

Book Review

***We're Better Than This.
My Fight for the Future of Our Democracy***

**By Elijah Cummings
with James Dale
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Author Note

The insights or views expressed in this review are those of the author. They do not reflect official policy of the institutions the author serves. The author has no conflicts of interest.

As We Begin

Succumbing to health complications, on October 17, 2019, Congressman Elijah Cummings passed. However, months earlier, unknown to the general public, he began writing this book about his life, career, political challenges and milestones, and his perspectives on the future of America's democracy.

At his funeral, ahead of the release of his book, the world would learn a lot about Congressman Elijah Cummings and what he meant to those who knew him. Yet even with all the accolades and generous depiction of his life, public service, and all the kind words that were spoken about him that day, all of the attendees---both physical and virtual---were spurred to know ever more about this man who brought together both sides of the Congressional aisle in Washington DC. They came to celebrate the life of a man who was armed with a gavel and congressional responsibility to oversee and reform the executive branch and agencies of the federal government.

With disarming transparency, fully expecting to personally represent his work in print and in person, he opened up his heart and soul. As such, he revealed intimate details about his

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life and political career that some might consider risky for someone who was still serving in Congress, and who was at the time, because of his duties in Congress, targeted for attacks on his character, integrity, constituency, and his work on behalf of the American people.

Context is important, especially in the case of appreciating the life of Congressman Elijah Cummings. How did this man from segregated South Baltimore evolve from being labeled as a learning disabled child, and then graduate from college and law school, become a lawyer, a state and national legislator, and finally rise to become Chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Reform? Who is this man who, at his funeral, would have great political leaders such as Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and Nancy Pelosi stand before the world and proclaim that losing him was a loss of one of this country's foremost protectors of American democracy? Who is this man whose life and political career was such that, at his passing, would receive the Nation's highest public recognition—to lie in repose in the United States Capitol, becoming the first African American lawmaker in history to receive such an honor?

Fortunately, Congressman Elijah Cummings was already at work to provide answers to those questions, and more. In this book, *We're Better Than This*, he shared intimate details about his journey and parts of his life that very few people knew. These include his having terminal cancer since 1994 and other closely held facts about why he cared so much about his beloved Baltimore, every soul he represented in Maryland's 7th district, and, in his capacity as Chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Reform, each and every American citizen.

In Summary

The context of Elijah Cummings' life chronicled in the book reveals a different story than one might imagine for such an esteemed political figure in American politics. In his book, he interwove parts of his life within the context of significant events that occurred in his life that consciously or unconsciously informed his thought processes, motives, actions, or simply were byproducts of his upbringing. That format works superbly. In many parts it evokes the need to fight back tears. This is the best one can expect considering you are unprepared for the Congressman to, as James Dale described, "take readers behind [the] wall...[to] shed light on the story...in this book." This makes it possible for readers to unconsciously connect the dots and remember disparate nuanced information from other chapters in the book. It also makes readers feel they had inside information that allows them to draw conclusions about Mr. Chairman, Congressman Cummings, Elijah, Dad (his daughters Jennifer and Adia's favorite of all of his titles, and one that only they could use), Uncle Eli (what his late nephew Christopher called him), or Bobby (what he was called by his siblings). All were titles or names associated with Elijah Cummings that he personally and or affectionately answered to. Mostly, throughout his life he was simply called "Elijah." Here is a look at Elijah Cummings' life as told through his own words, except for the final chapter.

Elijah Cummings was the son of Ruth and Robert Cummings Sr. and one of seven brothers and sisters raised in South Baltimore, Maryland. His parents were sharecroppers from South Carolina who moved to Baltimore in search of greater opportunity for themselves and their family. Unfortunately, this was the early 1960s where racial and social injustice aimed at African

Americans was clearly still present, even as civil rights leaders were fighting for the fair and equal treatment promised in the U.S. Constitution. His mother and father only had an elementary school level of education; but Elijah wrote: “they taught [his brothers and sisters] values and experiences that never left [them].” He shared how his parents were laborers, very involved parents, and were both preachers, starting and pastoring a church, all while modeling fortitude, leadership, and looking beyond the trials and tribulations of the day towards a better tomorrow, but with a plan and the intent to see it through.

His parents were ahead of their time when it came to sacrificing for the greater good. They saved enough to have a car, buy a house, and ensure their family had access to healthcare. While their own resources were limited, they still managed to help friends and neighbors that were less fortunate than they. Elijah Cummings bears witness to all of this. He said, “the wisdom I gained from my parents was rooted in their upbringing as well.” Elijah’s father had reason to be dead-set on having control over his life and that of his family. Elijah’s father witnessed the death of his own father that resulted from a white doctor not providing available lifesaving care to him because, in the doctor’s words, “He’s only a nigger.” His father told that story to Elijah and according to Elijah, it never left him. It is in this experience that laid the foundation for Elijah Cummings’ devotion to ensuring Black people and all people had access and the ability to receive proper healthcare and medicine.

