



George Washington Collins

1925–1972

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1970–1972
DEMOCRAT FROM ILLINOIS

Adiligent but reserved public servant, George Collins served only two years in Congress. He entered the political scene at the local level in Chicago, and converted his loyal service to Mayor Richard Daley's Democratic machine to a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. Unaffected by the redistricting many experts predicted would lead to his political demise, Collins won a second term in the House. His untimely death in a plane crash ended a promising House career but launched a long term of service by his widow, Cardiss.

George Washington Collins was born in Chicago, Illinois, on March 5, 1925. The son of Wash and Leanna Collins, George grew up during the Great Depression in the impoverished Cabrini-Green neighborhood, an area in the North Side of Chicago that was later known for its failed public housing experiment.¹ After graduating from Waller High School in Chicago, Collins entered the U.S. Army as a private in 1943. He served with the Engineers Corps in the South Pacific during World War II before being discharged as a sergeant in 1946. Upon returning to civilian life, Collins continued his education, earning a business law degree in 1957 from Northwestern University. On August 5, 1958, he married Cardiss Robertson. The couple had one son, Kevin.²

Collins gained his first political experience in the local Democratic organization headed by Mayor Daley. Appointed precinct captain in 1954 for Chicago's 24th Ward on the West Side—a section of the city known for its loyalty to the Democratic Party and the local machine—he went on to serve as deputy sheriff of Cook County from 1958 to 1961. Collins ascended further in local government as secretary to veteran alderman Benjamin Lewis of the 24th Ward and as an administrative assistant to the Chicago Board of Health.³ After Lewis's brutal murder in 1963—he was handcuffed and shot

in his ward office—Collins succeeded his former supervisor as 24th Ward alderman, a position he held until his election to Congress in 1970.⁴

When Representative Daniel J. Ronan of Illinois died during his third term in Congress in August 1969, Collins decided to run for the vacant seat. As a faithful member of the Cook County Democratic organization, Collins received the solid backing of Mayor Daley in the special election for Ronan's unexpired term for the 91st Congress (1969–1971) and for the election for a full term in the 92nd Congress (1971–1973). The March 1970 Democratic primary for the congressional district encompassing Chicago's predominantly black West Side and two working-class white suburbs, Cicero and Berwyn (once labeled the “Selma of the North” by Martin Luther King, Jr.), received national media attention because both candidates were African American.⁵ During the campaign, Collins emphasized his political experience and his ability to bring improvements to the district because of his connections with city hall. He easily defeated his opponent Brenetta Howell, an outspoken community activist, social worker, and mother, with 86 percent of the vote.⁶ Due in great part to the citywide influence of the Daley machine, Collins bested Alex Zabrosky—a white engineer and steel executive who resided in Berwyn—in the general election, 56 to 44 percent.⁷ With this victory, Collins became the first African-American Member of the 20th century to represent a minority-black district. (Two black Members from districts without a black majority—Ron Dellums of California and Parren Mitchell of Maryland—joined Collins in the House in the 92nd Congress.⁸) Collins's 1970 election also marked the first time two African Americans represented Chicago simultaneously in Congress.⁹

Sworn in on November 3, 1970, Collins was assigned to the Public Works and Government Operations committees.





★ GEORGE WASHINGTON COLLINS ★

Vowing to serve his constituents “in any way,” he made frequent trips to Chicago to ensure that he kept in touch with voters.¹⁰ To advance the interests and concerns of his urban district, the Illinois Representative promoted a wide range of legislation aimed at improving the lives of the poor in American cities. Although Collins supported President Richard M. Nixon’s proposals to provide a minimum federal payment to low-income families with children and to share federal tax revenues with states and localities, he judged funding levels to be inadequate. Collins sought to increase spending for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and advocated the passage of federal highway legislation that addressed the needs of mass transit programs and of urban residents uprooted from their neighborhoods by road construction. He introduced a bill requiring the Treasury Department to provide free tax preparation to low- and moderate-income taxpayers and backed a measure to offer fiscal relief to states burdened by high welfare costs.¹¹ Collins participated in efforts to reform the Federal Housing Administration after hearings conducted by the Government Operations Subcommittee on Legal and Monetary Affairs revealed that low-income homeowners had been defrauded by speculators, real estate brokers, and home repair companies.

