allowing DC residents to select their own local officials.¹⁶ He also ran as a “favorite-son” candidate in the 1972 DC Democratic presidential primary in a symbolic move to draw attention

to home rule and issues affecting Black Americans. After winning the election, he threw his support (the 15 votes of the Washington, DC, delegation) behind the eventual Democratic nominee, George McGovern, who endorsed much of Fauntroy’s DC agenda. “We must learn to use our power and stop relying on simple benevolence,” Fauntroy declared.¹⁷

In 1972, the defeat of District of Columbia Committee Chairman John L. McMillan of South Carolina, a longtime opponent of home rule, removed a critical obstacle from the pursuit of self-government for the nation’s capital. Fauntroy, Charles Diggs, Jr., of Michigan, the new chairman of the District of Columbia Committee, and the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) helped pass the District of Columbia Self-Government and Governmental Reorganization Act in December 1973. The bill gave the District limited self-rule, permitting citizens to elect a mayor and a city council.¹⁸ Although pleased with this progress, Fauntroy continued his efforts to attain greater independence for the District from the federal government. In 1978 he helped guide a proposed constitutional amendment through the House to give the District full representation in both bodies of Congress—one of his most significant accomplishments. The vote “reaffirmed my great faith in the American people,” asserted an elated Fauntroy.¹⁹ Despite his intense lobbying efforts, which included nationwide speaking tours, the DC Voting Rights Amendment failed to achieve ratification, with only 16 of the necessary 38 states approving the measure by 1985. Some critics blamed the DC Delegate for neglecting to muster enough support for the amendment and for causing a public backlash against the legislation after a controversial meeting with Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat.²⁰ “The District is too urban, too liberal, too Democratic and too black,” Fauntroy remarked bitterly after the defeat of the proposed amendment.²¹ Undaunted by the earlier failure, Fauntroy and Senator Edward M. (Ted) Kennedy of Massachusetts each introduced (unsuccessful) legislation in 1987 that would have granted the District of Columbia

statehood and full representation without amending the Constitution.²²

As chairman of several subcommittees on the District of Columbia Committee, Fauntroy vowed to improve conditions for his many poor constituents, focusing on affordable housing and antidrug legislation. He introduced a measure to convert vacant land on the former Bolling-Anacostia military complex into affordable housing and hospitals.²³ Fauntroy criticized urban renewal efforts in the nation's capital that adversely affected its many impoverished black residents. In 1978 he compiled a housing and community proposal to address common neighborhood problems such as housing shortages, abandoned buildings, resident displacement, and inadequate community services.²⁴ He also cosponsored antidrug bills as a member of the House Select Committee on Narcotics and a resolution to create an organization to battle regional drug trafficking.²⁵

During his tenure in the House, Fauntroy served on the Banking and Currency Committee (later named the Banking, Currency, and Housing Committee and subsequently the Banking, Finance, and Urban Affairs Committee) from the 93rd to the 101st Congresses (1973–1991) and chaired three of its subcommittees, including the influential Domestic Monetary Policy Subcommittee.²⁶ He also served on the Select Assassinations Committee during the 94th and 95th Congresses (1975–1979).

Despite his nonvoting status in the House, Fauntroy played an active role in the CBC, seeking to use his position to highlight issues concerning African Americans, both in the District and nationwide. As chairman of the CBC during the 97th Congress (1981–1983), he criticized the economic and social policies of President Ronald W. Reagan, insisting that they undermined progress made during the civil rights movement.²⁷ In 1977, Fauntroy sought to increase the CBC's effectiveness by founding the National Black Leadership Roundtable (NBLR), a group of national organizations encompassing black civil rights, business, and labor leaders, to promote the public policy

agenda of the caucus. Under Fauntroy's direction, the NBLR successfully promoted the election of more African Americans to federal office.²⁸

Fauntroy's legislative interests extended beyond domestic affairs, and he used his position in the House to effect change internationally. The DC Delegate made headlines on November 21, 1984, along with Mary Frances Berry, a member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, and Randall Robinson, director of the foreign policy advocacy organization TransAfrica. The group was arrested for refusing to vacate the premises of the South African Embassy in Washington, DC, while protesting the imprisonment of several South African labor and civil rights leaders. Their arrest, the first of many until the passage of comprehensive economic sanctions by the United States against South Africa in 1986, sparked a national wave of civil disobedience. "We knew we had to humble ourselves and go to jail," explained Fauntroy after his highly publicized arrest.²⁹ The three subsequently launched the Free South Africa Movement (FSAM) to publicize racial inequality in South Africa and to pressure the Reagan administration into stiffening its foreign policy toward the apartheid regime.³⁰ Fauntroy drew upon his experience as a civil rights leader to help orchestrate a relentless campaign of peaceful demonstrations outside the South African Embassy that included many high-profile figures, such as Members of Congress, civil rights leaders, and celebrities.³¹ In January 1986, he joined five congressional colleagues on a tour of South Africa to assess the effects of limited economic sanctions imposed by the United States during the first session of the 99th Congress (1985–1987).³² Fauntroy continued his work with the FSAM and the CBC to pressure Congress to pass stronger sanctions against South Africa. On October 2, 1986, the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act became law after the House and Senate mustered enough votes to override a veto by President Reagan.³³