God and education were extremely important to Elijah’s parents, in that order, even after considering other important priorities necessary to raise a family. The spiritual example that his parents set for Elijah and his siblings became an innate part of all of them. Elijah said, “I like to say I am a man of faith.” However, he struggled with living up to the high spiritual standards his parents set and expected of themselves and their children. He added, “I am far, very far from perfect...I think it enables me to reach out to others with human weakness and needs and help them...”

Considering Elijah Cummings’ accomplishments, it was quite unexpected to learn he had difficulty learning in school and was placed in special education classes. It was a frustrating time in his life and he compared it to being a caged bird. He had the desire to learn but could not bring it to fruition on his own, and his teachers were not even trying to help him find a way out of that metaphorical cage. Finally, a sixth-grade teacher “saw Elijah” and intervened to help him become a better learner. That single encounter changed the trajectory of Elijah’s life by giving him the assurance that he could learn. And he did learn—so much so that he began to enjoy school, learning, and challenging himself to excel academically.

Instrumental in helping Elijah to excel in school was his use of the public library. It was there that he had his first opportunity to see segregation through a different lens. The mostly white library staff saw that he was there all the time and began to offer their assistance. He learned an important lesson in diversity that he carried throughout his life, namely that there are good people of all colors. He also developed an unstoppable work ethic. He saw that with persistence, belief in himself, and the help of others, there was nothing he could not achieve. Elijah developed a mantra for himself that he carried with him every day. It said, “Education is the key to success.” Everywhere he went, he would share his mantra. That experience at the library also planted the seeds of his ability to reach across culture, racial, gender, sexual orientation, and any other barrier to accomplish a goal that is bigger than one person can handle alone.

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However, segregation in South Baltimore remained alive and well. Local activists in Baltimore challenged the racial status quo and turned their attention to integrating neighborhood pools. Several kids in his segregated neighborhood were wading in a very small portable pool when the activists encouraged them to be escorted by them to the pool where only white kids were allowed. As a kid, Elijah Cummings witnessed firsthand the angry racist response that was levied at that group of small children by white adults. In one incident, an angry group of people began to throw rocks at the Black kids swimming in the community pool. One of those rocks landed on Elijah Cummings' forehead and left a scar that never went away. The scar became a reminder that change must come and that he wanted to do his part to bring change.

Something else came out of that pool encounter. Elijah noticed that the activists involved in challenging the pool's segregation policies were a group of lawyers. He became enamored of their occupation. It was there that he got the idea of becoming a lawyer. Despite a school counselor who tried to discourage him, Elijah never gave up his dream of becoming a lawyer.

After grade school and high school he went on to college at Howard University and then to law school at the University of Maryland. Upon graduating with his law degree, he took the Maryland bar examination and passed it the first time, an uncommon victory among African American law school graduates. He soon built a successful law practice.

Almost immediately he established a highly successful tutoring program to help African American law school graduates study for the bar examination. It was so successful that it caught the attention of important people in Maryland politics. When a retiring state delegate in Elijah Cummings' district in Baltimore began to look for her successor, she changed her strategy and sought out Elijah Cummings to groom him as a candidate. Although politics was not on his radar, he accepted the opportunity and was elected to serve in Maryland's General Assembly. He enjoyed helping his constituents and fell in love with his city and the people of Baltimore.

It was never Elijah Cummings' intention to seek a higher political office. However, in 1995, when Kweisi Mfume, the sitting congressional representative for Maryland's 7th district decided to leave the U.S. Congress to lead the NAACP, Elijah was approached by people to encourage him to run for the seat. It was not an easy decision, but ultimately, he joined the race as one of many candidates seeking Congressman Mfume's vacated seat. Elijah Cummings, with over an 80 percent majority, was elected to finish Kweisi Mfume's term; and then subsequently was consistently re-elected by similar majorities to serve 13 more terms until he died while in office on October 17, 2019.

While Elijah Cummings' political career grew in stature, responsibility and demands on his time, his personal life was undergirded by the unconditional love and support from his family. His two daughters, Jennifer and Adia whom he loved without measure, made him so proud. His brothers and sisters loved him and supported his "calling to serve." And making time to enjoy monthly Sunday family dinners with his siblings and his wife Maya will likely be a treasured memory for eternity.

Dr. Maya Rockeymoore Cummings was his most trusted confidant, the love of his life, and the wife who loved him deeply and unconditionally, in health and sickness, in joy and pain, from June 2008 until his last breath. Elijah's pastor and confidant of more than 40 years, Bishop Walter Scott Thomas Sr., said this when he saw Elijah and Maya together: "...he sees a love that

is rare.” In response, Elijah said, “...she is my best friend, and I am so fortunate to be married to my best friend...” Another supremely important confidant in his very small circle of trustworthy confidants, was Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Chairman Cummings said, “I cannot say enough about Nancy Pelosi...My respect [for her] knows no limits. She is steady--a rock in a storm. There are so few like her in Washington.”