As a veteran of World War II, Collins cared deeply about the welfare of American soldiers, and he devoted particular attention to ending racial discrimination in the armed services. In 1971, Collins and nine other members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC)—the newly-formed organization created to promote economic, educational, and social issues affecting African Americans—toured American military bases to investigate widespread allegations of racial discrimination. He and his CBC colleagues conducted a series of hearings to investigate the complaints.¹² Known as a Member who preferred to work quietly behind the scenes, Collins made only occasional speeches on the floor during his tenure in the House. When Vice President Spiro Agnew accused African-American Representatives of exaggerating the desperate circumstances of many blacks living in the

United States, several members of the CBC, including Collins, reproached him. “Mr. Agnew, take off those rose-colored glasses,” Collins retorted. “When the black leadership talk about social, economic, and financial conditions of the black and the poor, it is very real.”¹³

Despite a comfortable margin of victory in his initial election to office, Collins’s bid for a second term in Congress was met with uncertainty. As a result of a court-ordered redistricting plan for the state of Illinois, Collins found himself facing another product of the Chicago Democratic machine, Frank Annunzio—an Illinois Representative first elected in the 89th Congress (1965–1967)—in a newly drawn district extending east to west from the heart of downtown Chicago to the western portion of the city.¹⁴ Unconcerned with the restructuring that would potentially pit two Daley followers against one another, Annunzio confided to friends on Capitol Hill that the situation “will be taken care of by the organization.”¹⁵ Allegedly offered a position in the city administration in return for not opposing Annunzio, Collins defied the mayor, declaring his intention to enter the upcoming election. In a different political climate, Daley might not have tolerated such insubordination. But relations between the Chicago Democratic machine and the city’s African-American political leadership had deteriorated in the aftermath of a split between the mayor and South Side Representative Ralph Metcalfe, William Dawson’s successor. Metcalfe had accused Daley of devoting insufficient attention to the death of an unarmed black teenager shot by a Chicago policeman. Given his difficulties with Metcalfe, Daley could not afford to alienate the city’s other African-American Representative, so he accommodated Collins’s wishes to stand for another term.¹⁶ In an attempt to avoid a direct contest between the two politicians, Daley successfully encouraged Annunzio to run for an open congressional seat in a more affluent Chicago district vacated by Representative Roman Pucinski, who unsuccessfully challenged Republican Senator Charles Percy.¹⁷ With a formidable foe eliminated, Collins handily defeated Rhea Mojica



Hammer, an associate producer of a Spanish-language television program, in the March primary.¹⁸ In the heavily Democratic district, Collins trounced his Republican opponent, real estate broker Thomas Lento, in the general election, garnering 83 percent of the vote.¹⁹

On December 8, 1972, a month after his re-election to a second term, Collins died in an airplane crash that killed 45 of the 61 passengers and the crew onboard a flight from Washington, DC, to Chicago, where Collins had planned to organize a Christmas party for children in his district.²⁰ Then-CBC chairman Louis Stokes of Ohio eulogized his congressional colleague: “The legacy which George Collins leaves is an abiding devotion to the people. . . . Those of us who served with him saw his strength and balance. The legacy he left all of us is that we should renew our devotion to mankind.”²¹ Shortly after Collins’s death, his widow, Cardiss, entered and won the special election to fill his vacant congressional seat. The only African-American widow to succeed her husband in Congress, Cardiss Collins served 24 years in the House.

FOR FURTHER READING

“Collins, George Washington,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=C000637>.

