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Commencement Address - Foxcroft School - Middleburg, Virginia

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001

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Commencement Address by Senator Mike Mansfield (D., Montana)
Foxcroft School, Middleburg, Virginia
Friday, June 9, 1972, 10:00 a.m., D.S.T.

Whenever I talk with people of your age, I am struck
by your candor and honesty. You raise questions as to the values
of our society, the integrity of our public affairs and the wisdom
with which government is being run. This is as it should be. Only
through constant reexamination will our policies and our system be
shaped to meet the ever-changing needs of the nation.

There is a human tendency to cling to the ways of the
past. It is desirable in that it gives continuity to our national
life. If carried too far, however, it can be a straight-jacket.
Persons in public life, perhaps, tend to be very susceptible to
this tendency. Hence, the mistakes or irrelevancies of the past
may be over-reflected in current policies. Until very recently,
for example, your government's position on China seems to have been
based largely on inadequate or erroneous assumptions of what was
going on inside that nation of 800 million. Now that the President has visited Peking, the fictions about China are falling away. We are beginning, at last, to see what really confronts us in the great nation on the other side of the globe.

I would like to talk to you, therefore, about myths and realities regarding China. I do so because what happens in our relations with that nation will have profound meaning to you throughout your adult lives. A few weeks ago, I had the experience of spending 16 days traveling in China. It was not my first visit but it was in 1946 that I had last been there. So for a quarter of a century, that vast land has been to me as it has been to almost all Americans, as remote as the moon. In fact, since the space program began, we have spent more time and energy—and much more of the federal treasury—thousands of times more—in attempting to fathom the moon's secrets than in trying to learn the truth about China.
Since 1949, our concepts of China have been compounded of ignorance, half truth and untruth. This concoction produced a U. S. policy which was designed on the basis of a China seen as a malignant dragon breathing fire and lashing out aggressively at the world.

Before most of you who are graduating were born, your government had already begun to erect a Great Wall of isolation against this presumed menace. A ring of military treaties was established in Asia to choke off what were thought to be China's imperial ambitions. To nail these treaties into place, moreover, U. S. bases were established all over that region. U. S. troops were sent to man the bases. Tens of billions of dollars in military aid were distributed among foreign governments who did not have to do much more to obtain such aid than to give us assurances of their hostility to Communism.

While we were seeing China as a reckless, belligerent and powerful ally of Communist Russia, China was struggling to
build on the ruins of World War II and a great revolution, a political and economic system which would serve the needs of the Chinese people. If we sought to contain China, in turn, the Chinese sought to keep us from interfering in their affairs. The Chinese view of U.S. policy in those days was that it was a logical extension of the over-all Western effort to dominate and exploit their country which had persisted for 150 years. They saw us as implacable enemies.

If the Chinese did not read our intentions correctly, we did not read theirs any more accurately. The fact is that China did not engage in aggressive seizures of neighboring nations. Whatever territorial changes they have sought, with the Soviet Union, Burma and India, had also previously been those pursued by predecessor Chinese governments, notably the government of Chiang Kai-shek on Taiwan.
In retrospect, U. S. policy with regard to China since 1949 has been ill-informed and mis-guided. I say that not as a Monday morning quarter-back. All of us who lived through those years share, to some degree, the writing of this unfortunate chapter in U. S.-Chinese relations. The fact is that we let our fears get the best of us. In looking at China for the past two decades, we saw much that was not there.

It is still difficult even now to form impressions of China free of these past distortions. Nevertheless, the distortions can be tempered by perspective in the sense that a bottle can be judged as half full or as half empty. If China is measured by some of our common yardsticks, whether they be highway mileage, the number of cars, television sets, kitchen gadgets, political parties, or newspaper editors—the bottle will be seen as half empty. If China is viewed in the light of its own past, the bottle is half full and rapidly filling.
That is the way the Chinese people look at their situation.

They are not comparing their way of life with ours or with India's or even Taiwan's. They are looking inward at where they were yesterday, where they are today and where they will be tomorrow.

It is no wonder, then, that there are many signs of popular acceptance of the new China and very little to indicate popular discontent. The fact is that the contrast of the new China with the old is nothing short of extraordinary.

If the new China is a closely controlled society, it is also true that political freedom was not a preeminent characteristic of the old China. Yet, there are sharp contrasts between the old and the new. Unlike the past, the current political controls have resulted in a China free of the ever-present threat of famine, pestilence, flood and other calamities. It is also a China largely free of exploitation, free of political corruption and free of indifferent government.
By comparison with the past, there is every visible indication that the Chinese people, today, live in a well-fed, adequately clothed and housed, and reasonably healthy society. The cities are clean, orderly and safe. The shops are well stocked with food, clothing and modest consumer items. Crime, begging, drug addiction, alcoholism, delinquency are conspicuous in their absence.

Personal integrity is scrupulous to an extreme. In Canton, for example, I saw a display case for lost and found articles in the lobby of the People's Hotel. It contained, among other things, a half-empty package of cigarettes and a pencil.

Today's China is an effectively organized, hard-working, early-to-bed, early-to-rise society. In both urban and rural areas, the people appear to be well motivated and cooperative. Women and men work side by side for equal pay. There is no visible distinction of rank on the farms, in the factories, in the armed services or government offices. A casual sense of freedom and mutual
tolerance prevades personal relationships. There is an air of easy egalitarianism. There is no bowing down or kowtowing, not even to the highest officials.

The accent in China is on today and tomorrow, but a new interest is also evidenced in China's rich past. Everywhere there are striking restorations of cultural shrines even as the search continues for more of the ancient heritage. Excavations of the historic sites are underway throughout China and the archeological finds, to date, have been very impressive.

