



Parren James Mitchell

1922–2007

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1971–1987
DEMOCRAT FROM MARYLAND

A lifelong activist who carried on his family's tradition of public service, Parren Mitchell won election to the U.S. House in 1970, becoming the first African-American Representative from Maryland. As a Member of Congress, he earned a reputation as a dedicated and successful legislator who focused on improving the economic welfare of minorities residing in his Baltimore district and other urban centers. Mitchell's passion and determination to extend the gains made in the civil rights movement—mainly through increased opportunities for minority-owned businesses—guided his eight terms in the House. After Mitchell's death in May 2007, Representative Elijah Cummings of Maryland described him as “a true servant leader, never concerning himself about fame or fortune but, rather, devoting himself entirely to uplifting the people he represented.”¹

Parren James Mitchell was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on April 29, 1922, to Clarence Mitchell, Sr., a waiter, and Elsie Davis Mitchell. His older brother, Clarence Mitchell, Jr., became an influential and longtime lobbyist for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), serving as director of the Washington bureau from 1950 to 1978.² In their youth, Clarence and Parren participated in demonstrations protesting segregation in Baltimore. This early activism fostered Parren Mitchell's interest in promoting civil rights, which shaped much of his future legislative career. Mitchell's political family tree also extended to his sister-in-law, Juanita Jackson Mitchell, who led the Maryland office of the NAACP, and a nephew who served in the Maryland state senate.³ After graduating from Douglass High School in Baltimore in 1940, Parren Mitchell joined the U.S. Army in 1942, serving as a commissioned officer and a company commander with the all-black 92nd Infantry Division. Mitchell earned a Purple Heart

during his World War II service in Italy.⁴ Following his discharge from the armed services in 1946, Mitchell used funding from the 1944 GI Bill of Rights to enroll in Morgan State College in Baltimore. After graduating with an A.B. from Morgan State in 1950, he sued the University of Maryland for admission to the main campus in College Park. Mitchell became the school's first African-American graduate student, earning an M.A. in sociology in 1952.⁵ After becoming an instructor of sociology at his undergraduate alma mater, Morgan State, from 1953 to 1954, Mitchell supervised probation work for the Supreme Bench of Baltimore City from 1954 to 1957. He was appointed the executive secretary of the Maryland Commission on Interracial Problems and Relations in 1963 and oversaw the implementation of the state's new public accommodations law.⁶ Mitchell also led the Baltimore Community Action Agency, an antipoverty program, from 1965 to 1968, before returning to Morgan State as a professor of sociology and the assistant director of its Urban Affairs Institute. In 1969 Mitchell became president of Baltimore Neighborhoods, Inc., a nonprofit fair housing organization.⁷ Mitchell never married and had no children.

Persuaded by local community groups to run for elective office, Mitchell believed he could best help the inner-city residents of Baltimore from Congress. Consequently, he entered the 1968 Democratic primary for the Maryland House seat that encompassed much of western Baltimore and its bordering suburbs. During the campaign, Mitchell accused the 16-year incumbent and chairman of the Committee on House Administration, Samuel Friedel, of losing touch with his constituents, saying, “He doesn't understand the dimensions of the urban crisis, the mood of the people.”⁸ Mitchell ultimately lost his first election by 5,000 votes.⁹ Two years later,





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he again challenged Friedel in the Democratic primary. Mitchell countered his opponent's political experience by accentuating his family's civil rights activism and deep roots in Baltimore. In a grass-roots campaign that focused on his antiwar stance and record of community outreach, Mitchell won by a razor-thin margin of 38 votes.¹⁰ He went on to defeat his Republican opponent, lawyer Peter Parker, in the overwhelmingly Democratic district, becoming the first African American to represent the state of Maryland in Congress. Mitchell also became one of the first black Members to win election in a minority-black congressional district.¹¹ After his Maryland district was redrawn in 1971, Mitchell rarely encountered any serious opposition in his bids for re-election. Once predominantly Jewish and African American, the district now encompassed much of Baltimore's minority population; most of the white suburbs were eliminated. With this shift, the district became even safer for Democrats.¹²

