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### Mississippi's Mike Espy: Vowing 'To Do Some Good' and Alex Williams & Ike Leggett:

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# **MIKE ESPY**

**Mississippi's First  
Black Congressman Since  
Reconstruction**





# MISSISSIPPI'S MIKE ESPY:

## Vowing 'To Do Some Good'

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An air of proud excitement hung over the crowded room in the Rayburn House Office Building on Capitol Hill this January 6. The excitement of people who knew they had come to see history being made — and that they had helped to make it.

People like 69-year-old Nellie Johnson, a retired schoolteacher from Tunica County, Miss., the poorest county in the poorest state in the nation. She'd come up on a bus with 30 others to see Mike Espy sworn in as a member of the 100th Congress, thus becoming the first Black congressman to represent the state since Reconstruction Republican John Roy Lynch left the House in 1883.

"It was pretty rough," said Johnson of the 23-hour bus ride. "But we said, 'Washington or bust.' We were determined to see him installed. A group of us worked real hard through the primary and through the general election and we just believed he was going to win. He believed it. We believed it. Of course, there were some who doubted. But I had faith from the beginning."

And so Nellie Johnson and this roomful of Mississippians, dressed in what might easily pass as "Sunday best," had come by any means possible to see *their* congressman get off to a good start.

A minister asked everyone to hold hands, bow heads and reflect on the significance of this day. A poet recited verse ("Keep your hand on the plow") that bespoke the determination that had made this day possible. A singer sang of an "America, the Beautiful" that stood in ironic juxtaposition to many of the stark images from Mississippi's past: dogs digging their teeth into the legs of escaping slaves; the bodies of Black men swaying from trees; the battered corpse of 14-year-old Emmett Till whose "crime" was to say "Bye, Baby" to a white woman; the bodies of civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner retrieved from an earthen dam; the sprawled, bloodied form of NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers, cut down by a sniper's bullet . . .



Mike Espy was nine years old when Evers was killed. But in his remarks to his constituents and other onlookers the 33-year-old congressman showed that youth need be no impediment to the development of a historical consciousness. As his wife, two children and other family members sat nearby, he first thanked all those who had helped make this day possible (his special bow of appreciation "to the riders on the bus" drew cheers) and to reflect on what it meant.

"In the chamber of the House a few minutes ago I uttered a phrase which took only two seconds to utter: 'I do' [accept the responsibilities outlined in the oath of office.] But in a collective sense we're all aware that it took us generations to get here. Generations of toil, generations of struggle, generations of pain, generations of anguish and generations of adversity. But through adversity comes strength. . . .

"And so this afternoon I come with you to celebrate not the victory of Mike Espy, but the strength of Fannie Lou Hamer. She ran for Congress [via the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party] knowing she couldn't be elected; but she prepared the way for us. We celebrate the strength of Medgar Evers staring death in the face but always moving. We celebrate the strength of Martin Luther King — and he continues to help us. And we also celebrate the hope of another woman. Her name is Rosie Tidwell."

And Espy told of how this 85-year-old woman, confined by illness to her bed, had filled out an absentee ballot, but had died the day before the election. "As she signed her name — and perhaps it was the last time she ever signed her name — she handed the ballot to the notary public and she said the thing that always will be etched on my mind," Espy recounted. "She said, 'You tell that young man that I hope he wins. You tell

that young man that I hope my vote will count. You tell that young man that I want him to go up there and do us some good. Do us some good.' *Do us some good. That is my challenge.*"

Shortly after, the mild-mannered, bespectacled, vulnerably young-looking new congressman excused himself to return to the chamber of the House to cast a vote. "I'll be right back," he called out. "Beginning today I'm going to do my utmost to make Mississippi a better place to live. But I need your help. I need your help to make the only campaign promise I ever made come true: to build — and do — some good."

### The District

The Second Congressional District of Mississippi, which Espy now represents, stretches 200 miles along the Mississippi River, almost from Memphis (Tenn.) to Natchez. It is predominantly rural and predominantly Black, covering much of the Delta. By any index, it is a district in dire need of being the recipient of "good." Consider just a few facts about the district culled from information provided by Espy, his press secretary Tom Opiel, various other Mississippians and recent newspaper and magazine articles:

- It is the nation's third poorest, ranking only behind two districts in New York City (in the South Bronx and Brooklyn's Bedford Stuyvesant), with 34.4 percent of its population living at or below the federal poverty line.
- Its 22 counties include the nation's two poorest: Tunica and Holmes. In Tunica, for instance, is Sugar Ditch Alley, whose deplorable housing conditions were dramatized on the television screens of America with Jesse Jackson's well-publicized visit.
- Unemployment is in the double digit range. One estimate puts it at 12.7 percent for the district as a whole, another at 15 percent, while it soars to more than 20 percent in its five poorest counties.
- Federal transfer payments such as welfare, veterans, Social Security and Supplemental Social Security benefits and food stamps make up the largest single source of income.
- Illiteracy, a statewide problem, is especially magnified within its population as is low educational attainment. Of those 25 and older, 35 percent have an eighth-grade education or less. (For Blacks, alone, the figure is 56 percent.)