NOTES

- 1 James S. Stephens, “Collins Lauded at Rites,” 22 December 1972, *Chicago Daily Defender*: 29. This article lists Collins’s parents as Wash and Leanna. Wash is presumably short for Washington, which is George Collins’s middle name. See also Maurine Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Publishers, 1976): 266.
- 2 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 266; “Crash Takes Life of Congressman,” 9 December 1972, *New York Times*: 70.
- 3 Grayson Mitchell, “Rep. George Collins (D.-Ill.) Killed in Chicago Jet Crash,” 10 December 1972, *Washington Post*: B4; “Crash Takes Life of Congressman.”
- 4 “Ben Lewis’ Aid Named as 24th Ward Leader,” 4 July 1963, *Chicago Tribune*: 7; “Aid of Lewis Named to Fill His Ward Job,” 9 July 1963, *Chicago Tribune*: 14.
- 5 David E. Rosenbaum, “3 White Districts Choose Negroes for House Seats,” 5 November 1970, *New York Times*: 28; Guy Halverson, “Few New Blacks Expected to Land Seats in Congress,” 30 October 1970, *Christian Science Monitor*: 1; “Crash Takes Life of Congressman.”
- 6 Francis Ward, “Chicago Congress Race Tests Black Militancy,” 1 February 1970, *Los Angeles Times*: L4; Michael Kilian, “Most Exciting Contest to Be in 6th District,” 22 February 1970, *Chicago Tribune*: W3; Michael Kilian, “Congressional Race Contested in the 6th,” 15 March 1970, *Chicago Tribune*: W8; Michael Kilian, “Daley Choices Win Key Tests,” 18 March 1970, *Chicago Tribune*: 1.
- 7 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html; *Almanac of American Politics, 1972* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1971): 205–206; Becky Beaupre, “Alex J. Zabrosky, Steel Company Exec.,” 4 February 2001, *Chicago Sun Times*, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4155/is_20010204/ai_n13896147 (accessed 12 September 2007).
- 8 Rosenbaum, “3 White Districts Choose Negroes for House Seats”; Carol M. Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests: The Representation of African Americans in Congress* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993): 117; “Crash Takes Life of Congressman”; Philip Warden, “2 Democrats Battle Over New District,” 11 November 1971, *Chicago Tribune*: 12.



- 9 The other African-American Representative representing Chicago, William Dawson, died just six days after Collins's election. Representative Ralph Metcalfe succeeded Dawson in the House, thereby keeping two African Americans representing Chicago.
- 10 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 266.
- 11 *Congressional Record*, House, 92nd Cong., 1st sess. (17 November 1971): 41864.
- 12 Thomas A. Johnson, "10 in Black Caucus Visit Bases in Study of Charges of Bias," 16 November 1971, *New York Times*: 62; Mitchell, "Rep. George Collins (D.-Ill.) Killed in Chicago Jet Crash."
- 13 *Congressional Record*, House, 92nd Cong., 1st sess. (21 July 1971): 26518.
- 14 John Elmer, "House Remap May Give G.O.P. 3 Seats," 23 September 1971, *Chicago Tribune*: 2; Warden, "2 Democrats Battle Over New District."
- 15 R. W. Apple, Jr., "Blacks May Lose in Redistricting," 25 October 1971, *New York Times*: 15.
- 16 R. W. Apple, Jr., "Black Leader's Rebellion Is Hurting Daley Machine," 10 May 1972, *New York Times*: 36.
- 17 Joel Weisman, "Daley Seen Re-Slating Negro," 10 December 1971, *Washington Post*: A3; Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 267.
- 18 Stephen Crews, "2 Democrats Face Spunky Challengers in 5th, 7th District," 19 March 1972, *Chicago Tribune*: SCL6; Stephen Crews, "Mikva, Young Easy Winners in 10th Dist.; Hanrahan in 3d," 22 March 1972, *Chicago Tribune*: 3; Stephen Crews, "Novice Shakes Slate," 16 March 1972, *Chicago Tribune*: S1.
- 19 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html; Michael J. Dubin et al., *United States Congressional Elections, 1788–1997* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1998): 678; "Split Ballots Threat to Coattail Theory," 15 October 1972, *Chicago Tribune*: W3.
- 20 "Rep. George Collins (D.-Ill.) Killed in Chicago Jet Crash"; John Kifner, "Toll in Chicago Crash Rises to 45 as 2 More Bodies Are Found," 10 December 1972, *New York Times*: 77; Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 267–268.
- 21 Stephens, "Collins Lauded at Rites."



“MR. AGNEW, TAKE OFF THOSE
ROSE-COLORED GLASSES,”
COLLINS REMARKED WHEN
VICE PRESIDENT SPIRO AGNEW
ACCUSED AFRICAN-AMERICAN
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“WHEN THE BLACK LEADERSHIP
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AND FINANCIAL CONDITIONS OF
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