



Photos by Associated Press, Bertram L. Merritt, and Bob Burchette — The Washington Post
Jannita Jackson Mitchell, left, Clarence Mitchell Jr., right, and seated surrounded by grandchildren, daughters-in-law and their four sons, standing from left, Clarence M. Mitchell III, George Davis Mitchell, Dr. Keiffer Jackson Mitchell and Michael Bowen Mitchell.

Mitchells of Maryland: Standing Up, Speaking Out

By Jacqueline Trescott

It happens everytime a Mitchell runs for office. The compact cars of the brothers, wives and cousins are loaded with speakers and they wind through the Baltimore streets broadcasting "There's a bright, young black who'll work for you" in City Hall, the State House or Congress. Mitchells are pounding on doors, selling tickets to cook-outs, and preaching from soapboxes. The senior Mrs. Mitchell runs her short fingers down her thick black book and calls all her friends for campaign contributions. Then on election day her husband drives his neighbors to

the polls before they all convene on Druid Hill Avenue, the family homestead, to celebrate.

"We are the black Kennedys," Maryland State Senator Clarence Mitchell III once told an interviewer. "When we sit down as a family and decide what each shall do in the public sector, it is done."

So it is that the Mitchells of Maryland, one of America's remarkable political families, have scored high on successes. Poorhouse candidates by Kennedy-checkbook standards, nevertheless since the

Depression the Mitchells, and a branch of the family by marriage, the Jacksons, have wielded considerable power in Maryland. And while the Mitchell tribe today eschews the comparison to the Kennedy style, the Kennedy parallel is only half the story, the political half.

Before some family members actively entered politics, others had made their impact felt in the civil rights arena. Spurred on by an almost religious pledge, the older generations' names became synonymous with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and they were catapulted to national renown.

Though civil rights activities have often been a springboard for black political careers, especially during the '60s and after, what makes the Mitchells' pattern unusual among black families is that, from goals of collective achievements, they have recycled those same energies and talents into individual aspirations in a systematic, deliberate and unified way.

Because of their ardor, leading to arrogance in some cases, and their longevity, they are both loved and

hated. "That's a family where no one has ever said, 'I'm going to make it on my own.' No, they are a collective training farm," says one observer. "And their greatest defense is that when you fight one, you have to fight them all," says G. James Fleming, 73, a political scientist at Morgan State College and newspaper columnist. "Very few families, black or white, can show that togetherness. Each generation has had to fight and those achievements override their idiosyncrasies."

See MITCHELL, D3, Col. 1

The Mitchells of Maryland: Standing Up, Speaking Out

MITCHELL, From D1

The foremost Mitchell is Clarence Mitchell Jr., 64, who for the last three decades has run the NAACP's Washington office.

As the leading civil rights lobbyist, Mitchell Jr.'s the man who pounded on congressional doors, bent presidential ears and guided some of the most important social legislation of this and any generation from dreams through the dizzy legislative litany of H.R. 2020Z to reality. Stripped of all its paper grandeur, that reality meant that Brother and Sister Jones in Hattiesburg, Miss., could go to the polls and vote or sit down at the Crossroads Cafe and order a glass of milk.

His brother, Parren J. Mitchell, 53, was the first black elected to Congress from Maryland and is now in his third term. One of Mitchell Jr.'s four sons, Clarence M. Mitchell III, 36, has been a member of the Maryland legislature for 14 years. Michael Bowen Mitchell, 30, an attorney, was elected to the Baltimore City Council last November.

Juanita Jackson Mitchell, the lobbyist's wife and an attorney, has taken her turn as an indomitable force on all levels of politics. Daughter of a crusader, Mrs. Mitchell was the first black on the law-review journal of the University of Maryland Law School in the late '40s, years after she had been denied entrance to the school because of her race. Through her work as state president of the NAACP, she argued many of Baltimore's landmark desegregation cases, and she also was elected to the state's Constitutional Convention.

It was her mother, Lillie May Jackson, who shaped the Jackson-Mitchell alliance into a fearless machine of civic involvement. With the late Carl Murphy, founder of the Afro-American newspaper chain, she ran black Baltimore, and her children and grandchildren's lives were often the test cases.

In Lillie Jackson's 35 years at the helm of the Baltimore NAACP, from 1935-1970, she built that membership from dormancy to 18,000 members at its peak, probably the largest NAACP branch of its day. "I'd rather the devil got after me than Dr. Jackson (a title from an honorary degree). Give her what she wants," one Maryland governor once said in an expression of her impact.

Though now they are not directly involved in civil rights, Mitchell Jr.'s other children are achievers. Keiffer Jackson Mitchell, 34, was the first black doctor on the staff of the Greater

Baltimore Medical Center and is now a faculty member at Johns Hopkins Medical School. The youngest son, George Davis Mitchell, 24, is a bailiff at the city's Juvenile Court, and there are 7 grandchildren yet to groom.

