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Avoice Summary Paper Authored by Terry A. Wilson

A Mission to Preserve History

Avoice—African American Voices in Congress or www.avoiceonline.org—is the first and most comprehensive virtual library dedicated to recognizing the political and legislative contributions African Americans have made in Congress and the roles African Americans have played in shaping democracy in the United States.

Invaluable Content

The initial Avoice web site highlights four exhibits that relate to significant legislative achievements of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) including the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Bill; the Anti-Apartheid Movement; the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the formation of the CBC. The exhibits chronicle the history of this landmark legislation and feature congressional speeches and debates, letters, policy papers, newsletters, photographs and correspondence between CBC members and the Presidents of the United States, cabinet members as well as business and world leaders. The site has also a timeline to help viewers trace legislation from its proposal stages through adoption.

Avoice includes a section dedicated to the history of the CBC, featuring the biography and photograph of each founding CBC member and a document gallery illustrating all of the legislation the CBC has been involved with since its inception.

History of Avoice

Avoice was conceived by the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation (CBCF) and Dell Inc., and is a partnership that includes the University of Texas at Austin and Howard University's Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

"We wanted partners that would move this project forward and not only be partners on paper. Therefore, we believe the strength of Dell—with its technology expertise, Howard University—with its rich history, and the University of Texas at Austin—with its diversity and strong technology base—would provide a strong force to move this effort to the next level," said Congressman Elijah E. Cummings (D-MD.) and former chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus.

Leaders from the CBCF and Dell saw the need for a central online resource with the objective of making this material available to scholars, educators and students as well as the general public in order to capture and preserve the historical contributions of African Americans who have served in the U.S. Congress. Avoice will represent the official history of the Congressional Black Caucus and will allow users to view an extensive collection of primary documents and important historical material.

"At Dell we recognize the significance of working in partnership with the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, the University of Texas at Austin and Howard University to preserve the legislative achievements and enduring legacy of African Americans in the United States Congress. Our support of this project highlights our commitment to diversity and educating the public on the contributions of African Americans to our nation's history," said Kevin Rollins, President and Chief Executive Officer of Dell.

About CBCF

The CBCF was established in 1976 and focuses on education, economic development, public health and African globalization programs. Through these programs, the CBCF seeks to empower African Americans and other underserved Americans as well as contribute to the achievement of social and economic parity. Capturing the history of the participation and

contribution of African Americans in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate is central to the policy development and educational mission of the CBCF. A voice will enable African Americans to become more knowledgeable of past and current political issues; it will provide a central source for researchers and students of public policy to gain access to information about African American legislators, and it will serve as encouragement to young people to pursue careers in government based on the contributions of previous leaders.

African Americans began participating in the government of the United States during Reconstruction when Hiram Rhodes Revels (R-MS) served in the Senate during the 41st Congress (1870) along with Joseph H. Rainey (R-SC) who served as the first African American member of the House of Representatives. From 1870 to 2005 (109th Congress), a total of 112 African Americans have served in the House of Representatives along with five in the Senate. After Reconstruction, a second generation of African American representation in Congress began in 1928 with the election of Oscar DePriest (R-IL.), who represented an inner-city district in Chicago. A third generation followed in the late 1960's and continues today. This period was marked by the creation of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC).

Early CBC Days

The CBC was founded in January 1969, by a group of black members of the House of Representatives. Originally called a "Democratic Select Committee," it was named the Congressional Black Caucus in February 1971 on the motion of Charles B. Rangel of New York. Founding members were Shirley Chisholm (D-NY), William L. Clay (D-MO.), George W. Collins (D-IL), John Conyers (D-MI.), Ronald Dellums (D-CA.), Charles Diggs (D-MI.), Augustus F. Hawkins (D-CA.), Ralph Metcalfe (D-IL.), Parren Mitchell (D-MD.), Robert Nix (D-PA.), Charles Rangel (D-NY), Louis Stokes (D-OH.), and Washington D.C. Delegate Walter Fauntroy (CRS Report for Congress, 2005).

"Because the human and civil rights of African Americans were denied for centuries by American law and because this legacy often bestows upon us the honor of defending the rights of the locked out and left behind, African American members of Congress often take positions that

critique the justice and fairness of U.S. foreign and domestic policy. For that reason, the Congressional Black Caucus has been called the conscience of the U.S. Congress. Through rigorous debate as well as progressive and humane legislative action, we have continually pressed to make this nation ever more 'a government of the people, by the people and for the people,' said Rep. John Lewis (D-GA). "Through Avoice Americans will realize what CBC members have done to defend the fundamental principles of our democracy, and they will recognize that the African American contribution to this nation extends beyond the boundaries of race, but serves all humanity by helping this nation reach its highest destiny."