Fauntroy also spent considerable time during his congressional career highlighting human rights violations in Haiti and promoting economic development for

the impoverished country.³⁴ Believing he should use his position to focus on international affairs as well as domestic affairs, Fauntroy responded to critics who argued he spent too much time away from the nation's capital. "When I sought the office of delegate, I ran on the theme that once elected I would build a network of friends for the District, and my traveling is for the purpose of strengthening that network."³⁵

Fauntroy opted to leave his safe congressional seat to run for mayor of Washington, DC, in 1990. While the longtime Delegate indicated his decision to run surfaced from a desire to heal a polarized and beleaguered city, some speculated he had become frustrated with his limited authority as a Delegate. Fauntroy joined a crowded field in the Democratic primary to replace Mayor Marion Barry, who had been arrested, imprisoned, and later entered a rehabilitation facility to be treated for drug addiction. During the campaign, Fauntroy had difficulty convincing his political base that he understood the problems facing the District—a criticism that stemmed from his global approach to politics as a Delegate. "The people do not know me," Fauntroy admitted. "They don't know what I do on the Hill."³⁶ After winning less than 10 percent of the vote in the Democratic primary, Fauntroy noted, "I am disappointed, of course, that I did not win and that I will not have the opportunity to personally implement solutions to some of the most serious problems facing any city in this nation."³⁷ In 1995, Fauntroy was sentenced to two years of probation for filing a false financial report in 1988 when he served in Congress.³⁸ Fauntroy currently serves as pastor of the New Bethel Baptist Church in Washington, DC—a position he held while in Congress—and has been involved in a series of community projects.

FOR FURTHER READING

"Fauntroy, Walter Edward," *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=F000046>.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

The George Washington University, Special Collections, Gelman Library (Washington, DC). *Papers*: ca. 1963–1991, 681 boxes. The papers of Walter Fauntroy include materials generated during his 39 years of community service. The collection includes 623 boxes that have not been processed, and portions may be restricted. A finding aid for the papers is available in the repository.

NOTES

- 1 Martha M. Hamilton, "Outspoken Fauntroy Manner Changes in His Second Term," 15 July 1973, *Washington Post*: B1.
- 2 "Walter E. Fauntroy," *Contemporary Black Biography* (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1996); Marcia Slacum Greene, "Fauntroys Welcome New Baby," 2 June 1990, *Washington Post*: B3; Shirley Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress* (Washington, DC: U.S. Capitol Historical Society, 1998): 29. For more information on Delegate Walter Fauntroy, see <http://www.walterfauntroy.com/home.html> (accessed 4 December 2007).
- 3 For more on King's early years in the civil rights movement, see Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988).
- 4 Cortez Rainey, "Walter E. Fauntroy," in Jesse Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Men* (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1998): 397 (hereinafter referred to as *NBAM*); Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 30; Robert E. Baker, "Civil Rights Talks Begin Here Today," 1 June 1966, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 5 Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982): 256.
- 6 "Fauntroy, Walter," *Current Biography, 1979* (New York: H. W. Wilson and Company, 1979): 124–127.
- 7 Willard Clopton Jr., "\$18 Million Grant Goes to Shaw Area," 24 October 1966, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 8 Michael Fauntroy, "District of Columbia Delegates to Congress," 4 April 2001, Report RS208785, Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, Washington, DC; "At the Starting Gate for the Delegate Race," 25 September 1970, *Washington Post*: A24. The position of House Delegate was previously reserved for territories that were likely to become states. The District of Columbia Act launched a new trend of creating Delegates for areas without statehood on the legislative horizon: the District of Columbia (1970), the U.S. Virgin Islands and Guam (1972), and American Samoa (1978).
- 9 "Fauntroy Plans Plank on Job Bias," 17 October 1970, *Washington Post*: E2; Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 30.
- 10 "Delegate Hopefuls Push Hard as Campaigning Nears End," 9 January 1971, *Washington Post*: B1; R. W. Apple, Jr., "Dr. King Aide Wins Capital Primary," 14 January 1971, *New York Times*: 24.
- 11 Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 30; R. W. Apple, Jr., "Black Minister Wins Election as House Delegate for Capital," 24 March 1971, *New York Times*: 24.
- 12 "Fauntroy Exhilarated Over Victory," 24 March 1971, *Washington Post*: A10.
- 13 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 14 The mayor and the city council of the District of Columbia were appointed by the President before the passage of the District of Columbia Self-Government and Governmental Reorganization Act. See, for example, Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 30.
- 15 Joseph D. Whitaker, "Fauntroy, Negro Congressmen Urge Nixon to Back Home Rule," 26 March 1971, *Washington Post*: A6.
- 16 "Fauntroy Introduces Home Rule Bill," 30 June 1971, *Washington Post*: A7.
- 17 R. W. Apple, Jr., "Black in the Capital to Enter Primary," 8 December 1971, *New York Times*: 26; Richard E. Prince, "Fauntroy May Scrap 'Favorite-Son Strategy,'" 25 May 1972, *Washington Post*: B1; *Current Biography, 1979*: 126.
- 18 "After 8 Years, House Will Weigh District of Columbia Home Rule," 8 October 1973, *New York Times*: 22; "Home Rule Bill for Washington Signed," 25 December 1973, *Los Angeles Times*: 4.
- 19 "House Approves Full Vote Rights on Hill for DC," 3 March 1978, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 20 Jacqueline Trescott, "Walter Fauntroy—His Days of Trial," 7 November 1979, *Los Angeles Times*: C8; Rainey "Walter E. Fauntroy," *NBAM*: 398.
- 21 Barbara Gamarekians, "A Legislator With Statehood on His Mind," 30 November 1986, *New York Times*: 77.
- 22 Eric Pianin, "Fauntroy Renews Bid for DC Statehood," 8 January 1987, *Washington Post*: D7.
- 23 David R. Boldt, "Fauntroy Challenges Nixon to Build Housing at Bolling," 5 January 1971, *Washington Post*: B4; *Current Biography, 1979*: 126.
- 24 Patricia Camp, "Fauntroy Heckled on DC Housing Plan," 12 May 1978, *Washington Post*: B2.
- 25 Sandra Sugawara, "Lawmakers Propose Metropolitan Drug Authority," 7 June 1985, *Washington Post*: C7.
- 26 Gamarekians, "A Legislator With Statehood on His Mind."



