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Cummings reflects on his big leap

Biggest surprise for Mfume's successor: more partisanship

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SUN NATIONAL STAFF

WASHINGTON — In the world of politics, moving from the State House to Congress is like being called up from AAA baseball to the major leagues.

One day, you're toiling in relative obscurity on some subcommittee in a state's capital city. The next, you're walking the halls of Congress, seeing your face on C-SPAN and working around

some of the nation's most powerful politicians.

Baltimore's Elijah E. Cummings made that leap last month. After 14 years in the Maryland legislature, he won an election in April to replace retiring Rep. Kweisi Mfume and become the state's newest congressman.

Cummings, a Democrat, represents the 7th District, which stretches from East Baltimore through most of West Baltimore and western Baltimore County.

In moving to the federal level, he has traded the relaxed, collegial culture of Annapolis for the high-profile, hardball politics of Washington. Last week, Cummings sat down with a *Sun* reporter

to discuss his impressions of life on Capitol Hill as he approached the end of his first month in office.

What has been the biggest surprise so far?

The partisanship. After coming from the state, where, basically, you had a lot of people working together, it's clear that the lines are drawn here.

In Annapolis, you generally either had a unanimous vote or you maybe had two or three people going the other way. In Washington, almost every vote is along party lines.

Why do you think Washington is so different?

There's a lot at stake. We're . [See Cummings, 12B]

Intensity of partisanship is biggest surprise for Cummings as he makes leap to Washington

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in an election year, and there is an effort afoot to make sure that the president doesn't look too good.

Republicans control Congress. At one of my first committee hearings, we had to vote on a contempt citation for the president's counsel not producing all documents

requested regarding the White House travel office scandal.

My position was — and this is based on 20 years as a lawyer — before you hold him in contempt, let's try to have him come before us and find out what he has to say. But the vote came down for contempt, and it was strictly along party lines.

How has your life changed?

As a lawyer, I was used to the daily grind of acquiring clients, running the business, appearing in court, making payroll every Thursday and being a legislator.

It was not unusual for me to spend 25 to 30 hours a week on legislative duties when we were out of session and then another 40 to 50 hours a week as a lawyer.

Here, the hours are still long, but I've given up my law practice, so I have the opportunity to focus on one job, and I like that. Fortunately, I also have a staff that helps me tremendously in addressing various problems.

How big was your staff in Annapolis?

(Cummings laughs.)

Sometimes I had one person, and sometimes I had two. Here, right now, we've got about 16. This makes a big difference.

How has your experience in the State House helped you in your transition?

What I learned in Annapolis over 14 years and as speaker pro tem (the second-highest position in the House of Delegates) has really helped me hit the ground running. When I received a detailed briefing on parliamentary procedures, I already had a pretty good idea of what the various terms meant.

A lot of times, you don't know what you know until you are put in a position like this.

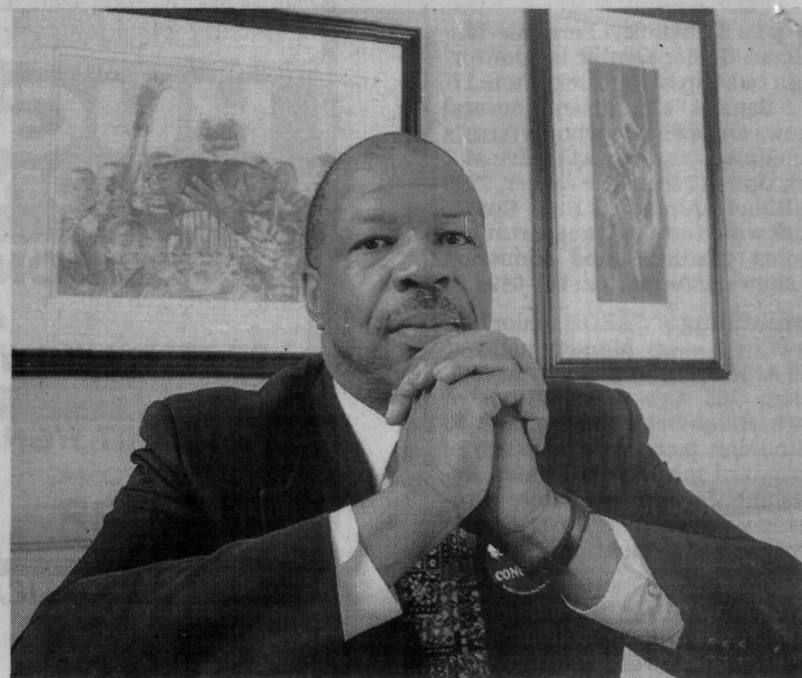
Do people in your district treat you differently now?

When I was a state legislator, I could go into a restaurant and maybe, maybe, maybe, one or two people would recognize me. On Mother's Day, I went to Shoney's on Reisterstown Road. At least 50 people came up to wish me well.

In all my years in Annapolis, I had three requests for autographs. I guess I get 100 a week now.

Are you comfortable with the attention? Do you like it?

I'm comfortable with it. Because people recognize me, they are able to approach me, tell me their problems, and that helps me to do my job.



SUN FILE PHOTO

New congressman: Rep. Elijah E. Cummings won an April election.

It does become difficult to eat, though. At Shoney's, I just ran in for a quick meal. I ended up being there for 2½ hours.

It's not a fancy restaurant, and I think the mere fact that I was there said a lot to them. That's the kind of person I am: I want to be accessible to people.

One time I went to a Valu City — I've got to tell you this one — I was standing in line, and people were shocked that their congressman was in Valu City.

A woman came up and said, "I feel so ashamed to shop at Valu City, but now that I know my congressman shops here, I feel OK."

Are the issues in Washington similar to those in Annapolis?

The concerns are the same. People want safe neighborhoods, good paychecks and good schools.

The difference is in scope. What I do here affects everywhere from Omaha, Neb., to the rest of the world. I feel a tremendous amount of responsibility and duty to the people who put their faith and trust in me.

How is power wielded in Washington compared with in Annapolis?

In the House of Delegates, basically what you had was a leadership team of 30 people. They gave guidance to the entire body. It was leadership by consensus. Here, I don't necessarily see that consensus.

What do you see?

Partisanship. I see a "Contract with America" that most Americans haven't seen. I see an effort by Republicans not to have a vote on the minimum wage when most Americans support an increase.

Do you see as much of your 13-year-old daughter, Jennifer?

It's a little better now. When I went to Washington, I realized that it's a year-round job, as opposed to three months in the state legislature. So, I try to make an effort to spend more time with her.

This weekend, she went with me to three events, a prayer breakfast, a rally in East Baltimore and a public housing advisers luncheon. She gets a chance to meet a lot of different people. I think she likes it.

Recognizing that you've only been in office for about a month, what have you done so far to help your constituents?

I recently helped expedite the federal licensing process so a Maryland company can invest in minority-owned small businesses. I've worked with the treasurer of the state of Maryland to place some of the state's funds in African-American banks. And we are working on a job fair in October.

What do you think of Newt Gingrich?

I've only met him once, and we didn't speak long. The jury's still out.