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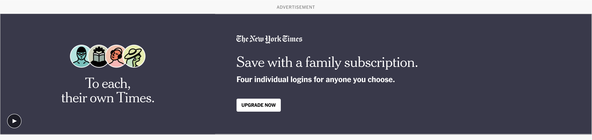

Tillie Fowler, 62, a Former House Leader, Dies

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By Douglas Martin
March 3, 2005

Former Representative Tillie Fowler, who despite being the most powerful woman in Congress did not run for re-election in 2000 to keep a promise to serve only four terms, died yesterday in Jacksonville, Fla. She was 62.

She had suffered a brain hemorrhage two days earlier, a family spokesman, Tom Alexander, told The Associated Press.

Ms. Fowler was vice chairwoman of the House Republican Conference and No.5 in the House leadership when she left Congress. Her steely intelligence earned her the nickname Steel Magnolia. A member of the House Armed Services Committee, she was known for her expertise on military matters, including vigorous efforts to retain armed services bases in her Florida district.

After leaving Congress in 2001 and joining a law firm, she continued her leadership role in military matters as chairwoman of both the commission that investigated sexual abuse accusations at the United States Air Force Academy and the Defense Policy Board Advisory Committee, which advises the secretary of defense.

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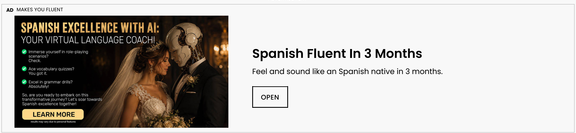

Ms. Fowler was also on an independent panel that last year investigated the abuse of prisoners in Iraq, attributing the problem to a string of failures that led all the way up the chain of command to the Pentagon.

She was born on Dec. 23, 1942, in Milledgeville, Ga., where her father, Culver Kidd, owned a drug store. Mr. Kidd served for 44 years in the Georgia Legislature.

A photograph in Ms. Fowler's Congressional office showed her at age 7 playing on the desk of Gov. Herman Talmadge of Georgia. She recalled that she was arguing with him.

She earned a law degree from Emory University, where she also did her undergraduate work. She later worked as a Congressional aide and in the Nixon White House, in consumer affairs. In 1971, she moved to Jacksonville with her husband, Buck Fowler.

She threw herself into volunteer work, then used those contacts to run successfully for the Jacksonville City Council. Elected president of the Council, she had three members arrested in 1989, when they tried to walk out of a meeting, which would have prevented a quorum needed to pass the city budget.

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In 1992, she ran for Congress, promising to serve no more than four terms. She received 57 percent of the vote and was unopposed in her next three races.

She got a seat on the Armed Services Committee and was elected co-chairwoman of the Freshman Republican Task Force on Reform. In her second term, she became a deputy whip for the Republicans. In late 1996, Speaker Newt Gingrich gave her and Representative Jane Harman, Democrat of California, the tough assignment of investigating sexual harassment in the Army.

In 1998, Ms. Fowler was elected vice chairwoman of the House Republican Conference on the vow that she would serve no longer than two years in the Republican leadership. She filed papers in 1999 to seek re-election, but later decided to keep her initial promise.

She is survived by her husband and her daughters, Tillie Anne, of Washington, and Elizabeth, of California.

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