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Congressional Record S. 17094 - Profiles of Mike Mansfield

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001

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October 5, 1970

CONGRESSIONAL RECORD — SENATE
S17933

ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS OF SENATORS

PROFILE OF MIKE MANSFIELD
SENATE MAJORITY LEADER

Mr. MANSFIELD: Mr. President, the current issue of Washingtonian magazine includes a profile of our majority leader, the distinguished senior Senator from Montana Mr. MANSFIELD.

In "Mike Mansfield: Straight Shooter in the Senate," editor Julius Duscha gives his impressions of one of the most powerful men in the free world. It is with pleasing pride that I call to the attention of the Senate, I ask unanimous consent that excerpts from the article be printed in the Record.

There being no objection, the excerpts were ordered to be printed in the Record as follows:

MIKE MANSFIELD: STRAIGHT SHOOTER IN THE SENATE

(By Julius Duscha)

The sky behind the Capitol dome was turning from pink to blue when I arrived at the Old Senate Office Building shortly before seven to spend the day with Mike Mansfield, the Senate majority leader who has become the most important Democratic elder in the United States.

A sleepy policeman noticed me as I entered the building and walked down a deserted first floor corridor to Mansfield's office. When I tried the door, I found it locked. Light came through the transom; so I knocked, softly, I thought, but the noise echoed in the empty hall. A moment later Mansfield, dressed in a baggy blue sportcoat and blue trousers, opened the door and let me in.

He was alone, as he is so much of the time. He hurried into his private office, motioned me to a chair, and without another word sat down and resumed signing the letters piled on his desk.

An early rise since his days a young copper miner in Montana, Mansfield is generally the first Senator on Capitol Hill every morning. He had been at work an hour before the building was opened.

As I looked around the plainly furnished office, his personal effects included some sketches of Montana frontier life. I thought of the stories I had heard about Mansfield stoicism. Like the time he sat on an airplane to escape the Foreign Relations Committee he knew well and would not enter, Mansfield flew over the Pacific.

He just smoked his pipe and looked out the window.

Mansfield is the quiet man of the Senate. He is not a talker, but he is always ready to have a dry wit, but none of his aides or friends can remember any Mansfield witticisms. "You see, he really laugh maybe once or twice a month," an aide chuckled.

Like so many quiet men—Bill Buckley for one—Mansfield is a temper, and when he loses it he is the loudest of the loudest.

When Mansfield speaks out calmly, he generally just as forthright and honest as he is when he gets mad. And above all he is a gentleman. His qualifications were those of that most exclusive gentleman's club on Capitol Hill: "The only criticism you really hear of this guy," said one of Mansfield's aides, "is that he isn't enough of a bastard."

"Perhaps, but he's a saint, either," said President Nixon has been in the White House, Mansfield has spent so much time as a freshman Senator from Montana, he has not had time to be as influential in national politics as he is in Montana.

Mansfield looks more like a man straight out of the West. His face is open and weathered, his features are clean cut, his eyes are clear, and he speaks with the deliberateness of a western sheriff. His black hair is greying at the temples, but he still looks like he could spend the day riding the range.

By 7:30, this is Mansfield's principal aide, Peggy Dimmich and Ray Dockstader, had arrived. While not as much as a "go-to" man of the Senate, they have been to the office of Mike Mansfield since January 1961, and Mansfield still has three hours to spend in the Senate chamber, and in the Senate chamber's side room with crystal chandeliers and a marble fireplace, topped by a huge mirror trimmed in gold.

The three room suite includes a conference room, a private notarial office, and "Mike's Jackie Kennedy room." Mansfield was chosen to the House of Representatives in 1932 by the late Representative, Mr. J. C. Mathias, greatly admired both President and Mrs. Kennedy. Mansfield's favorite place to spend time was the box next to a pictures of Mrs. Onassis in prominent places in the Senate.

The Senate was meeting early that day, at 10:30, but Mansfield was late, as he had a 3:00 meeting before the session was to begin. Mansfield left his office, walked into the Capitol office from which he was nominated for President. Mansfield emerged in late January 1961, and Mansfield still has three hours to spend in the Senate chamber, and in the Senate chamber's side room with crystal chandeliers and a marble fireplace, topped by a huge mirror trimmed in gold.

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chamber and across the center aisle from Mansfield.

Mansfield went over to a side aisle to walk to the front of the chamber to avoid disturbing Scott. As soon as the reporters saw Mansfield, however, they broke off their questioning of Scott and went over to Mansfield to ask him about the effect of amendments to the education bill scheduled to be debated that day. Mansfield parted most of the questions.

A buzzer sounded, the reporters scattered. Mansfield said a few words to Scott, and the two of them bowed their heads as another Senate session started with a prayer.

"The majority leader has very little power," Mansfield told me later when we talked about his role in the Senate, "and what authority you have is on suffering from your colleagues. I operate on the basis that I trust my colleagues, regardless of seniority or political differences, to treat things as they should be treated. I don't desire power. I don't want to go to the Senate to be treated as though I'm a man who has much more power than I have."