However, his life was not without challenges. According to Elijah, he had to warm up to the idea of letting readers inside his personal affairs, struggles, and disappointments, at least in his mind. But he did find the courage to share his private life to encourage people who might think they are alone in this life’s struggles and obstacles. For example, he shared that he faced foreclosure during his political career. Despite his upbringing and family values modeled by his parents, he had been married previously and that marriage ended in divorce. In 1994 he was diagnosed with thymic cancer, a rare and often fatal disease. When initially diagnosed, he was told he had only six months to live. Obviously, he beat the odds for more than 25 years, but at a major cost to his health along the way. In the last year of his life he spent what seemed to be more time at doctor offices and in the hospital than at home.

Gun violence brought personal tragedy to the Congressman and his family when his nephew, Christopher Cummings, was murdered while attending college in Norfolk, Virginia. It was a major blow to Elijah because he spent his career doing everything in his power to help people find a better way to live and thrive. But because he was such a focused and purposeful person, his pain became his passion. It also created a perpetual sense of urgency throughout his life that translated into getting the work done even when his body refused to cooperate with his insatiable determination and drive to carry out his oath of office as Chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Reform, and his determination to remain ever-present and available to his constituency in Baltimore.

In fact, it was in his capacity as Chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Reform that caused him the greatest challenges. Frustrated by what he, the oversight committee, and the majority in Congress felt was an inhuman response to the President’s immigration policy enforcement involving separating children from their parents and then failing to properly provide basic resources to care for their daily needs, he retorted firmly during one of the hearings: “We Are Better Than This!” According to Speaker Pelosi, those words “ignited a movement to protect the children... And for many Democrats in Congress, it would become immortalized as their moral mantra...”

That same force and fervor were applied to the Committee’s first probe—the pharmaceutical industry. But it was the Committee’s investigation into the President’s affairs and activities before and while in office that brought Chairman Cummings the most trouble. The late Representative from the state of Georgia and civil rights icon Congressman John Lewis might say it was “good trouble” in light of the seriousness of the charges and what they meant to the future of the American Democracy. Nevertheless, according to the accounts in the book, Chairman Cummings suffered what many in Congress, on both sides of the aisle, in media, and the general public, would describe as a full-on personal attack on the Congressman, his constituents in Baltimore, and even people of color throughout the country. In the book, Chairman Cummings delineated twelve specific events that started in January 2019 when the Oversight Committee began investigating issues related to persons in the President’s cabinet or close circles and ending in the Twitter post of a woman who posted a video portraying

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Baltimore as a rundown and infested city. This was what he considered to be the final event that sent the President “into Twitter attack mode” against him, his city, and the Committee’s inquiry into the Administration. He personally felt the pain that everyone targeted by that attack felt. He internalized it. It affected his health, but it did not stop or deter him from walking in his calling.

In Elijah Cummings’ final days and hours, he was yet at work fighting for the future of the democracy. In his untimely passing, Elijah’s wife and soulmate, Dr. Maya Rockeymoore Cummings, saw it fitting to ensure his book was completed, picked up Elijah’s mantle, and continued working with James Dale to publish the book. In the last chapter she wrote: “...we must continue to hear Elijah’s voice: “We’re better than this. We’re better than this.” And her response: “Yes we are. We must be.”

Upon Reflection and In Conclusion

This book will certainly guide readers through Elijah Cummings’ life in a succinct and insightful manner. Upon review, this author found that the closing chapter, authored by the Congressman’s wife, provides an enlightened foundation upon which readers will want to know and continually reflect upon the details that are provided by the Congressman himself throughout the entire book from its beginnings.

Reflecting on Elijah Cummings’ life and career actually requires self-reflection. Intentionally or not, it will happen. While reviewing this book, self-reflection was an inescapable part of the process. It was impossible to simply read the book and walk away without it impacting something inside. Truth be told, there were times the review had to be set aside for days just to allow this author time to recover emotionally and absorb the essence of the message.

Finally, below are some key reflections/comments from the book that conclude this review. Hopefully they provide an impetus to learn more about Elijah Cummings, the U.S. Constitution, the work of the United States Congress regardless of political party, and or activate a personal call to action that best suits each reader’s vocation, profession, volunteerism, service, gifts, talents, or divine calling. Ultimately, the message of this Elijah Cummings’ book will move individuals and society to devote themselves to making the U.S. Constitution work for *all* Americans. This book will serve as a primer to begin that journey for years to come. In this closing spirit, kindly consider the following select reflections:

Hillary Clinton, *Former Secretary of State*

“Towards the end of his life he [Elijah Cummings] said, “I’m begging the American people to pay attention to what is going on, because if you want to have a democracy intact for your children and your children’s children and generations yet unborn, we have got to guard this moment. This is our watch.”

Barack Obama, *Forty-Fourth President*

“...‘Our children are the living messengers we send to a future we will never see,’ he would say, and he would remind all of us that our time is too short not to fight for what’s good and what is true and what is best in America.”

Nancy Pelosi, *Speaker of the House*

“The year of his death he proclaimed, ‘When we’re dancing with the angels, the question will be asked...what did we do to make sure we kept our democracy intact?’...may we all remember Elijah’s moral charge: ‘WE ARE BETTER THAN THIS!’”



Special Notation

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