

## Tri-City Herald Editorial Board

7/15/05

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### Our Voice

# Art Fletcher: The poor have lost their hero

People living outside political circles might not appreciate the power Art Fletcher carried, but those who knew him know he was one of the most influential men in recent American history.

The former Pasco city councilman died this week at the age of 80 at his Washington, D.C., home. The legacy he leaves behind is astounding.

He helped prove a black man could be a force in politics at a time when blacks in some parts of the country were afraid to vote. Most notably, he shaped the nation's equal opportunity and affirmative action policies when the fight against discrimination was just beginning.

As a young man, Fletcher became the first black to play football for the Baltimore Colts and later the Los Angeles Rams. Wounds suffered during World War II in a segregated army ended his football career.

After the war, he ended up as a teacher in rural Kansas in the 1950s, becoming involved in efforts to overturn school segregation. In fact, Fletcher was the last living member of nine original plaintiffs involved in the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* case, which led to the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that ordered nationwide integration of public schools.

He always was a champion of human rights, and fiercely fought to improve the economic fate of blacks. When he moved to Pasco in the late 1960s, Fletcher created the East Pasco Self-Help Cooperative, a neighborhood development corpora-

tion helping blacks start their own businesses.

In 1967, he became the first black person ever elected to a city council in the Tri-Cities. That election night, another black man won in Seattle, making the two of them the first black men in the state to win city council seats.

Not long after, he won the Republican primary for lieutenant governor of Washington by a 2-1 margin. He lost to the incumbent during the November election slightly by less than 50,000 votes out of 1.2 million cast. The close race caught the attention of President Richard Nixon who appointed Fletcher assistant secretary for the Department of Labor, where he was in charge of stopping employment discrimination. Later, Nixon appointed him chairman of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission.

Fletcher always was a staunch Republican, but in recent interviews lamented his party's shift to a far-right agenda that hurt the poor and minorities.

"I find the Republican Party condemning people for being poor," he once said. He also criticized Republican candidates for talking about family and religious values while at the same time "not being charitable."

The poor still need a champion, someone with the political force to speak up for them.

If anything, that's what Fletcher did, and our country is much better for it.