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# ALEX WILLIAMS & IKE LEGGETT:

## Breaking New Ground In Suburbia

**O**n a crisp, sunny January afternoon, Alexander Williams Jr. stood in front of the columned, colonial style county courthouse in Upper Marlboro, Md., to be sworn in as state's attorney for Prince George's County. Dressed in a grey suit sans overcoat, in seeming defiance of the weather, he raised his right hand to repeat the oath of office administered to him by a robed Judge James H. Taylor:

"I, Alexander Williams Jr., do solemnly swear to support the Constitution of the United States and that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to the state of Maryland and support the constitution and laws thereof, and that I will to the best of my skill and judgment diligently and faithfully and without partiality or prejudice execute the office of the state's attorney for Prince George's County according to the constitution and laws of the state."

His words were greeted with applause by a crowd of some 200 who had gathered to witness this historic moment. For with these words, "Alex" Williams, as he prefers to be called, became the first Black state's attorney in the county's history and one of only three Black prosecuting attorneys in the nation to serve a major jurisdiction. (The others are Denver District Attorney Norman Early and Baltimore State's Attorney Kurt Schmoke.)

When Williams came to the podium, he groped for words to describe his emotions, settling for: "I am simply overjoyed, quite ecstatic and grateful." His wife and three children stood by proudly as he then went on to thank those whose support had helped make his victory possible: his family; the faculty of the Howard School of Law who had nurtured him when he was a student and advised, encouraged and stimulated him as a fellow teacher; his campaign team; his many and diverse supporters, ranging from members of the church where his family worships to prominent county politicians.



"I shall not make a campaign speech," he declared, to appreciative laughter. "The election is over. It is time to get to work." Cries of "all right" rang out as he went on to outline some of his general approaches to the task before him. In so doing, he pointedly referred to a special concern of Black political activists in the country: police brutality.

"Let me say that I am advised that two cases involving allegations of police excessiveness are on my desk upstairs and await my immediate attention," he said. "Let me state unequivocally that I support law enforcement. I intend to give every ounce of my energy supporting the efforts of police and others who put their lives on the line under extremely difficult circumstances. The community, in turn, expects law enforcement officers themselves to adhere to the very laws that they are sworn to uphold."

As the applause died down, he continued: "The resolution of these two cases and

others in the future will not be decided on the basis of community pressure. Nor will they be based on attempts by the state's attorney's office to justify some act to cover up or take the heat from a few bad apples [a criticism sometimes leveled at his predecessor.] As state's attorney, I intend to make a decision based on common sense and good conscience—which my mother always told me I had."

His last sentence precipitated more laughter, restoring the festive mood to the occasion. Still, Williams had managed to use this celebratory ceremonial event to serve notice that a new man, indeed, was now in charge of the law enforcement process in this particular suburban county: one committed to protecting the rights of crime victims, to vigorously prosecuting violators of the criminal laws, to ensuring safety on the streets, yes, but also one who would show a special sensitivity to some of the particular concerns of the Black community when it appeared that the law enforcement process had been abused.

A week later, in another setting, Williams' fellow Howard School of Law alumnus and colleague Isiah ("Ike") Leggett zeroed in on an issue of special concern to his constituents. The setting was the handsome seventh-floor hearing room of the headquarters of the Montgomery County Council in Rockville, Md. The occasion was one of the council's regular Tuesday meetings. And the issue: discrimination in rental housing.

It was one of the first council meetings held after Leggett had made history by becoming the first Black candidate to win a seat on the seven-member legislative body.

At about 3:30 council chairperson Rose Crenca called the council's attention to the resolution now before it.

The resolution read, in part: "The Montgomery Council and the County Executive deplore all forms of racial discrimination in Montgomery County and resolve to initiate immediate action to end racial discrimination in rental housing." More specifically, the resolution called for the county executive and council to sponsor a community colloquium which would assess and evaluate the county's current fair housing laws and antidiscrimination efforts, identify areas of noncompliance and make concrete recommendations for action.

The resolution was introduced by Ike Leggett. And it was spurred by a study of racial discrimination in rental housing in the

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■ With its rich alluvial floodplain soil, agriculture is the district's economic lifeblood. Cotton, rice, soybeans and, more recently, pond-raised catfish are the leading crops. But this lifeblood is being strangled as the agricultural crisis which is besetting the nation as a whole is reflected particularly cruelly within its borders. Espy estimates that 30 percent of the family farmers in the district have gone bankrupt and another 30 percent are on the brink. Even those farms that are prospering — the huge ones — provide few jobs because they are so highly mechanized. There is little industry to serve as an alternative economic base.

Blacks have been especially hard-hit by all these problems.

Of the district's 503,935 residents, 58 percent are Black, while the Black voting-age population stands at 52.8 percent. That the district today is so constituted is the result of court-mandated redrawing of its boundaries in 1982 and 1984. That action, spearheaded by a dedicated band of civil rights lawyers, increased the district's Black population, thus giving it a better chance to elect a Black congressman. In 1982 and again in 1984, a Black Democratic candidate, state legislator Robert Clark, ran for the House seat, narrowly losing to white Republican Webb Franklin.

