



Archon Roland Burris,
Illinois state senator

THE ROAD TO EQUALITY, FROM CIVIL RIGHTS TO CONGRESS

By Archon Roland W. Burris, *Beta Boulé*

Since the founding of Sigma Pi Phi more than a century ago, there has been great progress in race relations, but it has not come without struggle. Frederick Douglass foreshadowed both the triumphs and the difficulties of the road ahead for African Americans as he fought for equality and basic rights while achieving fame as a statesman and an

abolitionist. One of the first blacks to attain high government posts, Douglass found himself isolated from the black majority, who still faced oppression, and the professional working class, which was almost entirely white. Although others followed in his footsteps and achieved success, there was a shortage of affluent blacks, and they were detached from any specific social group because of their rare standing.



Archon Burris being sworn in as senator

The founders of Sigma Pi Phi sought solace from this loneliness and determined that it was necessary to bring together these minority members of affluent society. The founders created a community that would serve as a learned social group and as an organization for cultural advancement. The exclusive fraternity was born to bring together members of like tastes to flourish in one another's company. These men, led by Henry McKee Minton, "resolved that a society be organized for the purpose of binding men of like qualities into a close, sacred, fraternal union, that they may know the best of one another, and that each in this life may to his full ability aid the other, and by concerted action bring about those things that seem best for all that cannot be accomplished by individual effort."

Over the next century a group united, and through the efforts of not only blacks but all races of people, a more equal society emerged. While we are still not completely egalitarian, we are able to entertain honest discussion and see the mountaintop from a significantly closer distance.

The significance of my position is not lost on me. It is with great humility and responsibility that I serve as the sole African American in the U.S. Senate. I can relate to our dear founders of Sigma Pi Phi, because at a time when most professions are integrated, my colleagues are still a highly homogeneous group (81 percent are white males). The difference, of course, is that bigotry is no longer an accepted part of our culture, at least as it pertains to race. Interestingly, the only black senators in modern political history – Carol Moseley

Braun, Barack Obama and I – have all occupied the same Illinois seat in the U.S. Senate. I take great pride in following these two icons. I know and respect each of them immensely and hope to convey the same messages of pride and unity that they successfully advocated. The only other African American senators in U.S. history may come as a bit of a surprise. Hiram Revels (1870–71) and Blanche Bruce (1875–81) were appointed and elected, respectively, by a Reconstruction Era Deep South state shortly before the introduction of Jim Crow laws. Mississippi was predominantly black after the Civil War, and these two trailblazers undoubtedly experienced resistance in their efforts to join "the most exclusive club."

The election of Barack Obama as our first African American president was a tremendous moment that will be remembered fondly in future generations. The greatness of our democracy enabled a free and fair election, and the freedoms of our country facilitated the rise of a black man to the presidency. Many recalled the words of Archon Martin Luther King, Jr., and proclaimed that we had reached the mountaintop. The notion that a black man could be elected president in a landslide, enjoy large approval ratings and face only minor resistance in his quest should remind us of our progress. We should also be reminded that the journey is not over, because upon his election and subsequent resignation from the Senate, the upper house of our bicameral legislature was once again left without a single African American. I serve proudly, knowing that I represent not only the people of Illinois but also the dreams of our civil rights leaders, and work to ensure that the voice of every citizen and every group of people is heard.

I can fondly recall the memories of my childhood. Our country was recovering from the Second World War, and the German oppression and persecution of Jews was seen as senseless and barbaric. This universal condemnation of such outright bigotry and racism perhaps set the stage for a movement that was gathering steam. I first experienced the influence of civil rights as a teenager in the 1950's. My hometown of Centralia, Illinois, was dominated by the pervasive southern culture of the time. My father, vice president of the local



Roland Burris II, (holding Ian Burris), Martha Burris, Archon Roland W. Burris, (holding Roland T. Burris), Rolanda Burris, Archousa Berlean Burris, Eron Miller and Dick Cheney, former vice president



Roland Burris II and Rolanda Burris look on as Archon Roland W. Burris, with Archousa Berlean Burris, is sworn in as Illinois Comptroller by Justice Glen Johnson.

NAACP, led an effort to integrate the public swimming pool. After several years of resistance, the fight was successful.

One Memorial Day, I was chosen along with several other schoolchildren to test the desegregation. I proudly entered that pool and swam in the water as an equal. We took great pride in knowing that we had achieved something, but the victory did not answer the question of why these struggles were necessary. This was only the beginning. The next decade and a half saw the peak of the Civil Rights Movement, and like a wave headed toward the shore, it grew larger and louder and gained momentum. It reached a crescendo as small victories in the 1950's paved the way for institutional change in the 1960's. We saw the Montgomery Bus Boycott, student sit-ins, Freedom Rides and the March on Washington—all nonviolent protests. President Lyndon B. Johnson and Congress took note and ushered in a new generation with the monumental Civil Rights Act of 1965, effectively ending the intolerant Jim Crow laws.

