

# Examining the Leadership Style of Mike Espy Using Key Leadership Traits

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*This study seeks to evaluate the leadership style of Mike Espy, a former United States Secretary of Agriculture and Congressman. The author will employ four methodologies: good and bad leadership attributes, leadership style, and vision shaping. Organizational leadership will be analyzed through a new leadership theory and guiding principles that aim to identify ways of enhancing leadership in a dynamic society. Mike Espy has extensive experience in politics, having served in Congress and the military. In 1986, he became Mississippi's first African American to serve in Congress since Reconstruction. He made history again in 1993 when President Bill Clinton appointed him as the United States Secretary of Agriculture, making him the first African American to hold the position. The author will assess Espy's leadership style and its effectiveness in achieving his goals. This study aims to provide insights into effective leadership strategies that can be applied in various settings.*

*Keywords: Mike Espy, key leadership traits, transformational leadership, charismatic leadership*

## INTRODUCTION

In 1939, a team of researchers, headed by psychologist Kurt Lewin started with the goal of determining the many leadership styles that exist. This early study was very influential and established three major leadership styles that have provided a springboard for further research and identified more distinct leadership types. While further research has identified more distinct types of leadership, this early study was very influential and established these three major leadership styles. American attorney and politician Michael Espy is well-known in American politics. He was the 25th U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, a position he held from 1993 to 1994. He was born on November 30, 1953, in the United States of America. He was the first African American to occupy the job and first person from a rural location in the South (Bhatti et.al., 2012). Espy was a member of Congress from 1987 to 1993, representing Mississippi's 2nd congressional district. Espy is a Democrat and former government public servant who has since retired. Throughout his career, Mike Espy has been an innovator in various fields (Bhatti et.al., 2012).

As Mississippi's Assistant Secretary of State, he helped restructure school finance to increase funding for rural public schools, which marked the beginning of his public service career. His work had a tremendous impact on the quality of education in rural Mississippi, and his tireless commitment to improving public services throughout the state earned him respect from people from all walks of life. This was the start of his career in government service, and this event kicked off what would become a distinguished career in public service. Soon after, he became the first African American to be elected to Congress from Mississippi since the Reconstruction Era ended in 1865. He became a prominent champion for racial equality and civil rights after being elected in 1986 and serving three terms. Before that, he served

as Assistant Attorney General and as the Director of the Mississippi Consumer Protection and Medicaid Fraud Divisions. In winning the election, he became the first African American to represent Mississippi in Congress since the conclusion of the Reconstruction Era. Despite being just 32 years old at the time of his election, Mike Espy made history as the first person of African ancestry to be elected to Congress from the state of Mississippi since the end of Reconstruction. He embodied the same young political passion that spawned Mississippi activists like Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Medgar Evers, and he was immediately heralded as one of the nation's most promising political up-and-comers in the nation's capital. Espy was also a prime example of the teenage political passion that inspired other Mississippi activists like Fannie Lou Hamer and Medgar Evers. His election marked a momentous victory for the civil rights movement and African Americans in Mississippi, signifying a significant shift in state politics. He is a great illustration to use when discussing leaders' characteristics, the many leadership styles, and how leaders can influence the future.

## **LEADERSHIP CASE STUDY**

### **Introduction**

From 1993 to 1994, Michael Espy served as the United States Secretary of Agriculture. He is the first person of African descent from the South ever to occupy that post. Espy served as the representative for Mississippi's 2nd congressional district beginning in 1987 and continuing until 1993. During his tenure in the Agriculture Secretary post, Espy worked hard to open doors for African Americans in agriculture-related fields. In March 2018, Espy ran for the Senate seat that Thad Cochran vacated. Espy was defeated in the nonpartisan special election on November 6 and ran against Republican Cindy Hyde-Smith on November 27. In the special election, Espy received support from prominent figures in the Democratic Party, such as then former Vice President Joe Biden and actor Morgan Freeman. Even though he was second behind Cindy Hyde-Smith, Mike Espy still received more than 46% of the vote. He ran against Hyde-Smith again in 2020 and was defeated by a margin of ten points. During the 100th Congress, Espy served as the representative for Mississippi's 2nd congressional district. After the Republican Hiram Revels served from 1870 to 1871, he was the first African-American to represent Mississippi in Congress since then. Espy was victorious in all three elections. In December 1992, Bill Clinton appointed Mike Espy as the United States Secretary of Agriculture. Espy stepped down from his position in the House of Representatives in January 1993 after his confirmation by the Senate. During his tenure as Agriculture Secretary from 1993 to 1994, Espy made history by being the first African American and someone from the Deep South to hold the position (Navarro, 1993). Espy achieved many milestones in his political career, making history with his election wins and appointment as the Secretary of Agriculture. The White House investigated his official perks and gifts in October of 1994. In 1998, he was found not guilty of 30 accusations of accepting forbidden gifts (Vilsack, et.al., 2012). In October 2007, Espy supported Republican Haley Barbour for the governor's race in Mississippi.

