

Remarks of Senator Edward M. Kennedy
100th Birthday Tribute to Mike Mansfield
Washington, D.C.
April 2, 2003

I'm grateful to Mark Shields for that very generous introduction. It's an honor to be here with Mike Mansfield's daughter Anne, with Howard Baker, with Max Baucus and my other colleagues from the Senate, and so many other friends for this centennial tribute to Mike.

It's especially fitting that we honor Mike in this Library that reminds us of so many treasures of the nation's past -- because Mike Mansfield is certainly one of those treasures, and he always will be.

It's hard to believe that only eight Senators are still serving who had the rare privilege of serving with Mike in the Senate. It seems like only yesterday that he was our Majority Leader. It's a bit unfair that Democrats have lost Mike -- and lost our majority too.

But history has a way of repeating itself. In many ways, Tom Daschle is a lot like Mike Mansfield, so that may mean we'll have Tom back as our Majority Leader before long.

I have to say to Howard Baker though, it must be something in the Tennessee water -- that keeps producing Tennessee Republican Majority Leaders for the Senate.

Besides our many years together in the Senate, Howard and I have one other thing in common -- we both tried our hand at running for President in 1980. Things didn't quite work out the way we hoped.

But at least the nation's voters gave Howard a nice consolation prize. They made him Majority Leader when he came back to the Senate. They wouldn't even let me keep my committee chairmanship.

Needless to say, Howard and I had immense respect for Mike Mansfield -- and so did 98 other Senators each year on both sides of the aisle.

I'll always be grateful to Mike for the way he took me in and took me under his very gentle wing when I landed on his doorstep in 1962. I was all of 30 and had a willingness to learn -- but not much else on my own. Mike was always ready to take me in. He even let me be his Whip for a couple of years -- until Bob Byrd, who knew how to do the job, took over. I used to joke in those days that the Majority Whip was the name of a leather bar in Malibu.

Actually, I inherited Mike from my brother Jack. After serving together in the House for six years, Mike and Jack both moved to the Senate in 1952, and they served together on the Foreign Relations Committee.

That's how Jack became so impressed with Mike's expertise on Asia. He knew that Mike had been a Professor of Far East History in Montana, and that FDR had sent Mike as a freshman Congressman in 1944 on a special mission to Asia to assess the likely challenges we'd face there after World War II.

That's why, in his thousand days in the White House, Jack had so much respect for Mike's insights on Indochina and Vietnam, and they had serious discussions about it. One of the great "what ifs" of our history in those years is what might have happened differently if their discussions had continued.

One of my favorite pictures from those years is the photo of three Senators playing softball. The year is 1958. Scoop Jackson is at bat, Jack is playing catcher, and the umpire looking over Jack's shoulder is Mike Mansfield. Scoop is in mid-swing. You can see the ball just about to reach his bat. Jack is crouched behind the plate poised to catch it. And Mike has his right arm straight out -- about to call it a strike.

In some ways, that photo says it all about Mike. He always called 'em as he saw 'em -- the fairest umpire we ever saw. And all of us who had the privilege to serve with him saw that fairness in action in full splendor every day, year in and year out for 16 years, when Mike became our Leader in 1961.

Wisdom, integrity, fairmindedness, compassion, humanity, humility -- he had all those virtues and more, and he had them in abundance. They guided his daily life for all those years and they guided us too.

Mike was proud of his Irish immigrant parents, and it must have been the luck of the Irish that put him on the path in the Senate to be Majority Leader. The Democratic Whip under LBJ had been defeated in the 1956 election, and LBJ asked George Smathers to be the next whip. When George turned it down, LBJ chose Mike. When LBJ became Vice President in 1961, Mike became Senate Leader -- and a new age began for the Senate.

People speak of the Webster-Clay-Calhoun years as the Golden Age of the Senate -- but you could say the same thing about the Mansfield years.

The Great Society was Lyndon Johnson's great achievement, but it could never have happened without Mike Mansfield's Senate and all the landmark legislation on civil rights and voting rights and Medicare and social justice that so transformed our nation for the better in those tumultuous years.

