The death of Elijah Cummings: Democrats, media glorify a mediocrity

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The death of Representative Elijah Cummings (D-Maryland) early Thursday morning became the occasion for an outpouring of praise from both Democrats and Republicans, hailing the late Baltimore congressman as a paragon of political principle and moral rectitude. The corporate media joined in, making a political mountain out of a molehill, glorifying a run-of-the-mill member of Congress as though he were a hero of the civil rights movement.

Both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* published front-page tributes to the 68-year-old Cummings in their Friday editions. The *Post* headline described him as "A congressman of principle and resolve," while the *Times* called Cummings a "Fighter Revered by Democrats as a 'North Star'." Large photographs of Cummings accompanied both obituaries.

The real purpose of the flowery tributes was to give a "progressive" gloss to the impeachment campaign launched by the House Democrats, in which Cummings played a significant role to the very end, issuing subpoenas by the House Government Oversight Committee from his sickbed at a Baltimore hospice.

The reality is that if Cummings had died in 2017, when he suffered a serious heart ailment and had to have surgery on his aorta, his passing would have been relegated to a perfunctory notice on the inside pages: one more Democratic machine politician, soon to be replaced by another. It is only his role in the past eight months that has caused the corporate media to sing hallelujahs to the Maryland congressman.

Cummings was born in 1951, the son of Southern sharecroppers who moved to Baltimore to find work—his father in the city's booming factories, his mother as a domestic and then herself a factory work. Both were Baptist ministers on the side, and passed on their religious orientation to their son.

Given his age, Cummings played no role in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. By the time he graduated from Howard University in 1973, and then obtained his law degree from the University of Maryland in 1976, the heyday of the great struggles for equal rights had passed, and a new period of capitalist political reaction was setting in.

The generation that led the civil rights struggles had either been murdered, like Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., or had been coopted by the capitalist establishment, taking positions as Democratic congressmen, big-city mayors, corporate executives, union bureaucrats and the like, helping police the working class on behalf of American capitalism.

Already aspiring to become a bourgeois politician, Cummings was president of his sophomore class at Howard, majored in political science, and was student body president as a senior. He passed the Maryland bar in 1976 and, after a few years working as a lawyer in Baltimore, ran for and won a seat in the Maryland House of Delegates. He effectively inherited the seat, as the retiring delegate backed his campaign and served as a political mentor. From 1983 to 1996, Cummings was a member of the House of Delegates, rising to head the black caucus and serve as Speaker pro tem, the second-ranking position in the leadership of the heavily Democratic legislature.

Early in 1996, he won a special election in Baltimore to replace Congressman Kweisi Mfume, who had resigned to become president of the NAACP. In one of his first votes in Congress, Cummings backed passage of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRAIRA), which made it nearly impossible for millions of undocumented people to achieve legal status and facilitated rapid deportations, including through the "expedited removal" process in which immigrants are stripped of the right to appear before a judge.

Cummings moved up the ranks of Democratic members of what became the House Government Oversight Committee, which played an increasingly prominent role in conducting investigations into charges of malfeasance by the Bush and Obama administrations. But as in the Maryland legislature, he was a dutiful back-bencher in the House, making few waves and rising through the accumulation of seniority as he routinely won reelection from his district, which was centered on the heavily African-American west side of Baltimore.

The first WSWS mention of Cummings comes in February 2008, some 12 years after he first entered Congress, when he was described raking baseball pitcher Roger Clemens over the coals at a hearing on steroid use. In a loud baritone, he demanded to know whether the witness was aware he was under oath as he made his denials.

Two months later, Cummings was not nearly so ferocious in

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questioning Federal Reserve Board chairman Ben Bernanke about the deepening US financial crisis. He adopted a begging or wheedling tone to the head of the US central bank, an important figure in American capitalism. “There are people in my district who can’t even afford the gasoline to get to their jobs. These people will be watching now to try to understand what’s going on,” he pleaded, and then added plaintively, “You’re the expert, you’re the one that we depend on, you’re the superstar, you have to tell us what to do.”

This contrast perfectly captures the political psychology of congressional Democrats: bullying towards those seen as vulnerable, groveling towards the powerful and well-connected. The very opposite of the “speaking truth to power” which the *Post* obituary claimed was Cummings’ forte.

Cummings came to national prominence briefly in 2015, after the police murder of Freddie Gray, a young African-American man, in west Baltimore. He joined with clergymen and other Democratic politicians, armed with bullhorns and backed by squads of police, imploring Baltimore residents to leave the streets where they had assembled to protest, and return to their homes.

At a press conference in August 2015, Cummings portrayed the population of westside Baltimore as criminals, declaring, “Black lives matter and they do matter. But black lives also have to matter to black people. We know over and over again a lot of the victims of these crimes are African-American, and we know a lot of the perpetrators are African-American.”

Cummings made his name with the leadership of the Democratic Party by serving as the principal advocate for Hillary Clinton during a series of hearings into the attack on US facilities in Benghazi, Libya. Congressional Republicans turned the minor incident into a long-running campaign of mudslinging, claiming Clinton had blocked reinforcement of the US mission and was personally responsible for the death of US Ambassador Christopher Stevens.

Chosen to lead the Democrats on the Select Committee that investigated Benghazi, Cummings defended Clinton throughout her eight hours of testimony in October 2015, as well as during many others hearings. There is little doubt that if Clinton had won the presidency in 2016, she would have repaid the favor, perhaps with a cabinet position.

While the Democrats were in the minority in the House, from 2010 to 2018, Cummings formed close relationships with many of his Republican colleagues, sharing the spotlight with such right-wingers as Jason Chaffetz and Darrell Issa, at hearings on the Flint water crisis and the profit-gouging by drug companies like Mylan and the maker of the Epi-pen.

In February 2017, Cummings issued a joint statement with Senator Bernie Sanders citing Trump’s campaign demagogy over high pharmaceutical prices, expressing the “hope” that Trump would “really” take on the industry, and offering to join him in that effort.

Even after the Democrats regained the House majority in November 2018, Cummings remained a firm advocate of bipartisanship. He was among those preaching the gospel of “go slow” on impeachment, urging Democrats to combine investigation and legislation, and presenting Trump and the congressional Republicans as potential bipartisan partners.

It was only in early 2019, at a hearing for former Trump lawyer and “fixer” Michael Cohen, that Cummings was widely hailed in the media as the “conscience” of the Democratic Party, for his eight-minute closing remarks pointing to Trump’s criminality before and during his presidency. At the same hearing he defended ultra-right Republican Mark Meadows from an accusation of racism, describing him as “one of my best friends.”

Even more important in Cummings’ elevation to the status of a secular “saint” was Trump’s vitriolic denunciation of his Baltimore congressional district during the summer, which he described as a “disgusting, rat and rodent infested mess” and declared that no human beings would want to live there. The unmistakable implication was those who lived in west Baltimore were less than human.

After Cummings’ death, Trump joined in the general acclamation for his life and work, offering his “warmest condolences”—a temperature in Trump’s case only slightly above absolute zero—and claiming, “I got to see first hand the strength, passion and wisdom of this highly respected political leader.”

Trump’s cynicism and the media glorification of Cummings are two sides of the same coin. A political mediocrity while he was alive, he becomes in death just one more rock to be thrown in the ongoing conflict raging within the US ruling elite.

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