The American Political Scene

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001
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Address by Senator Mike Mansfield (D., Montana)
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We are in the midst of the political campaign of 1962. Yet, it is not my intention to discuss this campaign, except incidentally. For, I am not here, tonight, as a Democrat which I am. Nor do I speak to you as a Senator in the Congress of the United States which by the grace of the people of this state I am. I am with you, rather, as one Montanan among other Montanans--Democrats, Republicans and Independents. And most of all I am here to speak with young Montanans as a former Professor of History and out of such knowledge as two decades of experience in the Congress may have given me.

It might be more dramatic, perhaps, if I were to discuss the issues of the impending election or, perhaps, the record of the 87th Congress. But the discussion would also be more transitory. No matter how important it may seem at the moment, the record of the 87th Congress is likely to be of interest primarily to historians a decade hence. And not long after November sixth, the passions of the current political campaign will cool. What seems urgent now will seem less so then. In time today's issues will become old issues. And, in time, new issues will emerge to excite future voters.
But regardless of this election or subsequent elections, Montana will still be here. So will the United States. And certain fundamental political matters--of which the work of the last Congress and the issues of the present campaign are but a fleeting reflection--will also be with us.

Now, does this mean that elections are unimportant? That the work of a Congress is trivial? It does not mean that at all. Every election is of great importance. Every Congress--for better or for worse--transacts public business which is also of great importance.

What I am trying to suggest is that elections and Congresses need to be seen in terms of the long history of American politics. In this deeper perspective, any single election, is not a be-all and end-all. Elections are, rather, the forks and the turns in a long journey. The decisions which the voters make at these critical points--at the turning points, at the forks--may prolong the journey. But whatever the decisions--the journey will go on.

What, then, is this long political journey on which we are embarked as a nation--this ultimate objective? It is one which began with the birth of the nation. It is the continuing effort to secure both the common good and equal opportunity for each individual American to do what he will with his life, consistent with the common good.

Basically that is what politics is all about, whether it be local, state or federal. If I confine my remarks to the federal scene, it is because, in our times, Washington has come to occupy the key position in the effort to insure the common good and the right of equal opportunity to every American.

It used to be that the federal government did not have a great deal to do with the basic political interests of Americans. In the frontier days, the average citizen was far more concerned in and far more affected by the
politics of his community or, at most, his state. Washington was a distant place in meaning to him as well as in miles. Indeed, all government was relatively unimportant to the shepherd or herdsman on the range. And once government had deeded his property it was of little importance to the early homesteader.

But times have changed. With education, with the improvements in communication and transportation, our individual needs and expectations have changed. Agriculture has changed. Industry and commerce have changed. And the rest of the world and its meaning for us as individuals have changed.

To independence which has been, from the outset, a major characteristic of American life has been added a great increase in the factor of a broad interdependence which has also been a characteristic of American life from the beginning. Those who went west in the early days were independent men and women, but they were also interdependent men and women in the sense, for example, that they traveled in wagon trains and formed communities for mutual protection, mutual aid and mutual comfort. The interdependence was not always one of choice. Rather it was one, largely, of necessity. And the growth of interdependence in our day is also not always one of choice but of necessity. The changes in our society and world have meant a change in the pattern of national government and politics. Community and State remain important to us in our lives as individuals, but the nation as a unit has grown in importance to us.

And it is hardly surprising. It was not necessary for anyone to plan or conspire to bring about this change. The federal government had to play a greater role, if we were to survive as a single free nation. Let me cite some comparatively recent examples of changing needs: How else—except through the federal government—would we have met the demands of the great
depression, with millions out of work and reduced to desperation in community after community, state after state? How else—except through the federal government—would we have met the demands of survival in World War II, with millions of people swept up into the armed services and transplanted to the far corners of the earth and millions of others funneled into industrial centers throughout the nation?

How, today, would we be able to find a safe-path for the nation—for the common good—in a world of vast change, except through the intensified use of the instrumentalities of the federal government? How, today, would we begin to deal with industrialization and automation which has spread industry across state borders, from coast to coast and has altered the pattern of livelihood for millions upon millions of people who work for a living? How would we deal with the technological revolution in agriculture which has deluged us with commodities while it has denuded the land of farmers and the farm families? How would we begin to move into the age of space-exploration, which involves the integrated use of science, industry and labor drawn from almost every state in the union?

We cannot escape these realities of our times. We have to face the fact that it is not possible for government and politics to remain fixed in the forms of the late 19th century or even the early 20th century, while all the rest of our society and the world evolves in the drastically altered patterns of the second half of the 20th century. In short, we must ask ourselves is it reasonable to expect stagecoach government while the rest of the nation moves over the threshold of the era of travel through space?

