

MY TRIBUTE TO A LEGEND

by

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On May 28, 2007, our nation lost a giant in the Black community and a pioneer for the ability of small businesses to receive a fair share of government contracts. Representative Parren J. Mitchell (D-MD) died in a Baltimore nursing home at the age of 85 after suffering from complications from pneumonia.

From 1983 until 1986 I had the privilege to work as legal counsel to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Small Business. Representative Mitchell was the Chairman of this Committee. During this time I was able to participate and witness first hand the masterful work of “Parren”, as he was affectionately known, in spearheading legislation that would establish aggressive programs to increase federal contract awards to small and minority businesses. As the champion for small business and the “godfather” of minority business, Parren worked tirelessly to ensure that federal agencies and major prime contractors fulfilled their legal requirement to support the small and minority business program. Parren was a tough, fiery and outspoken advocate for small and minority businesses, and most government officials and major prime contractors feared testifying before his Committee. They knew that their prepared testimony would not be good enough for Parren. He pushed the government and corporate contracting officials to recognize that small and minority businesses were essential to the government industrial base and he would not accept the perennial argument of “lack of capacity” as an excuse for not engaging these companies.



Parren authored Public Law 95-507 which, among other things, gave strength to the offices within executive agencies charged with advocating for small businesses also known as the Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization (OSDBU). Through this law, he put teeth in the government subcontracting program for small businesses and devised liquidated damages for noncompliance. Parren recognized that small businesses are the engine of innovation and thus created the Small Business Innovation and Research (SBIR) Program. He realized the critical need for small business contractors to receive timely government payments and authored the Prompt Payment Act. In 1982, Parren was responsible for the 10 percent minority business goal for the award of government contracts in the public works area under the Surface Transportation Assistance Act. This legislation paved the way for the numerous statutory goal programs that the federal government now has for contracting with various categories within the small business community. He was the catalyst behind the legislation assigning a 5 percent goal to the Department of Defense for contract awards to minority businesses. Clearly the list is endless regarding the social and economic impact that Parren Mitchell had during his tenure in the United States Congress. Once he retired from the Congress he carried on his work through the Minority Business Legal Defense and Education Fund (MBELDEF). Unfortunately the organization lacks strong support and funding needed to sustain viability.



In October 2006, I had the honor and the pleasure to receive an award of excellence from the Parren Mitchell Foundation. This foundation was founded by Retired Colonel Theodore Adams, now deceased, to further Parren’s legacy of effective leadership and ensuring equal opportunity for all, particularly minority business enterprise. Receipt of this award was extremely special to me. As the Director of the Office of Small Business Programs for the Department of the Army, I attribute my indoctrination to the area of government procurement and the ability to lead the Federal Government in contracting with small businesses, to working for Parren Mitchell. I last saw Parren at the Foundation dinner. He was 82. He had suffered physically and his body was weak. It was quite obvious that while his communication was slight, his spirit was alive and well. It is imperative that we keep the spirit of Representative Parren J. Mitchell alive and continue to advocate for much greater participation of small businesses and all the sub categories, in government contracting. And...when the government touts how well it is doing in meeting procurement goals in the small business arena, understand the real reason why.