### The Candidacy

When Espy announced his candidacy for the 1986 race, he was at first greeted with skepticism. Not that he didn't have fine educational and professional credentials. He was, after all, a graduate of Howard University (with a major in political science) and of the University of Santa Clara (Calif.) Law School. And he had been a managing attorney with Central Mississippi Legal Services, an assistant secretary of state and an assistant attorney general. In this last post, he had headed the Consumer Protection Division, helping to return more than \$2 million to victims of consumer fraud in 18 months.

Not that he didn't have deep roots in the Mississippi soil. In 1921, in the small town of Yazoo City, his maternal grandfather, T.J. Huddleston Sr., founded the first hospital in Mississippi operated by and for Blacks. (It is no longer in existence.) Huddleston also opened a chain of funeral homes in the state, some of which are still owned and operated by the Espy family. Espy had been born in his grandfather's hospital, had lived in Yazoo City for most of his life.

Still . . . roots and educational and professional achievements notwithstanding, Espy faced what some saw as insurmountable hurdles in his bid for the congressional seat. He had never held elective office. Mississippi had a long tradition of not unseating incumbent members of Congress. He faced the apathy of some Blacks who felt they'd already voted for a Black candidate and he lost twice, so why bother again? Intimidation hindered still others from voting at all, in spite of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the "New South." And then: Mike Espy had an initial image problem. Because he had never personally known the poverty of so many of his potential constituents, some didn't believe he could relate to their problems.

"When Mike announced he was going to run for the district, some people in the community put out the word that he was a person who hadn't paid his dues; that he hadn't picked cotton; he hadn't marched. But they had not met Mike. They did not know Mike," recalls Jackson attorney Jesse Pennington, whose own parents had been sharecroppers in Mississippi before migrating to Chicago.

**W**hen such people did meet Espy, they came to recognize something that has so impressed Pennington, himself. And that, he says, is this: "Mike has a *really good sense of history*. A good sense of how he got to run for that particular office, of the struggle of people like Fannie Lou Hamer and Medgar Evers, all those people. He's one of the few politicians I can say who really, truly understands that."

For Pennington, the Espy victory sends a message that "Mississippi is on the move again. It's sort of like the gap between Reconstruction and the present is beginning to be closed now. When I came to practice in Mississippi in 1969 [fresh out of Howard's law school] there were only about eight Black members of the Mississippi state bar. We thought our chances of being elected to any office were negligible."

Indeed, the overwhelming theme of most commentaries on the Espy victory is that it sends a message to the world that Mississippi has finally overtaken its bloody history.

Espy himself speaks of his election victory as a signpost that Mississippi has "matured." As he sat in his comfortably furnished office in the Cannon House Office Building one morning late in January, he seemed totally at ease in his history-making

role. Members of his staff — an interracial staff — were busy in adjoining offices as he talked.

"When folks around the country think of Mississippi it seems as if their perceptions have been frozen in time," he observed, speaking in carefully measured tones. "The fact that I sit here today shows the world, yes, that Mississippi has matured and that we can march with just about any other state in terms of political sophistication and being able to forge the kinds of coalitions one must forge to promote and develop our agenda."

Responding to the farm crisis is high up on that agenda.

Even before he was elected, Espy had gotten a promise from the House Democratic leadership that if elected he would be assigned a seat on the House Agriculture Committee. The leadership honored that promise. Espy is also a member of the House Budget Committee, the only member of the House to serve on both the Budget and Agriculture Committees. "And that's significant," he believes, "especially in this whole atmosphere of austerity and shrinking dollars."

He hopes to use his seats on the two committees, he says, "to be able to speak for rural America and make sure we get our fair share of the federal dollar and that our priorities are addressed. . . . I want to make sure our farm programs are still maintained. We know they're going to have to be cut a little bit, but I want to make sure they don't get as deep a cut as the President has proposed. I also want to make sure exports continue to be promoted. That's a bright spot, really, on the agricultural front. And I want to see that programs for rural health care are maintained and that funding is continued for educational programs which are so important for a poorer state like Mississippi. We have to make sure people get the kind of education needed to develop the skills needed to operate in today's world."

Alongside his concern with helping farmers in his district is his interest in attracting more industry. What he envisions, he says, is "a workable, viable rather unique enterprise zone program which would offer small corporations magnificent incentives to move into Mississippi and be able to draw on our labor pool."

In addition to serving on the Agriculture Committee and four of its subcommittees, Espy is a member of the House Select Committee on Hunger. And, given the



district he represents, it's not hard to understand why it's a seat he coveted. "While working to alleviate hunger around the world," he says, "we certainly have to pay attention to home first. We've still got hungry people in Tunica County, the poorest county in America, in Holmes County, the second poorest county in America."

For Espy, the problems he will be dealing with on the Agriculture and Hunger Committees are related: "Something is clearly wrong when our family farmers, the most productive in the world, can't make a decent living; while at the same time, people living in the most prosperous nation on earth are forced to go to bed hungry."