Believe me, I can appreciate a longing for simpler times, a nostalgia for a world that it is not more. In many ways, it was a gentler world and, perhaps, even a happier world. But the surest way to make the present
world less happy and less gentle, is to fail to face its realities, to fail to meet them as responsibly and as honestly as we can.

To a great extent, we are measuring up to these responsibilities. As the world and our nation have changed so, too, has our government. Even as we now have, for example, nationwide business, massive labor organization and big agriculture, we also have expanded government. Some may find this expansion either obnoxious or frightening. May I say that to the extent that growth in government on any level is not commensurate with the needs of our people it is to be deplored. But changes in government which arise from the realities of the times in which we live is as necessary as it is inevitable.

As government has changed so too have politics in America. There are millions more voters today than was the case a few decades ago. Part of this is population growth but part of it, too, comes from the fact that women vote whereas less than a half-century ago they did not. Racial and other groups who were excluded or excluded themselves in the past, more and more, exercise the suffrage. Millions of Americans, unfortunately, still do not vote—about 40 or 50 percent of the eligible voters. And, unfortunately, too, millions who vote in Presidential elections do not bother to vote in Congressional, local and state elections. Most of the voters in the nation now are in or near great cities, whereas a few decades ago most of them lived in rural America. TV and Radio have worked major transformations, particularly in national elections. All of these changes in voting patterns mean changes in the style of politics. And they mean changes in the immediate objectives of politics and political parties.

These objectives are often expressed in election slogans. And slogans change quickly. How many of us, for example, will know in which
election campaigns of the past the rallying cry was "Fifty-four Forty or Fight" or "Free Speech, Free Press, Free-Soil" or "Too Proud to Fight" or "Forty Acres and a Mule" or "Two Cars in Every Garage." Yet, at one time, these slogans electrified Americans from one end of the country to the other. Today, they are part of our history and few are aware of them. The slogans in this campaign have to do with "Castro" or "Socialism" or "Medicare" or something of the sort.

In short, the parties meet and clash on new issues as the old recede. Yet the issues, today, are not really new. They are reflections of the same basic political concerns of the American people which I mentioned earlier in my remarks as beginning with the beginning of the Republic. They are reflections of the same basic concerns which led to the older slogans which I just mentioned. We are still engaged in the old effort in a new setting to advance the common good and to insure the right of every American to equal opportunity.

The political conflicts which emerge today derive from the same basic premise of our national life that prevailed in Jefferson's day, Lincoln's or Roosevelt's: that governments exist to insure the common good and the right of all to equal opportunity. And politics exist as the instrumentality through which the people can seek to require governments to function for these purposes.

What has changed is not what the people seek through government and politics but the setting in which it is sought and the means by which it is sought. Let me try to illustrate the point by reference to some of the questions which are being discussed in the present campaign. Take, for example, the question of Cuba. Politics may still draw an issue in this situation as politics will, even though politics has little place in this delicate situation. But that Cuba is discussed at all in this campaign is because it bears a relationship to our common security and, therefore, to the common good. Hence, it is of national concern. Does this mean, however, that Cuba is the same question
as it was in McKinley's day or that the remedies of that simpler day are applicable today?

Consider for a moment that in McKinley's days we were spending $190 million a year for all our defense. This year we are carrying a military budget of $55 billion. In 1900, our armed forces were composed of a total of 125,000 men and the great bulk of these men were on duty in the United States. In 1961 we had a total of almost 2.5 million men and women in the armed services and 575,000 of them were on duty outside the United States on every continent of the world.

What these figures indicate is that the problem of safeguarding national security--the common good--has become vastly more complex and costly. It is now world-wide in scope. No matter what we may do about Cuba, the problem of safeguarding our security--our common good--is not going to dissolve. We still have a dangerous situation in the Far East and Southeast Asia. We still have the problem of working out far-reaching commercial and defense arrangements with Western Europe. We still have a largely unstable Latin America on our southern doorstep. We still have the problem of evolving satisfactory relations with the new nations of Africa.