After being sworn in as a member of the 92nd Congress (1971–1973) on January 3, 1971, Mitchell reflected, "I was part of that breed that came in with some clear-cut objectives. I was part of that movement in the country that was deeply dissatisfied with the way the political process was working, and deeply dissatisfied with involvement in Vietnam."¹³ Early in his first term, Mitchell used his seat in the House to speak out against the war. The Maryland Representative joined nine of his congressional colleagues on a national tour in 1971 criticizing American foreign policy in Southeast Asia.¹⁴ He and 22 Members of Congress also sought to publicize the antiwar movement by drafting a lawsuit demanding an end to the American bombing and mining of North Vietnamese ports.¹⁵ Mitchell and a handful of Representatives sought to force President Richard M. Nixon to end a bombing campaign in Cambodia, declaring the action unconstitutional since Congress had not authorized it.¹⁶ Frustrated because the allotment of money to subsidize the war in Vietnam drained funding for social programs, Mitchell balked at a Nixon administration proposal to provide North Vietnam financial aid "to contribute to healing the wounds of war

and to postwar reconstruction of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and throughout Indochina."¹⁷

Mitchell served on the Banking and Currency Committee (later Banking, Finance, and Urban Affairs) for the duration of his House tenure and on the House Budget panel from the 93rd to the 95th Congresses (1973–1979). He also was a member of the Small Business Committee for the 94th Congress (1975–1977) and from the 96th to the 99th Congresses (1979–1987), serving as chairman from 1981 to 1987.¹⁸ As a Representative, Mitchell also sat on two joint committees: Defense Production and Economic. Mitchell's legislative focus took shape while he was a member of the Small Business Committee. Throughout his congressional career, he directed a series of measures promoting minority-owned businesses and small firms. In 1976 the Maryland Representative attached an amendment to a \$4 billion public works program that required state and local governments applying for federal contracts to reserve 10 percent of this money for minority-owned companies. He later described this effort as "my proudest congressional accomplishment."¹⁹ Mitchell achieved another major legislative triumph in 1982 when he guided a bill through the House to set aside funding for small businesses whose owners were economically disadvantaged.²⁰ Despite criticism that his affirmative action proposals constituted a quota system, Mitchell and other proponents maintained that such legislation was necessary to balance the economic scales.²¹ To provide small businesses with more opportunities to procure contracts from the Defense Department, he fought to remove constraints on the number of companies that were permitted to bid for spare parts contracts. Mitchell strongly supported the Small Business Administration (SBA) and opposed efforts to increase interest rates on loans to small businesses and efforts to reduce SBA disaster loans. He also resisted the establishment of a subminimum wage for workers aged 18 and younger.

As one of the 13 founding members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), Mitchell played a significant role in crafting the identity of the fledgling

organization. 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).²² Representative Cardiss Collins of Illinois noted that Mitchell’s efficient and selfless leadership helped lend credibility to the organization. “Parren works hard to make sure each person gets his share of spotlight. He’s forging the caucus forward because now we are acting rather than reacting,” she said.²³

Throughout his career in Congress, Mitchell consistently opposed increased funding for the military.²⁴ In 1977, for instance, he proposed transferring \$15 million from the military budget for programs to increase employment opportunities in the U.S. “I have no great fear of the Soviet Union or China,” Mitchell remarked. “If this democracy should ever fail it will come from within because of the enormous disparity between the rich and the poor.”²⁵ Under his direction, the CBC took a more public stance to curb defense spending. He lashed out against the James Earl (Jimmy) Carter administration’s proposed 1979 fiscal year budget, which allotted a 3 percent hike for military spending. Calling the boost “unconscionable,” Mitchell added, “I certainly feel duped in so far as the military budget is concerned.”²⁶ In 1980 Mitchell sponsored a CBC-backed amendment as an alternative to the House Budget Committee’s legislation to balance the budget. Mitchell’s unsuccessful proposal would have increased funding for domestic programs for education, job training, and income assistance. According to the Maryland Representative, the measure put forth by the Budget Committee plunged “an economic dagger into the bodies of the poor, the nearly poor and the elderly.”²⁷ The following year, the CBC launched its own comprehensive substitute budget—an initiative put forth annually by the caucus—emphasizing the need for increased funding for domestic programs.

