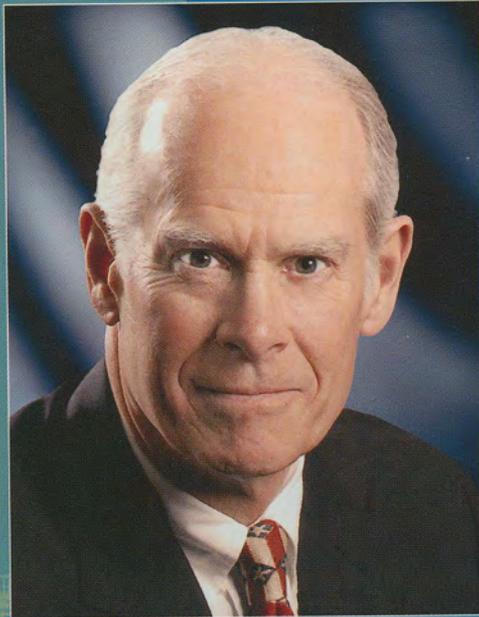


The Honorable John Edward Porter



Recipient of the 2003 Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Award
for Humanitarian Contributions to the Health of Humankind



It has been said there are two types of elected officials: the politician and the public servant. There is little question where John Edward Porter, the former congressman from Illinois stands.

“Politics was not his thing. It was a means to an end, it was a door to getting something done, a necessary step to achievement,” recalls Robert H. Bradner, Mr. Porter’s administrative counsel in Congress and now in private law practice in Washington, DC. “The concept of public service was early impressed on me by my father, who, for many years was a Cook County Circuit Court judge,” Mr. Porter says.

In the 21 years he served as the Republican Representative for the 10th District of Illinois Mr. Porter took many stands, some of them hardly popular with his party. “John Porter was a very forceful and active participant in what’s commonly referred to as the Tuesday group, a collection of moderate Republicans in the House who are very much a minority, maybe only 30 or 50 members of the House. Mr. Porter was able to move the moderates towards the conservatives and the conservatives towards the moderates and the leadership towards reality. He was quite adept at this. A substantial achievement in that environment,” says Mr. Bradner.

During his years in Congress Mr. Porter worked for tort reform; he succeeded in passing the Volunteer Protection Act that protected volunteers against law suits; he was founder and co-chairman of the Congress-

sional Human Rights Caucus, a bipartisan group that identifies and works to end human rights violations worldwide; he worked to protect the environment, enacting legislation to protect the tropical rain forests and advocated policies setting standards for recycling and energy efficiency. He kept up an interest in international affairs, serving as vice-chairman of the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations. He was a member of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, and was co-chair of the Global Legislators Organized for a Balanced Environment.

But what one remembers about Mr. Porter is his last six years in Congress, when he was chairman of the House subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education. During a time of strict budgetary constraints, Mr. Porter ensured that two of the most important health agencies in the Federal government, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), were adequately funded. The work has won him this year’s Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Award for Humanitarian Contributions to the Health of Humankind, presented by the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases.

Originally Mr. Porter thought of engineering as a career and spent a year at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, but in the end decided he wanted to be a lawyer like his father. “But,” he says, “the experience at MIT exposed me to science in a way that I don’t think I would have gotten through a general education. It really gave me an appreciation of the value of science.”

After service in the US Army Mr. Porter went to the University of Michigan Law School, graduating in 1961 with distinction, and was an editor of the Michigan Law Review. He was admitted to the Illinois bar in 1961, and

from 1963 until his election to Congress in 1980 practiced law in Evanston, Illinois. During that time he served three terms in the Illinois House of Representatives where he was praised for his leadership and legislative skills. In six years he steered 60 separate bills—a record number—to final House passage without a single defeat.

In 1978 Mr. Porter ran for Congress against the incumbent, a well-known and able Democrat, Abner Mikva. “Abner won the election, by 650 votes out of 189,000 votes cast. But it was a campaign where we had debates on real issues and where we respected one another. We didn’t engage in negative character assassination that seems to be the coin of today’s political campaigns,” comments Mr. Porter.

Four months after that election Mr. Mikva was appointed to the Federal bench and resigned his seat in Congress. The vacancy was filled by a special election that Mr. Porter won.

In 1981, after the 1980 elections, Bob Michel of Illinois became the House Republican leader. He had served on the House Committee on Appropriations, and was the ranking Republican on the Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services and Education.