Sometimes say who made Democratic colleagues. But I don't desire power in the Senate," a delegate once said to him. "I don't desire power in the Senate, I don't desire power anyplace."

Mansfield's relations with the southern senators were good, even though his policy of letting a hundred flowers bloom in the Senate has tended to dilute southern senatorial power.

In mid-afternoon Mansfield went back to his office to sign some more mail, glance at the afternoon newspapers, and have lunch, by himself, at the end of his conference table. He quickly ate his usual lunch of well-done roast beef and sliced tomatoes. A bad day in the Senate? "Oh, so-so," he replied with some resignation, "but what the hell?"

His spirits seemed to revive later when a constituent dropped by for a visit. He turned out to be an old friend, Eugene Etchart of Glasgow, Montana, a cattleman who was in Washington for a meeting of the Public Land Review Commission. Mansfield greeted him warmly and ushered him into his conference room for a cup of coffee.

After asking Etchart about the weather back home, Mansfield started talking about two of his favorite topics--crime in Washington and the lack of it in Montana. Two Montanans have been killed in Washington street crimes during the last two years, and their deaths have led Mansfield to make several Senate speeches about the need for more policemen and other efforts to control crime.

"We don't know how lucky we are, Gene," Mansfield said, "Montana is an oasis in this world today. Watch your cows, Gene, don't let them get cold."

Just then the buzzer sounded in Mansfield's office, indicating another vote in the Senate, and after instructing one of his secretaries to take Etchart up to the Family Gallery to watch the vote, Mansfield was on his way back to the Senate chamber.

As Mansfield hurried off, it occurred to me that he had not been on the telephone all day, and that not once had I seen him surrounded by aides as he walked down Senate corridors. His staff is in fact considerably small, and he does not even have a press secretary.

Talking with Mansfield later in the afternoon in the conference room of his Capitol office, I asked him about his relations with President Nixon. Mansfield sat back in his chair and said, "I don't talk very often, on legislative matters and situations in Asia. Sometimes he asks for my views, sometimes I just give him the benefit of my views. I had twelve or thirteen breakfasts alone with him. He seemed particularly interested in the follow-up trip to Asia and Romania that I undertook for him last year and seemed to be appreciative of the private report I gave him on the trip. We're not intimate friends, but we have a decent and tolerant understanding of each other."

"My feelings about Vietnam," Mansfield explained to me, "came largely from the French defeat there. I always thought that the French could not win there, and that should make us think we could. I always thought the analogy with Korea was false. But very few people agreed with me. President Johnson against going into Vietnam. Dick Russell warned him too. But I can see the President's point of view. But I had a lot of experts around him who thought we should go."

His early warnings against American involvement in Vietnam have made Mansfield popular among students. He receives many invitations to speak on college and university campuses.

"I think the young people are great," Mansfield told me. "They're more intelligent and their ears are open. We should not find fault with them. If they have faults, they are probably attributable to their parents. That is the best way to put their energies into useful channels. Both political parties, for example, need them. They'll learn through experience, and basically their intent is sound."

I had been talking with Mansfield for more than an hour, and he was becoming restless and visibly wanted to get back to the Senate chamber. When I thanked him and he started to excuse himself, he said, "That was a long one." Mansfield has a well-deserved reputation for giving unusually succinct answers for a politician. Whenever he is on a Sunday television interview program, his questioners are ready with twice as many topics as usual. He has answered sixty questions in a thirty-minute television program.

Mansfield is direct and the careful way he handles his time is both strengths and weaknesses. Those who work closely with him say that often he tends to take a position on an issue before he thinks it through, but when he realizes he has made up his mind too quickly he sometimes will reverse himself. As for the husbanding of his time, this leads occasionally to his aides telling him what they think he wants to hear rather than presenting both sides of a question.

But by being direct and not wasting time, Mansfield manages to keep on top of one of the most difficult jobs in politics. And one has the feeling that he is still trying to make up for the time he lost as a young and unknown. Born in Greenwhich Village of Irish Catholic parents, Mansfield grew up in Great Falls, Montana. At fourteen, before he finished the eighth grade, Mansfield left home and joined the Navy. He was discharged when World War I ended in 1918, but he then enlisted in the Army for a year and was discharged because of his service with the steering committee. Mansfield saw action in France and was discharged a second time in 1920. He then got a job working in mines in Montana and then went on to the University of Montana, where he got both a bachelor's and a master's degree.

Upon graduating, he took a job teaching in Eastern and Latin American history at the University of Montana, and one day by his wife again, Mansfield became interested in politics. "There's a little bit of political blood in all the Irish," he says.

And even though it was now late in the afternoon, Mansfield hurried off to the Senate chamber to see whether the goal for the day—the passage of an education bill—would be reached.

By the time the Senate had finished its final vote, it was the evening of the day. Mansfield had been on Capitol Hill for almost twelve hours. But it was not yet time to go home. Making one final check with Mrs. Sahagian, Mansfield hurried off to catch an elevator and take the quick ride back to his office. The telephone calls had brought from Montana before going home for a quiet dinner.