

“A Political Legacy Stained”

House of Diggs: The Rise and Fall of America's Most Consequential Black Congressman, Charles C. Diggs Jr., by Marion Orr. North Carolina, 338 pages, \$29.95

By David J. Garrow, *Wall Street Journal*, October 29, 2025, p. A13.

Unless you're a student of black politics or over 65, it's unlikely that you'll recognize the name of Charles C. “Charley” Diggs Jr. Elected to the House of Representatives from his hometown of Detroit in 1954, he served until 1980, when he resigned his seat after a payroll-kickback scandal ultimately led to a felony conviction and jail time.

Despite the ignominious end to his career, Diggs spent many years as a stellar legislator who became, as his biographer Marion Orr writes, “the most powerful Black politician on Capitol Hill.” Mr. Orr, a professor of political science at Brown University, provides a rewarding portrait of Diggs's career as a civil-rights activist and legislator in his exhaustively researched biography, “House of Diggs.”

Born into a family of morticians in 1922, Diggs was drafted in 1943, experienced segregation on and around southern military bases, yet was commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant in the Army Air Force before World War II ended.

Diggs's father was elected as Michigan's first black Democratic state senator in 1936, but lost his seat in 1944 following charges of bribery. The younger Diggs later won the seat, entering the Michigan legislature in 1951 while still in his 20s. Three years later he trounced an incumbent member of Congress. Diggs took his seat in the House in 1955, as one of only three black representatives. Within weeks he began traveling to civil-rights hot spots in the Deep South. Later that year he would attend the racially tense trial of young Emmett Till's killers in rural Mississippi. In early 1956 he rallied with Montgomery bus boycott participants in Alabama.

As a congressman, Diggs became a dogged fighter of racial exclusion and discrimination in a host of areas, ranging from commercial air travel to all branches of the U.S. military. “If one word encompasses Charles Diggs's approach in Congress, that word is persistence,” Mr. Orr writes. Diggs's

flamboyant colleague from Harlem, Adam Clayton Powell, loomed larger as a public figure, but, Mr. Orr argues, on Capitol Hill the quiet Diggs “accomplished far more” than his black fellow representative.

Diggs’s approach to the competing agendas of the political factions he dealt with did not always sit well with allies. In April 1963 Diggs was staying at the Clarksdale, Miss., home of a courageous activist named Aaron Henry when several Molotov cocktails came through the windows at 3 a.m. “The emotional impact of being awakened by a bomb out of the dead of sleep is tremendous,” Diggs told reporters. But the following year, Diggs disappointed his Mississippi friends. The state’s civil-rights proponents formed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to challenge the seating of the regular party’s all-white delegation at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. An insecure President Lyndon B. Johnson desperately wanted to avoid a public floor fight over the group’s challenge. Mr. Orr details how “Diggs played a big role in helping Johnson” to neutralize activists on the decisive committee. “Aaron Henry felt betrayed by Diggs,” Mr. Orr states, and Henry complained that Diggs “turned out to be a party man” rather than a movement champion.

Thus, as Mr. Orr perceptively observes, Diggs represented “the personification of the shift” that Bayard Rustin, the civil-rights movement’s leading intellectual, heralded and advocated in his famous essay “From Protest to Politics,” published in the wake of the 1964 DNC. “Diggs strategically practiced a moderate politics,” Mr. Orr writes.

From early in his time in Congress, Diggs manifested an abiding interest in Africa. “Diggs would make more official trips and fact-finding missions to Africa than any other member of Congress,” the author reports. Changing American attitudes toward the apartheid government of South Africa “would prove to be both Diggs’s greatest challenge and his greatest achievement,” Mr. Orr notes. In 1969 Diggs headed the Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Africa and in 1973 he became the chairman of the House Committee on the District of Columbia, a post from which the “hardworking legislator” fought for D.C. home rule.

Yet Diggs’s increased prominence heralded a catastrophic turn. In 1967 his father died by suicide, and the family’s funeral business—called the House of Diggs—began a terminal decline under the son’s often-absentee direction.

According to Mr. Orr, Diggs began using the funeral home's funds to "pay for many of his personal expenses." Simeon Booker, a black journalist who would be the best man at the fourth of Diggs's serial weddings, later wrote that Diggs also "indulged a passion for gambling, to the point where it seemed to be an addiction."

In 1976 Diggs hired as his congressional chief of staff 35-year-old Randall Robinson, who would go on to become, in Mr. Orr's phrase, "the country's premier anti-apartheid organizer." In June 1977 the Washington Post reported that the Justice Department was probing Diggs for receiving kickbacks from some of his congressional employees' inflated salaries. Mr. Orr convincingly identifies Robinson as the man who dropped the dime to prosecutors.

Indicted by a federal grand jury in March 1978, Diggs was convicted on 29 counts of mail fraud and making false statements. Re-elected nonetheless that fall, Diggs resigned his seat in June 1980, after exhausting his appeals. He served only seven months imprisonment and died in 1998 at age 75. His widow and three previous wives all attended his funeral.

"House of Diggs" is unsparing in its portrait of the corruption that tarnishes its subject's memory. Yet Mr. Orr rightly emphasizes how "few Americans know of Diggs's contributions" and argues that Diggs was "perhaps the most consequential Black federal legislator ever to serve in the United States Congress." This biography astutely portrays how "Diggs's personal failures and weaknesses" counterbalanced his impressive professional strengths and prematurely ended a career of no little significance.

Mr. Garrow's books include "Bearing the Cross," a biography of Martin Luther King Jr.