

# Washington Post: Elijah Cummings endured two painful years. Soon he'll be more powerful than ever.



Rep. Elijah E. Cummings (D-Md.) will chair the House Oversight Committee come January. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

By [Ben Terris](#)

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**When the word of the Lord came to Elijah, it arrived on a slip of paper tucked in a stranger's bra.**

**In 2017, Congressman Elijah E. Cummings had been laid up in a Johns Hopkins hospital bed for two months, crippled by pain after a difficult recovery from a heart valve replacement, when an interloper came bursting through the door, calling his name.**

**"She reaches into her bosom and pulls out a note," Cummings said recently. "She says, 'The Lord has been waking me all night. . . . It was so important I thought I'd write it down. It says: He don't mean you no harm, he's just trying to get your attention. He wants you to know he ain't finished with you yet.'"**

Cummings, 67, recalled this story in an interview from his district office in Baltimore. His head: freshly shaved. His eyes: puffy. His large hands: swollen by gout. He wore big-platformed Velcro sneakers, which he had been shuffling around in all day with the help of a walker.

If God was trying to get his attention, he wasn't being subtle about it.

This month, Democrats triumphed in elections across the country, winning back the House of Representatives. In doing so, Cummings returns to Congress hobbled physically but more powerful than ever. Armed with a gavel and subpoenas, he is the soon-to-be chairman of the House Committee on Oversight.

For Cummings, this is the culmination of two years riddled with painful moments, some beyond his control and others that he walked into himself. He'd tried to work with President Trump only to have it blow up in his face. He'd been ignored by his Republican colleagues on the committee time and again. And he just couldn't seem to stay out of the hospital.

With a healthy heart, and in control, Cummings has limitless possible targets: hush money paid to a porn star on Trump's behalf, citizenship questions on the census, security clearances revoked from the president's critics, and dozens of other oh-yeah-remember-thats that slipped out of the churning news cycle unanswered.

The difficulty won't be finding things to look into. It will be figuring out what's worth looking into. Cummings knows by now the risks that come with opening wounds voluntarily. After he recovered from heart surgery, he checked back into the hospital for another procedure — this time on his knee. But something went wrong. The knee got infected, and Cummings spent another three months at Hopkins.

He emerged more aware than ever that there's only a finite amount of time in this world.

It will be up to him to make the best use of it.



In the past two years, Cummings has been hospitalized for several months. He says he is healthy and was itching to get back. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

**“Elijah Cummings was in my office,” Donald Trump told the New York Times in April of 2017. “And he said, ‘You will go down as one of the great presidents in the history of our country.’”**

**It’s a prophecy that Cummings said he never actually offered, and one that, if he does his job well as Oversight Committee chairman, will almost certainly not come true.**

**But early in Trump’s presidency, while many Democrats were angst-ridden, Cummings believed there was an opportunity for some good to come of it. He attended the inauguration and chatted with the president at the luncheon afterward about the need to lower prescription drug prices, an issue he’d long championed.**

**“These drug companies are getting away with murder,” Cummings said the president told him. “We’ve got to do something about this.”**

Later, Cummings accepted an invitation to the Oval Office to discuss a bill he co-authored that would do just that, and he was heartened by Trump's continued enthusiasm.

As Cummings recalls, he offered the president advice: If you stop working to divide the country and work on issues that can unite them, then you could go down in history as a great president. He honestly believed it.

The president had his base locked up no matter what, if Trump really believed [shooting someone on Fifth Avenue](#) wouldn't make them stray, so then what would the risk be to work with Democrats? He used to *be* a Democrat, a little voice kept reminding Cummings.

"Perhaps if I knew then what I know now, I wouldn't have had a lot of hope," Cummings said. "He is a man who quite often calls the truth a lie and calls a lie the truth."

A week after their meeting, Trump called Cummings to let him know he hadn't forgotten about the issue and still planned to take action on it. Cummings never heard from Trump again.

Does Cummings's belief that he could work with Trump make him unbelievably naive or a man of unshakable faith?

Cummings grew up in Baltimore the son of two former sharecroppers from South Carolina who moved to Baltimore and became preachers. He didn't learn to dance until prom because his parents thought it was a sin. He still doesn't know how to play cards.

And it was his parents who drove him into public service, his own form of ministry. He rarely gives a speech without mentioning his mother and how she used to soak her feet in epsom salts, singing her prayers, each night after cleaning houses. When his father died of a heart attack, shortly after giving a sermon at a women's detention center, Cummings arrived at the morgue to sort through his belongings. He found in his father's wallet a note that Cummings had written him years earlier, folded and refolded so many times over the years that it had holes in the paper.

“Did you know that you’re my hero, and everything I’d like to be,” the note said, quoting the song made popular by Bette Midler. “I can fly higher than an eagle because you are the wind beneath my wings.”

Cummings’s spirituality can border on hokey like that, certainly earnest in a way that most politicians are not.

*[\[Bob Corker is free to speak his mind about Trump. If he could only make it up.\]](#)*

At an election night watch party this year, he quoted a Garth Brooks song (“This ain’t comin’ from no prophet, just an ordinary man”). His eyes well up when he talks about his favorite musical, “The Lion King.” He meditates before each committee hearing, he said, picturing himself running down a long road, people in need of his help alongside him.

