

Carol Moseley Braun United States Senator, 1993-1999

PREFACE

Carol Moseley Braun served in the United States Senate from 1993 to 1999 as a Democrat from Illinois. Born in Chicago in 1947, she was the oldest child of Joseph J. Moseley, a policeman, and Edna A. Davie, a medical technician. While still a teenager, Moseley Braun staged her first protest, a sit-in at a segregated restaurant. At age sixteen, she marched with Martin Luther King, Jr., to protest housing conditions in Chicago. Moseley Braun earned a BA in political science from the University of Illinois in 1969, graduated from the University of Chicago School of Law in 1972, and joined the Illinois State Bar in 1973. She soon joined the staff of the Assistant U.S. Attorney of northern Illinois, serving until 1977.

In the 1970s Moseley Braun's role as an environmental activist in Chicago prompted her to run for the state legislature. She became an Illinois state representative in 1977 and served until 1988. Following an unsuccessful bid for lieutenant governor in 1986, she served as Recorder of Deeds for Cook County, Illinois, from 1988 to 1992, the first African American elected to a Cook County executive position.

Motivated, in part, by the spectacle of the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation hearings in 1991, Moseley Braun became convinced that the predominantly white, male U.S. Senate needed to change. In 1992 she sensed an anti-incumbent force underway and challenged Senator Alan Dixon for the Democratic nomination. She won the primary election on March 17, 1992, and in November she defeated Republican candidate Richard Williamson with 53 percent of the votes. On January 3, 1993, Moseley Braun became the first female U.S. senator from Illinois and the first African American woman to serve in the United States Senate.

Moseley Braun entered the U.S. Senate in January of 1993 under intense public scrutiny. As one reporter noted, when "expectations are enormous, missteps [are] magnified." Every misstep, real or perceived, dogged the senator for the next six years. Criticism included an accusation of misuse of campaign funds (a charge that was eventually cleared by a Federal Election Commission investigation), use of income from a sale of family land, and a controversial trip to Nigeria. Senator Moseley Braun discussed each of these issues in her oral history interviews.

As one of only seven women senators and the only African American in the Senate at the time, Moseley Braun became burdened with a level of constituent demands rarely seen before. Despite such pressures, the senator was determined to influence legislation, including lifting a ban on gays in the military and promoting health care issues. Consistently, she provided a strong voice for civil rights legislation and promoted preservation of historic sites along the route of the Underground Railroad. Among her legislative achievements was the Improving America's School Act of 1994. Although Moseley Braun did not gain a coveted seat on the Senate Appropriations Committee, she became one of the first women to serve on the Senate Committees on Judiciary and Finance.

Moseley Braun also had some high-profile confrontations with North Carolina senator Jesse Helms. In May 1993 the Senate Judiciary Committee heeded Moseley Braun's plea to deny the United Daughters of the Confederacy renewal of its 95-year-old federal patent on an insignia that featured the Confederate flag. Two months later, when Moseley Braun learned that Helms had introduced an amendment to reinstate the patent, she rushed to the Senate Chamber and made an eloquent plea against the amendment. "Symbols are important," she told her colleagues. "Everyone knows what that insignia means." She won the argument and the Senate voted 75 to 25 to deny the patent.

Despite legislative successes and her high-profile confrontations with Helms, Moseley Braun faced a tough reelection campaign in 1998. Although she received support from President Bill Clinton's administration, she was unable to raise sufficient funds from the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee and other party sources to ward off a challenge from wealthy Republican candidate Peter Fitzgerald. She lost the election by less than four percentage points.

Following her Senate career, Moseley Braun became a consultant for the Department of Education. On October 8, 1999, President Clinton nominated her as ambassador to New Zealand and Samoa. During Senate confirmation hearings, Senator Helms threatened to stop the nomination and claimed that an "ethical cloud" hung over her Senate career. Ironically, Helms allowed Moseley Braun finally to clear up many lingering questions. The results of the FEC's five-year investigation into misuse of campaign funds were made public for the first time, showing a discrepancy of only \$311. The Senate confirmed her nomination on November 10, 1999, with a 96-2 vote.

Moseley Braun served as ambassador to New Zealand and Samoa until 2001. She later became a visiting professor at Morris Brown College and professor of business law at DePaul University. She returned to politics in 2003 by entering the presidential race as a "peace dove and budget hawk." If elected, she vowed to bring more women and minorities into the democratic system. Difficulty in fundraising caused her to drop out of the race in January 2004. Following her presidential bid, Moseley Braun has served as a business consultant and founded an organic foods company.

About the Interviewer: Betty K. Koed received her Ph.D. in history from the University of California, Santa Barbara. She joined the U.S. Senate Historical Office as Assistant Historian in 1998, and became the Associate Historian and Deputy Director in 2009. In addition to many other Senate responsibilities, Koed is senior editor of the *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress* and serves as the Senate's History Webmaster.