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Mansfield, Mike 1903-2001, "Convention of Montana Educational Association Compromise in a Democracy" (1963). *Mike Mansfield Speeches, Statements and Interviews*. 515.

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COMPROMISE IN A DEMOCRACY

Speech Given by Senator Mike Mansfield (D., Montana) before the
Convention of the Montana Education Association
Missoula, Montana, October 25, 1963

It is with great personal pleasure that I meet with you today. I have enjoyed a long affinity with the MSA, as a teacher in fact and in retrospect over the years.

In undertaking this speech, I am reminded of one given by a Pennsylvania Congressman several years ago. The Congressman was congratulating himself for giving what he considered a rather good talk when a lady approached him. She was most enthusiastic and exclaimed to the Congressman: "Your speech was simply superfluous, simply superfluous!" Assuming she was pulling his leg, he replied in the same vein, "Thank you. I'm thinking of having that speech published posthumously." Again she was full of enthusiasm, and said, "Yes, yes, the sooner the better!" There is no doubt that a similar comment on my speech today would be greeted with fervent approval in some political circles in Montana. But as an educator among educators I anticipate a somewhat more sympathetic treatment here regardless of your political views.

When I was asked to speak, today, several topics were suggested. The one entitled "Compromise in a Democracy" caught my attention at once. That is not strange, since the word "compromise" is very frequently associated with the word "politics."

An overworked, but nevertheless accurate phrase states that politics is the art of compromise, or "the art of things possible" as Count Cavour put it a century ago. Unfortunately, there are those who view both "compromise" and "politics" as equally noxious terms. But if that view had predominated in our history, this nation would have not known an orderly evolution. Indeed, without the constant exercise of compromise, a popularly responsive and responsible government such as we know could not exist.

We have learned, through experience, that compromise is an essential ingredient of a government by consent. The history of our own State is a good example. The tradition of our early years, as you well know, is accented with violence. Many of our pioneers were veterans of the Civil War and our early history reflects some of the vindictive aftermath of that conflict. Vigilante law and the quick draw, not compromise and due process, were an early and accepted way of dealing with differences. In honesty, however, I suspect that the actual casualties which resulted from this approach in all the early years of the State's settlement do not equal the current output of death by violence in a week of T/V westerns.

I have always been intrigued by story of what took place in
Missouri in the winter of 1863-64. Several of Henry Plummer's gang of
had... it is... the issue... everyone believed

they were intent upon rifling a safe which held \$65,000. Convinced not by their actions--they were just looting at the company store--but by their reputation, a posse of 21 citizens from Alder Gulch rode into Missouri, rounded up Plummer's gang, held a brief trial in the store, and sentenced all of them to be hung. With the expedition which characterized such proceedings, the company adjourned to a nearby barn. The rope was thrown over a beam, and George Shears, one of Plummer's men, was asked to walk up a ladder into the hay to give the trouble of preparing a drop for him. "Gentlemen," Shears said, "I am not used to this business. Shall I jump off or slide off?" He was told to jump--and so he died.

As late as April, 1883, the Territorial Governor of our State telegraphed the postal authorities at Washington:

"Vigilantes at Great Falls, Montana, have removed postmaster by hanging. . . Offices. . . now vacant."

We have come some distance since those early days. Office-holders, today, are no longer removed by hanging but rather by the more refined--and, presumably, less painful--process of the ballot. I, personally and understandably regard this as a great achievement.

One of the keys to this transition has been the general recognition that an orderly society is inconceivable in the absence of the will to compromise. To say this is not to defend those instances in which compromise represents an abuse of public power and a violation of

public trust. But I do say that the view which tends to hold compromise in contempt is a most unfortunate one. And it does not matter whether this view is applied in local setting, in state or national politics or, indeed, to international problems. For it is but one step from the disdain of compromise to the application of the opprobrium of appeasement or "sell-out" to all who practice this essential art of political--indeed of all--human relations. And to cast aspersions upon the efforts to solve by compromise, problems which defy the simple solution is to invite chaos. And with it, would only come a return to the law of the vigilante and the quick draw--this, in a world in which one quick draw in the final analysis may be the last.

If there is anything which I have learned in more than two decades in Congress, it is that issues which have only two sides--and which can be disposed of largely on the basis of all right or all wrong--are for the most part either unimportant, old and settled matters or rarely, new questions which, not infrequently, have tragic implications. The Declaration of War against Japan, for example, was passed in less than a day and with only one dissenting vote in both Houses of Congress. It was a clear-cut issue but it was also a tragic issue.

In Congress, today, most defense measures are also passed by nearly unanimous vote. The necessity for them is clear-cut and long established and remains essentially unchanged in the absence of significant change in the world situation. In every Congress, of course, we also pass

many minor bills unanimously. But for the most part, they involve the relief of a single citizen who in some way or other has suffered some obvious injury at the hands of the government or other matters of very limited implication.

