

# Thad Cochran, Mississippi Republican and former Senate Appropriations Committee chairman, dies at 81

By [Emily Langer](#)

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Thad Cochran, a Mississippi Republican who brought Southern gentility to Washington and Washington largesse to the South over nearly four decades in the U.S. Senate, where he was a past chairman of the powerful Appropriations Committee, died May 30 at a nursing home in Oxford, Miss. He was 81.

His death was announced by the office of Sen. Cindy Hyde-Smith (R-Miss.), who succeeded Mr. Cochran in the Senate after he resigned in April 2018 amid failing health. The cause was renal failure, said his daughter, Kate Cochran.

Mr. Cochran spent nearly half a century on Capitol Hill, first as a House member representing a district that included Jackson, Miss., from 1973 to 1978 and later in the Senate. He [narrowly defeated](#) an insurgent tea party challenger — in a primary race that drew national headlines for its nastiness — and went on to win his seventh term in 2014.

By the end of his career, [“The Almanac of American Politics”](#) described the white-haired Mr. Cochran as a politician who “personifies an all-but-vanished breed of Southern Republicans — amiable to all, conservative but not rigidly so, a devoted institutionalist, and a proficient procurer of funding for his poor, rural state.”

His conservative record was tempered by aisle-crossing positions, most notably his forceful support for the food-stamp program. In the halls and chamber of the Senate, he became known for his understated style.

There were those politicians inclined to “throw bombs, Newt Gingrich-style,” John M. Bruce, chairman of the political science department at the University of Mississippi, said in an interview. “What Cochran has done is be decent to people, even when he disagrees with them, and that’s worth something.”

Mr. Cochran spent much of his legislative career as his state’s senior senator. He served alongside fellow Republican Trent Lott, who joined him in the Senate in 1989 and served until [resigning in 2007](#). Their styles — Mr. Cochran’s courtly, Lott’s more brash — often conflicted, and the two men endured a sometimes rivalrous relationship.

Both were graduates of the University of Mississippi, where they had been elected university cheerleaders — then a common extracurricular for male students. It was noted that they began their political careers competing for the position in which they led crowds in cheers of “Hotty toddy, gosh almighty, who the hell are we? Hey! Flim, flam, bim, bam, Ole Miss by damn!”

(Both senators also cultivated an interest in music. Lott sang in the [Singing Senators](#) barbershop quartet, and Mr. Cochran kept a piano in his Senate office.)

Each trained as a lawyer before winning election to the U.S. House in 1972. Mr. Cochran skipped past Lott and several other rising Mississippi Republicans to win the Senate seat vacated in 1978 by the long-serving Mississippi Democrat and Senate president pro tempore James O. Eastland, a prominent segregationist who openly espoused racist views.

By 1991, Mr. Cochran had ascended to the chairmanship of the Senate Republican Conference, the third-ranking position in the Republican leadership. In 1995, Lott raced past him to become party whip, the No. 2 spot. The next year, when Bob Dole (R-Kan.) left the Senate to run for president, Mr. Cochran and Lott competed to succeed him as majority leader. Lott, an aggressive campaigner perhaps more comfortable in the Republican era ushered in by then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich (Ga.), won a decisive victory.

Mr. Cochran maintained significant clout as chairman of the Agriculture Committee, which he led from 2003 to 2005, and the Appropriations Committee, over which he presided from 2005 to 2007, and again from 2015 until he resigned.

As an Appropriations Committee chairman and longtime member, Mr. Cochran received a great portion of credit or blame, depending on the perspective, for helping make Mississippi the only state where federal funds made up more than 50 percent of the budget.

He helped deliver tens of millions of federal dollars to support Mississippi's universities, ports, farming industry and infrastructure. His Appropriations Committee chairmanship coincided with Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which wracked Mississippi's Gulf Coast as well as New Orleans, and allowed him to help obtain, by his tally, \$87 billion for the region.