Mike Espy is a native of Mississippi and has spent his whole life working to better the lives of people around the state. He was born and raised in Yazoo City, Mississippi, approximately in the middle of Indianola and Jackson, Mississippi, and he understood from an early age that he wanted to serve the community in which he had spent his childhood. After completing his studies at Howard University's School of Law, he relocated his legal practice to his childhood neighborhood in the Mississippi Delta. After that, he worked for the state of Mississippi as an Assistant Secretary of state, and after that, he worked for the state of Mississippi as an Assistant Attorney General. In 1986, Mike Espy accomplished a remarkable victory by unseating a Republican incumbent who had served two terms to become the first Black person to represent Mississippi in the United States Congress since Reconstruction. After that, in 1992, Secretary Espy was chosen to become the first Black person ever to hold the position of U.S. Secretary of the Department of Agriculture. Since then, Secretary Espy has relocated back to Mississippi to continue serving the people he loves (Saputra & Mahaputra, 2022).

Espy started his political career by holding various posts within the state administration. Between 1978 and 1980, he was the first black person to hold the position of assistant secretary of state in Mississippi,

where he oversaw the central legal services division. Espy worked as the assistant secretary of state for the division of the public lands for the following four years. In this capacity, he was in charge of executing a state statute that designated one of every 36 square miles for educational reasons. Between 1984 and 1985, Espy served as an Assistant State Attorney general in charge of the consumer protection division. When Espy served on the rules committee for the Democratic Party's 1984 national convention, he garnered more national recognition inside the Democratic Party (Ichsan et.al., 2021).

### **Good and Bad Leadership Attributes and Traits**

Espy ran again in the 2020 election for the Senate, hence a trait of humility and persistence. He believed in equality and proper health which was in accordance to his campaign and; legislative activities. The expansion of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act was one of the central tenets of his campaign, which was centered on making health care more accessible and practical. The message resonated with his constituents, as Espy believed that no one should be denied medical care due to financial difficulty or preexisting conditions. In March, he easily prevailed over his competitors to win the Democratic nomination. However, he was unsuccessful in his bid to defeat Cindy Hyde-Smith in the general election held in November. Espy started his political career by holding various posts within the state administration. Between 1978 and 1980, he was the first black person to hold the position of Assistant Secretary of State in Mississippi, where he oversaw the central legal services division. Espy worked as the assistant secretary of state for the division of the public lands for the following four years. In this capacity, he was in charge of executing a state statute that designated one of every 36 square miles for educational reasons. Between 1984 and 1985, Espy served as an assistant state attorney general in charge of the consumer protection division (Huertas-Valdivia et.al., 2019). When Espy was serving for the 1984 Democratic National Convention, he attracted the attention of people all around the country inside the Democratic Party.

Espy credited his triumph in the election to his dedication to providing excellent service to his constituents. He sponsored the Lower Mississippi River Valley Delta Development Act as a freshman in the House of Representatives (Huertas-Valdivia et.al., 2019). He enlisted the assistance of Jamie Whitten, a fellow Mississippi Democrat and the influential Chairman of the Appropriations Committee. In this way, Espy was able to deliver much-needed economic benefits to the impoverished Delta Region of Mississippi. Whitten assisted in securing \$3 million in funding for the project. The measure set a strategy for economic development along the banks of the Mississippi River. The commission members were chosen by the governors of the states that took part in the initiative, which included Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri, and Illinois.