Mitchell’s legislative agenda stretched beyond national borders; he was an outspoken supporter of strong economic sanctions against South Africa’s apartheid government. When the House passed a watered-down

version of a bill to limit trade between the United States and South Africa, he angrily remarked, “You can’t compromise with total evil. You can’t take a mid-point on immorality.”²⁸ Mitchell also urged U.S. participation in the African Development Fund, an international financial institution that focused on providing money for basic infrastructure projects in Africa. “A brief cost-analysis will show that the benefits received by the United States far exceeds [*sic*] the cost of participating in the African Development Fund, mainly because African countries serve the commercial interests of the United States,” Mitchell informed his House colleagues.²⁹

Mitchell was known as an outspoken and passionate legislator. One of the first to call for President Nixon’s resignation after the Watergate scandal, he routinely criticized the White House during his eight terms in the House for what he perceived as a willingness to neglect the needs of poor Americans. Mitchell’s characterization in the press as an “unhappy warrior” with “seething anger” stemmed from his frustration with Black Americans’ lack of economic advancement. “I know I get emotional. But it’s been more than 20 years from 1954 (the year of the landmark Supreme Court decision on school desegregation). How many people have been jailed, lost, and now you see those gains unraveling.”³⁰

During the 1980s, Mitchell often sparred with the Ronald W. Reagan administration. Against the backdrop of the Cold War, the Maryland Representative accused President Reagan of excessive defense spending without regard for vital social programs. In particular, he criticized budget initiatives he believed neglected the welfare of America’s neediest citizens. At a time when he thought Democrats should stand firm in their commitment to help the poor, Mitchell claimed his party was “trying to out-Republican the Republicans.”³¹ As a conservative mood swept the electorate in the early 1980s, Mitchell also disputed the growing backlash against the term “liberal”: “I’m a liberal, not a post-liberal or a neo-liberal or a reformed liberal, and I plan to stay that way.”³² Mitchell took great pride in his determination to stay



in close contact with his constituents—he commuted to the Capitol every day from Baltimore to ensure his accessibility to voters. “I know it sounds hokey, but I enjoy all this work,” Mitchell admitted. “When you’re asked to take this job, you’re asked to perform a public service. And that’s what I think I do.”³³

Mitchell’s announcement in September 1985 that he would not seek re-election to a ninth term came as a surprise to many. “I’m concerned about what you might call the heart of Congress,” he said, adding, “Those who are poor are generally treated with contempt. The concerns of minorities are no longer the concerns of this Congress. . . . It’s a step backward.”³⁴ Mitchell denied speculation that his retirement resulted from an ideological rift with the Democratic Party, saying he was leaving because “16 years is a long time to be here.”³⁵ In 1986, he accepted an invitation from Maryland Attorney General Stephen H. Sachs to join his gubernatorial ticket as a candidate for state lieutenant governor; Mitchell’s political aspirations ended when he and Sachs failed to win the Democratic nomination.³⁶ After his retirement from Congress, Mitchell continued to promote economic opportunities for minorities, founding the Minority Business Legal Defense and Education Fund, a private organization that offered legal assistance for the minority business community.³⁷

Mitchell died on May 28, 2007, in Baltimore, Maryland, of complications from pneumonia. “If you believe in fighting racism, you make a commitment for the rest of your life,” Mitchell said after he retired from the House. “There’s no getting off that train. You can’t say, ‘I’ve put five years in fighting racism and now I am 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.”³⁸

FOR FURTHER READING

“Mitchell, James Parren,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=M000826>.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Howard University (Washington, DC), Moorland–Spingarn Research Center. *Oral History*: 1973, 20 pages. An oral history interview with Parren J. Mitchell conducted by Edward Thompson III on February 22, 1973. In the interview, Parren Mitchell discusses the Congressional Black Caucus, including its accomplishments and relationship to Democratic National Committee. Mitchell also comments on the 1972 National Black Political Convention, describes the purpose and function of the Committee on Banking and Currency and its importance to blacks, and discusses the usurpation of congressional power by President Nixon and the economic policies of his administration. Mitchell also recalls his congressional campaign.