On the Agriculture Committee, Mr. Cochran helped shepherd numerous farm bills over the years. He was "as strong a proponent of the food stamp program" as he was a "vigorous defender of the subsidies that help the Southern farmers, particularly cotton, rice and peanuts," said Jerry Hagstrom, an agricultural journalist who is the founder and executive editor of the Hagstrom Report.

Mr. Cochran was often called the "King of Pork" — a title applied to many earmarking lawmakers over the years — and, in the latter part of his career, endured criticism as anti-spending activists drew attention to what they considered government waste. Mr. Cochran defended his work on behalf of Mississippians, arguing that the federal dollars he brought to his state were necessary for its functioning and success.

Almost without exception, Mr. Cochran easily won reelection. But in 2014, he faced a bruising primary challenge by Mississippi state Sen. Chris McDaniel in a race that presaged the populist rage represented by Republican Donald Trump's successful presidential bid two years later.

Mr. Cochran "personifies almost everything the tea party dislikes," The Washington Post [noted at the time](#), citing the senator's "longevity in Washington; comity and compromise rather than confrontation; a record of winning earmarks that hardly qualifies him as a champion of small government or deep spending cuts."

Under assault by McDaniel, Mr. Cochran sought out support on the left, effectively inching toward the center rather than trying to placate the tea party.

In the initial primary vote, Mr. Cochran received 49 percent to McDaniel's 50 percent. That result forced a runoff, in which Mr. Cochran openly campaigned among Democrats — particularly African Americans and farmers — entreating them to support him over McDaniel. Mr. Cochran squeaked by 51 percent to 49 percent, before easily defeating the Democratic challenger in the general election.

The primary race reached a low point when McDaniel supporters conspired to enter the nursing home where Mr. Cochran's wife, the former Rose Clayton, was being treated for dementia and posted online images of her along with claims that Mr. Cochran was having an improper relationship with an aide. One alleged conspirator [committed suicide](#). [Another](#) was sentenced to two years in prison.

Acrimony did not abate after the race, with McDaniel charging that Mr. Cochran, by encouraging non-Republicans to vote in the runoff, had allowed the primary results to be determined by Democrats. Tea party supporters memorialized the narrow loss with the Alamo-like catchphrase "Remember Mississippi."

William Thad Cochran was born in Pontotoc, Miss., on Dec. 7, 1937. His mother was a math teacher, and his father was a principal.

The future senator played varsity football, basketball, baseball and tennis at his high school, where he was valedictorian. At Ole Miss, he was student body vice president and received a bachelor's degree in psychology in 1959. After service in the Navy, he returned to the university and received a law degree in 1965.

He embarked on a law practice in Jackson, wading into politics when he worked in Mississippi on Richard M. Nixon's successful 1968 presidential campaign.

To win his U.S. Senate seat, then-Rep. Cochran defeated a Democrat, Maurice Dantin, and an independent, Charles Evers, brother of the murdered civil rights leader Medgar Evers. "Mississippi is basically a very conservative state," Mr. Cochran told *The Post* at the time. "I've preempted the right, Evers has preempted the left, and we're both squeezing Dantin for the middle."

With 45 percent of the vote, he was the first Republican senator from Mississippi since Reconstruction.

Rose Cochran [died in 2014](#) after 50 years of marriage. The next year, Mr. Cochran married Kay Webber, an aide who was exactly his age at the time, 77. Survivors include two children from his first marriage, Clayton Cochran of New Albany, Miss., and Kate Cochran of Hattiesburg, Miss.; a brother; and three grandchildren.

Even when Mr. Cochran first arrived in Washington, he sensed the partisanship that would only intensify over his career.

"Criticism of Congress is well earned in my opinion," he told *U.S. News and World Report* in 1975, when he was a junior congressman. "Decision-making is hampered by partisan considerations in too many instances. . . . My impression during my short tenure here is that we have too many party loyalists and not enough statesmen."


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