



Collection of U.S. House of Representatives

Congressman Parren J. Mitchell

Many lives have been changed, touched and inspired by Congressman Parren J. Mitchell's life-long battle to attain equal opportunities for all people. He and his nine siblings were born and raised in Baltimore Maryland, where his father worked as a hotel waiter to support his family. When he graduated high school, America was entrenched in World War II, so Mitchell enlisted in the Army for four years, and received a Purple Heart.

Education was valued in the Mitchell family, and after his Army discharge Mitchell attended Morgan State where he received his degree in 1950. Although he graduated from Morgan with honors, he was refused admission to the University of Maryland's graduate school because of his race. Using Thurgood Marshall as his legal counsel, he successfully sued the University to gain admission. In 1952, he became the first Black person to earn a graduate degree from a "White" state school below the Mason-Dixon Line.

Before deciding to run for Congress in 1968, Mitchell held several positions with the city, state and non-profit organizations, all dedicated to achieving racial parity. He also taught sociology at his alma mater. Mitchell lost his first bid for Congress, but undeterred he ran again in 1970 and this time he won, becoming Maryland's first African-American congressman. As one of the founders of the Congressional Black Caucus, one of Mitchell's first actions was to boycott President Richard M. Nixon's State of the Union address in 1971, after Nixon had refused to meet with the group. Dubbed the "Little General" for his ability to assemble and organize caucus members with little notice, Mitchell chaired the CBC during the 95th Congress (1977–1979).¹

¹ Trescott, "One of God's Angry Men."

Mitchell soon became the primary Congressional champion for more access to government contracts for minority owned businesses. After years of unsuccessfully proposing legislation to do this, in 1976, he successfully amended the Public Works bill, Pub. L. 94-369, to include the following language.

*Except to the extent that the Secretary determines otherwise, no grant shall be made under this chapter for any local public works project unless the applicant gives satisfactory assurance to the Secretary that at least **10 per centum** of the amount of each grant shall be expended for minority business enterprises.²*

This legislation prompted many states to set similar goals and led to a spate of law suits questioning the legality of dispersing “government benefits” based on race.

Later in 1976, he succeeded in getting legislation passed requiring contractors to document their minority business goals. In 1980, he achieved the same victory for Surface Transportation projects. Mitchell also introduced Public Law 95-507 which, among other things, gave strength to the offices within executive agencies charged with advocating for small businesses also known as the Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization. Through this law, he put teeth in the government subcontracting program for small businesses and devised liquidated damages for noncompliance. Mitchell recognized that small businesses are the engine of innovation and thus created the Small Business Innovation and Research (SBIR) Program. Recognizing the critical need for small business contractors to receive timely government payments he also authored the Prompt Payment Act.³ In 1980, Mitchell helped found the Minority Business Enterprise Legal Defense and Education Fund (MBELDEF), and worked there after his retirement from Congress in 1987.

Mitchell also fought against racism in other quarters. “in a speech dripping with sarcasm on the House floor in 1983; Mitchell thanked President Ronald Reagan for appointing a single black judge and for his "generosity" in giving the nation a 20.4 percent unemployment rate among blacks.”⁴

After Mitchell died on May 28, 2007, as a result of complications from pneumonia, he was eulogized by many, including current President, Barack Obama, then Senator Obama who said, “It's men like Parren Mitchell that made my career in public service possible.”⁵

According to Maryland Congressman, Elijah Cummings, “Mitchell adopted these words as the theme for his public life – the words of Dr. Benjamin Mays: ***I only have a minute - sixty seconds***

² <http://uscode.house.gov/download/pls/42C80.txt>

³ Pinson, Tracey L., *My Tribute to a Legend*, http://www.osdbu.gov/Assets/PDF/mitchell_article.pdf

⁴ <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C06EFDB1430F933A05756C0A9619C8B63>

⁵

http://www.allamericanpatriots.com/48723917_barack_obama_barack_obama_obama_statement_passing_fo_rmer_maryland_rep_parren_mitchell

in it. Forced upon me I did not choose it, But I know that I must use it..., Suffer if I lose it..., Give account if I abuse it. Only a tiny little minute...but eternity is In It”⁶

It is appropriate for us to end this article about Mitchell with the words of USA Today, syndicated columnist, DeWayne Wickham who said of Mitchell, “Heroes can be measured in ways large and small. They can be gauged by the achievements gained in a life of public service

the deeds done under the scrutiny that comes to those who chose to live their lives in a political fishbowl. By this yardstick, Mitchell was a remarkable man.”⁷

Other Sources

http://www.answers.com/topic/parren-mitchell#External_links

<http://www.route-one.org/students/parren-mitchell-3.html>

http://www.gazette.net/stories/060107/polinew235455_32337.shtml¹

⁶ <http://www.mddems.org/ht/display/ReleaseDetails/i/1036097>

⁷ <http://www.mddems.org/ht/display/ReleaseDetails/i/1036097>

⁸ http://blogs.usatoday.com/oped/2007/06/parren_mitchell.html