Preserving the Congressional Papers

The formal relationship between the Howard University Moorland-Spingarn Research Center (MSRC) and the Congressional Black Caucus was initiated in 1983, when CBC and Howard University entered into an agreement establishing the CBC Archives at MSRC. The Moorland-Spingarn Research Center has a long tradition of acquiring Congressional papers, having obtained the papers of Reconstruction Congressmen Blanche K. Bruce and James T. Rapier, and the elected, but unseated, P.B.S. Pinchback, as well as scrapbooks compiled by John Mercer Langston during the Reconstruction Era. "Historically, the black voice, indeed the black presence, was often absent when it came to the critical issues of our role in building this great nation. Avoice has come forward in a magnificent way to fill this gap with this comprehensive virtual library," said H. Patrick Swygert, president of Howard University.

The first installation of CBC records consisting of 116 boxes of administrative files from the Office of the Executive Director was transferred to Howard University. These records represent a unique source of primary materials documenting the activities of the Congressional Black Caucus during a pivotal period in U.S. political history, roughly 1974-1980, when the issues of enforcement of domestic civil rights legislation and human rights, particularly in Africa, were being addressed by Black Congressional representatives with zeal and courage.

In 2004, the second installation of 8 boxes was acquired when the administrative files of then outgoing CBC Chair, Congressman Elijah Cummings were transferred to Howard University,

and in 2006, the MSRC acquired an additional 9 boxes of the CBC records of Congressman Ron Dellums. The more recent installations also serve to chronicle the objectives and achievements of the CBC as it continues its ever-crucial role as the “conscience” of the U.S. Congress.

As a result of the establishment of the CBC Archives, the MSRC acquired the personal papers of several Congressmen, including Charles C. Diggs, Jr., William L. Dawson, George C. Crockett, Jr., and Bennett M. Stewart. These collections total more than 1,400 linear feet and contain one-of-a-kind primary source materials that are accessible to researchers throughout the world.

“We must shed light on the accomplishments of the past—because these accomplishments are the building blocks of the future. For years, much of the Congressional Black Caucus’s history has been archived in boxes and stored in the basements of former members. The Avoice project will virtually take history out of those boxes and display it for the world to see on the internet,” said Congressman Cummings.

Partnering with the University of Texas at Austin’s Libraries

To make Avoice a reality, The University of Texas at Austin’s Libraries has and will continue to digitize archival materials made available to Howard University’s Moorland-Spingarn Research Center from individual congressmen and women as well as Historical Black Colleges and Universities in possession of the papers of individuals who have served in Congress. UT Austin has designed and implemented the information architecture for the web site, developed the search terms for each piece of available information to make research possible and will host and maintain the digital archive, which will become an integral component of the UT Libraries web site. The Libraries also will work with the partners of www.avoiceonline.com to create ways for the information to be used, especially for academic and educational purposes, and will promote a collective sharing of the archive with other institutions of higher learning in order to make the information broadly accessible.

“The University of Texas at Austin is honored to participate in developing an online library dedicated to chronicling the major contributions African American members of Congress have

made to our nation's history. These dedicated lawmakers have had an enduring impact on our society, and this library enables us to tell their story more richly than ever before", said William C. Powers Jr., president of the University of Texas at Austin.

Avoice: The Future

The archival digital materials that are produced through the Avoice project will be incorporated into the University of Texas Libraries' digital repository. The mission of the library is, in part, to care for its collections so they will be available for researchers of the future. The systems that are built will ensure that the digital information collected will be able to be migrated as technology changes and new information access methods develop. Over time, data storage techniques will change, and UT Austin will be working closely with the CBCF, Dell, Howard University and other contributors to the archive to ensure ongoing access to Avoice's digital collection.

The CBC makes history every day and the Avoice project is designed to represent the enduring contribution of African American legislators. More exhibits and primary documents will be added to reflect the contributions of African American legislators from the 1800s to the present. Video and audio materials also will be available. In addition a "For Educators" section will include interactive materials for civic courses and curriculum development.

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Resources:

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