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The Six Year Presidency

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SUBMITTED BY SENATOR MIKE MANSFIELD (D., MONT.)

THE SIX YEAR PRESIDENCY: ITS TIME HAS ARRIVED

The political processes of America are undergoing a degree of stress and strain today as seldom, if ever, witnessed before in the Nation's history. It is in such an atmosphere, however, that I have chosen to raise anew the proposal to change the Constitution so as to limit the Presidency to a single term of six years. Without attempting to assess blame or liability, it is only in terms of the political circumstances in which the Nation now finds itself that the merits of this proposal can be so clearly viewed.

There is no more compelling argument than that which says every step must be taken that serves to divorce the office of the Presidency from the arena of the political campaign. A single term of six years— or five or seven— would assist such an end.

With that said I would note that in recent years there have been a number of significant amendments to the Constitution of the United States. Correcting the matter of Presidential succession and particularly extending the franchise of the ballot to young adults 18, 19 and 20 years of age represents enormous strides forward— actions that, in my judgment, serve to protect and enhance immensely the Democratic processes of this Nation.
It is in this same context of Constitutional evolution that a single Presidential term of six years is urged. It is to preserve for future generations the complete integrity of this Nation's highest office. Only with a single term will there be assured a sufficient degree of freedom and independence for the President to function properly and adequately today and in the years ahead; years that will produce still further trials and tensions on the national and global scale, some of which have emerged, others of which have yet to emerge.

Though the suggestion for this Constitutional change has received fresh attention it is not to be implied that new ground is being broken or that a topic of first impression is being raised. Indeed, the suggestion of a single six-year term has been with us ever since the delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 thrashed over the issue of a President's term and his eligibility for re-election.

Since the Constitution was ratified hundreds of amendments have been introduced in the Senate and House of Representatives proposing a change in Presidential tenure. More than 130 of these recommended a single term of six years. Twice, the House of Representatives reported legislation providing for the six-year term. And in 1913, the Senate passed S.J. Res. 78, calling for a term of six years, but no action was taken by the House. Presidents themselves have been most active in their support
for the concept. Nearly 150 years ago Andrew Jackson recommended that the electoral college be abolished and that the President be limited to a single term of either four or six years. Presidents Hayes and Cleveland and William Howard Taft also supported the proposal. More recently, President Lyndon Johnson endorsed the concept as an essential reform for democratic institutions in a rapidly changing world. That brings us up to today, and I must say that the merits of the proposal dictate its need now as never before. In light of this, President Nixon himself greeted the proposal without disfavor.

Against this backdrop steeped in historical credibility, it is just intolerable that a President of the United States—any President of whatever party—is compelled to devote his time, energy, efforts and talents to what can be characterized only as purely political campaign tasks. I do not refer solely to a President’s own re-election campaign. To be sure, a re-election effort and all it entails are burdens enough. But a President facing re-election faces as well a host of demands that range from attending the needs of political officeholders, office seekers, financial backers and all the rest, to riding herd on the day-to-day developments within the pedestrian partisan arena. Surely this amendment does not represent a panacea for these ills which have grown up with our system of democracy. But along with an effective public financing law for elections, it would go far,
I think, in unsaddling the Presidency from many of these unnecessary political burdens that an incumbent must bear, to a very great extent such a change would free the President to devote a far greater measure of his time to the enormous task of serving all of the people of this Nation as Chief Executive as much of the time as possible. Accordingly, more time would be provided for policy-making and policy-implementing, for program initiating and for shaping and directing the kind of Administration a President chooses. More time would be provided as well for the kind of experimentation that a successful Presidency requires; such experimentation has come too infrequently in recent years and as a Nation we suffer from that inadequacy.

And what of the arguments against this proposition? One raises the lame duck issue. The argument goes that when a President is elected for a single term of six years, he immediately becomes a lame duck. But the same is true today as soon as a President has been re-elected to a second term. The Twenty-second Amendment saw to that. And upon examination it is really no argument at all. Lameness by no means is inherent in a single term. It relates in fact to the strength and quality of the man holding the office; should he be a lame duck President it is not because of any inhibitions imposed by a single term. An unlimited number of terms would not sustain such a man. On the other hand, a President who rises to his responsibilities will have sufficient
opportunity to organize an effective and successful administration given a six-year term to do so. Six years is not a magic number to be sure. Given five or seven or six years will provide any President with sufficient time to effectuate all such policy aims a newly elected officeholder entertains.

Conversely, six years is long enough for one man to endure in a position filled with the pressures and tensions, the worries and responsibilities of the Presidency of the United States. Adding to them, the stresses and strains of a re-election campaign simply makes no sense today. With a single six-year term, gone would be the charge, however invalid, that a President uses his power to appoint to achieve political ends and to pave the way for his re-election. For that matter, too, it would help offset the charge—so-called—of political factors in decisions involving foreign policy, economics or whatever else might be considered politically motivated.

Finally, along with this issue arises squarely the matter of election costs. The money involved in a Presidential campaign today has skyrocketed beyond all reason. The situation cannot be tolerated. The facts of what happens when political slush funds are made available are just beginning to emerge. Spreading the financial strain over six-year intervals should certainly ease some of the financial burden; but the only real answer lies, I think,
in a comprehensive public election financing law. And such a proposal must be considered right along with the suggestion for a single Presidential term.

To sum it up, what this proposal seeks is to place the office of the Presidency in a position that transcends as much as possible partisan political considerations of whatever nature and source. That it cannot do the reform job completely is clear. Still, its adoption would do much, I think, to streamline the Presidency in a manner that ultimately will make the office more fully responsive to the concerns of all Americans.