But with respect to significant new issues, quick and unanimous agreement is unusual. There are just too many millions of persons in this country, too many groups and sub-groups, whose interests are affected by the passage of legislation. Here are some of the more obvious divisions within our society.

** There are ten distinct geographic divisions and countless subdivisions in the United States, each with its own peculiar problems and interests.

** The last census showed 125 million people living in urban areas and 54 million in rural areas. The former stress that the ^{government's} ~~nation's~~ resources and energies should be directed toward cleaning up slums, improving mass transportation systems and a thousand other worthwhile goals. The latter call for greater investment in conservation, more emphasis on strengthening the agricultural and livestock industries and so forth.

** Over 20 million Negroes and numerous whites of almost every religious denomination ask for equality of treatment for all Americans in all walks of life and demand that it be given today. Other millions resist this effort and urge, in effect, there be a slow-down in the process of applying with greater equity the promise of the Constitution to all citizens.

** There are more than 18 million persons over 65 years of age, many of whom are living out their final years in poverty and fear of ^{financially} catastrophic sickness. They ask that the rest of the nation consider their past contributions, if not the future to which we are all headed, by providing a self-respecting and adequate system of insurance against the major financial hazards. Yet there are some--and I would hope not too many Americans--who would begrudge any such system to older citizens especially if it is under the general control of the Federal government. But how otherwise it might be adequately provided is not made clear.

** On the other end of the age spectrum, there are some 70 million persons under the age of 20. Their needs, if we are to look to a stable national future, include adequate access to higher education, commensurate with ability. They include in many parts of the nation sufficient classrooms and teachers at all levels of education. And they include action to open up jobs, to end ill-advised or avoidable school drop-outs, and to develop a sound, well-rounded national approach to the mounting delinquency problems of our young people. And no one knows better than educators that the term juvenile delinquency covers a complex multitude of factors which will not be dispelled simply because we have assigned them this glib name and then wrung our hands and deplored the name.

There is, too, as still another aspect of our national diversity, the endless conflict of industrial interests as among themselves and with agricultural interests. Poultry raisers in Georgia and beef producers in Montana and their Congressmen and Senators, including me, watch with growing concern the rising imports of their products into the United States. Detroit workers who owe their living in part to the export of automotive parts fear that tariffs which we impose will bring retaliation against them.

The government sustains prices for raw cotton production in order to help one set of farmers. The cotton is disposed of at bargain terms abroad in order to keep the stockpiles from mounting too high. This bargain-term cotton is manufactured into various textiles abroad and when some of these are exported to the United States, we face the complaints of our own textile producers in New England, or, indeed, in the same states where the cotton is grown. And so it goes and we do the best we can to deal with these inconsistencies while at the same time, through compromise, we seek to strike some measure of equity for all parts of the land and for all groups in the economy.

** In the political arena, the monopoly by the Republicans and Democrats leads some to suppose that there are only two well-defined parties in the nation. But there are other political and quasi political bodies competing for public acceptance and there are repeated divisions

and alignments within each party. It is significant, for example, that in the vote in the Senate on ratification of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, 25 Republicans joined 95 Democrats in support of the Treaty while only 8 Republicans joined 11 Democrats in opposition.

Anyone who has had the opportunity to travel the length and breadth of this great land cannot but be amazed by the tremendous vitality in its diversity. This quality contributes much to our strength and our greatness. At the same time it is a major source of the need for compromise. All of the diverse interests must somehow be contained within a broader concept of national interest. For, in the last analysis there is no future for agriculture in this nation unless there is also a future for industry and the reverse is true. There is no future for protestants unless there is also a future for Catholics, Jews and others and the reverse is true. There is no future for the Negro if there is not also a future for the White and the reverse is true. There is no future for Montana if there is not also a future for the other States and the reverse is true. In short, the diversities of interest must in some way find, through compromise and mutual restraint, a common meeting place in the national interest and a common hope in the nation's future. Unless they do so the immense strength and vitality of the whole may be exhausted in the bitter schisms of the parts.

This nation has grown great and is great, in short, precisely because we have learned the art of compromise. It has given us a powerful unity which undergirds our position as a nation in the world and provides stable progress at home. Throughout our history, only the Civil War yields an example of the overwhelming and devastating rejection of the process of compromise. That one exception came when the passion of various groups for their own point of view grew so overweening as to foreclose rational reconciliation among them. And even today, we are haunted by this failure of a century ago. Problems which might otherwise have long since been resolved are still with us. And we have still a difficult way to go before the racial and sectional fears and suspicions and misunderstandings--the grim heritage of that one great failure--are finally laid to rest, as one day they will be.