Additionally, Espy was instrumental in establishing the Lower Mississippi Delta Congressional Caucus and served as the organization's chairman (Bhatti, et.al., 2012). As a leader who assured consistency, he improved the Mississippi black power movement while opposing the white supremacist movement. He was able to effectively oppose white supremacy by building a network of support among the African American populace and collaborating with other civil rights organizations. By uniting a wide range of individuals, organizations, and political actors under the umbrella of civil rights reform, he successfully challenged the status quo. In 1890, it started by Mississippi avoiding white supremacy into the very fabric of the state, ensuring that whites would maintain power, and denying black citizens their right to vote for decades to come. This was part of a more significant trend in the South that sought to reinforce a racial hierarchy that had been deeply embedded in the region since the end of Reconstruction.

Furthermore, they were successful in their efforts. There were 189,884 Black voters in the state at the time of the convention, whereas there were only 118,890 white voters in the state (Moskowitz, 2021). In 1965, when the Voting Rights Act was finally voted into law, there were only 28,500 black persons in the state who were registered to vote (Moskowitz, 2021). To put it another way, just 6.7% of black residents of the state who were entitled to vote were registered to do so, whereas the percentage of white residents who were eligible to vote was almost 70%. It was a culture that Espy tried to ensure was adopted, and all people were treated equally.

**TABLE 1**  
**TABLE KEY LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS**

Characteristic	Opinion
Flexible	To garner credibility
Self-aware	To be role models
Humility	To be fully present
Constant and consistent	Empower others

Some traits were not a good image of Espy as he was charged with allegations of obtaining inappropriate gifts on August 27, 1997. The accusations against him included obtaining sports tickets, housing, and flights. As a result of Espy’s refusal to enter a plea bargain, he was found not guilty of all 30 criminal accusations against him on December 2, 1998. Independent Counsel Donald Smaltz called more than seventy witnesses during the trial and spent over twenty million dollars preparing for and prosecuting the case ((Foels et.al., 2000). Sun-Diamond Growers was given a \$1.5 million punishment in 1996 for providing Espy \$6,000 in gifts; however, in March 1998, the company secured a reversal of the decision at the Court of Appeals level. Independent Counsel Smaltz has filed an appeal with the Supreme Court over that judgment. The judgment of the Court of Appeals was upheld by the Supreme Court, which concluded that the gratuities Act requires a connection to be established between a present and an official act. Because Smaltz could not establish such a connection, the gratuity claim against Sun-Diamond was dropped. Another source of controversy in 1994 was the revelation by the White House that Patricia Dempsey, who was dating Espy then, had received a scholarship worth \$1,200 from a charity managed by Tyson Foods (Foels et.al., 2000). Espy and his attorney have stated that they were dishonest with the White House, which initially believed Espy’s false claim that he did not know about the scholarship until it was awarded to Dempsey (Foels et.al., 2000).

The trend toward the individualization of politics and breakdown of bipartisanship has both contributed to the development of a crisis in contemporary democracies, which can be identified by the increasing importance placed on the relationship that exists between citizens and their elected representatives. Modern political communication tends to portray political leaders as the primary players in delivering answers and presenting a political vision. As a response to these kinds of changes, academics have begun to investigate the topic of leadership more systematically. Any leadership role requires the ability to take command and inspire others, but for black leaders, gaining the credibility required to do so may present a unique set of problems (McFadden, 2021). However, there needs to be more study on political leadership styles, particularly in relation to how leaders communicate with their followers and the residents of their country. By understanding how different political leaders use communication strategies and how their audiences perceive those messages, scholars can better understand how leadership styles influence public opinion and the overall quality of democracy. Studies based on organization theory have long had a dominant position in academic research on leadership styles (Al Khajeh, 2018). Accounts of what talents and characteristics allow a person to perform political leadership may also be found in various subjects, such as political psychology, decision-making analysis, gender studies, and communication studies, to name a few of these fields’ specific examples. Each of these fields presents different lenses through which to view the roles of political leadership and how specific talents, characteristics, or behaviors lead to effective leadership in different contexts.

