



Robert Nelson Cornelius Nix, Sr. 1898–1987

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1958–1979
DEMOCRAT FROM PENNSYLVANIA

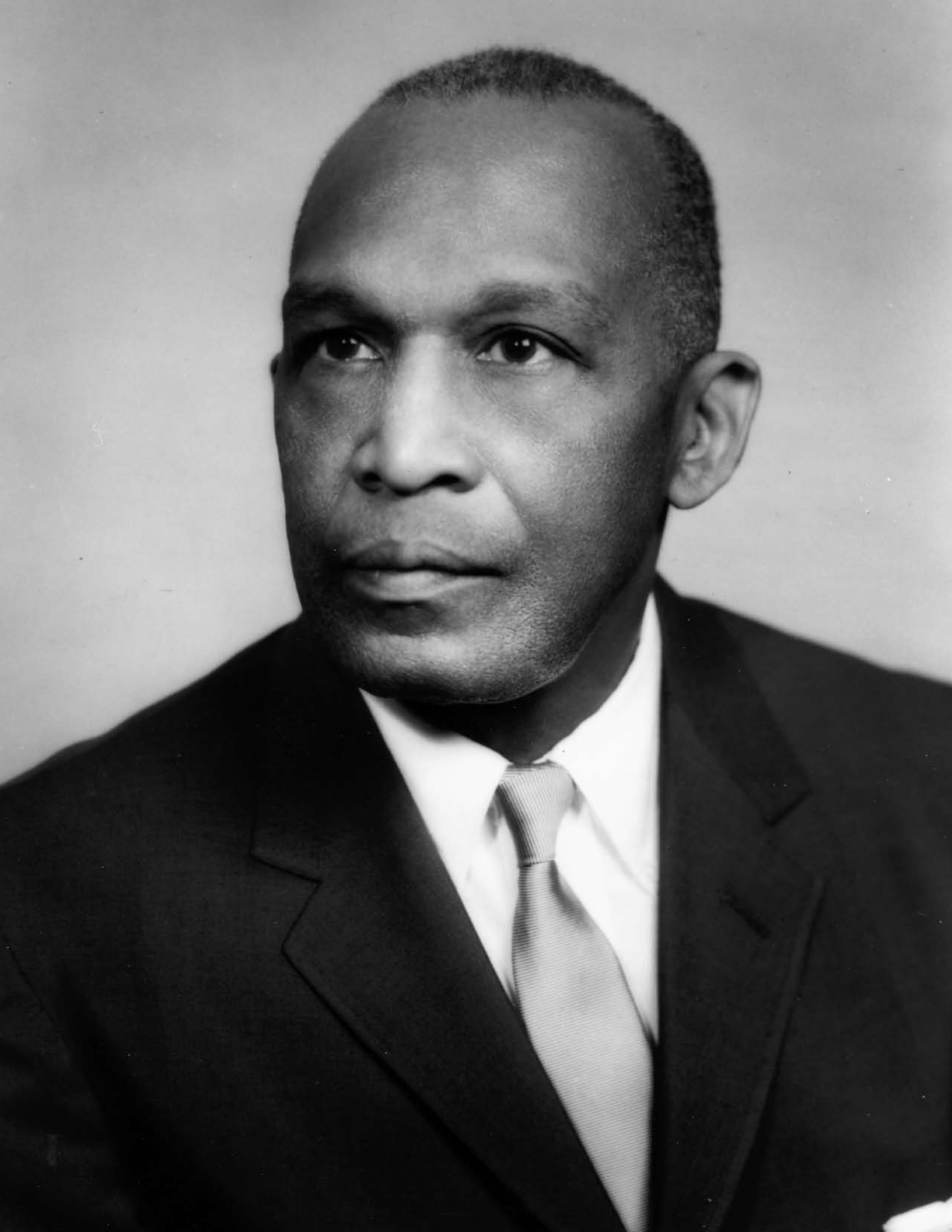
After gaining experience in Philadelphia politics, Robert N. C. Nix earned a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives in a special election in 1958. Nix served in Congress for more than two decades. As the first African American to represent the state of Pennsylvania and only the third black Member to chair a standing committee in the House, he dedicated himself “to ending the oppression of black people.”¹ However, critics claimed Nix fell short of this goal, placing party politics before the national black agenda. Loyal to the local Democratic machine that helped begin his career on the Hill, Nix was disinclined to demand radical change for minorities, an approach that conflicted with many of his African-American colleagues’ more militant politics during the 1960s and 1970s.