We would do well to consider some of the factors which complicate the art of mutual accommodation and make more difficult the tasks of this nation. There are two which stand out and which have a special urgency for us today. I have touched upon one of these already. It has to do with the apparent compulsion of some to insist that the simple solution can be applied to every problem--no matter how complex it may be. The other is the tendency of many Americans to question the motives or loyalty of those with whom they disagree. Both tendencies have long existed in

mankind. But the complex life of the 20th Century has sharpened them-- and at a time and under conditions when the nation can least afford them.

The shrinking of distance, the greater mobility and forced association of peoples who a short time ago would never have come into contact with one another, the increased urbanization, the growing population and the increasing impersonalism of our economic organization have all contributed to an atmosphere of greater anxiety and insecurity. And overall, hangs the ever-present specter of devastating nuclear conflict, although just a few weeks ago, we witnessed a glimmer of hope in this connection with the signing of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

It is not surprising, then, that there is a nostalgic desire on the part of many to cling to the belief that a return to simpler days, days of the relative isolation of individuals, communities and states is a choice still open to us as a nation. I can understand this desire. Indeed, there are days when I share it. But the front page of any morning's newspaper is enough to dispell it. The added pressures within the nation and the awesome dangers from without make it more imperative than ever that we seek solutions which take full cognizance of the complexities of modern life in this nation and in the world. If we are to succeed in finding solutions we must draw into a common pool such wisdom and sensitivity as may be available in all parts of the nation, in all political parties.

We cannot read any able citizen out of the community simply because we do not happen to agree with him politically. We cannot arbitrarily decide as some have done that an American as distinguished in his service to the nation as former President Eisenhower or his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, were not only useless but even worse--virtual enemies of America. If these men were not worthy of bearing the name Americans then I am not and no person in this room is worthy of it. Who, then, is worthy?

The truth is that no single individual, no single group, no single political party has a monopoly on virtue or patriotism. None can lay claim to sole possession of all that is necessary to make our nation work. None has all the answers. But all are Americans and each in his own way has a contribution to make which can only be made if we have a measure of mutual respect and mutual restraint and accommodation.

The democratic process--the practice of compromise--does not necessarily provide perfect answers. But it has supplied and will continue to supply suitable answers and the only answers suitable to a free people.

It does not matter whether the place where these answers are sought happens to be the Congress of the United States or the city council of Missoula--or for that matter, the PTA, or the NEA. The problems facing Congress may be more complex. The decisions made by it

may affect far more people. But in the final analysis in the House of Representatives it is almost 500 men and women and in the Senate, it is 100 men and women meeting in a face-to-face situation trying to do the best that they can to serve the interests of the States and people whom they represent. There is nothing to keep Senators from pulling the government apart in this process, nothing that is, except self-discipline, mutual respect, tolerance for the views of others and a willingness to compromise. The system is far from perfect and the answers which it produces are not necessarily always the best. Nevertheless, the institution is bound together by the desire to safeguard and advance particular interests in the context of the total national good. It works largely because individual Senators are prepared not to press their concept of what is 100 per cent perfect 100 per cent of the time.

I have emphasized the legislative branch of the government because it is most familiar to me. But these observations apply to a considerable degree to the Executive Branch of the government. Too often we forget that the President of the United States is only a human being faced with a superhuman task. Every time he makes a significant decision, a thousand and one pressures are directed upon him from all parts of the nation as well as from abroad. And he, too, must think in terms of the accommodation of these pressures to the end that the nation stays on an even keel and moves ⁱⁿ an orderly and unified progress. The President, too, does the best he can on the basis of patriotic dedication to the nation and that applies, may I say on the basis of my personal observations for two decades, no less to President Eisenhower than it does to President Kennedy and to the Presidents who preceded them.

In these remarks, I have tried to emphasize that the words "compromise" and "politics" are not in themselves unsavory terms, but rather they are the staff of freedom. Successful compromise is as necessary as the air we breathe. This is true for all aspects of government--from the smallest community in Montana to the Congress and Presidency of the United States.

I have every confidence that we will continue to exercise the good will towards one another and the moderation which have done so much to make this nation great. And while the T/V westerns will continue to awaken a warm and an understandable nostalgia for the simpler days of the frontier--especially since we ^{do} not have to bear their hardships in the comfort of our living-rooms--I have every confidence that Americans also recognize that the real frontiers of the modern world now lie on the fringes of outer space. We will think and act as we must in order to live and prosper in this changed setting even as the frontiersmen thought and acted in consonance with the realities which they encountered and so, lived and prospered.

As educators, I can think of no way in which you might better prepare the youth of the state for a responsible, useful and satisfying life than to help them to understand what the nation and world today are really like and to emphasize to them the place of compromise, mutual accommodation and tolerance in making both run in freedom.