

**James Johnson**  
Page, U.S. House of Representatives

## **The Long Struggle for Representation: Oral Histories of African Americans in Congress**

### **“Being a Pioneer”**

James Johnson describes the responsibility that comes with being a career pioneer.  
*Interview recorded October 24, 2019*

Yeah, I guess I've been a pioneer, but you know you, if you get an opportunity you have to make the most of it and you have to look to bring some other people behind you. If you fail, then no one's going to come behind you. I mean, if you're the first one into something, you have to succeed. I mean, you can't be messing around because if you're the first one in, if you fail or you mess around, then there's not, you know it may be a long time before somebody else gets a chance. So, part of, quote, “being a pioneer,” or being the first, is understanding the responsibility that goes along with it. But for me, that fit with my family values of always striving to be the best at whatever opportunity you have, not wasting it, hard work, etc., etc., so. I was the first African American at UCLA in surgery. I was the first African American selected on active duty in, in, as a doctor in the Navy medical department. When I went on my first tour in '72 on my ship, it was an amphibious ready group—what we would call an amphibious ready group now. So, I don't know, probably 3,000 people in the task force. As a fresh-caught lieutenant, I was the highest ranking African American in the entire task force. And back in '72, there were issues. *Kitty Hawk* had race riots on their ships, so did ours—the *New Orleans*. And the CO said I had to help quiet this. As I said, the only other officer on this ship was an ensign. So even though I had only been in the Navy a few months, I was in that leadership role. As I said, that, it, the opportunities that—the Navy had a long history of, of African Americans who were in the Navy being primarily in subservient roles, working as mess stewards, etc., etc., so. Like I said, you have to make the most of what opportunities you're given. And if you're given an opportunity, particularly that no one has had before you, you can't fail at that.