

**“BEYOND THE RHETORIC”**

**Harry C. Alford**

**Parren J. Mitchell, a Congressional Giant**

It is with mixed feelings that we announce the passing (May 28, 2007) of the Honorable Parren J. Mitchell. We are sad that he has left us for Heaven but we are happy that he came and will celebrate his great life. The last few years have been painful for this warrior. The pain is gone but his memory and triumphs are etched in history and shall never go away.

Parren was elected in 1970 to the first of his eight terms in Congress from the 7th District (Democrat -Baltimore, MD) after holding posts in the administrations of two Baltimore mayors and one governor. During his tenure he fought tenaciously for Black economic empowerment which he phrased as “The second phase of the civil rights movement”. Every minority and women business legislation from the smallest town to the largest state to each and every agency of the federal government can be directly attributed to the legislative activity of Parren J. Mitchell. He was aggressive and terribly motivated which was the key to his success. Every minority and woman business owner owes much gratitude to the performance of Congressman Mitchell. He was truly a national hero who is responsible for billions of dollars in all communities through his belief that America must equitably distribute its tax funded procurements.

The vast majority of Black firms in this nation are graduates of the SBA’s 8a program. As Secretary of HUD Alphonso Jackson often says, “There is no other program that has produced more Black millionaires in this nation than the 8a program. It is a success whose legacy

demands that it remains.” This with the Department of Transportation DBE program; minority owned concessions in our airports; regional civil rights offices around the nation auditing the diversity of major government and private entities. The whole aura of accountability for diversity in the procurement and business arenas is due to the efforts of this giant.

He must have seen at least 5 attempts in establishing a National Black Chamber of Commerce in this nation. He quietly watched them fail. I was relieved to receive his warm greeting and encouragement when I sought his counsel in starting the NBCC in 1992. He told me, “Remember as Adam Clayton Powell taught us 'It's the plan, not the man'. Put it all in writing and have a succinct strategic plan. If you are truly committed and fear nothing but God you can prevail. Don't worry about the numbers as the greatest advocate for justice to walk this earth, Jesus Christ, had only twelve captains and one of them was flaky. If you are clear and unbending you can succeed.”

Kay and I have such fond memories of the precious moments we spent with Parren. Such as staying up until 2:00AM in a motel room in Peoria, IL talking about developing our chamber infrastructure, sipping Martel and watching our twin boys sleep on the floor. Such sweet memories we will forever cherish.

After returning from World War II as a hero - he jumped on a live grenade to save the lives of three other soldiers - he enrolled in Morgan State University and obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree. By the way, he received a Purple Heart for the military heroics even though many wounded Blacks were refused a Purple Heart. The effort merited a Silver Star or Medal of Honor but Blacks could not receive such medals at that time. He applied (1950) to the University of Maryland's graduate program. The President of the College Park campus rebuffed him by saying it was “inadvisable for Blacks to attend the College Park campus”. Parren sued and prevailed becoming the first Black to receive a post graduate degree from the main campus of the University of Maryland. Today, the University of Maryland boasts that it graduates more African Americans per year than any other state university system in the nation. This was the start of a long and productive life in fighting bigotry and creating opportunity for the under served.

Thank God for Parren J. Mitchell! He made this a better world. We must carry on the struggle he so valiantly fought and bear more fruit for the generations to come and in fond memory of his legacy.

“If you believe in fighting racism, you make a commitment for the rest of your life. There's no getting off that train. You can't say I've put five years in fighting racism and now I'm finished. No, you are not finished. Our job is to fight it every day, to continue to shove it down and when it rises up to shove it down even harder.” Parren J. Mitchell, 1922 - 2007

Mr. Alford is the Co-Founder, President/CEO of the National Black Chamber of Commerce, Inc. Website: [www.nationalbcc.org](http://www.nationalbcc.org) .