

# Blount declares end to a 32-year political career

'Not going to run again,'  
says Baltimore senator

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Baltimore Sen. Clarence W. Blount came to Annapolis to announce his retirement yesterday. But after 32 years and months of dropped hints, it was still tough to let go.

He praised his colleagues and talked about how good it would be to spend time with his family, but then playfully mused that he could change his mind before Monday's filing deadline.

Finally he was coaxed into saying what everyone present knew was true: "I'm not going to run again."

With those words, the 81-year-old brought an end to one of Maryland's most remarkable political careers: one that took him from a sharecropper's farm in North Carolina to the battlefields of Europe to the inner circle of leadership of the Maryland Senate.

"Bottom line," said Gov. Parris N. Glendening, "is this is a better state because Clarence Blount gave so much of his time."

Blount's announcement that he would not seek re-election after eight terms came at an Annapolis news conference where he threw his support behind Del. Lisa A. Gladden for election to his 41st District seat.

"It's been a mission. I'm very glad that it's over," he said. "I'm beginning to feel relieved."

Blount's decision, which was widely expected, means Baltimore will lose a powerful protector of its interests in Annapolis.

He was the first black senator to hold the position of majority leader — a largely ceremonial

role whose importance he enlarged with his behind-the-scenes influence with governors and the Senate leadership.

Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller, who elevated him to that position 16 years ago, lauded his longtime ally.

"He not only has been the leader in the Senate politically; he's also been the moral leader as well," Miller said. "He's probably one of the

finest orators that has ever spoken on the floor of the Senate."

Over his career, Blount has been one of the few senators whose words — carefully chosen and spoken in the slow drawl of his native North Carolina — could alter the course of a debate. Standing 6-feet-3, lean and unbowed by age, he was in imposing presence whether delivering an impassioned speech or making a routine procedural motion.

When other senators clashed in uncivil tones, it was Blount who would gently admonish them to respect the chamber's tradition of decorum. Invariably, the transgressors would sink in their seats like students scolded by their principal — the position Blount held at Dunbar High School before his election to the Senate in 1970.

In addition to moral authority, Blount has wielded power as one of the four lawmakers — and the only African-American — to chair a Senate standing committee.

In that role he has been a staunch ally of the governor, pushing through major legislation on the environment, minority business and education with only minor alterations.

Glendening said yesterday

that Blount had been more than a supporter, calling the eight-term senator a personal friend and mentor.

"Just about every major piece of legislation I've taken pride in for the last eight years he's had a role in," the governor said.

Born to a sharecropper father, Blount arrived in Baltimore when he was 8 — illiterate and unable to count to 10. He entered first grade at 10 and graduated from Douglass High School at 21.

Soon after he entered Morgan State College in 1941, Blount was drafted. He would spend four years in the segregated Army during World War II, earning a battlefield commission and citations for valor with the 92nd Infantry Division.

Blount graduated from Morgan in 1950 and would remain protective of the historically black institution to the last day of his last legislative session.

He went on to build a career as a teacher and administrator in the Baltimore school system — rising to principal of Dunbar and later executive assistant of what was then the Community College of Baltimore.

A staunch Democrat, Blount won election to the Senate in 1970. When he arrived in Annapolis the next January, Marvin Mandel was governor — the first of five under whom Blount would serve.

The General Assembly that Blount joined was far different from today's legislature. There were only a handful of black legislators — and none held positions of power. Women held no standing committee chairmanships. Miller was across the hall in the House of Delegates.

Blount found a home in the Maryland Senate. A student of history, he relished its traditions. Despite his youthful poverty, he carried himself with aristocratic dignity.

While other African-American senators came and went, he moved steadily into higher ranks of leadership. He became majority leader in 1983 under Senate President Melvin A. Steinberg. In 1987, after supporting Miller's rise to Senate president, Blount became chairman of the standing committee overseeing education and environmental policy. He thus became the first African-American to head a major Senate committee.

Miller said Blount played a crucial role in pushing through the programs of both Glendening and Gov. William Donald

Schaefer, mentioning the construction of Oriole Park at Camden Yards and the Ravens' football stadium.

Through his career, Blount remained free of financial scandal — though he was embroiled in controversy in 1998 when a political rival challenged his right to run in his city district while living in Pikesville much of the time. The Court of Appeals found that he met the standard for residency, however, and he easily won re-election.

Blount said yesterday that he takes pride in his accomplishments in education — “my number one thought.” It was his impassioned speech that in 1997 helped seal approval of a controversial \$250 million plan for restructuring of the Baltimore school system.

The retiring senator said he is also proud of his record in minority business affairs: He helped pass Glendening's increases in the state's goals for minority participation in contracting. And Blount said he takes pride in the projects he brought home to his district — one of the least wealthy in Maryland.

Blount said he's in good health but that after 32 years it's time to put his family first and to leave the Senate to a new generation of leaders.

“I didn't enter it for money. I didn't enter it for glory,” he said. “That I've lasted 32 years is a testament to God's glory and God's goodness.”