
The lion in winter

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Few outside of Clarence W. Blount's generation can fully understand or appreciate his achievement. We know only that we have an absolute responsibility never to forget.

The late state senator from Northwest Baltimore died April 12 after complications following a stroke. He was 81 years old. He was an educator. A husband. A father. A pioneer. He served in the Maryland Senate for 31 years and carried himself with such great dignity and integrity that he came to be known as that body's conscience.

Those accomplishments are all very well. But to appreciate them fully, they must be understood in context, something only those of Blount's generation are fully equipped to do.

Blount grew up a sharecropper's son in rural North Carolina during the 1920s, at a time when racism, bigotry and the violent oppression of Black aspirations were at their height. His family came to Baltimore in the 1930s, only to find a city so painfully segregated that writers such as Langston Hughes and civil rights leaders such as Thurgood Marshall singled it out for special approbation. Nevertheless, Blount wrested an education from the overcrowded, under-funded schools that had been set aside for Baltimore's Black students.

He became a decorated war hero, then a public school principal. And then, as the civil rights movement gathered steam, he became one of the Black community's most principled and respected advocates for change. He won election to the Maryland Senate in 1971 at a time of unparalleled divisiveness there, a time when a sizable number of his colleagues had already decided that the state had done more than enough to redress past wrongs.

The attitudes of many of his colleagues never changed. But neither did Sen. Blount. For three decades, he fought for the people of this city and this state against a reactionary tide which the mainstream described in euphemistic and overly kind terms that tended to mask the ugliness of their point of view and the ferocity of the conflict.

During the Nixon years, Blount fought against "White backlash." During the Reagan years, he had to contend with "compassion fatigue." In his final years in the senate, he had faced "neo-conservatism."

Whatever the tag, Blount fought tirelessly. He could be angry and unyielding when the occasion demanded. He could be a consensus builder when the tactical situation permitted it.

He carried himself always with quiet, iron dignity that served as a role model to his allies and earned the admiration even of his political opponents. He rose to the leadership position of Senate Majority Leader in 1983 and never relinquished that role until his retirement last year.

When we lay Blount to rest in Woodlawn Cemetery this weekend, we will be laying to rest one of the last giant warriors of a contentious era warriors such as Verda Welcome, Parren J. Mitchell and countless others.

It is a mark of his – of their – legacy that we who follow have a hard time even imagining how hard they had to fight, the tenacity of the obstacles they faced, and the thoroughness of the change they wrought.

We celebrate that legacy. We honor their strength. We renew our eternal vow that their struggle shall never be forgotten and will never have been in vain.