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Moakley, Rangel Interview Transcript (MS100/09.01#10)

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Program Title: "Representative Moakley with Representative Charles Rangel"

Program Participants: Congressman John Joseph Moakley and Congressman Charles Rangel

Date of Recording: n.d. **Length of Recording:** 00:14:45

Item Number: Moakley Papers, MS100/09.01#10

Citation: Rangel, Charles. Interviewed by Representative Joe Moakley. Moakley Papers, MS100/09.01#10. n.d. Transcript and audio recording available, John Joseph Moakley Archive and Institute, Suffolk University, Boston, MA.

Recording Overview: Representatives Joe Moakley and Charles Rangel discuss the increasing numbers of black members in Congress and the role of the Congressional Black Caucus. They also discuss the educational opportunities created by the G.I. Bill of Rights. The discussion was broadcast on WILD as an episode of a radio show featuring Congressman Moakley and other members of Congress.

TRANSCRIPT BEGINS

JOE MOAKLEY: I'm very pleased to have as my guest today Congressman Charles Rangel of New York. Mr. Rangel who represents the people of Harlem in Congress is the newly elected chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus¹. Congressman Rangel serves on the House Judiciary Committee and on the House District of Columbia Committee. And before coming to Congress, Charles Rangel had been a very outstanding leader in the Civil Rights Movement.

As a lawyer in New York, Congressman Rangel worked on the serious problem of housing in the city, and I'm sure he can provide some insight into the problems facing the Congress and the nation in that field today. Charlie, it's very nice having you on the show again.

CHARLES RANGEL: Thanks for inviting me. It's always a pleasure to be with you.

¹The Congressional Black Caucus, formed in 1969, is a coalition of African-American members of Congress working to address the legislative concerns of black and minority citizens.



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MOAKLEY: Charles, most Washington observers feel the Congressional Black Caucus has grown in sophistication over the past few years. And as an example of this maturity, the caucus has built some real solid relationships with the southern congressmen. Do you think this relationship will continue now that you're the chairman?

RANGEL: It's hard to say. It's been more of a political relationship that we've been able to better understand their needs on pieces of legislation that would not adversely affect our position. We found that we just couldn't afford the luxury of voting against the South, even though emotionally many of us have felt a distance between the regional areas. And I think that the coming of Andrew Young from Georgia to the Black Caucus has assisted us really in better understanding that the problems of the black and the poor in this nation are not restricted to the inner cities. And most all of us, as you know, come from large cities and come from inner cities within that. And so, we've been able to find out exactly the things that they're looking for and if it did not politically adversely affect us, then we would be able to go to them and ask for the type of votes that we need for programs that would not affect them as far as a reelection is concerned.

But I think if we had to find out what was that ingredient, Joe, what was it that brought us closer together-- I think it was a study that the Congressional Black Caucus had prepared by the Joint Center of Political Studies which was able to identify all of the black folks that we have living in the southern states by congressional district. And it just makes one heck of a lot of difference when you analyze how a member got elected and reelected, what was the percentage of the vote, and what effect, if any, did the black population in his Congressional District have on his political future.

So, it was done by one of the members in a very political way when the list was circulated. But we tried to do it in a more sophisticated way, saying that by helping the people in your district that look like it and by voting with them you are helping us. And we hope that we can go into your districts and lord the work that you have been doing. So, it hasn't been really the big stick of the heavy threat. And of course, the more frightened we get with this administration, the more



we find a more compassionate understanding of congresspeople who had not been with us politically, notwithstanding the Democratic label, but because they too are becoming disenchanted. I have found not only with the Southern members but the members of Congress are working more closely together because it is not just the poor. I think the poor are catching more hell. But I think everybody in this country now can see the possibility of being caught in that same economic bind.

MOAKLEY: I think you're right. Charles, it has been a sharp increase in the number of black elected officials in the past five years. And the Black Caucus has today its highest membership with sixteen members. What do you attribute these additional seats to and these gains that the Black Caucus has made in the Congress?

RANGEL: Actually, it all has to be directly attributed to the 1965 Civil Rights Act which did make registration and participation in the elected process a reality. And people like the late Dr. Martin Luther King and people like Andy Young and those of us in New York that really went to the Southern states in order to build up that type of registration, it was all the democratic process. The blacks were there. The communities were there. Local legislative bodies continued to gerrymander as some of them do now. And it just seems to me that this is not a black issue, a brown issue, a poor issue. It is hard for anyone that has any confidence in this country and in the Constitution just to preclude people because of their color from participating. It just seems to me that if you expect the poor to respect law and order that you have to give them an opportunity to participate in making that law.

So, in the case of, of course, Barbara Jordan², that was a unique situation where that was a personal victory for her, because while she doesn't have a black district, she had proven her expertise politically and legislative wise in the state of Texas. Andy Young's district is, I think, a little less than half black. But here again, he had the respect of all of the people, that is the

² Barbara Jordan was the first woman elected to the Texas State Senate and the first black elected since 1883.



majority of the people and necessary to vote a guy in, and he was able to pull it out. We have Yvonne Burke, and again, not because of her blackness but because of her ability to convince people that she was dedicated and interested in providing service in Washington, she was sent to the House of Representatives. And those were the three new members. Of course, it went from three to six, to nine.

MOAKLEY: May I say, at this time those three new members are three very outstanding freshman members of the new Congress, Yvonne Burke, Barbara Jordan and Andy Young; three very outstanding and very vocal, very articulate.

RANGEL: Someone told a joke which I didn't think was very funny. But it said that a Black has to be twice as good in order to get half the job in this country. But that's not very difficult.

MOAKLEY: But actually, I know that years ago, and I'm sure that probably before your time, that the Black Caucus was just a group that nobody gave much credibility to and just thought, well, it's another one of those organizations. But in the recent years, the Congressional Black Caucus has become a very important part of the Congressional scene.