"The white man took the country away from the Indians with firewater, let's keep our minds clear," urged Lillie Jackson as she rallied her friends to keep taverns and pool halls out of their neighborhoods. To this attractive woman, who marched in subdued dresses, sensible shoes and brimmed hats, bars only brought the nuisances of molesting and profanity. They destroyed character and above all, she told her four children and 10 grands, "A man must be honest, fair and decent."

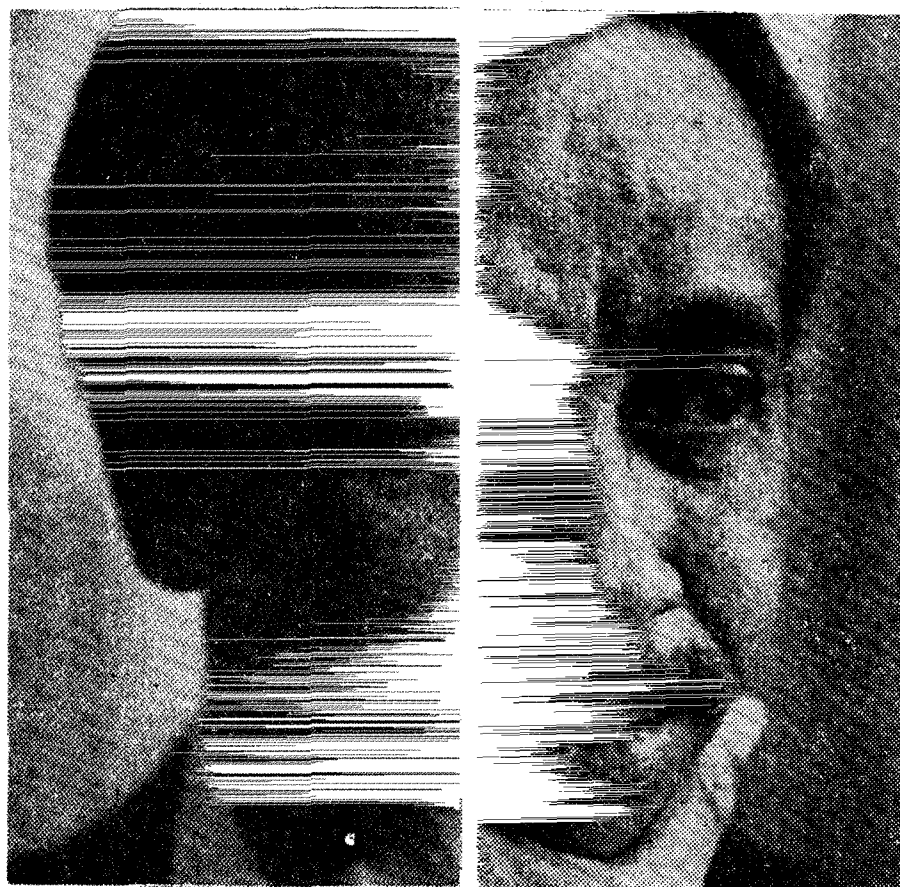
Across the generations the family has dared to speak out for its fairness-rooted principles. And Mrs. Jackson's unwavering faith (she picketed one theater for seven years) crystallized the family's belief in the marriage of words and action.

Juanita Mitchell wanted to swim. So she took a few of her nieces and walked into the Chesapeake Bay. When they emerged, the state officials were pointing to the "white only" sign on Sandy Point, then a new and attractive beach, not far from the one reserved for blacks described as "makeshift." The incident became known as "The Lonesome Case" because when Mrs. Mitchell called her plaintiffs in court no one was there. But she won the case anyway and the beach was integrated.

On every office wall of the Maryland Mitchell family there's a snapshot of Mitchell Jr. and Lyndon Baines Johnson. In one the NAACP lobbyist and the President are matched—sloped nose to nose, shoulder-to-shoulder. He's probably offering the kind of encouragement that sealed his friendship with Johnson and many others. "I looked around the room and only one voice boomed 'we can do it,'" Johnson once said, "That was Mitchell."

Not because he's a friend of Presidents but because he quietly has effected immeasurable changes in black lives, though minorities aren't his only concern, Mitchell was honored with his own day here last week.

A coalition of Jewish, Republican, Catholic, Democratic, labor and other groups involved in civil rights — all members of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, which he helped start and now serves as legislative chairman, celebrated his life and times at a huge luncheon, a Washington ritual he has rarely shared, and an evening reception,



Rep. Parren Mitchell: "He lost his first bid for Congress in 1968 but now he runs unopposed."

another rite rarely on his priority list. In fact, Mitchell tried to squelch the entire testimonial, lamenting to his brother Parren, "This is only taking people away from their work."

"Mr. Clean" is one of Mitchell Jr.'s nicknames — so called for his religious convictions, courage, creativity and impenetrable optimism. All protected — some day blinded — by an iron authority, inflexibility and sizeable ego that emerges when someone threatens his lobbyist territory. "Once he makes up his mind he doesn't change. I've never seen anyone change his mind," observes one friend. "And he will roll up his sleeves to defend his position."

