

Losing Will

Will Hurd isn't your typical Texas Republican. He's young, black, and he stands up to Trump. Oh, and he's leaving Congress.



Will Hurd is exactly the kind of politician the Republican establishment once dreamed of as being its future. In March 2013, the Republican National Committee, reeling from Barack Obama's reelection and losses in the House and Senate, published an election postmortem

laying out a new path for the party. The so-called Obama coalition of people of color, millennials, and women had proved resilient, and if the GOP wanted to remain a factor in American politics, the report's authors believed, the party needed to make a course correction with the same voters. The RNC advocated for a "welcoming conservatism" that would expand the party's appeal, particularly to Latinos and citizens "who do not agree with us on every issue." Hurd, who was

first elected as the congressman for Texas's Twenty-third District the next year, seemed almost laboratory-concocted to meet this challenge. He was young (just 37 when he was first elected), African American, and brainy. He had an impressive résumé—Texas A&M student body president and nine years as a CIA case officer with undercover assignments in India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan—which had earned him a loyal coterie of powerful friends, among them former secretary of defense Robert Gates.

Hurd proved a gravity-defying political force. In 2014 he won in a Republican wave year, but in 2016 he prevailed even as Hillary Clinton bested Donald Trump in his district by 3.5 percentage points. Last year, Democrat Beto O'Rourke outperformed Ted Cruz by 5 points in the Twenty-third, and Hurd still managed to squeak out a win by fewer than a thousand votes.

"I'm winning in a district that Trump lost and Ted Cruz lost," Hurd told me in February, when I was writing a cover story about him for *Texas Monthly*. "We obviously understand how to navigate this."

Then, on the night of August 1, in a move that shocked the political world, Hurd announced on Twitter that he would not be seeking reelection. NBC News quickly declared that it was "big, bad news" for the GOP.

Hurd was always an unlikely representative for his vast, mostly rural district, which stretches from San Antonio to El Paso and is, as Hurd never tires of saying, "roughly the size of Georgia." He was the first non-Latino congressman elected to serve the Twenty-third District since 1984, and, until his first campaign, he'd never

set foot anywhere in the district west of greater San Antonio, where he grew up. Once Hurd got elected, he was for the most part a reliable partisan. He has an "A" rating from the NRA, a 6 percent lifetime score from the environmental group League of Conservation Voters, and a record of supporting party-line legislation like the 2017 tax cuts.

But Hurd has also strongly and consistently objected to key tenets of Trumpism. He called the idea of a border wall a "third-century solution to a twenty-first-century problem," denounced the president's embrace of Vladimir Putin as playing into a "Russian disinformation campaign," and was recently one of only four Republicans to vote for a House resolution that strongly condemned Trump for making "racist comments." Taken together with a party-bucking vote against the repeal of Obamacare and a continued push to protect undocumented youth known as Dreamers, Hurd was independent enough to inspire voters in his district to split their tickets.

But with each election, Hurd's district has looked a little bluer and his balancing act has gotten a little tougher. His formidable 2018 opponent, Democrat Gina Ortiz Jones, announced in May that she was returning for a rematch, and as Trump gears up for reelection, no Republican is going to be able to avoid being associated with him. Despite 2020 looking like his hardest race yet, when I talked to Hurd the day after he revealed he wasn't running for reelection, he told me he wasn't "worried about [his] electoral success."

- 1) In the RNC "postmortem," what goals did the party set?
- 2) What were congressman's Hurd's qualifications?
- 3) Why was his decision not to run in 2020 considered "big bad news for the GOP?"
- 4) Why do you believe African Americans are so underrepresented in Congress?