Remarks at Harry Truman Dinner

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001
Statement of Senator Mike Mansfield of Montana

My Fellow Democrats:

It is not only encouraging to have so many Democrats come from so many parts of the country, but it is downright pleasant to have the opportunity to talk to people of like political affiliation on matters, not as we would wish them to be, not as Madison Avenue advertises them to be, but as they actually are. We Democrats do not assume that all of our troubles begin abroad and end at the water's edge - or perhaps I should say, at the stratosphere's limits. The eyes of Washington may be glued to the earth satellites and their hypnotic, symbolic, orbiting of the earth. That is not necessarily the case with citizens elsewhere in the nation. There is an awareness, a growing awareness, that our national problems are larger than a mere matching of some particular Soviet achievement in the realm of science or military techniques. There is increasing concern not only with this one aspect of our affairs but with the total state of the Union.

We cannot, in an absorption with what goes on abroad, lose sight of what is going on at home.

The point bears repeating at this time. It bears repeating because there are domestic difficulties which adversely affect millions of citizens and they cannot be covered with a gloss of official optimism. It bears
repeating because these difficulties, in turn, have a great influence on the position of the United States in the world. They affect our capacity to defend the nation and they affect our capacity to bring about a durable peace.

These domestic difficulties have an international meaning because foreign policy is not unrelated to other aspects of our national life. It is not a thing apart. If we sink at home, sooner or later we shall sink abroad. If the Union is strong, cohesive and dynamic, there is at least a chance that foreign policy will be able to safeguard the nation's security, to advance the welfare of our people and to further the hope of peace. If the Union is weak, divided and fearful, foreign policy can do little to uphold our position as a nation among many nations. In short, to the extent that we face the difficulties within our borders and deal with them, we shall be able to act on the much more complex difficulties that beset us abroad.

Let me turn my remarks to the domestic situation. I suggest that we shift our eyes for a moment from the distant reaches of space and glance around us, first, at the economic situation. Look at the State of Michigan, at Pennsylvania, the State of Montana, at Maine or Alabama. Look at the mining industry, the steel industry, the aircraft, automobile and farm equipment industries, the textile industry. Look at the unemployment figures. Look at the condition of small enterprise, at the decline of business profits and take-home pay, and look at the level of prices. It does not require a one-hundred inch
telescope for this exploration. It does not require a high-speed electronic computer to discover that the economic map of the United States is pock-marked with craters of distress.

These are times, however, in which it is regarded as somewhat vulgar to see situations that have not first been tinted by the reassuring techniques of the Administration's press agents. It is not pleasant political manners to mention uncomfortable economic facts. It is much more acceptable to accent the positive and, after all, 1957 was the best year of our history. One can hear reputable economists assure us that six months hence all will be well, and the economy will once again be riding the beam or the boom. As for unemployment, moving now towards the five million mark, these same economists will tell you that that is an inevitable part of the "rolling readjustment". Distress in particular areas and industries? These are merely temporary phenomena connected with the "leveling off" of the boom.

These terms have a kind of painless, inoffensive, almost pleasant sound. But ask the miner of copper in Butte, unemployed for months, what they mean. Ask the men who manage these mines. Ask a steel worker in Pittsburgh, the timberjack in western Montana, or a weaver in New England. Ask the man who runs a small business, in these and other places. They may very well use that unmentionable word "depression" and speak of their fears of it.
The term may be too strong to describe the situation in which we now find ourselves. Nevertheless, we ought not to ignore the damage which this situation is already doing to millions of citizens. We ought not to underestimate the present and potential impact of this situation, whatever it is called, on our position in the world.

Here in Washington, it may seem logical to give a high priority to foreign policy matters. These are indeed urgent matters. Is it unreasonable, however, for those who have been adversely affected by the economic decline at home to ask why foreign aid takes precedence over their own very real difficulties? Is it unreasonable for those who have been adversely affected by the reciprocal trade program to raise questions as to the value of the program?

It is all very well to talk in abstract terms of long-range national benefits from these and other foreign policies. They can, indeed, provide such benefits. Individual citizens, however, do not live on abstractions. When their personal and immediate problems are overlooked by government, they are not likely to appreciate abstractions. Sooner or later, this lack of public appreciation will be reflected in legislative action and foreign policy may well suffer in consequence.

We may not now be in a period of general economic crisis. It is irresponsible, however, to dismiss the possibility that we might be headed in that direction. It is irresponsible to ignore the plight of those Americans
who have already been rolled aside by the rolling readjustment. It is irresponsible to expect human beings to appreciate long-range national problems of government when their immediate and personal plight is overlooked by government.

We had better not wait too long and come forth with too little to reverse present economic trends. We had better make certain that the legal remedies for this type of situation, most of which were set up in the 1930's, are still adequate in this new era of automation.

Let us take the first step now by sweeping aside the cozy optimism that enshrouds about us and by recognizing honestly and openly that our economic house is not in order. The Russians did not make this situation. The satellites in the sky have nothing to do with it. We made this situation ourselves and it is up to us to correct it.

My purpose in beginning these remarks as I have was not only to call attention to the persistence of domestic difficulties which have importance in themselves to the people of this country but also to emphasize their significance as a factor in our relations with other nations. These domestic difficulties are in a very real sense the neglected dimension of foreign policy. We have looked without and above for the danger signals and well we should. At the same time, we have overlooked the warning signs within. These inner difficulties do not disappear simply because there may be more complex difficulties confronting us from outside. Internal difficulties cannot be swept
out of sight by sweeping the skies with a radar screen. If we are free men, in spirit as well as words, we shall not put them aside. We shall face them and do the best we can to deal with them. We shall recognise them in all humility, for what they are, measurements of our own national shortcomings as a free society. We shall see them, as they are, limitations on our total national unity and strength and, therefore, on our position in the world.

This country shall not survive in recognizable form in the world of today and tomorrow, much less lead it, if we build Maginot Lines out of alliances and bases around the world and stud the sky with artificial stars, only to permit disunity, inertia and fear to produce decay at the core. We will survive and we may lead if we face honestly our economic, moral, intellectual and military shortcomings at home and act with determination to meet them.

That is the first requisite for the survival and growth of the United States. It is not the only requisite. We shall not remain a nation with hope for future generations of Americans and with a message for the world unless, at the same time, we face the responsibilities and the difficulties of living on this earth of many nations, unless we face these responsibilities and difficulties with quiet courage, with wisdom and with deep human understanding. We will survive, grow, and perhaps lead, in short, only if we keep alive the meaning, the creative and the compassionate meaning, of a free America both at home and in the world.
If the Administration will not or cannot face up to the economic
difficulties confronting our country, then it will be up to the Congress, under
the leadership of Lyndon Johnson in the Senate and Sam Rayburn in the House,
to undertake programs which will alleviate and correct the present economic
situation and to once again give hope rather than despair to the American
people. This will be done through a series of suggestions and proposals
which have already been discussed in the Congress and in legislative measures
which have been introduced into the Congress.

In the Senate, under the leadership of such men as Senators
Sparkman, Gore, Fulbright, Douglas, Humphrey, Bible, Pastore, Monroney,
and others, the Democrats intend to do their best to see to it that in our dis-
cussion of things astronomical, we will not lose sight of the importance of
matters close to home. We will operate on a basis of responsibility to the
end that our defense posture will be made strong, our foreign policy made
sound, and our domestic economy made secure. If any of these are weak,
all will be weak.

To the end that we can do it, we pledge to the people of this
country our utmost efforts to strengthen all facets of the American pattern
and to do it in as responsible and as understanding a way as possible.