From some outside the loyal Mitchell coterie, he receives an ambivalent evaluation, for while it is generally recognized that he made an invaluable contribution in a time when it was downright dangerous to shout for black anything, some feel he hasn't changed with the times. For example, in last year's heated battle over the tensions of the Voting Rights Act, Mitchell opposed the inclusion of a Spanish-speaking citizens clause in the main section as a political expedient, but the move alienated some

Congresspersons and Chicano-interest groups.

More recently some blacks have been very critical of his work at the United Nations, where he served as a public delegate to the U.S. mission last session, because he unrelentingly supported the controversial U.S. Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who a decade ago criticized black family structure, and more recently harshly characterized some Third World interests. Some have even accused Mitchell of being a State Department pawn, but he appears unruffled at the criticism and almost disbelieving that they don't see things his way.

Inside the Congressional Black Caucus, a group Mitchell praises though once it was thought he was against an organization of only black representatives, there are feelings that Mitchell hasn't reached out to younger people who would like to be lobbyists. "Mitchell feels he is an institution within himself, which is true," one strategist, 30 years his junior, said. "If he goes tomorrow the valuable teacher is gone and we are back to where we started."

When asked what accomplishment he's most proud of, Mitchell raises his bushy eyebrows and the arched lines

around his generous mouth relax. Leaning back from the scarred wooden desk in his downtown Washington office, he speaks slowly. "I never answer that question." The former Episcopalian altar boy and now trustee board chairman of his Methodist church, fingers a mound of pink message slips and goes on, "I don't use the word pride. Part of a religious background teaches that you're not supposed to be proud of anything you've done yourself."

"Don't take anything from anyone," was the simple way Clarence and Elsie Mitchell prepared their sons, Clarence Jr. and Parren, and their six other children for racial bias.

The Mitchell parents, both descendants of Maryland families, weren't community activists but gave their children strong religious foundations, a respect for education and hard work and a sharp sense of self-pride which became part of their success drive.

Around the mahogany table in their plain Baltimore home, without central heating but with plenty of books and magazines, Clarence was told, "as each child learns something, you must pass it on to the younger ones." It was just after World War I when 10-year-old Mitchell Jr. started hauling wood, coal and ice in a wheelbarrow his father, a musician, helped him build. Parren, almost 10 years his junior, worked as an elevator operator and delivery boy. Later Clarence Jr. would skate between his day and night jobs to save money.

When he became a father Mitchell Jr. instilled similar goals and traditions, insisting, for example, that all the families' birthdays be celebrated together to show each individual's worth.

"I often didn't understand why he wasn't there for those father-son banquets. What was a filibuster? Why did my mother look frightened if he didn't call and say he missed the train?" said Mitchell, now the state senator. But he made up for it. He's a Christian and affectionate man.

When he had time to relax at his home, Mitchell Jr. built bookcases, tended to his rose garden behind the inner-city home the family has occupied for the last 35 years, and wrote poetic notes to his children about their wrongdoings. He made sure they were at the dinner table when guests like Mary McLeod Bethune, Eleanor Roosevelt, Walter White, Charles Houston and Jackie Robinson came by after NAACP rallies.

It was only natural that when blacks

made the transition from community action into elected politics in increased numbers in the 1960s, the Mitchells were part of the movement.

Parren Mitchell, who was first elected to Congress in 1970, had graduated from Morgan in 1950, then waged a typical Mitchell legal battle to become the first black graduate student at the College Park campus of the University of Maryland before he used his sociology training in a series of local and state jobs. He lost his first bid for Congress in 1968 but now he runs unopposed. Last year he made a bid for mayor of Baltimore but withdrew after a few weeks and his filing was seen more as a move to call attention to the paucity of blacks in official Maryland than as an indication of his intention to wage a serious campaign.

Insiders on the Hill says he's well-respected and one comments, "People like him because he does his own homework, handles his press and is available. He's considered impetuous and sometimes relies too much on the family name, but he's his own man."

Since his early entry into politics at age 22, Mitchell III has had a controversial career. First in the State Assembly, now in the Senate where he is deputy majority leader, his civil rights stands have followed his father's lead. He is considered a party faithful, though he has openly criticized Mandel, and seems to be compatible with the rough-and-tumble of Maryland politics.

Early in his political career he exposed a bribe, an action that brought him general respect. But he has been served with several indictments, accusing him of unpaid property taxes, failure to file income-tax returns and splitting a bribe. All were later dropped. He is also the family manager of its sizable property holdings in the inner-city which each election time brings renewed charges of "slum landlord" on the family.

In 1967 Mitchell III ran unsuccessfully for Baltimore City Council president and years later made an unsuccessful bid for the Democratic primary in the mayor's race. Here, some observers feel, the Mitchell determination to dominate hampered the drive to elect a black mayor.

Now a city councilman, Mitchell has a dream. "We will always be involved in politics," he says. "And I can see the day I run for President... my father going down Druid Hill, knocking on doors and driving people to the polls. And I would try to be the kind of decent, honest voice my father has been. He says anything is possible."