**Leadership Style of the Case Study**

A leadership style is a method by which a leader achieves their team’s purpose. This is accomplished through inspiring team members to strive toward a shared objective and concentrating on the welfare of those team members. A team needs to have a good understanding of leadership styles for them to be able to work together, continue to improve, and adapt to changes. A strategic leader is someone like Michael Espy. Strategic leadership is the process through which leaders use their talents and competencies to assist

members of their team and the country in achieving its long-term objectives. Leaders who think strategically work to bring out the best in others and every given scenario. By utilizing their innate talents and competencies, strategic leaders can guide their team members, offering support and direction while promoting a unified vision of the organization's future. In addition, Espy is not simply trying to convince Black people to support him; he, like Jones, must also try to convince people of other races (Choi, 2007). Espy discusses topics vital to the well-being of all Mississippians, such as having access to affordable social insurance. Mike Espy has profoundly committed and devoted loyalty to the people of Mississippi and the nation. Mike worked hard to increase and widen the financial opportunities available to those in the most need, including children, businesses, and ranchers. Now is the time for people in Mississippi to give him another opportunity to serve in the Senate, where he can fight for the urgently needed things in our society, such as improved job opportunities, more educational possibilities, and affordable human services. Espy proposes an excellent chance that would settle on options for deregulation that are "based on certainties," not legislative concerns, and routinely state, "I will fall in favor of business" (Nash & Espy, 2004).

Many different theories have been developed to analyze different types of leadership, as well as their efficacy and assessment. Even though there are many definitions of leadership, most agree that leadership is a relationship between a leader and followers in which the leader has more power than the followers (Nash & Espy, 2004). As such, leadership should be studied in a group process, in which the leader mobilizes and leads the group, being aware of goals and context dynamics. Interactional theories are typically studied to propose various leadership styles. Examples of these styles include autocratic versus democratic versus laissez-fair, task versus people-oriented, production versus people-oriented, managerial grid, combining people and tasks in team management, or transactional versus transformational leadership. The last category was expanded further by those who thought that goal orientation might be connected to transactional and transformational leaders. Autocratic leadership is the most effective kind of leadership while persuading others to look at the circumstance which decides the leader's success. According to many leadership theories, a leader's success depends not on the circumstances but on the people they lead (Nash & Espy, 2004). The capabilities of a leader, which go into making up their style, might potentially affect how other people see leaders and their preferences about them (Scarupa, 1987).

A few distinctive characteristics of Espy as a strategic leader are that He has a genuine concern for other people's happiness, an open mind, an acute awareness of his shortcomings, and strong interpersonal communication skills. Throughout this election season, one of the most pressing questions has been how African Americans' votes might influence the outcomes of races. African American ladies still anticipated that they would appear to cast a ballot, and why a few African Americans are casting a ballot democrat, which shows precisely how influential African Americans can be for the turnout of the presidential race. Despite efforts to block early voting, African American ladies still anticipated that they would appear to cast a ballot. Regarding organizations, legislative concerns are among the most sensitive points that might arise. Mike claims that the majority of the staff ignore the topic. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that should be considered and recognized (Espy, 1994).

The capacity of a leader to envision, plan, lead, and make the most of the resources at their disposal to carry out plans effectively and efficiently is an essential component of strategic leadership. Leaders with a strategic mindset should integrate their strategic plans with management strategies. While attempting to make that goal a reality, their company recognizes and appreciates their leadership position and overall vision (McFadden, 2021). Businesses are directly influenced by the authorities currently in power on the local, state, and national levels. People should vote so their voices may be heard and businesses can get the rights they are due. Espy encourages people to vote. The agreements and actions they allow to go into law can significantly influence the business activities that take place, the directions that companies must follow, and the amount of corporate taxes they must pay. This is essential to keep in mind both as a company and as an employee. Workers' bosses should do all their power to encourage their employees to take an interest in the political and urban process. This may be promoting calendars for voting, coming to open meetings, or providing sufficient flexibility to workers if a representative selection is made, so that workers can become chosen authorities (Navarro, 1993). One such method by which an enterprise might encourage

financial donations is by disseminating neutral material to its employees to educate them about pressing topics, crucial meetings, and significant dates for casting ballots.

