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Clarence M. Mitchell, Jr.

The greatest laws of this era — the civil rights laws that guide Americans on how they are to treat one another as human beings — stand as a monument to Clarence M. Mitchell, Jr. As director of the Washington office of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, this outstanding Baltimorean was instrumental in turning around the U.S. Senate on the issue of race. Quite fittingly, he accomplished this immense task by bringing his own human qualities to bear.

In the late Fifties and most of the Sixties, the Senate was under the control of Southern committee chairmen who sought to uphold segregation in the face of a burgeoning civil rights movement. These were courtly lawmakers, well schooled in the parliamentary rules that allowed them to beat back demands for equal treatment.

Outside the Senate, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and other black leaders were fighting through sit-ins, marches, demonstrations, songs and oratory. Live theater was their way of teaching white America what had to be done. The national mood was created that proved indispensable to a breakthrough in the Senate.

Mr. Mitchell rightly decided his technique had to be different. He had to be lawyer, lobbyist, parliamentarian, strategist, negotiator and even psychoanalyst. In dealing with Northern senators eager to compromise, Mr. Mitchell badgered and pushed in friendly fashion to hold them in line. But the Southern senators were key. Mr. Mitchell de-

cidated to win over the likes of Richard Russell, Allen Ellender and Sam Ervin by appealing to their better natures — to that hard kernel of goodness he sought in everyone.

This was not spectacular work. It was not the stuff of headlines. It was a cozy ride on a Senate subway car with Russell Long or careful plotting with Mike Mansfield to make sure Everett Dirksen got enough credit for compromises worked out behind the scenes. Such were Mr. Mitchell's popularity and success that, in the end, he became known as the "101st senator."

While Mr. Mitchell was making national history in Washington, he was patriarch of one of Baltimore's most powerful political families. His brother, Parren Mitchell, sits in Congress; his son, Clarence III, in the Maryland Senate; his son, Michael, in the Baltimore City Council. His wife, Juanita Jackson Mitchell, has long been a towering civil rights activist in her own right.

This newspaper published Sunday columns by Mr. Mitchell after his retirement from the NAACP in 1979. In one of those columns, Mr. Mitchell told about a memorial service for Medgar W. Evers on the 20th anniversary of his assassination. At the end of the service, one of Mr. Evers's grandchildren touched his tombstone and said: "Wake up, Grandpa, I want to thank you for giving me a better world than you had when you were with us."

Americans can thank Clarence Mitchell, who died Sunday at age 73, for giving us a better world.