Of course, as we all knew, it happened with a little trademark push and tug now and then from -- Charlie Ferris.

We all have our special memories of Mike and how he accomplished so much. His legendary “Yups” and “Nopes” and “Could Be’s” endeared him to everyone -- if you don’t count the press. I used to think of him in terms of the motto of the Army Air Force in World War II -- “The difficult we do immediately. The impossible takes a little longer.”

That’s how 18 year olds got the right to vote. The year was 1970, and in those difficult times for our nation in Vietnam, more and more of us in Congress had begun to feel that if 18-year-olds were old enough to fight, they were old enough to vote.

A few of us felt we could lower the voting age by statute, instead of by constitutional amendment. A distinguished constitutional lawyer had suggested the idea, and other constitutional lawyers agreed with us. So we went ahead and prepared to add our proposal to the Voting Rights Act about to be approved by Congress that year.

We suddenly held back, though, when many of our colleagues in the House and the Senate felt they had to oppose the strategy, fearing it might jeopardize passage of the overall Voting Rights Act. Mike saw it differently. He felt so strongly about the basic fairness of the idea that he proposed it himself as an amendment to the bill. It sailed through the Senate and the House, and President Nixon signed it into law. Mike had made all the difference, just as he did on so many other vital challenges that have made our country a stronger and better and fairer land.

As David Broder wrote in awe a few years ago, after a lunch with Mike when Mike was 96 -- when you talked with Mike Mansfield, you left his company thinking a nation that produces such a citizen might make it through another century.

He never sought and never wanted any credit for anything he did. As Majority Leader for 16 years, it was said that he lived by the words of the ancient Chinese philosopher and poet Lao-Tse, whose philosophy of a virtuous life could be summed up in three words -- “acting without acting”.

As he wrote over two thousand years ago, “A leader is best when people barely know he exists. Of a good leader, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say, we did this ourselves.”

Under Mike, the Senate came close to being the sort of Senate the Founding Fathers had in mind when they gave us the Constitution. One of the highest tributes that can be paid to any citizen is to say that he could have been a Founding Father. It’s rarely said, but we’ve been saying it in recent days about the loss of Pat Moynihan, and we said it about Mike Mansfield.

During those great years we had with him, all of us who knew Mike knew Maureen too, and we will never forget how much she meant to him, and he to her. He always said he owed everything to her, and I have no doubt that if she were still with us,

we would be holding this tribute dinner to celebrate her birthday, or he wouldn't have come.

For Mike, it was always first things first. As far as he was concerned, it was never Mike and Maureen -- it was always Maureen and Mike.

He was a man of few words, but what golden words they were. Perhaps the most beautiful and moving of all were those he spoke in grief about Maureen when she left him. It was less than two weeks after their 68th wedding anniversary, and this is part of what Mike said that sad day:

We met -- she was 24 and I was 26. She was a high school teacher.

I was a miner in the copper mines of Butte.

She was a college graduate. I had not finished the 8th grade.

She urged me to achieve a better education.

I followed her advice.

She took me out of the mines and brought me to the surface.

She gave up her teaching job. She cashed in her insurance.

Maureen was very politically oriented. I was not.

In 1940, she urged me to run for Congress. We campaigned together.

We finished next to last.

The day after the election, she put us on the campaign trail for the next election, and we won.

In 1952, she got us elected to the Senate.

In 1977, we decided, after talking it over, to retire.

But President Carter asked me if we would be interested in becoming the U.S. Ambassador to Japan.

Maureen said we should accept, and we did.

And when President Reagan called and asked us to stay, we did -- for almost 12 years.

She sat in the shadow. I stood in the limelight.

She gave all of herself to me. I sacrificed nothing.

Without her, I would have been little or nothing.

She was responsible for my life.

Now, and in the years to come, we will always remember Maureen and Mike and those priceless qualities -- especially the quality of humility -- that made Mike such a giant of our time. We each have our favorite stories of Mike. But perhaps the greatest story of all and one of the greatest stories of the American dream is a love story -- the story of Maureen and Mike. We miss them both, and we always will.