John F. Kennedy Library and Museum (Boston, MA), Oral History Collection. *Oral History*: 1988, 110 pages. An interview with Parren Mitchell by Anthony Shriver in 1988. The interview concerned John F. Kennedy’s telephone call to Coretta Scott King during the 1960 presidential campaign.

Morgan State University (Baltimore, MD). *Papers*: Memorabilia.



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NOTES

- 1 Joe Holley, "Parren Mitchell; Politician, Civil Rights Activist; Activist Was Maryland's 1st Black Congressman," 30 May 2007, *Washington Post*: B05; Kelly Brewington, "Fighter, Pioneer, Activist, Mentor; Hundreds Attend Service to Honor, Laud Parren Mitchell," 6 June 2007, *Baltimore Sun*: 1A. Representative Cummings has represented Mitchell's former Maryland congressional district since 1996.
- 2 For more information on Clarence Mitchell, Jr., see Denton L. Watson, *Lion in the Lobby: Clarence Mitchell, Jr.'s Struggle for the Passage of Civil Rights Laws* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1990).
- 3 Sandra Sugawara, "Retiring Mitchell Still Has Passion for Justice," 1 December 1985, *Washington Post*: 37; Jacqueline Trescott, "'One of God's Angry Men,'" 23 September 1977, *Washington Post*: C1; Richard M. Cohen, "Mitchell Victory Seen in Black, Liberal Turnout," 17 August 1970, *Washington Post*: B1.
- 4 Shirley Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress* (Washington, DC: U.S. Capitol Historical Society, 1998): 61–62; Delphine Ava Gross, "Parren J. Mitchell," in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Men* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1999): 825 (hereinafter referred to as *NBAM*).
- 5 Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 62; Jacqueline Trescott, "Mitchells of Maryland: Standing Up and Speaking Out," 1 February 1976, *Washington Post*: 93; Gross, "Parren J. Mitchell," *NBAM*; "Negro Admitted to Baltimore Unit of Maryland U.," 31 August 1950, *Washington Post*: 1; "Accept Negro Student," 31 August 1950, *New York Times*: 31.
- 6 William Chapman, "Negro Appointed Secretary of Maryland Commission," 11 April 1963, *Washington Post*: B1; "Civil Rights Workshop Set in Mount Pleasant," 25 September 1964, *Washington Post*: C6. Most contemporary newspaper articles refer to the commission as the Maryland Commission on Interracial Problems and Relations; however, variations of the name appear in other sources. Mitchell was most likely appointed to the commission by the governor of Maryland, J. Millard Tawes.
- 7 "Parren James Mitchell," *Who's Who Among African Americans, 2002* (New York: Gale Research, 2002); "Parren J. Mitchell," Associated Press Candidate Biographies, 1986; Gross, "Parren J. Mitchell," *NBAM*. For more information on the history of Baltimore Neighborhoods, Inc., see <http://www.bni-maryland.org/about/index.htm> (accessed 3 December 2007).
- 8 According to a contemporary newspaper article, Mitchell did not reside in the district when he ran for the open congressional seat in Maryland. For more information on Mitchell's first campaign for elective office, see Richard Homan, "Negro Poses Solid Threat to Friedel," 25 August 1968, *Washington Post*: C1; Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 63; Friedel became chairman of the Committee on House Administration on July 30, 1968, when the previous chairman, Omar Burlison of Texas, moved to the House Committee on Ways and Means. See Garrison Nelson, *Committees in the U.S. Congress 1947–1992*, Volume 2 (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1994): 545.
- 9 Cohen, "Mitchell Victory Seen in Black, Liberal Turnout"; Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 63.
- 10 Richard M. Cohen, "Mandel to Aid Parren Mitchell as Race Issue Surfaces in Drive," 7 October 1970, *Washington Post*: C2; "Maryland's Friedel Concedes," 6 October 1970, *New York Times*: 36; Cohen, "Mitchell Victory Seen in Black, Liberal Turnout."
- 11 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html; David E. Rosenbaum, "3 White Districts Choose Negroes for House Seats," 5 November 1970, *New York Times*: 28.
- 12 Cohen, "Mandel to Aid Parren Mitchell as Race Issue Surfaces in Drive"; Cohen, "Mitchell Victory Seen in Black, Liberal Turnout"; *Politics in America, 1982* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1981): 535.
- 13 Sugawara, "Retiring Mitchell Still Has Passion for Justice."
- 14 "10 in House Open an Antiwar Tour," 8 May 1971, *New York Times*: 13.
- 15 Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 61–62; Bart Barnes, "Rallies on War Stir Capitol," 12 May 1972, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 16 Trescott, "'One of God's Angry Men'"; Paul Hodge, "Anti-Bombing Suit Loses Second Test," 25 July 1973, *Washington Post*: A6.
- 17 Herbert H. Denton, "U.S. Aid to North Vietnam Opposed in Lawmakers' Mail," 22 March 1973, *Washington Post*: B1.
- 18 Mitchell stepped down from the Small Business Committee on May 15, 1975, to serve on the Budget Committee. He returned to the Small Business Committee at the beginning of the 96th Congress (1979–1981). See Nelson, *Committees in the U.S. Congress 1947–1992*, Volume 2: 624.
- 19 Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 64; Thomas Goldwasser, "Liberal's Liberal Mitchell Is Fiscal Conservative," 15 September 1980, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 20 Sugawara, "Retiring Rep. Mitchell Still Has Passion for Justice"; Martin Weil and Gwen Hill, "Rep. Mitchell to Retire," 1 October 1985, *Washington Post*: D1.
- 21 Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 64.
- 22 Trescott, "'One of God's Angry Men.'"
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.; Sugawara, "Retiring Mitchell Still Has Passion for Justice."
- 25 Jean Campbell, "A Move to Transfer \$15 Billion From Defense," 23 April 1977, *Los Angeles Times*: B4.



