

A Lost Cohort of Black Politicians

Written by Lottie Joiner

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During the Congressional Black Caucus legislative week in 2004, there was a fundraising reception held for a young black politician from Chicago who hoped to represent his state in the U.S. Senate. The honorary chairs of the fundraiser were Reps. Jesse Jackson Jr. (D-Ill.), Harold Ford Jr. (D-Tenn.), Artur Davis (D-Ala.) and Kendrick Meek (D-Fla.). They helped raise money for Barack Obama, who went on to win the Illinois Senate seat. We all know how the story ends. In 2008 Obama became the first black president of the United States and in November was elected for a second term.

The young black politicians who helped raise funds for Obama were known as the "the New Breed." They arrived in Washington during the mid- to late 1990s and early 2000s and were part of the hip-hop generation, the generation born between 1965 and 1984. Jackson became a member of Congress in 1995. Ford joined him in the House two years later. In January 2003, Meek and Davis were sworn in. And just two years earlier, in 2001, Kwame Kilpatrick became the youngest mayor of Detroit when he was elected at age 31.

"I think it's exciting anytime young people of color emerge in an elected office," James Peterson, director of Africana studies and associate professor of English at Lehigh University, told *The Root*. "It's doubly exciting when those folks come from the hip-hop generation and identify with the constituents of hip-hop culture."

Indeed. This cohort of young black politicians was smart, driven, dynamic and energetic. They hadn't marched on Washington, but they had come to take Washington by storm.

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"The younger generation really tried to position themselves as being part of the new breed that didn't wear race on their sleeve, that was committed to reform and good government ... and to do better than previous generations of black politicians had done and actually be able to address inequality in the community," said Andra Gillespie, an associate professor of political science at Emory University and author of *The New Black Politician: Cory Booker, Newark, and Post-Racial America*.

One of the most ambitious was Ford. When he entered Congress in 1997, he was selected as the Democrats' freshman class president. He was only 30 years old in 2000 when he gave the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention. Two years later, he boldly ran for the position of Democratic leader, ultimately losing to veteran lawmaker Nancy Pelosi, who became the first woman to lead a party in Congress.

But what happened to these young men who came into office with such ambition? Unfortunately, their aspirations met reality, Gillespie said.

Ford and Meek, both from political families, ran for Senate in their respective states and lost. Davis, a Harvard graduate and former assistant U.S. attorney, wanted to be the first black governor of Alabama but failed to secure the Democratic nomination in his state.

"The younger generation actually thought that there were greater opportunities for them to be able to act upon their ambition, and because of that they took risks that older black politicians and earlier cohorts of black politicians didn't take. Unfortunately they [the risks] didn't pay off," said Gillespie. "In Artur Davis' case he miscalculated. He took the Obama moment and hoped that it would transfer to success in the Deep South."

The tragic disappointment of Jackson and Kilpatrick is another story. After 17 years in Congress, Jackson resigned from his seat on Nov. 21 to "focus on restoring" his health. Jackson was diagnosed with bipolar II depression this summer. The former congressman remains under federal investigation for misuse of campaign funds. Kilpatrick resigned as mayor of Detroit in 2008 after a corruption trial that included a sexting scandal. He served jail time and is currently in court again facing more corruption charges.

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win -- governor, senator," said David Bositis, senior research associate at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. Kwame, he said, "was a young man who didn't view the world as a potentially dangerous place. I think to some degree, he thought he could pretty much do what he wanted."

But for all their faults, the public still rooted for these young black men from the hip-hop generation. They wanted to see them succeed.

"The reason why the downfall of these two men in particular was so disheartening was because this cohort did a really good job of presenting themselves as technocratic do-gooders. People believed the hype and I think assumed that they were not susceptible to the same sort of challenges and vulnerabilities that a lot of people are susceptible to," said Gillespie. "And so it's more shocking because they had always framed themselves as being very, very different from their predecessors who, sometimes, had ethics issues."

The young black politicians of the hip-hop generation have now moved on from Capitol Hill. Ford found his place in corporate America and is a popular television commentator. Meek continues to work on education issues with his family's foundation. Davis, who abandoned the Democratic Party and spoke at the Republican National Convention, worked at a law firm after leaving office and was a fellow at Harvard's Institute of Politics this spring. Kilpatrick continues to deal with his corruption charges.

Bositis believes that most of these young black politicians who entered Congress with great fanfare can still have a career in politics, if not elected office.

Though the new breed may not have accomplished all that they would have liked or reached their own personal goals, Peterson notes that their time in office was important in the bigger scheme of things.

"It really spoke back to older generations -- that suggestion that our generation was disengaged, that our generation was apathetic," said Peterson. "These leaders, successful or not, as they emerged, they really helped to sort of construct a counter-narrative to the political-apathy identity that some of these people try to hang around the hip-hop culture."

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