

## GOVERNMENT

# Chairmanship of black caucus gives Cummings national voice

BY TOM STUCKEY

Associated Press

Rep. Elijah Cummings, chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, was surprised to be invited backstage to meet President Bush at a conference of the National Urban League this summer and even more surprised at the president's greeting.

As the Baltimore Democrat recalls it, Bush walked into the room, looked at him and said, "Elijah, you dissed me."

Bush's quip was a reference to Cummings' refusal to attend a July White House meeting, a protest against the president's failure to meet with the caucus.

"He really threw me," said Cummings, who jokingly told the president the comment sounded like something he would hear in his Baltimore neighborhood.

Cummings, 52, said the meeting with the president — also attended by Jesse Jackson and former Clinton administration Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater — was cordial.

"To his credit, it was a good meeting," Cummings said.

But he does not regret turning down the July invitation to the White House after the president's trip to Africa. Cummings wanted to make known his displeasure that Bush's only meeting with the CBC was during his first month in office.

"I had to make a statement," Cummings said in a recent interview. It was nice that Bush said during the Africa trip that he felt bad about slavery, but members of the black caucus "are only 15 blocks away (from the White House) and we couldn't get a meeting in 2 1/2 years," Cummings said.

Cummings was elected to Congress in 1996 when Kweisi Mfume resigned from the 7th District seat to become president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Because of Cummings' leadership abilities, "his ascension to the chairmanship of the Congressional Black Caucus was pretty predictable," said Mfume, also a former caucus chairman.

Democrats and Republicans who worked with Cummings in the Maryland legislature and Congress say the exchange with the president is typical of a man who can maintain cordial relations with political opponents while passionately defending the best interests of his constituents.

Maryland Republican Gov. Robert Ehrlich, who served with Cummings in the legislature and Congress, said they seldom agreed on major issues.

"We did battle in Annapolis. We did battle on Capitol Hill," Ehrlich said. "But we always got along. On a personal level, we were very close."

Democratic Rep. Benjamin Cardin, whose district also includes part of Baltimore, said Cummings is well liked in Washington, but "when you cross his path on issues that he believes are critically important to the people he represents, he'll let you know that."

And even though Republican Rep. Wayne Gilchrest of Maryland's 1st District believes Cummings should not have rejected the invitation to the White House, he said even people who disagree with Cummings "always come away from Elijah feeling a sense of mutual respect."

House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer, another Maryland congressman, described Cummings as thoughtful and temperate, but also very determined, a quality that was on display in his successful campaign to bring a Democratic presidential debate to Baltimore.

Cummings initially proposed four debates that would be sponsored by the CBC "to energize the African-American community" before the 2004 election. But in negotiations with Democratic National Committee Chairman Terry McAuliffe, he agreed to have the caucus sponsor just one of six official DNC debates and to hold it in Detroit.

However, Cummings was still trying to find a way to have a debate in his hometown when he ran into Roger Ailes, chairman and CEO of Fox News Channel, at a dinner in Washington.

"I told him I really need your help on

this," Cummings said, asking if Fox would televise a debate in Baltimore.

"He called me the next day and said, 'Do it.' I said, 'Will you do Detroit and will you do Baltimore?' He said, 'Yes.'"

Democratic presidential candidates, already facing six debates, may not have wanted another, but all have promised to come to Baltimore Sept. 9 for a forum at Morgan State University.

They agreed after Cummings called their campaigns to let them know black voters, the Democratic party's most loyal supporters, "would be very, very concerned if they couldn't be there."

Since Cummings took over as chairman in January, the caucus has pressed President Bush to commit the United States to bringing an end to violence in Liberia, protested proposed changes in the Head Start program that black lawmakers said would adversely affect minorities, defended affirmative action programs and lobbied for more federal funds to fight AIDS in Africa and the United States.

Other top priorities of the caucus are health care and fighting "the merchants of

death" who peddle drugs that have a devastating effect on everyone, Cummings said.

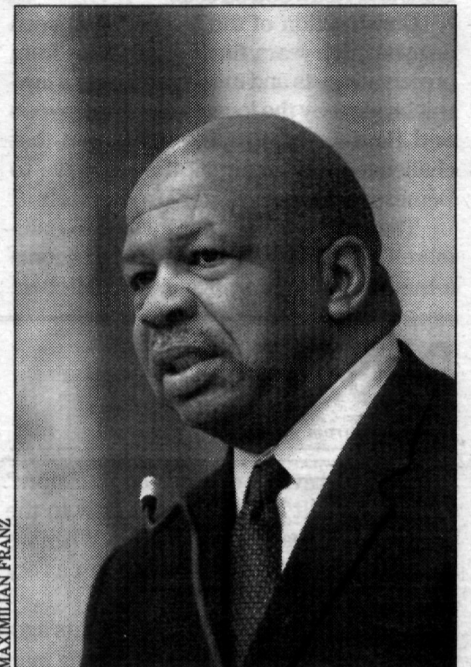
The determination and sense of mission that drive Cummings today were evident in the child who grew up in an inner city neighborhood in Baltimore, the son of parents who left South Carolina to escape subsistence jobs and seek a better life for their family.

Even though his parents stressed the importance of school because they "were so determined to see their children do better than they did," Cummings was put in special classes for slow learners.

A big fan of Perry Mason, he told his 6th grade guidance counselor he wanted to be a lawyer. The counselor's response: "You are aiming too high. Why don't you aim lower?"

When he told his mother, "she had me write on the back of a ... rice box, 'I will be what I want to be.'"

Cummings said he immersed himself in books at the public library, studying for hours every day after school. He was moved to regular classrooms after working up the nerve to ask to be tested so he could prove he was not a slow learner.



U.S. Rep. Elijah Cummings, 52, maintains cordial relations with political opponents while passionately defending the best interests of his constituents, according to Democrats and Republicans alike.

MAXIMILIAN FRANZ