The lessons of my childhood inspired and motivated me. When only a junior in high school, I set my sights on two goals: first to be a lawyer and second to be a statewide-elected official. I used my collegiate years to build leadership skills and gain cultural experience. During my junior year I became the first African American undergraduate at Southern Illinois University to be an exchange student at the University of Hamburg in Germany. I lived in a dormitory with students from thirty countries and was elected president of the dorm. After graduation I attended Howard University School of Law and made good on my goal of becoming a lawyer. I spent the next several years traveling the Midwest as a bank examiner, evaluating the soundness of small financial institutions.

I enjoyed my professional experience in the banking world, but it was time to explore politics, a longtime passion. After working on a few political campaigns, I finally gained enough experience to run on my own. I was elected comptroller of Illinois in 1978 and became the first African American to be elected to statewide office in my home state. Following three successful terms, I was elected to an even more challenging office, attorney general of Illinois, in which I fought for civil liber-

ties and equal rights. There were many great accomplishments and reforms during my four years as attorney general, and I am confident that I left Illinois in better shape than I found it. I worked across the aisle with the Republican-controlled state legislature and was the first state attorney general in the country to create a women's-advocacy division. The division was an opportunity to prevent violence against women and to use government resources to promote gender equality.

My appointment to the U.S. Senate has certainly been one of the greatest honors of my life. Each day I take the lessons learned over a lifetime and apply them to the incredible responsibility of being a senator. Ours is a country of opportunity and possibility, but also one of great challenges. I serve proudly, knowing that much work is left to be done. My three months in office have been a learning experience, and I've certainly met with some adversity. With an economy in disarray and wars on many fronts, the role of Congress is even more important than usual. During more prosperous and peaceful times, some people may forget that federal policy is crucial to our future. Because of the current situations and the interest regarding my appointment, each vote I have cast has taken on another level of importance.

I entered office as the senator from Illinois and have had the pleasure of working with President Obama during his first 100 days. I am proud of the votes I have made since I arrived in the Senate, and it has been a very hectic first few months on the legislative side. Two of my very first votes were to confirm Hillary Clinton and Timothy Geithner as secretaries of state and the treasury, respectively. Experiencing the confirmation process was a good introduction to the Senate: One of the candidates received near-unanimous support (Secretary Clinton passed 94-2), and the other was the subject of a classic partisan battle (Secretary Geithner was barely confirmed, 60-34, with the support of only ten Republicans).

On the economic front, in addition to voting for the FY 2009 Omnibus Appropriations Act and the FY 2010 Budget, we tackled and passed the landmark American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, a bill designed to restart the great American economic engine, reinvest in our communities, and put people back to work.



Roland Burris II, Martha Burris, President Barack Obama, Archousa Berlean Burris, Rolanda Burris and Archon Roland W. Burris

I've also worked to make several other notable votes that will have a positive impact on Main Street and provide opportunities for less fortunate Americans. One of my first legislative accomplishments was pushing to reauthorize funding of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). I am determined to use my time in the Senate as an opportunity to help improve the quality of life for all Americans. Legislation like CHIP, which increases funding for children's health care, is a start to narrowing the gap between the haves and the have-nots that exists in this country.

Every American deserves equal opportunity and should be represented accordingly. It is for this reason that I am an ardent supporter of Washington, D.C., voting rights and voted for that measure when it was before the Senate. The residents of the nation's capital deserve fair representation in Congress and not simply an elected "delegate" with no voting power.

The Lilly Ledbetter Wage Discrimination Act of 2009 is another groundbreaking achievement of the 111th Congress. It is my hope that this legislation will ensure that victims of pay discrimination can now effectively challenge unequal pay. This is a battle fought during the Civil Rights Movement that continues today: No person should receive different treatment or unequal pay because of his or her race, gender, creed or sexual preference. These are values upon which America was founded, and ideals we stand for still today.

As Congress gears up to tackle the president's more ambitious proposals, there will be some measures and ideas that all of us can and will support, but there will also be controversial issues about which tough decisions will be necessary. After thirty years in public life, I know that not everybody will agree with my policies. But I will never regret a vote as long as I maintain my integrity and am guided by my

principles. Much is expected from public officials, and I bear a unique responsibility as the sole African American senator. The founders of Sigma Pi Phi preached equality and mutual respect, and I have worked my entire career to ensure that these values are imparted to future generations. The founders left an enduring legacy to us all, and it is my hope to contribute to that legacy for future generations to build upon.

Archon Roland Wallace Burris of Beta Boulé, Chicago, is the junior U.S. senator for the state of Illinois – and he is the only African American now in the Senate. A lifelong Democrat, he was nominated for the seat in January 2009 by Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich to replace Barack Obama, who resigned following his election as President of the United States.

When Archon Burris was elected state comptroller in 1978, he became the first African American to hold statewide office in Illinois. He served in that capacity until his election as Illinois attorney general in 1990.

Active in Beta Boulé affairs, he headed the social action committee that supports Urban Prep Academies, a school dedicated to programs that enhance the lives of African American boys in Chicago's Englewood area and enrich their high-school experience through effective college preparation and activities that encourage them to develop into well-rounded individuals.

Burris was born on August 3, 1937, and raised in the small community of Centralia in southern Illinois. A 1955 graduate of Centralia High School, he attended Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, receiving a B.A. in political science. He won a scholarship to study international law at the University of Hamburg in Germany, and he earned his juris doctorate from Howard University School of Law in 1963.

