When Senator Albert Gore, Sr. lost his re-election campaign in 1970, fellow Senator George McGovern comforted him, saying Gore should be proud of his 32 years in Congress because he was “a statesman at a time when this country desperately needed statesmanship.”

Born in Granville, Tennessee in 1907, Albert Arnold Gore grew up on a farm in Smith County. He spent his young adult years farming and working odd jobs while earning an education degree from Middle Tennessee State Teachers College (Class of 1932), and a degree from the Nashville School of Law (Class of 1936). He put his education degree to work serving as Smith County’s superintendent of schools, and later became Tennessee’s commissioner of labor before running for the U.S. Congress.

After making a name for himself on the campaign trail with fiery speeches from tree stumps and playing fiddle in his own road show, Gore won election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1938. At the age of 31, he began his three-decade career in Congress, where he built a respected legacy as an independent thinker set on modernizing the South and improving the lives of those who had been underserved by their government.

World War II dominated the early years of Gore’s career. He followed in the footsteps of his role model, fellow Tennessee politician and Franklin Roosevelt’s Secretary of State Cordell Hull, by firmly planting himself as a staunch interventionist. Wartime mobilization and New Deal policies influenced Gore’s support of using the federal government to regulate the economy and develop the South’s infrastructure. He was especially fond of utilizing the Tennessee Valley Authority to modernize agriculture, create cheap power, and improve the region’s industry.

“...it has meant a great deal to my region.”

—Albert Gore speaking on the House Floor, June 1, 1944

THE SOUTHERN STATESMAN
Albert Sr. in Congress, 1939-1971
Gore was elected to the Senate in 1952, entering with fellow freshman Senator John F. Kennedy. Senate Democratic Leader Lyndon B. Johnson appointed Gore to the Public Works Committee, which ultimately led to his most important legislative achievement—the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956. The act funded the construction of over 41,000 miles of interstate highways. Gore knew such a highway system would be critical infrastructure for the development of the South’s industry and economic investment.

After politics, Gore worked as a successful lawyer and became chairman of Island Creek Coal Company. Back home in Carthage, he ran an antique mall, a hardware store, and a sporting goods store. He renovated buildings and owned a few apartments. Of course, there was always the farm and his cattle until he sold his prize herd in 1988 when his son, Al, ran for president.

Gore spent his final term in Congress bumping heads with President Lyndon B. Johnson and, more notably, with many of his constituents. He managed to work with Johnson to establish Medicare in 1965, but Gore’s vocal opposition to United States involvement in Vietnam drove a wedge between the men. The senator’s stance on the Vietnam War also deeply angered citizens of the Volunteer State and became one of the main issues that cost him reelection. Gore’s politics had become too liberal for increasingly conservative Tennessee voters.

The passage of civil rights bills was another major issue for the nation during Gore’s tenure. Civil rights activists pushed President John F. Kennedy and Congress to address the need for progressive legislation that enacted education, employment, housing, voting, and public accommodation rights for African Americans. Senator Gore voted for nearly all civil rights legislation during his time in office. However, his vote against the groundbreaking Civil Rights Act of 1964 remains a negative mark on his record.


Map showing the construction stages of Tennessee’s interstate highway system, 1960s. Courtesy of the Albert Gore, Sr. Papers

Senator Gore received thousands of pieces of constituent mail against the Civil Rights Act of 1964, including this letter to President Johnson from The Commercial Appeal in Memphis. Courtesy of Albert Gore, Sr. Papers

This constituent letter in support of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is a rare document in Senator Gore’s Papers.

“...This war must end... It must end because it is immoral and because it is wrong...it threatens to destroy us.”

—Albert Gore on the Vietnam War in August 1969

MTSU students participated in the “Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam,” which was one of the largest demonstrations held across the United States in October 1969. Courtesy of MTSU and Public Affairs Collected University Archives


Map showing the construction stages of Tennessee’s interstate highway system, 1960s. Courtesy of theAlbert Gore, Sr. Papers
In the 1950s and 1960s, Tennessee fostered an energetic and youthful civil rights movement, especially in Nashville. College students Diane Nash, John Lewis, and Rev. James Lawson, Jr. practiced nonviolence and were leaders in the Nashville Student Movement. These activists and others across the country forced congressional debates on civil rights legislation.

Senator Gore was a moderate on racial issues and opposed the segregationist stand of his southern colleagues in the U.S. Senate. Gore, Estes Kefauver, and Lyndon B. Johnson were the only southern Democratic senators who refused to sign the “Southern Manifesto” in 1956. Gore voted for the Civil Rights Act of 1957—the first of its kind to pass since the Reconstruction era. He also supported the Civil Rights Act of 1960, which provided a limited mechanism for federal protection of voting rights for African Americans.

Senator Gore's vote against the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 is one of the most discussed decisions of his time in Congress. A few factors led to his opposition. Civil rights activists put pressure on the timeline for progress, but Gore was most comfortable with the gradualist approach. Thousands of constituent letters from Tennesseans requested he vote against the bill and threatened to not re-elect him. He was also wary about Title VI, which required nondiscrimination compliance for activities that received federal funds.

“The FREEDOM of the ballot box is the very essence of DEMOCRACY.”

—Albert Gore in his Washington Report, 1965

Following re-election, Gore supported the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which aligned with his past record. He always believed in the equality of the vote, often writing to his constituents that “the freedom of the ballot box is the very essence of democracy.” He also voted for the Fair Housing Act of 1968, and supported many of the Great Society programs that sought to end poverty and racial injustice.