### The Expectations

As one spends time with Espy, as one hears him speak with such conviction, as one recognizes the magnitude of the problems besetting the district he represents, one can't help but wonder if the expectations of what he can do aren't impossibly high.

"I have a minor fear that expectations may be too high," Espy acknowledges. "But it's minor because I think I'll be able to do much more than what the constituents are used to. So it becomes relative: expectations, relative to what? I think that if my constituents give me a little time, I will bring home the bacon. I will deliver for them."

Nellie Johnson, one of these constituents, isn't much concerned about the problem of high expectations, either. "We know he can't just get in there and wave a magic wand," she says of her new congressman. "We'll help to do what we can to point up the needs [of the district] and maybe we can get more federal help and maybe we can get some industry to come in."

"No, we're not looking for him to get in there and do everything and do it all at once. We know he's going to have to work his way from the ground up—just as Harold Ford did when he was first elected from Tennessee in 1974. Now Ford's doing a lot of things for Memphis."

"Already," Pennington adds, "Mike has done something concrete to recognize the needs of his constituents. He's placed on his Yazoo City staff a person who is an expert in public benefits so that when a constituent calls and says, 'I've got a problem with my Social Security check or my welfare benefits,' there will be an expert right there to handle it. And most of the problems coming to that office will be along those lines. And

he's taken a lot of time to place a person on his staff who is an expert in agricultural law and related issues. The former congressman didn't have anyone on his staff with that type of expertise and, of course, he wasn't a member of the Agriculture Committee. So Mike's already starting out ahead."

### The Vote

The final vote tally showed that Espy had received 71,119 votes to Webb Franklin's 68,292. (It was one of the lightest turnouts in years.) In analyzing the returns, what most commentators seem to have found especially significant is that an estimated 17 percent of that vote came from whites. Because of this, some went so far as to dub the election "a triumph for coalition politics." Others, while agreeing that Espy's white support was noteworthy, especially in light of Mississippi's past, are more restrained. They caution that it would be overstating the case to say white votes—or even an interracial coalition—actually *caused* the Espy victory.

"I think it was more a case that white turnout was so low that Black turnout basically pulled off the election," observes Linda Williams, a political analyst with the Joint Center for Political Studies, who is on leave from a teaching post in Howard's political science department. "Many white voters were very dissatisfied with Webb Franklin, but didn't really want to support Mike, so they stayed at home." (Or, in the less elegant political terminology: they voted with their rumps.)

**A**s for why Espy was able to succeed while Robert Clark could not, political analysts cite a variety of factors: the lessons Espy derived from the successes and failures of Clark's campaigns; Espy's articulateness and his low-keyed, non-militant manner which was perceived as being less "threatening" to whites; some savvy television ads, especially one featuring the endorsement of a white sheriff; and, perhaps most importantly, a sophisticated, high-tech campaign operation which was buttressed by a hefty campaign war chest (\$571,000).

By relying on computerized voter lists which showed the age, race, sex and registration status of every person in the district, Espy's campaign team was able to precisely target the people most likely to vote for him and to see that they registered (if they hadn't already) and came out for the primary and general election. "I worked in Robert Clark's first campaign," recalls Pen-

nington, "and there was no question Mike's campaign was better organized. I was at the polls in Canton, Miss., [as a legal adviser] and his campaign workers knew by 4 o'clock that certain people had not voted and they were able to get on the telephone and try to get them to the polls."

Espy's campaign benefitted, as well, from outside support. One key example: the National Black Leadership Roundtable, an organization composed of the leaders of some 300 Black organizations, which bused volunteers into the district to aid Espy's effort through its Campaign Workers Assistance Project.

Among the volunteers were students from Howard and other historically Black colleges and universities. Comments Carol Page, who coordinated the project for the Roundtable: "They were sent throughout the Delta and worked from sunup to sundown. They did the grunt work. They walked from door to door in all kinds of weather, knocking on doors, passing out leaflets. Wherever it was felt there needed to be some get-out-the-vote activity, they were dispatched. It was particularly gratifying," says the former Howard history faculty member, "especially since it belies the image of today's students as politically apathetic, solely concerned with getting an M.B.A. and making money."

### The Howard Impact

The involvement of Howard students in the Espy election has echoes in Espy's own experience as a Howard student. Ronald Walters, who was chairman of the political science department when Espy was a student, remembers him as "one of a very active group of students who went to Mississippi to do poll-watching and other things like that." The purpose of those trips, Walters says, "was to get students seasoned and grounded in some of the hands-on problems of politics Blacks were facing in the South." In general, he remembers Espy as "sharp, vigorous, interested in politics and student activism." "I knew he'd be going places," he adds.

Raymond Archer, the university's director of student activities, was a resident assistant at Drew Hall when Espy, then a freshman, lived there. And he remembers how Espy confounded the stereotypes of many northern students about what somebody from Yazoo City, Miss., would be like. "Mike was very serious," he recalls. "Mike was very articulate. Mike had the ability to

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Washington, D.C., metropolitan area conducted by an ad hoc group, the Regional Fair Housing Consortium. The group had sent out Black and white "testers" who posed as prospective renters of apartments advertised in *The Washington Post* and it reported that of all jurisdictions in the area, "Blacks were treated least favorably in Montgomery County, where they encountered discrimination 64 percent of the time."