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- 27 “Congressional Black Caucus Picks Fauntroy as Chairman,” 13 December 1980, *Washington Post*: A28; Rainey “Walter E. Fauntroy,” *NBAM*: 399.
- 28 Gamarekians, “A Legislator With Statehood on His Mind”; William L. Clay, *Just Permanent Interests: Black Americans in Congress, 1870–1991* (New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1992): 269–272. According to the National Black Leadership Roundtable Web site, Fauntroy currently serves as the chairman of the organization, see <http://www.nblr.us/index.html> (accessed 4 December 2007).
- 29 Eleanor Holmes Norton, then a Georgetown University law professor, and Fauntroy’s eventual successor as DC Delegate, accompanied Fauntroy, Berry, and Robinson to the South African Embassy but left prior to the group’s arrest to notify the press of their protest. Dorothy Gilliam, “DC Sit-In Led the Way,” 9 September 1985, *Washington Post*: A1; “Capital’s House Delegate Held in Embassy Sit-In,” 22 November 1984, *New York Times*: B1.
- 30 Kenneth Bredemeier and Michael Marriott, “Fauntroy Arrested in Embassy,” 22 November 1984, *Washington Post*: 1; Courtland Milloy, “Blacks Form ‘Free S. Africa Movement,’” 24 November 1984, *Washington Post*: C1; “Capital’s House Delegate Held in Embassy Sit-In.” For more information on the formation of the Free South Africa Movement, see Robert Kinloch Massie, *Loosing the Bonds* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 1997): 558–560.
- 31 Ed Bruske, “Fauntroy: District’s Man in Congress,” 1 September 1986, *Washington Post*: B1; Massie, *Loosing the Bonds*: 559–560.
- 32 Allister Sparks, “Six Congressmen Begin Tour of S. Africa,” 8 January 1986, *Washington Post*: A1; Eric Pianin, “DC Statehood Fauntroy’s Big Loss,” 12 November 1987, *Washington Post*: C1.
- 33 Helen Dewar, “Congress Votes Sanctions on South Africa,” 13 September 1986, *Washington Post*: A1; Edward Walsh, “House Easily Overrides Veto of South Africa Sanctions,” 30 September 1986, *Washington Post*: A1; “Senate Overrides Reagan’s Veto of Sanctions 78 to 21,” 2 October 1986, *Los Angeles Times*: A1.
- 34 “Fauntroy Faults Haiti,” 13 April 1985, *Washington Post*: B6; “Fauntroy Explores Financial Aid for Haiti Development,” 7 April 1985, *Washington Post*: C2.
- 35 Bruske, “Fauntroy: District’s Man in Congress.”
- 36 R. H. Melton, “Fauntroy’s Giant Leap of Faith,” 5 March 1990, *Washington Post*: E1; R. H. Melton, “Underdog Reprising a Familiar Role,” 28 August 2000, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 37 Mary Ann French and Keith Harriston, “Fauntroy Sanguine in the Face of Resounding Defeat,” 12 September 1990, *Washington Post*: A21.
- 38 “Former Delegate to Congress Is Sentenced,” 10 August 1995, *New York Times*: 16A.



“THE ELECTION OF A
CONGRESSMAN IS BUT THE FIRST
STEP TOWARD FULL
SELF-GOVERNMENT FOR
THE DISTRICT,” FAUNTROY
COMMENTED. “THE IMMEDIATE
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