RANGEL: Actually, black, just like any other group, I think what happened in the past was that there were so few black members that they had to come from their local political organization and had to identify with their local parochial needs. And they came down here and got swallowed up just like many ethnic groups do either in their state delegation or supporting urban needs, and were unable really to identify with each other. Because I guess, with the exception of Adam Powell, very few felt that secure on a nation-wide basis. So that the increase in number and also the break down in the political machinery where you had to check in with the political boss in order to determine how to vote, gave more independence to the type of black that came here so that when there was just nine of us and President Nixon more than anybody else brought into existence the Congressional Black Caucus--



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MOAKLEY: By putting them all on the enemy list?

RANGEL: We didn't know we were on the enemy list at that time. But because of his ignorance and saying that he would not entertain our request to meet with him, because the President's honesty and his blatant racism made him come to surface and say, no, I will not meet with the black members of the House of Representatives. It made even white members of the Congress feel that this was wrong for a President of the United States to do. So, that showed the necessity. We hope the day would soon come that we can just deal with our regional differences and not talk about blackness and this separation of the economic rungs of the ladder.

MOAKLEY: Actually, if you go through many pieces of legislation that are filed by the Black Caucus, it affects everybody in that socioeconomic group, regardless of what color they are. It's certain people in certain areas that need a certain type of legislation. So, actually the Black Caucus serves many people that I represent that aren't Black.

RANGEL: It's really spectacular, Joe. I've said this and given so many speeches and saying that the only thing black about Caucus is its complexion, because this legislation cannot identify black people in this country. It's unconstitutional. The hardest thing is to sell this to white southerners. And we have to appreciate there are more white poor people in this country than black poor people just because there are more white people here. And in the southern states where they standard of living is so low, they're so far behind in education, if we can persuade the south to forget the color and just deal with what are the medical service, educational service or housing service, just what is it you'd like to do for your district. But somehow they've given different connotations to words in New York, of course. And I guess in sophisticated Boston they don't call it welfare. It's social services. So, you have to change the words around. But it's bad connotations when what we mean is doesn't this country have an obligation to provide the best quality of life for all of its people? And if those people happen to be black or black and white and living together, the standard should be the same and the opportunity should be the same so that there should not be a Black Caucus because as you pointed out, when the dollars



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and cents figure is attributed to the legislation that we sponsored, when you break it down, the blacks will not be getting the majority of the money. And we should not because we're not the majority in this country.

But if you could improve, just to take one instance, the quality of education, it makes so damn much sense that this country not only will be getting return back in income tax, but will be producing a person better able to deal with some of the problems. The energy problem, we have black inventors and we have many poor people that became some of the greatest contributors to the science.

MOAKLEY: The GI Bill of Rights³ says exactly what you're saying. When the government poured that money into the educational and made these people become more productive, make more money, they paid more taxes and the GI Bill has paid back the government time and time and time again.

RANGEL: I can't come from a community that, quite honestly, I don't know any black professional that was not the recipient of the G.I. Bill. And in my family, since I was the first ever to go to college, the thought of going to college on my block was something that was reserved to the movies. I just knew that they weren't talking about me. There was something I could do. I knew I was good. But the college thing was completely out until the G.I. Bill. And so it means that what the hell should a veteran be getting that a citizen should not be getting? I mean, why be rewarded because you got caught up in a bad situation when really this is something that every youngster that can make it should look forward to. And if you can't make it, well the heck with it, do something else. But the opportunity should be there.

³ The GI Bill of Rights, officially called the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, provided, among other benefits, government compensation for the educational costs of returning World War II veterans.



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MOAKLEY: Like yourself, I am the first in my family to go to college. And if it wasn't for the G.I. Bill of Rights, I'm sure that I'd be working in a less professional type job. But because of the G.I. Bill of Rights, I, like yourself, was able to go to college and go to law school and become a more productive member of the community.

RANGEL: I don't know why we find it so difficult to sell this to the South, because this is where we find the conservative opposition. They understand subsidy for peanut oil and cotton and wheat and all of the things that go out of the ground they're ready to subsidize it to the hilt. But the people that till the soil and run the machines and that are the citizens of their community, they just don't understand giving a little subsidy until the guy can get on his feet, and like you and I have proven, can return that money back to the community and the country tri-fold.

MOAKLEY: I said earlier, as a result of the administration's cutback on the OEO and all of the people programs, now America has got a brand new program. It's capitalism for the poor and socialism for the rich. It's all right to give Lockheed and Boeing and all these big companies all the money they want and subsidize the big pharma's, but when it comes to give Ms. Jones the little subsidy to keep her family alive, well, we've got to take a closer look at that and maybe that's not the right program.

RANGEL: Well, even in this administration they've cut back the GI Bill. They're always fighting back the Social Security. If there is anybody that's entitled to anything in this country, it's those who came before us, our senior citizens to make it possible. But with this administration, I'm going back to school because I've yet to understand the economic thesis involved in the best way to take care of the energy crisis is to increase the price. So that—this is something that I hear from Simon Says that all you have to do is triple the price of gasoline and everything is going to be all right. So, the oil industry certainly has had more of an opportunity to govern the lives of America than we've had to govern them.



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MOAKLEY: Well, Congressman Rangel, we've really moved along quickly on the show and we've run out of time. But I'd like you to come back with me next week on this program so that we can get into some of the other matters that we didn't discuss today.

RANGEL: I look forward to it.

MOAKLEY: Thank you very much. That's Congressman Charles Rangel, the newly elected Chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, my guest today, and will be with us the same time next week. Thank you very much, Congressman Rangel.

END OF INTERVIEW