20 "I think we were all somewhat shocked and deeply saddened by the fact that in a county so enlightened as this one, we led the entire metropolitan area in the incidence of housing discrimination in the rental market," Leggett told his fellow council members. "The resolution before you in no way, shape or form is a panacea for totally resolving the problem. It is simply a first step."

One by one, other council members expressed their support of the resolution and congratulated Leggett for introducing it. Observing the council's deliberations were a number of people with a special interest in the fair housing issue. Among them was DeVance Walker Jr., minority affairs officer for the county and also a Howard alumnus. "The reputation of the county has made people complacent," he remarked. "People want to feel that there is no discrimination in 1987. Plus, in the housing situation, a lot of those who are discriminated against don't even know it. Discrimination is more sophisticated than it used to be."

"Most of the council members are sensitive to this issue," he added. "But Leggett deals with the Black population on a regular basis and knows the feelings of that population about this particular issue more than anyone else. He's making it a council priority. He's doing what he's supposed to do as a council member because he has a Black constituency out there that wants him to address the issue. And he also has a number of white people out there who want him to address the issue. These are the people who voted for him. So it's only right for him to take the leadership on this."

### The Suburban Setting

The county where Leggett has made his home for the past 17 years is one of the nation's most affluent and well-educated. In 1984, the latest year for which figures are available, its medium household income

was \$41,385 and 42.8 percent of its residents over the age of 25 were college graduates. Blacks make up about 9 percent of the county's population (625,800 as of 1985), with the overall minority population about 15 percent.

Prince George's County, which reported a population of 677,400 as of 1985, is more economically and racially heterogeneous, including within its boundaries numerous blue collar communities as well as affluent enclaves. As of 1980, the county medium household income was \$22,395, while 21.1 percent of those 25 and older were college graduates. (Unfortunately for comparison's sake with Montgomery County, more up-to-date Prince George's County statistics are not available.) Black population of the county is estimated at about 48 percent today and is projected to hit the 50 percent mark by the end of the year. But the percentage of Black registered voters is far lower.

Given the reality of such demographics, both Williams and Leggett ran campaigns which purposefully deemphasized race and sought to appeal to a broad spectrum of voters. As Leggett says, "I used to joke that given the numerical odds, if every Black in Montgomery County voted for me three times over and I had ex-President Marcos of the Philippines counting the votes for me, I still wouldn't win. So we [his campaign team] had to emphasize that here was a candidate who would work for all the people."

Linda Williams, senior analyst with the Joint Center for Political Studies, the Washington, D.C.-based think tank, sees the Leggett and Williams races as "a forerunner of a trend of Black candidates winning more white support." She also sees these races as a forerunner of another trend: "the opening up of suburban possibilities in politics for Black candidates." Both men agree.

Says Alex Williams, a native Washingtonian who settled in Prince George's County in the early 1970s because he saw the county as a land of opportunity for a young Black lawyer: "The suburbs are a [political] haven that have not been conquered. But, traditionally, we've never looked that way because we've focused our attention on the District. All through my campaign I kept harping on the bedroom syndrome where we work and play and party and go to church and visit our parents' friends and all that in the District, but we sleep in Prince George's County.

"Because of this allegiance to the District, many Blacks in the suburbs have not involved themselves in the communities and the government where they live, have not been politically astute. And therefore, historically, the power structure has been able to capitalize on that. People need to understand that *there's real power in the suburbs* — in Northern Virginia, in Montgomery County, in Prince George's County . . . That's the new frontier."

Surveying the national scene Leggett adds: "We've already elected Black mayors in many of our cities. We've elected Black school board members, Black council people . . . At some point we're going to maximize our political strength in the inner cities. Now where do we go beyond that? The suburbs. We're going to have to learn the art of coalescing in politics where we are not the majority. We've got to find out how to effectively get involved in the political process. We're going to have to learn how to take a candidate and sell a candidate to an almost all-white audience, without that candidate losing his or her Black identity. That's the new challenge."

It's one he obviously has met. In analyzing the election returns, his campaign team estimates that of the 100,000 votes he received in the general election, 92,000 of those votes came from non-Blacks. (Williams estimates his white support at about 30 percent.)

Recently, the two men took some time out from very busy schedules to talk about the campaigns they ran, the challenges they face in their new jobs and the role the Howard School of Law played in helping shape their political destinies.

The settings for these conversations were their faculty offices on the third floor of Houston Hall on Howard's west campus. [Williams will go on public service leave from the university at the end of the semester.] It seemed particularly fitting that they should be ensconced in a building named for Charles Hamilton Houston. And that that building should house a law school whose first dean, John Mercer Langston, had succeeded in his bid for public office as far back as 1888 (when he was elected to Congress from Northern Virginia.)