Conservation of natural resources has also received great emphasis. So many trees have been planted in and around Peking, for example, that the local weather has been altered for the better. Throughout China a new productivity is being developed by the reclamation of wastelands and by massive water control projects.

Only a few years ago, no medical care to speak of was available to the great preponderance of China's people. Now, along with regular physicians, so-called "barefoot" doctors who,
in the tens of thousands, constitute a kind of basic civilian medical corps, are active in every region of China. The help which they give is often based on a limited medical knowledge but it is sustained by an unlimited enthusiasm to serve the sick.

Along with modern medicine, the Chinese are also using traditional herb treatment and acupuncture techniques. The latter is a Chinese healing practice which is over three thousand years old. It has been revived as a highly effective anesthesia in surgery and is also being put to widespread experimental use as a treatment for many ailments.

Intestinal and other epidemic diseases--the terrors of old China--have been drastically reduced or eliminated. The heavy accent which has been placed on personal cleanliness and order has been a major factor in this achievement. In addition, there have been repeated mobilizations of the population in mass campaigns to eradicate disease-carrying snails, flies and mosquitoes.
Not only in health but in every aspect of society there is evidence of a China being rebuilt. The Chinese people have swept away much of the inequity, the ineffectiveness and the despair of the past.

Notwithstanding reports to the contrary, the family remains as the basic social unit of China. It is a unit, however, which is no longer permitted to function on the sole basis of family interests, indifferent to the fate of the community and the nation. In short, the Chinese are fashioning a modern society, with a way of life which is rooted in the past but meets the needs of the present, and seems to offer hope for the future.

While these vast changes have been taking place in China, we have gone on fighting a war in Indochina. Our involvement in that war is derived in large part from the policies towards China which were adopted in 1949. As a former President put it some years ago: "Over this war (in Indochina), and all Asia is another reality: The deepening shadow of Communist China." To
say it another way, we had engaged ourselves in Indochina, in major part, to block an aggressive China. For all practical purposes, President Nixon no longer sees the situation that way. On his visit he found a China not turned outward for aggressive ends but a China intent on solving its many internal problems. He initiated further contact on the basis of this finding.

The fact is that the Chinese, themselves, reject the status of "super-power" and insist that their system does not permit them to impose their views on others by force. Their armed forces are maintained inside China's borders and there are no appeals for military crusades abroad. They have no military outposts or bases in Korea, Southeast Asia or anywhere else on the Asian continent.

In a book written after a recent visit to China, Ross Terrill summed up the Chinese view of the world in these words:
"Here is a superior people... but whose sense of their superiority is rooted in contentment with their own mountains and rivers--not an active sense of superiority which pants to convert the world to its excellence. A passive sense of superiority, which basks, inward-turned, within its own possessed excellence."

There is little reason to expect a radical change in the basic direction of China's present course. Mao Tse-tung has already become a living legend in China and his writings are likely to illuminate the path of China's social, political, and economic development for the foreseeable future. What is to be anticipated, I believe is more rapid progress in building China's economy, with continued emphasis on production. China's resources are so diverse, its population so vast, and its needs so great that the emphasis could continue to be placed on internal development for many years to come.
I would anticipate that there will be an expansion of contacts between China and the rest of the world, including the United States. So far as I can see, the steps taken thus far by the President and the Chinese Premier to normalize relations are irreversible provided, I repeat, provided that this nation's course out of Viet Nam is also irreversible. Without peace in Indochina, there is little likelihood of a significant expansion of peaceful contact with China.

As for future relations between the Chinese and ourselves, I believe that we can dissolve the fears of the past by an honest exchange of viewpoints, mutual consideration, and decent restraints in dealing with one another. The differences which exist and will continue to exist need not lead to conflict. On the contrary, they can be adjusted to mutual gain.

We are a young national culture relative to China, hundreds of years compared with thousands of years. There is much to be learned and gained on both sides, in agriculture,
industry, pollution control, health, education and many other fields.

There are human values to be examined and weighed. The mutual educative process has begun anew. The process must be maintained on the basis of equality of treatment and respect. The days of the one-sided relationship which once existed with China—of teacher-pupil, master-servant, benefactor and dependent, and so on back into the 19th Century's "enlightened and heathen," are gone and it is hard to see who in contemporary China or in this nation will mourn their passing.

Chou En-lai noted that it had taken "100 years since the Opium Wars for the Chinese people to stand up." Today, they are standing up. Self-reliance is their watchword and on that basis they are building a new China. In the years ahead, you will also be building, as each generation does, a new nation here in the United States. I would hope that it will remain rooted in
the soil of the past even as it is redesigned for living in the present and to provide hope and confidence for the future.

I regret to say that the legacy which has been left to you with regard to our relations with China contains a high percentage of distortion which, in turn, has helped to distort relations with other parts of the globe. It is no accident, for example, that we have spent and are continuing to spend the lives of tens of thousands of Americans in Indochina and tens of billions of dollars in that tragic conflict. These sacrifices are a part of the price of two decades of distortion in China policy and the sooner we face up to this underlying cause of the Indochina war the better.

You, who are not saddled with the myths of the past, can play a large role in clearing away this debris. On the heels of the President's initiative, the reality of China is beginning to trickle into the consciousness of government. The enlightenment
of your generation can speed that process. I am confident that you will not be fettered with the fears of the past, that you will look at the world around you with fresh clarity and find the courage to think your own thoughts. To think your own thoughts is the well-spring of freedom. May you draw deeply on it to help shape a better relationship between this nation and China and with all nations.