

For Cummings, a Higher Profile Means Getting Things Done

By [Emma Dumain](#) Posted at 10 a.m. Nov. 4



Between events in Baltimore, Cummings chats with a constituent as an aide tries to keep the congressman dry. (Photo By Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call)

BALTIMORE — There are many things Rep. Elijah E. Cummings wants people to know about him. One is that his constituents love him.

“My constituents want to know that they can touch me, they want to know that they can communicate with me,” the Maryland Democrat said. “I guarantee you, if we were to walk through my district, people will come up to me — white, black, all colors, some of them high. ‘We love you, Mr. Cummings.’ ‘We love you, man.’ ‘I’ll take a bullet for you.’ Someone told me that yesterday.”

It didn’t take long for CQ Roll Call — spending a rainy October day with the congressman on his home turf in Baltimore — to see exactly what he meant.

Minutes later, Cummings, who’d just taken part in a voter protection event, was greeted on the wet sidewalk outside by two fans.

Shaking hands with the former Congressional Black Caucus chairman, a young white man in a hoodie and baggy jeans said his wife is black and loves the man whose political career began on those same gritty streets.

A few steps away, a black man holding a large piece of cardboard folded over his head stepped up to talk quietly with the congressman.

Cummings, standing with an aide under a huge umbrella, handed the man a dollar bill from his pocket and told him several times, even as he started to walk away, "I love you."



Cummings talks quietly with a Baltimore man who approached the congressman outside an event last month. (Photo By Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call)

"You see?" Cummings said as he unlocked his car parked across the street and settled in.

He was ready to drive to his next activity of the day, delivering the keynote address at a nearby Johns Hopkins University symposium on HIV/AIDS. There, the professor who introduced the congressman gushed, "I always get a little starstruck when I see him at the downtown Whole Foods."

The local grocery isn't the only place Cummings is recognized these days. The nine-term lawmaker has seen his national profile grow considerably in the four years he's served as ranking member on the Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

The turning point came in March, after clips of Chairman Darrell Issa, R-Calif., abruptly cutting off Cummings' microphone went viral.

"They used to mistake me for John Lewis," said Cummings of his House colleague, a Georgia Democrat and civil rights icon who is also black with a shiny, bald head. "They don't do that anymore."

Higher profile or not, Cummings brushes aside speculation that he's now on the short list of potential successors for any of the three Democrats currently atop the House delegation: Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, Minority Whip Steny H. Hoyer or Assistant Leader James E. Clyburn.

"I don't have to be in top leadership to feed my soul," the 63-year-old lawmaker said.

“I’ve never necessarily aspired to any leadership position,” he said. “But one thing I do know is that I did not want to be on the back bench. And the reason I didn’t want to be on the back bench is, I think, the more visible I am, the more effective I can be.”

Cummings is obsessive about making sure his actions yield maximum effective and efficient results. That’s something else he wants people to know about him: Those two adjectives — “effective” and “efficient” — underscore everything he does.

His top priority, he said, is to help the community where he was born and raised.

He knows that Democrats regaining control of the House and keeping power in the Senate increases his effectiveness and efficiency as a policymaker, so he contributes to the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee and stumps for candidates and incumbents.

He agrees to appear on so many cable news and Sunday shows because he believes the exposure also extends his reach.

“When ... one of my employees calls about Social Security and the call is coming from Congressman Cummings’ office, that person on the other end of the phone knows, ‘Oh, this is a serious guy. I’ve seen him on the television, and he’s very serious. And he doesn’t play.’”

But not every encounter with the media serves Cummings’ larger purpose. Rehashing the explosive clash with Issa, in his estimation, doesn’t make him more effective or efficient. So he’s not going to do it.

The same goes for the 2010 sequence of events that led to him become the ranking member on Oversight, when party leaders empowered him to run against former Rep. Edolphus Towns, a more senior member and a CBC colleague who’d been pressured to step aside.

Stirring up old wounds serves no purpose, so why do it?

On the issue of race and racism, Cummings acknowledges he was shaped by memories of growing up in segregated Baltimore, where his father spent an hour alone in the car each night to recover from a day’s worth of verbal abuse. As a little boy, Cummings was pelted with rocks when he tried to swim in a “whites only” public pool.

But focusing on race can sometimes be counterproductive, he said.

“I don’t talk about race a lot because it’s distracting,” Cummings said. “When race is raised, the automatic response from [Republicans] is, ‘You pulled the race card.’ It distracts from the message. ... That’s gonna be the headline.”

In the days following the Issa episode, Cummings sat to the side as CBC members took to the House floor to condemn the committee chairman. Cummings also refused to engage when political commentators asked whether Issa’s actions were racially motivated.

“When the incident happened, I did not make it a racial issue,” Cummings continued. “And that’s why I said to Issa, ‘I represent 700,000 people, too.’ And by the way, those 700,000 are very diverse. And some of them are Republicans. And shouldn’t they have a voice?”

Cummings is eager to give examples of how his message resonates across demographics. He remembers bringing a white audience in Virginia to tears while talking about the Voting Rights Act during a recent campaign event with Democratic House candidate John Foust.

“A lot of people think the only thing an African-American can do is be persuasive with regards to blacks,” he said. “That’s not true. Because I think there are certain gut issues that are fundamental to all of us. ... People are swayed by passion.”

He’s generous in conveying that passion, even with strangers. At public speaking engagements he doesn’t hold back when he feels moved to shout to prove a point. In his speech at the HIV/AIDS symposium, there were moments where his whole body shook and he spoke so loudly he didn’t need the microphone.

He told the story of seeing his mentor, who was dying of prostate cancer, for the last time. When he assumed the old friend’s voice, Cummings scrunched up his face and spoke in a stuttering, shattered cry. His speech was almost theatrical, and when he stepped down from the podium he got a standing ovation.

As with many politicians, Cummings doesn’t lack for confidence or pride in his accomplishments. But there is also a part of him that still can’t quite believe he’s come this far.

He recalled a 2005 news conference in which he and CBC members called for — and then received — expedited rescue efforts in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

“When you come from where I come from,” Cummings said, “where you grow up very poor, seven kids in a four-room house, a segregated school with nine rooms, total ... it is humbling to know that you can effect change of a nation — of a nation! — with your words.

“It is without a doubt a sense of awe,” he said.