As the school's current dean, J. Clay Smith Jr., remarks: "In recent years there have been a greater number of our graduates or people associated with the law school seeking political office and fusing law with politics. But it's not a new phenomenon, not at all."



## Looking Back

As he looks back at his campaign, Alex Williams cites his endorsement in the primary by Prince George's County Executive Parris Glendening and U.S. Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) as the turning point. "I think they recognized that the demographics of the county had changed and that there was an educated Black community in the county that was no longer going to tolerate an all-white thing," he says, speaking with vigor as if he were still on the campaign trail. "In their own minds, I suspect, they realized their political future was dependent on an image of sharing power."

Paradoxically, Williams' voter appeal also was boosted by the consequences of a much-publicized tragedy: the cocaine-induced death of University of Maryland basketball star Len Bias. Since the death occurred in Prince George's County, the case fell under the jurisdiction of then Prince George's State's Attorney Arthur A. Marshall Jr.

Marshall's handling of the official investigation into Bias' death — especially his almost daily press conferences in which he lambasted University of Maryland officials and revealed sensitive grand jury information — convinced many voters the veteran prosecutor was using the case for his own political benefit. Williams reaped the rewards of such feelings. "I'm the first person to admit that I got a lot of votes in the primary from people, especially white people, who weren't so much voting for me, as voting against Mr. Marshall," he says.

"It's ironic, but the case started off as a thorn in my side [by giving Marshall a bonanza of free publicity], but ended up helping me in that Mr. Marshall overkilled." Another irony: Marshall is his old boss. The veteran prosecutor had hired Williams as a law clerk when he was a third-year Howard law student. It was Williams' first job in law.

Today, as state's attorney, the 38-year-old Williams is responsible for the investigation and prosecution of all crimes committed within the county's borders, overseeing a staff of more than 100, including 40 lawyers.

One thing he's all too aware of as he tackles this new job is the disproportionate number of Black males caught up in the criminal justice system. As for the whys of this disproportion, he has no easy answers, but he does say: "The causes that breed crime are socioeconomic. There's no question about that. Of course, as a prosecutor I can't go into that. That's something legislators and citizens have to address. I only

react once a person has shot someone or robbed someone or committed some other type of crime. My job is to prosecute those people and have them removed from society."

"I don't have any guilt trips about prosecuting people," he adds. "One of the assistants in my office was saying, 'If you're Black and you go into the courtroom and the people you're trying to get convictions on are Black, how do you reconcile that?'"

"I answer that by saying, 'Why do you get a job as a prosecutor?' You do it for two reasons. Black people are most of the *victims* of crime. That's number one. And they need strong representation. And secondly, you can do more as a prosecutor than you can as a defense attorney, whatever. When you see an injustice [in the criminal justice process] you have the authority and the discretion to rectify it right there by just saying 'I dismiss' or 'I charge' or 'I alter the charge' or 'I reduce the charge,' whatever. So I don't have any qualms about being a prosecutor, not at all."

Being in such a sensitive, visible and powerful position, Williams admits, has made him "apprehensive and paranoid." "There's a double standard used to judge Black politicians and I know I'll be constantly under the microscope for four years," Williams says. "I don't like it. But that's the life of a Black politician in a white world."

He then adds an upbeat postscript: "I don't have any problem with my ability to get the job done. One thing about me: I believe in Alex Williams."

In contrast to Williams' new job, Ike Leggett's new job on the Montgomery County Council is less powerful, in that he is one of seven; less demanding, in that it is considered part-time; and less likely, perhaps, to inspire white apprehensions, in that Black legislators are far less rare than Black prosecutors. Which is not to diminish the importance of his work and of the council as a whole.

The council is responsible for raising and disbursing revenues, overseeing a budget of \$1.4 billion. Its second major function is to direct land-use decisions, that is, to determine where, when and how land should be used, a determination that affects everything from road construction to employment opportunities.

One of Leggett's priority concerns as a council member, he says, is "getting a better grasp on the county's growth." That growth has been explosive in recent years,

leading to clogged roads, overtaxed police and fire departments and some overcrowded schools. While Leggett supports development, the 41-year-old lawyer believes it should be more orderly and coordinated than it has been in the past.

Other concerns which he intends to address as a council member relate to problems hidden beneath the county's affluent, glossy image of carefully manicured cul-de-sacs, spanking new apartment and townhouse complexes, streamlined office parks and glitzy shopping malls. There's the problem of housing discrimination, as we have seen, but also the problem of housing affordability. Many of those who work in the county, even schoolteachers and policemen, can't afford to buy a house there, especially if they are the sole family wage earner. In some areas, the county also has an increasing elderly population as well as an increasing Third World immigrant population and both groups are in need of various kinds of special services. Even homelessness, considered a big city problem, has shown its tragic face and demands sensitive response.

Aside from dealing with such more generalized problems through council meetings and those of its committees, Leggett has found that much of his time involves responding to the concerns of individual constituents. "That means everything from difficulties people have getting their trash picked up on time and potholes in the street to incidences of racism," he explains.