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- 26 John K. Colley, "US Budget Critics Rally in Congress," 29 January 1979, *Christian Science Monitor*: 9; John Dillin, "Carter Arms Budget Draws Flak From Liberals," 1 February 1978, *Christian Science Monitor*: 5.
- 27 Robert Parry, "House Liberals Fail to Rewrite 1981 Budget," 1 May 1980, Associated Press; Robert Parry, "House Rejects Republican Plan on Revenue Sharing," 30 April 1980, Associated Press.
- 28 Mary Russell, "Ex-Im Bank Curb for S. Africa Voted," 3 June 1978, *Washington Post*: A6; "Black Caucus Asks New Ban on S. Africa," 29 October 1977, *Washington Post*: A7.
- 29 *Congressional Record*, House, 94th Cong., 1st sess. (9 December 1975): 39381; William L. Clay, *Just Permanent Interests: Black Americans in Congress, 1870–1991* (New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1992): 382.
- 30 Trescott, "One of God's Angry Men"; Sugawara, "Retiring Mitchell Still Has Passion for Justice."
- 31 Sandra Sugawara and Michel McQueen, "Rep. Mitchell: Time for Something New," 2 October 1985, *Washington Post*: B1.
- 32 Thomas Korosec, "Blacks in Congress: Frustration and Bitterness," 28 March 1982, *Chicago Tribune*: A1.
- 33 Goldwasser, "Liberal's Liberal Mitchell Is Fiscal Conservative."
- 34 Sugawara, "Retiring Mitchell Still Has Passion for Justice."
- 35 Sugawara and McQueen. "Rep. Mitchell: Time for Something New."
- 36 Tom Kenworthy, "Mitchell Teams With Sachs in Md. Race," 3 June 1986, *Washington Post*: B1; Tom Kenworthy and Michael McQueen, "Shaefer, Mikulski Win," 10 September 1986, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 37 Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*: 65–66.
- 38 "Parren J. Mitchell, 85; Maryland Congressman Championed Civil Rights," 30 May 2007, *Los Angeles Times*: B6.



WHEN THE HOUSE PASSED A
WATERED-DOWN VERSION OF A
BILL TO LIMIT TRADE BETWEEN
THE UNITED STATES AND
SOUTH AFRICA, MITCHELL
ANGRILY REMARKED, “YOU CAN’T
COMPROMISE WITH TOTAL EVIL.
YOU CAN’T TAKE A MID-POINT
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