Several other recent occurrences are also providing Espy with favorable conditions, including the following: The public uproar and debates about racism that followed the assassination of George Floyd, the vote by the Mississippi Legislature to remove the Confederate battle emblem from the state flag, and Joe Biden's selection of Kamala Harris as his running mate all occurred around the same time. Espy thinks these factors will boost the percentage of black voters who cast ballots and win over some sorely needed white support. These events have allowed Espy to capitalize on a "perfect storm" of public opinion and make his case for why it is essential to change the leadership in Mississippi.

### **Shaping of Vision**

Leaders who think strategically use the reward and incentive system to encourage productive and high-quality workers to exhibit significantly improved performance for their firm. Invention, perception, and planning are the three pillars of functional strategic leadership that aid a person in accomplishing their aims and goals. Mike Espy discusses how businesses need to participate in this year's election and how doing so may benefit those businesses, given how important it is for African Americans who claim organizations to vote in the election. Mike has an unwavering commitment to ensuring that all Mississippians, regardless of age, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or handicap, are afforded the rights, privileges, and responsibilities that come with citizenship, including fair treatment, complete balance, and especially social liberties. Mike believes that all citizens of Mississippi should get assistance from their government in the fight against activities that prevent our fellow citizens from pursuing their goals for life. Mike Espy asserts that he would serve as an independent congressman for all of Mississippi and prioritize the needs of people above those of groups. If it would be to Mississippi and its people's benefit, he is willing to collaborate with anybody, regardless of whether or not they support or oppose him (Price, 2000).

In an ideal world, strategic leaders would be able to challenge prevalent viewpoints without eliciting a significant amount of pushback, would be able to see both the big picture and the details of the situation at the same time, would be able to adjust to shifting market conditions and capitalize on emerging opportunities, would be able to make difficult decisions, would be able to strike a balance between an analytical perspective and the human dimension of strategy building, and would be able to advocate for employees and engage with them. In 1986, Espy was victorious in his bid to become a member of the Democratic Party in the United States House of Representatives. He was the first African American from Mississippi to be elected to Congress after Reconstruction. He was a member of the House of Representatives from 1987 to 1993, and during that time, he sat on both the agricultural and budget committees. In January 1993, Clinton appointed him to the position of Secretary of Agriculture in his cabinet. However, in October of 1994, he resigned from the position amid rumors that he had taken favors from an agricultural conglomerate known as Tyson Foods, Inc. Clinton accepted Espy's resignation even though he lauded Espy's leadership at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). In the end, Espy was brought up on various federal corruption accusations; however, in December 1998, he was found not guilty of any allegations against him. After that, he had a successful career in private practice as an agricultural consultant and attorney (Bai, & Klaidman, 1998).

### **General Findings and Conclusion**

A manager's ability to convey a strategic vision for the company or a segment of the organization, as well as the ability to encourage and convince others to adopt that vision, is an example of what is meant by the term "strategic leadership." Another way to describe strategic leadership is as the application of strategy to the administration of personnel matters. It is the capacity to influence other members of the organization and bring about organizational change. Leaders who think strategically build organizational structures, decide how resources should be used, and articulate a strategic vision. Secretary Espy has been a historic leader in Mississippi. He brings extensive knowledge and experience to not only the country project board but also a passion for advancing thoughtful and inclusive policies derived from listening to and understanding the needs of rural Americans. Secretary Espy has been a historic leader in Mississippi.

Politicians may better understand people's preferences, determine what aspects of their need to be adjusted to be better received by voters, and boost their chances of being elected or reelected. To draw further conclusions from the research, it has to be carried out in more nations. To provide a more indifferent picture of preferences for leadership styles, gender differences may also be taken into consideration. It would be beneficial to have the ability to gauge the preferences of party members on the kind of leadership. As a result, the research should be broadened to cover other national contexts, genders, and ideologies. With this in mind, the study should include more countries better to understand leadership characteristics and gender variations across cultures. This method is significant because it allows us to understand better how people in different countries think about leadership and how different cultures may lead to differences in opinions on examining bad leadership, leadership style, and vision shaping based on Key Leadership Traits. It is also crucial to evaluate how different genders and ideologies may lead to differences in leadership perspectives. We can gain valuable insights into how people think about leadership styles by examining how different countries, genders, and philosophies handle the subject of leadership.

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