"Because I am 'the first minority and Black to be elected' and am such a visible person as a result of the campaign and my activism in the county, I probably have the highest constituent load on the council. Before, I think, many minority residents were somewhat reluctant to take a concern to a council person. But now they say, 'I know someone. I'm going to take it to Ike Leggett.'"

As with Williams' "I believe in Alex Williams" remark, Leggett shows that he, too, has the first prerequisite for a politician: abundant self-confidence.

Leggett claims, though, to have never planned to seek elective office. ("I always thought of myself as a background person, someone who would do the research and analysis of problems.") That he ended up doing so came about indirectly, through his involvement with a county group called the Coalition for Equitable Representation in Government (CERG).

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# BREAKING NEW GROUND IN SUBURBIA

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One of his tasks as a CERG member was to try to convince some Black residents of the county to run for political office. Many of those he sought out, he says, ended up convincing him that *he* would have the best chance to win, pointing out that he was already well-known through his posts as chairman of the Montgomery County Human Relations Commission and its quasi-judicial job discrimination panel and through his involvement in numerous community groups. Apparently, it didn't take much convincing. Leggett, the divorced father of a 12-year-old daughter, soon found himself running hard on the campaign trail.

Along the way he received an impressive array of endorsements from such groups as Hispanic Democrats, the Women's Political Caucus, the Retired Teachers Association, Builders PAC (Political Action Committee) and the Rainbow Coalition. But it was the endorsement of the Fraternal Order of Police, he believes, that marked the turning point in his campaign. "There were many larger organizations that endorsed me, but when I got that endorsement it suggested a different segment of the community, probably the more conservative segment, was prepared to support me and work in my behalf," he says. "And that, to me, signified it was going to be very difficult to defeat me."

That doesn't mean his campaign was immune from racial slurs. When one of his white supporters was handing out campaign literature before the primary, one white man told her, "I'm not going to vote for a Black guy, period. I don't care how qualified he is." "But," says Leggett, "it turned out that those who are fair in their judgment prevailed over those few who felt that way."

Leggett, who holds a M.A. in government from Howard, in addition to his Howard law degree, credits the university with preparing him well for undertaking elective office. "The substance of the issues has been fairly quick for me to grasp because of the education and training I've had at Howard," he says. "But Howard instilled in me something even more. It instilled in me a degree of motivation, enhanced my sensitivity to those who are less fortunate, provided me with the disci-

pline to get out and struggle through what I consider a long and difficult campaign."

## Backgrounds

Leggett had come to Howard for graduate work after earning a B.A. in political science from Southern University in Baton Rouge, La., serving as an Army captain in Vietnam, working as a claims examiner for the Social Security Administration and a legislative assistant to former U.S. Rep. Parren J. Mitchell (D-Md.).

Already he had come a long way from Alexandria, La., where he had been born into what he calls "an extremely poor family, and I underline *extremely*." His mother was a short order cook. His father constructed fences. There were twelve children to feed. Obviously, given such circumstances, there was to be no money for college. But, as a rather indifferent high school student concerned almost exclusively with athletics, Leggett says he wasn't thinking about college anyway. This changed following his enrollment in a summer job program at Southern University which impressed upon him the advantages of higher education and showed him a way to finance it through jobs, loans and ROTC.

He enrolled at Southern and almost immediately transferred the energies he had expended on the football field to the classroom, ending up graduating with a slew of honors, including that of student body president. That was the beginning of the numerous honors he was to receive through the years. The most prestigious: serving as a White House Fellow in 1978-1979. By then, Leggett had added three other degrees to his résumé — the aforementioned Howard degrees (M.A., government, 1972; and J.D., 1974) and a master of laws from Georgetown (1976). And he had worked as a Navy Department lawyer and was back at Howard — this time on the faculty.

When he returned to the School of Law, following his White House fellowship, he also became assistant dean, a post he held until he joined the council.

Williams was born and raised in the District of Columbia where his father

worked as a clerk in the Navy Yard and his mother was for many years a domestic worker, before becoming a cashier in a government cafeteria. With the strong encouragement of his mother, in particular, he, his two sisters and brother early set their eyes on achievement. Following in the footsteps of an older sister, Williams attended Howard as a government major already committed to a law career. A job as a Safeway clerk helped pay the way.

When it was time to think about law school, he applied to Georgetown, New York University, the University of Maryland, Ohio State — and Howard. "The white

"The substance of the issues has been fairly quick for me to grasp because of the education and training I've had at Howard. Howard [also] instilled in me a degree of motivation, enhanced my sensitivity to those who are less fortunate, provided me with the discipline to get out and struggle through what I consider a long and difficult campaign."

— *Ike Leggett*

schools all rejected me," he says. "I don't have any problem admitting that. They said that based on my score on the Law School Admission Test (LSAT) — it was just so-so — I wouldn't make a good lawyer. So I went to Howard. I realized I had some weaknesses and just worked hard to eliminate them. And I had some truly gifted instructors here, people who not only served the public well, but also were among the best legal minds around. So by the time I was ready to graduate [in 1973, a year before Leggett] I was as ready to pass the bar as if my parents had been high-powered college graduates. I passed the Maryland bar the first time around and went on to other things."