Robert Nelson Cornelius (N. C.) Nix, Sr. was born on August 9, 1898, in Orangeburg, South Carolina.² The third of four children of Nelson Nix—a former slave and future dean of South Carolina State College—and Sylvia Nix, Robert Nix later moved to New York City to live with relatives.³ Nix graduated from Townsend Harris High School in New York City (also attended by Nix’s future African-American House colleague Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. of New York), before enrolling in Lincoln University in Oxford, Pennsylvania.⁴ After earning a B.A. in 1921, Nix continued his education at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, from which he graduated three years later. In 1925, Nix began practicing law in Philadelphia. He first became active in politics when he was elected a Democratic committeeman from the 44th Ward in 1932. He retained this position for 26 years, serving as chairman for the final eight.⁵ From 1934 to 1938, Nix worked for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as a special deputy attorney general in the revenue department and as a special assistant deputy attorney general. Nix and his wife, the former Ethel Lanier, had one son, Robert N. C. Nix, Jr.

When five-term Democratic Representative Earl Chudoff resigned in 1958 to become a Philadelphia judge, Nix entered the special election to fill the vacant congressional seat encompassing sections of Philadelphia on both sides of the Schuylkill River.⁶ With solid backing from the local Democratic machine, Nix won the unexpired term, defeating Republican Cecil B. Moore, an African-American attorney, with 64 percent of the vote.⁷ House colleagues applauded as Nix was sworn in as a Member of the 85th Congress (1957–1959) on May 20, 1958, joining black Representatives William Dawson of Illinois; Adam Clayton Powell; and Charles Diggs, Jr., of Michigan.⁸ That same year, Nix was chosen unanimously as chairman of Philadelphia’s 32nd Ward, a position he held until his death in 1987.⁹

During his first two terms in the House, Nix served on the Merchant Marine and Fisheries and Veterans’ Affairs committees. In the 87th Congress (1961–1963) Nix relinquished his initial assignments for a spot on Foreign Affairs (later named International Relations); he remained on this committee for the rest of his tenure in the House and chaired the Foreign Economic Policy and Asian and Pacific Affairs subcommittees.¹⁰ After 14 years as a member of the Committee on the Post Office and Civil Service, Nix became the chairman.

A landmark study of House committees during the 1960s described the Post Office and Civil Service Committee as a “low-energy, low-influence, low-prestige” assignment. Though considered a valuable assignment by Members who sought to improve their chances of reelection by concentrating on constituency-service goals—particularly those related to the many postal carriers—the committee was also characterized by turnover.¹¹ Nix may have decided to remain on the committee partially because it allowed him to influence the working conditions of





the numerous African Americans employed by the U.S. Postal Service. First named head of the committee for the 95th Congress (1977–1979), Nix faced opposition instead of congratulations. A group of young Representatives contended that Nix’s “record of inactivity” and age (68) disqualified him from the leadership position. The Congressional Black Caucus (CBC)—an organization of African-American Members formed in 1971 to promote legislation that concerned blacks—thwarted the move to block his appointment, promising Nix would be a competent and committed chair.¹² During his two years as chairman, Nix led a movement to “require congressional approval of major policy changes” by the U.S. Postal System in an effort to improve service.¹³ He also backed a controversial bill put forth by President James Earl (Jimmy) Carter to restructure the civil service system.¹⁴ Portrayed as a plan to improve the efficiency of the federal government, the proposed reform was criticized by many veterans’ groups and federal unions that feared the legislation would undermine the rights of civil service workers.¹⁵

A politician who rarely sought publicity, Nix usually followed the Democratic Party line by supporting the liberal legislation of the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson administrations. Although some of his Democratic colleagues criticized America’s involvement in the Vietnam War, Nix, a senior member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, consistently backed executive foreign policy initiatives.¹⁶ As chairman of the Subcommittee on Foreign Economic Policy, Nix led an investigation of the use of funds by defense contractors to pay foreign consultants, agents, governmental officials, and political parties. He later introduced an amendment to the Foreign Military Sales Act requiring the Defense Department to provide Congress with information on the identities of and fees received by agents who negotiated arms sales for American firms.