There have been stumbles. Early in Cummings’s political career, he faced financial strains. According to a 1999 Baltimore Sun [article](#), he owed more than \$30,000 to the IRS (which he paid), and five times creditors took him to court to get him to pay \$24,000 in overdue debts. Cummings told the paper he lacked money partially because of a major surgery that drained his bank account and because he helped support three children: a daughter he had with his then-estranged wife and two children he had with other women.

“I have a moral conscience that is real central,” Cummings told the Sun then. “I didn’t ask the federal government or anyone else to do me any favors.”

He remarried in 2008 (his second wife, Maya Rockeymoore Cummings, a policy consultant, withdrew a bid for Maryland governor while Elijah was in the hospital). He has lived in the same inner-city house for three decades and, before serving 22 years in Congress, spent 14 years in the Maryland House of Delegates.

He learned his moral code in the pews and, perhaps equally important for someone going into politics, he learned the art of public speaking there, too. The first testimony he remembers giving in front of the congregation was thanking God for the integration of a local pool, which came after numerous marches

where he was beaten by segregationists. He couldn't have been more than 9.

He used to run home from Sunday church service to lie on the floor and listen to Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches on his transistor radio. He's been thinking a lot about one of them.

It was on the "interruptions of life."

"What he was saying was, don't let yourself get distracted because you may never get back to what you were doing," Cummings said. After two years of Twitter tantrums from the president, wild news conferences, attacks on the media, and other smokescreens, the lesson, Cummings said, is clear.

"Trump, apparently was listening to Martin Luther King," he said.

The president, he said, certainly knows the power of a good distraction.



A staffer watches Cummings on TV during a hearing on Capitol Hill. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

**Another excerpt from the Book of Elijah:**

“We’re in a storm,” he said from his office atop Capitol Hill. “And it’s a rough one. It’s not a question of whether the storm will end but when it will end. How much of our democracy will be saved?”

Cummings had just finished his first Oversight Committee hearing since election night, one of his last as ranking member. For six years, he has sat beside the chairman, just out of reach of real power. He’s had his microphone cut off by Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.). He was told he could not put a [woman](#) on a panel about contraceptives. In the past two years, he has had 64 subpoena requests ignored by Chairman Trey Gowdy of South Carolina.

The storm has been raging. But now Cummings can do something about it,

“I’m going to try and make people realize that in order to live the life they are living,” he said, “they need to have democracy, and it’s being threatened.”

He’s no longer asking for answers; he’s demanding. Of course, that doesn’t mean the Trump administration will comply. Its officials have been known to be difficult, sometimes even with fellow Republicans.

“I sent letters and subpoenas to the Trump administration and got no response,” Jason Chaffetz, the Oversight Committee’s Republican former chairman [told](#) The Post this month. “I was stymied every step of the way. What makes you think Elijah Cummings will get a response?”

Cummings admits this is a concern.

He also knows that his best bet to get anything done is to be focused, not to, as he told George Stephanopoulos on ABC’s “This Week,” hand out subpoenas “like somebody’s handing out candy on Halloween.”

Cummings has been on the other side of high-profile hearings that felt to him like a sham.

There was [Operation Fast and Furious](#), the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives program that tried to track illegal weapons sales. He was the ranking member of the Select

Committee on Benghazi, a Republican-led effort to investigate the 2012 attack on the U.S. Consulate in Libya.

Those investigations were derided by Democrats as politically motivated and, of course, Republicans will say the same about anything Cummings decides to investigate

Cummings says he wants to be judicious, but is that possible? How do you not try to peek at Trump's tax returns, or figure out who exactly has been staying at [Trump International Hotel](#) in Washington, or determine how former Environmental Protection Agency administrator Scott Pruitt was able to get away with buying so many first-class airline tickets on taxpayers' dime? "I can't imagine anyone better qualified and more passionate about oversight than Elijah," Gowdy said in an interview.

But, even if Cummings is open and transparent and does everything by the book, there's at least one Republican who won't see it that way.

"If the Democrats think they are going to waste Taxpayer Money investigating us at the House level, then we will likewise be forced to consider investigating them for all of the leaks of Classified information, and much else, at the Senate level," Trump tweeted recently. "Two can play that game!"



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**Is it possible that Democrats are getting carried away? Can Cummings really be the hero they need to stand up to Trump? After all, Cummings may want to maintain the moral high ground, but is that even possible in a fight with the president? Is it the best way to win — to bring a Bible to a knife fight?**

Leana Wen, the new president of Planned Parenthood, said it’s not for her to say, necessarily, but she knows a fighter when she sees one. She worked with Cummings during her time as the Baltimore health commissioner. She loved him so much she named her first child after him.

“When he was in the hospital, I tried not to think . . . about what could happen,” she said. “As a physician, I know a lot about the worst-case scenarios because I’ve seen it.”

The day she saw him for the first time out of the hospital, he looked and tired. She told him it was good to see him.

“He said, ‘It’s good to be seen and not viewed, if you know what I mean,’ ” she recalled. “To me, that meant he was back.”

Cummings tends to downplay his time in the hospital. It was just a little shortness of breath. Then a simple heart procedure that should have him home within three days. Then a gout flare-up and rehabilitation to gain back muscles lost from weeks unable to move.

Yes, it was excruciatingly painful, he’ll say. But, no, he never really thought his life was in danger. He was always itching to get back.

“If he were to slow down too much,” his younger brother James Cummings said, “it would probably kill him.”

In that case, the next two years may be the healthiest of Elijah Cummings’s life.