“That seat was an Illinois seat, Bob was coming off the committee, I was the newest Republican. So, with Bob’s help, after only one year in Congress—very unusual at that time—I got appointed to the appropriations committee and the subcommittee on Health and Human Services and Education and the subcommittee on Foreign Operations, my two first choices. I happened to be at the right place at the right time.”

Mr. Porter served on the subcommittee for 20 years. In the course of hearings he was exposed to the NIH and became impressed with the work the Institutes sup-

ported as well as the work at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “I became a very strong supporter of funding for the NIH and the CDC. Health, as an issue, was very important to me,” says Mr. Porter.

Every year, in addition to the administration’s testimony, the sub-committee holds hearings for public witnesses. “We had five days or more of public testimony. A lot of the sub-committees don’t do anything like that but Labor H [Mr. Porter uses the shorthand Congressional term for the subcommittee’s lengthy title] has always done this.

“We’d hear from these witnesses about how diseases affected them. There were many stories, but here is one. There was a woman probably in early 50’s accompanied by a gentleman whom she introduced as her husband. He had been a test pilot for the Navy, she said. ‘Then,’ she recounted, ‘four years ago, in his late 40’s he began showing signs of Alzheimer’s disease. Today he doesn’t know who I am. He can expect to live for 35 years and of course I’m going to take care of him. But he doesn’t know who I am.’

“Talk about touching your heart,” said Mr. Porter.

In addition, every year, the subcommittee, would bring Nobel Laureates to spend the entire day with the committee members. “It was an opportunity to hear their thoughts about where medical research was going and they were awe-inspiring sessions,” comments Mr. Porter.

In 1994, in the wake of the Republicans taking control of the House, Mr. Porter’s seniority gained him the chairmanship of the subcommittee. “I had the choice of being chair of Foreign Operations or Labor H. I chose Labor H because it has the largest jurisdiction of all and is second only to defense in appropriated funds. It has so many important programs that touch human be-

ings not only in the US but around the world that to me it was the obvious choice.”

At the time deficits were running around \$280 billion and in response the Republicans passed a very tight budget resolution which called for cutting the NIH budget by 5% each year for five straight years. “Our appropriation was \$70 billion and I had to cut it to \$61 billion. Frankly I thought it was insane.

“I went to see to Newt Gingrich and told him that the most important thing we have to do is protect NIH and CDC funding. I took with me five researchers and three chief executives of biotech and pharmaceutical companies. We talked to him for about an hour and he listened carefully, as they explained why these cuts would be devastating to medical research. At the end of the session, Mr. Gingrich said: ‘I think we have made a mistake.’ That gave me the room to put increases into the NIH budget—my first budget.

“We marked up the bill and took it to get Mr. Gingrich’s agreement—the way we proceeded in those days. We had cut or flat funded every one of the 800 line items, there were no increases except two—a 5.7% increase for NIH and a small increase for CDC. But we realized that, given the budget situation, there it would be warfare when the bill went to the floor. The members would look at the increase for NIH and want to take pieces out of it. It wouldn’t last.”

Mr. Porter’s response was to do something unprecedented. He took the funding increases for NIH and CDC out of the appropriations bill and put it into a separate piece of legislation. With the approval of Speaker Gingrich, and Robert Livingston, the chairman of the appropriations committee on the House side and with the agreement of key Republicans and Democrats and



all supporters of medical research, he got them to sign off on his proposal.

“We pushed it through the House, got it through the Senate and on the President’s desk for signature before the budgetary wars erupted,” Mr. Porter said.

“In the end of the next year I got a 6.9% increase for NIH and the third year a 7.1% increase—remember we were still running deficits at the time. In the fourth year we began the process of doubling the NIH budget. That was a tough concept but we got a 15% increase in that fourth year and a 15% increase in the 5th year and a 15% increase in 2001, my last year in Congress.”

Under Republican conference rules committee chairmanships are term limited so Mr. Porter had to give up his chairmanship. “So, I said myself, I’d like to begin a whole new career, trying to impact this priority for the future.”

On leaving Congress, Mr Porter joined the Washington law firm of Hogan and Hartson where he concentrates on health law and education issues. He continues his interest in medical research and health policy as a director of Research! America and of the Foundation for the National Institutes of Health and as chairman of an Institute of Medicine committee on the Future Roles of Academic Health Centers.

He says: “I like to say that I’m now trying to influence the things I used to control.”