# ESPY: VOWING TO DO SOME GOOD

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These other things included building a thriving criminal law practice in Prince George's County, serving as assistant public defender for the county, general counsel for the towns of Fairmont Heights and Glenarden, Md., hearing examiner and special counsel to the Prince George's County Board of Education, a commissioner on the Prince George's County Human Relations Commission and on the Maryland State Commission on Medical Discipline, chairman of the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission, which has basic authority over water and sewage services for Prince George's and Montgomery Counties—and teaching law at his alma mater.

Along the way, he found himself becoming more and more involved in politics. "I think it took me about five or six years after I began to practice to recognize that you had to have political power to get anything done," he says. "So I began to go out to political functions, get to know the movers and shakers, be appointed to things. And ultimately I decided it was time for me to move politically myself. Based on my training and the diversity of my legal experiences with a concentration in criminal law, the state's attorney's job was the one I wanted."

Looking over his fast-moving career and at the new challenges he faces as state's attorney, Williams says, "I'm grateful to Howard for giving me the opportunity to become a lawyer. But that's been the history of Howard. It always has picked people up who have been the victims of social, political and economic deprivation and molded them to the best they can be."

Veteran Howard law professor Henry Halvor Jones taught both Williams and Leggett and remembers them as outstanding and self-assured students.

Today, as he continues to interact with the professor-politicians they have become, he is full of praise. "We're very proud of them," he says, speaking of the faculty as a whole. "In fact, we're amazed sometimes by the successes some of our students have and the level of competence they have realized in face of all the problems that we [as Blacks] had generically. How they have overcome these problems, as someone said, is 'a social miracle.' But it's very difficult to sustain that story in the public eye."

In a subtle but nonetheless meaningful way, Alex Williams and Ike Leggett are sustaining that story as they break new political ground in the Maryland suburbs. □

get along very well with different groups of people from diverse parts of the country."

At the time [1971-72], long political discussions were an integral part of dorm life, Archer says, "and Mike was usually a part of those discussions. He was insightful, particularly for a freshman, in terms of talking and learning and wanting to know how to do things."

Archer also remembers Espy as "one of the gung-ho folks about Howard." With reason. For it was at Howard, says the congressman, that "I got a thirst for political development that has never been quenched." "I give Howard all the credit for that," he adds, his businesslike manner softening as he looks back on his student days. "If anybody can develop political skills anywhere, I developed them at Howard. I was elected Liberal Arts Student Council treasurer and we ran a traditional campaign with posters and radio speeches. And election machines! We didn't even have election machines in some counties in Mississippi, but at Howard we had them for student government elections."

In addition to being involved in student government, Espy served as president of the student political science society at the university and president of the National Association of Black Political Science Students, composed, he says proudly, of "political science students from all the predominantly Black colleges in America."

While Espy says he feels he learned as much from his fellow students at the university as from the faculty, he cites Walters as one professor who had particularly influenced his political development. "He was a strategist and a technician who gave me some insights into the mechanics of political operations," he recalls of the man who was later to become a key adviser to Jesse Jackson. "His agenda at the time was unifying the Black vote and making it influential in Democratic politics." A highlight of his student days, Espy says, was going with Walters and others to a National Black Political Convention in Little Rock "where we were exposed to so many different ideologies."

But, then, Howard, itself, broadened his view of the world. "Coming from Mississippi, I had been relatively sheltered in

terms of exposure," he says. "And here was Howard—located in Washington, D.C.—the cutting edge of a lot of the social and political changes we see now. And the international community was so well represented, not just in the city, but at Howard itself. If you wanted to be involved in the experience of another country, all you had to do was go to a dormitory and start up a conversation with someone from that country. I was exposed to the problems of Africa, the Caribbean, South America . . . And I was exposed to revolutionary politics. We [through the Liberal Arts Student Council] had the money to bring people to campus like Angela Davis, Imamu Baraka and Stokely Carmichael."

Today, he regards revolutionary politics as "a last resort." "I believe that I can work for change within the system," he says. "During my own lifetime, I can see that while progress may not have been made as fast as some would like, nonetheless progress has been made."

Today, of course, the venue of his political involvement has shifted from the campus of Howard University to the gleaming, domed Capitol of the United States of America several miles away. How does it feel?

"It's been humbling, to say the least," Mike Espy answers. "I do have to almost pinch myself sometimes, particularly at events like the State of the Union message. I used to watch that every year on TV. I used to look forward to it. To hear the most powerful man in the world give his annual statement on the position of the United States in the world, to me, is a significant event whether you agree with what he says or not. To have the leadership of this country crowded together in one small room was awe-inspiring to me and the fact that I was there for the first time was a bit overwhelming."

Smiling now, he adds, "I'm almost expecting someone to tap me on the shoulder and say it [the election] was all a mistake." "I'm just being facetious," he says quickly. "I know it wasn't a mistake. We ran a difficult campaign for a year-and-a-half and it was a good campaign and we won. But it is humbling to be here, for sure."

For sure. □