Throughout his tenure on the Hill, Nix remained connected to the political machine that helped him earn a spot in Congress. Accordingly, he promoted legislation that reflected the concerns of his urban constituents, sponsoring bills to preserve the Philadelphia Navy Yard and

to establish a “senior service corps” to employ workers older than 60. He also dedicated considerable effort to lowering unemployment, arguing, “This is the richest and most technically advanced country in the world. Every citizen should enjoy the opportunity to make a living consistent with his abilities and skills.”¹⁷ In line with the practices of the machine organization, Nix held regular Saturday hours in his district office to listen to his constituents’ concerns.¹⁸

As one of the few black Members in the House and the Representative of many African Americans living in Philadelphia, Nix backed a national civil rights agenda. In 1959, early in his congressional career, Nix introduced a measure to end racial discrimination in the armed forces. “To treat a man who wears that uniform with [contempt] merely because of the color of his skin is an insult to America and to everything for which our country stands,” Nix said on the House Floor.¹⁹ He supported passage of the landmark civil rights bills of the 1960s, with a focus on protecting of voting rights for Black Americans. In 1963, seeking to enforce the second section of the 14th Amendment, Nix authored a bill to decrease a state’s representation when voters’ rights were violated—echoing previous measures introduced unsuccessfully in the House for six decades.²⁰ During the House debate on the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Nix countered critics who maintained that African Americans from his native state of South Carolina had ample opportunity to register to vote. He highlighted the many levels of intimidation and the barriers that hindered significant black representation in the southern state.²¹ Disturbed by rumors that the March on Washington to secure equal rights for minorities, scheduled for August 1963, might result in rioting and violence, Nix made an impassioned speech to his House colleagues expressing his hope that the marchers’ campaign would be peaceful. “The promised land is here,” he proclaimed, “now, awaiting only the complete and immediate removal, by our fellow Americans, of the racial fence which has surrounded it and kept Negroes out for 300 years.”²² The Pennsylvania Representative also sought to prevent the House from denying Representative Powell, his seat in



★ ROBERT NELSON CORNELIUS NIX, SR. ★

the 90th Congress (1967–1969). Declaring “justice will prevail,” Nix argued that Powell “did not receive the fair and impartial trial guaranteed to every American citizen.” He added, “The Congress of the United States is honor bound to admit its error, and to correct its wrong.”²³

Despite his work to pursue equal rights for African Americans, many black leaders, including some fellow House Members, denounced Nix for failing to use his political position to secure significant gains for minorities. A reserved man who preferred to avoid controversy, Nix increasingly found himself in the minority among other black Members, whose approach to race relations was more militant. By 1974, Nix was the second-most-senior black Representative, behind Charles Diggs. However, Nix never emerged as a leader of the CBC, the symbolic power source of African-American legislators, but deferred to less senior Members of the House.

Another source of concern for the Philadelphia Representative was his high rate of absenteeism. Dubbed the “phantom” legislator by some of his congressional opponents, Nix appeared rarely at high-profile events, and his unwillingness to make himself available to the press magnified his image as an ambivalent Representative. This experience was not wholly without precedent for a machine politician like Nix who spent his final years in Congress contending with the decline of the local political network that brought him to power.²⁴ Throughout his career Nix also dealt with age-related concerns. After Nix’s death in 1987, his son Robert, a former chief justice of the Pennsylvania supreme court, released a statement that his father was seven years older than the age he indicated upon entering the special election in 1958; aware that his

age could impede his congressional career, Nix misled his constituents and colleagues in the House.²⁵

Redistricting necessitated by Philadelphia’s declining population modified the House district Nix represented, which came to encompass portions of northern and western Philadelphia that included poor areas populated mainly by African Americans in addition to some middle-class black areas and affluent white neighborhoods.²⁶ Although the constituency remained overwhelmingly Democratic, Nix did not possess a safe seat, facing frequent primary challenges from younger African Americans who criticized his close relationship with the Philadelphia Democratic machine. By the mid-1970s, with the local political establishment waning, Nix was politically vulnerable. In 1976, the Representative barely survived a primary challenge from a young African-American minister, William H. Gray III, capturing only 48 percent of the vote.²⁷ Two years later, Nix and Gray squared off in a Democratic primary rematch. The incumbent emphasized his congressional experience, contending that his chairmanship of a House standing committee was “the best weapon for helping this district.”²⁸ Nix performed poorly at the polls, with only 40 percent of the vote versus Gray’s 58 percent.²⁹

After leaving the House in January 1979, Nix remained active in politics as the leader of Philadelphia’s 32nd Ward until his death in Philadelphia on June 22, 1987. Representative Gray praised his predecessor, observing, “Because of him, I feel as if I’m standing on the shoulders of the congressmen who opened the doors so the next generation of black elected officials, like Bill Gray, can do the things they are doing now.”³⁰



FOR FURTHER READING

“Nix, Robert Nelson Cornelius, Sr.,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=N000113>.