And over the whole still hangs the monumental problem of nuclear weapons and military rockets which are quite capable--and I do not exaggerate--of obliterating tens of millions of people in this state and nation or in Russia or in many other places in the world within the next couple of hours. How we handle the problem of Cuba will affect all of these other aspects of our security and, hence, the common good, and the President has to keep the whole in mind, not just a single situation which may emerge as a political issue in one campaign or another.
It might well be asked: "Well, what are we doing about all these challenges to the common good?" The answer is that a Democratic President, no less than his Republican predecessor is doing the best he can. The most important thing that any President can do is to try to keep his head and to keep the world-wide scene in perspective, and not be carried away by any single factor or situation in it, no matter how provocative and exasperating it may be. The next best thing he can do is to use whatever honorable means may be open to him, whether it be by diplomacy through the United Nations or whatever or by the judicious and careful use of our armed strength, to try to cool off some of these situations and reduce the tensions which are a constant threat not only to our peace but the world's peace, not only to our common good but to the common good of the human race. And the best thing that the rest of us can do to help him and thereby help ourselves is to avoid losing our tempers over one situation and to try to understand the whole of what the President--any President--is confronted with in foreign policy and to weigh our words carefully in discussing it. We need to think through the total situation with as little heat and as much light as possible--the immediate demands of the political scene notwithstanding.

Let me turn next to a domestic question of the current campaign. It, too, will illustrate that what is new on the political scene is really not new at all. Rather it is a new reflection in new circumstances of the basic political struggle which is as old as the Republic, the struggle to insure the common good and the right of equal opportunity for all Americans. I refer to the so-called issues of "medicare." The term "medicare" is as
imprecise as is "socialized medicine." These are slogans which may have a place in an election campaign but which tell very little about what is really at issue. What is actually involved is the question of whether or not the Social Security system of old age insurance which has operated for a quarter of a century should be extended to cover a part of the cost of hospital care for all persons over 65 years of age.

A program of this kind will cost money because hospital care costs money. But it will also be a great assist to millions of older citizens and to their children because it provides a dignified way for meeting the major threat which prolonged hospital care at today's high costs frequently poses to the financial stability of the average American family.

Now this is not an idea someone suddenly dreamed up to win a few votes in a political campaign. It has been discussed for many years. In fact, the federal government has been subsidizing hospital building in the states for years, without many complaints, to try to reduce the end cost of hospital care and to keep up with growing needs. But the federal government has not had much to do directly with the costs of care of patients. We might note, however, that some form of prepaid universal hospital insurance against costly illness on a national basis is a characteristic of just about every civilized nation in the world. Indeed, our northern neighbor Canada has had a national hospital plan for years which provides not merely for those over 65 years of age and for a few months, but insures a hospital bed or nursing care for every Canadian of every age and for as long as it is needed. In view of the stories about the Saskatchewan doctors a few months ago, we might bear the other side of the Canadian coin equally in mind.
The truth is that we have never regarded it as desirable to permit older citizens to waste away, as some primitive tribes in the polar regions were reported once to have done. We do not regard that course as one in keeping with the common good or as consistent with the right of every American to equal opportunity, let alone as in harmony with our general religious beliefs.

Moreover, for a long time, we have not regarded this problem of adequate care as one exclusively of family responsibility. Private charity, localities and states for many decades have supplemented individual or family capacities to meet hospital bills. The extent of this public supplement has long been a part of local and state politics. In some instances—as for example—in mental illness or in tuberculosis, a total public obligation is assumed in many states.

The issue of the public financial supplement arises now on the national scene, not because someone conspired to make it an issue but because circumstances have changed. The fact is that more and more people are living longer and the life-span is constantly being extended. In consequence the need for hospital care is constantly increasing particularly among old people, even as the cost of hospital care rises constantly. At the same time, families are tending to fragment and to scatter throughout the nation on a far more extensive scale than in the past and the young are less able to provide for the older members of the unit and still meet their own family responsibilities. Finally, charities, communities and states are more and more unable to meet the expanded need for a public supplement to meet hospital costs.
These are the realities of our times. They have got to be faced and faced soon. They have got to be faced just as the issue of federal old age social security was faced in the thirties and is now no longer a major issue in the political arena.

It is out of these current realities that there has arisen a new political issue which some call "medicare" and some "socialized medicine" but which is neither. It is, rather, an effort to come to grips in a practical way with a very old political concern, the concern for the common good and the right of Americans to equal opportunity.

It would be possible to cite other examples of campaign issues which arise, each a reflection of the basic and continuing political drives of our national life. The issues appear and disappear and appear in new form, but the drive remains constant.

For it is the continuing search for the common good and the continuing effort to realize in practice the concept of equal opportunity that give vitality to the American system of human freedom. If we would insure that vitality, we will pay not less attention to politics but more. We will recognize that state and local politics, are of great significance, along with federal politics and we will participate vigorously in them. We will see that each election while it is not a be-all and an end-all in our national life is nevertheless a significant milestone in the same quest which led to the creation of the Republic. And we will see finally that it is our obligation to ourselves and to the nation to make the most of each election in terms of that quest.