

Statement of Yolanda O. Lee, a captain in the District of Columbia National Guard, before the United States House of Representatives Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties
H.R. 157, the District of Columbia House Voting Rights Act of 2009
January 27, 2009

Thank you Chairman Nadler and Ranking Member Sensenbrenner for permitting me to testify on the District of Columbia House Voting Rights Act. My name is Captain Yolanda Lee, and I have been a soldier in the D.C. National Guard for all of my adult life. I am here today to ask you to approve the D.C. House Voting Rights Act that would allow me, my family, my fellow soldiers, and the residents of my hometown to have a voting representative in the U.S. House of Representatives. I believe that the best way to let you know how much the vote in the House means to me is to tell you my story as a resident who was born and raised in the nation's capital. My family are life-long Washingtonians. I am a 4th generation resident on my father's side and 3rd generation through my mother. I attended D.C. public schools, and graduated from Ballou Senior High School in Southeast Washington in 1993. I am a graduate of the University of the District of Columbia (UDC), where I majored in criminal justice. During college, I served in the Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) through the Howard University Consortium Program, because UDC does not have a ROTC program. Upon commissioning, I had the option of leaving the D.C. National Guard, but I chose to stay and serve as a part-time soldier for two years and then became a full-time Guardsman. I am proud to speak to you this morning as a career soldier for the last 15 years.

In 2004, I was deployed to Iraq, where I served in-country from January 1, 2005 through November 20, 2005. In Iraq, I was assigned to a Guard transportation unit from Minnesota, the 50th Main Support Battalion, which transported people, supplies and equipment. As a transportation unit in the middle of what, at the time, some called a civil war, we were an inviting target for enemy attacks. On June 28, 2005, I was the combat logistical patrol commander for a 17-vehicle convoy transporting concrete security barriers. The lead convoy vehicle was hit by a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device. At the same time, our convoy was attacked by small-arms fire. I gave the order to return fire on the target and sent a gun truck to capture the two enemy combatants believed to have triggered the explosive device, who were attempting to run to a nearby village. While my unit was exchanging fire with the enemy, I ordered them to arrange their vehicles so as to protect the soldiers in the vehicle that had been struck by the explosive device, which was then in flames, and I ordered soldiers to approach that vehicle and pull out the body of the gunner, who was dead, and one injured passenger, who survived. Our unit then surrounded the nearby village and took two enemy combatants. I was awarded a Bronze Star for my service in Iraq.

One of the reasons we were sent to Iraq was to help bring democracy to that country. In the United States and all over the world, the right of all Iraqi citizens to vote for the new Iraqi legislature was taken to be the most important sign that democracy had come to the Iraqi people. In my first month in Iraq, on January 30, 2005, Iraq held its first free elections in 50 years. Iraqis were able to elect members to the transitional

National Assembly. For Iraqis, the right to vote for the representatives who decide the most important issues for the Iraqi people and for their country was so important that Iraqis overseas, including those born in this country, were given the franchise in those elections. Iraqis who lived in the District of Columbia, even those who were born in this country and had no right to a voting representative in the nation's capital, were given the right to vote in that election, and continued to vote as well in the election of the permanent legislature, the Council of Representatives, that took place less than a month after I left Iraq. The first resident of the District of Columbia to die in the Iraq war was Specialist Daryl Dent, a 21-year old member of the D.C. National Guard. Specialist Dent gave his life in service to our country, but his sacrifice also helped Iraqi citizens get the voting representation he did not live to see for himself.

After I came home to the District, I voted in the next national election. Although I was proud to see the Iraqis exercise their right to vote for voting representatives in their new democracy, I could not vote for such a representative to the U.S. House of Representatives in our country. Four generations of my family have lived without this right. I am proud to be an American. I am proud to be a Washingtonian. And I am proud to be a soldier. That will never change. But I ask you to change my status as an American citizen who pays taxes and serves in war and peace, but is entitled only to a non-voting delegate in the U.S. House of Representatives. I ask for your support of the D.C. House Voting Rights Act.