NOTES

- 1 Gordon K. Lee, “Robert N.C. Nix, Sr.,” in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Men* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Research, Inc., 1999): 878 (hereinafter referred to as *NBAM*).
- 2 Tyree Johnson, “Ex-Rep. Nix, ‘Pathfinder,’ Dead at 88,” 23 June 1987, *Philadelphia Daily News*: 4.
- 3 Lee, “Robert N.C. Nix, Sr.,” *NBAM*: 876.
- 4 For more on the early education of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., see Wil Haygood, *King of the Cats: The Life and Times of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* (New York: Amistad, 2006): 3–4.
- 5 *Congressional Directory*, 86th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1959): 135–136.
- 6 Kenneth C. Martis, *The Historical Atlas of Political Parties in the United States Congress: 1789–1989*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989): 211.
- 7 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html; William G. Weart, “Party Men Fight in Pennsylvania,” 30 March 1958, *New York Times*: 52; William G. Weart, “Stassen Swamped in Pennsylvania Bid,” 21 May 1958, *New York Times*: 1, 24.
- 8 “4th Negro in Congress Sworn in,” 5 June 1958, *Washington Post*: A2; Maurine Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976): 216.
- 9 “Congressman Robert N.C. Nix Sr. Dies,” 22 June 1987, PR Newswire; Johnson, “Ex-Rep. Nix, ‘Pathfinder,’ Dead at 88”; Lee, “Robert N.C. Nix, Sr.,” *NBAM*.
- 10 Nix also served brief tenures on the Select Committee on Standards of Official Conduct in 1966 (89th Congress), and the Select Committee on Crime from 1969 to 1971 (91st Congress).
- 11 Richard F. Fenno, Jr., *Congressmen in Committees* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1973): 252–255.
- 12 “Robert N.C. Nix Sr., 88, Dies; Ex-Congressman from Pa.,” 23 June 1987, *Washington Post*: B4; William L. Clay, *Just Permanent Interests: Black Americans in Congress, 1870–1991* (New York: Amistad, 1992): 90–91.
- 13 *Congressional Record*, House, 95th Cong., 1st sess. (8 September 1977): 28335–28336.
- 14 Kathy Sawyer, “Nix Loss Not Seen Affecting Civil Service Reform,” 18 May 1978, *Washington Post*: A2; Clay, *Just Permanent Interests*: 91–92.
- 15 Sawyer, “Nix Loss Not Seen Affecting Civil Service Reform”; Mike Causey, “2 Hangups in Reform Plan,” 24 April 1978, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 16 “Robert N.C. Nix Sr., 88, Dies; Ex-Congressman from Pa.”
- 17 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 216.
- 18 Johnson, “Ex-Rep. Nix, ‘Pathfinder,’ Dead at 88.”
- 19 *Congressional Record*, House, 86th Cong., 1st sess. (27 August 1959): 17230.
- 20 *Congressional Record*, House, 88th Cong., 1st sess. (12 June 1963): 10741.
- 21 *Congressional Record*, House, 89th Cong., 1st sess. (12 May 1965): 10293.
- 22 *Congressional Record*, House, 88th Cong., 1st sess. (22 August 1963): 15618.
- 23 *Congressional Record*, House, 90th Cong., 1st sess. (13 July 1967): 18727, 18732.
- 24 Johnson, “Ex-Rep. Nix, ‘Pathfinder,’ Dead at 88.”
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 David S. Broder, “The Ambassador, the Congressman and the Problem,” 2 May 1978, *Washington Post*: A1; *Almanac of American Politics, 1974* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1973): 856–857.
- 27 *Almanac of American Politics, 1978* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1977): 723.
- 28 Broder, “The Ambassador, the Congressman and the Problem.”
- 29 *Almanac of American Politics, 1980* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1979): 748.
- 30 Johnson, “Ex-Rep. Nix, ‘Pathfinder,’ Dead at 88.”



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