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Mike Mansfield 1903-2001
Remarks of Senator Mike Mansfield (D., Montana)

Before the

Senate Democratic Conference

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On Friday, July 12, the President signed into law a measure which opens the way for Congress to exercise effectively one of its fundamental responsibilities. I refer to the new Budget Act which provides for the coordination of Congressional procedures and clarifies the roles of the Branches with regard to control of federal finances. The Act mandates that Congress face and decide the following four basic questions each year:

1. How much money is needed, and how much can be provided to finance all federal programs?

2. How will available federal resources be divided among those programs?

3. How much revenue will be derived from existing taxes and should this amount be increased or decreased?

4. What size federal surplus or deficit is consistent with sound economic policy?

Congress has recognized the need to address these fundamental questions for decades. Our past inadequacies in dealing with them, however, have been all too apparent. With the fragmentation within the Committee structure and our sometimes leisurely and haphazard practices and with our varied viewpoints, we have not been able in the past to focus and act coordinately on these questions. As a consequence, the Executive Branch has acquired almost the whole of the
initiative in matters involving coordination of federal financial policy. That is not as it should be under the Constitution but, perhaps inevitably, that is how it has been in practice.

The Budget Act will not be a panacea for this situation. But, at least, it is designed to equip Congress in ways which will help us to face up to our own responsibilities and respond more effectively to some of the most critical choices which must be made by the federal government.

To begin with, the law creates here in the Senate a Committee on the Budget. A similar committee comes into existence in the House. In addition, there is established a Congressional Office of the Budget which is expected to be staffed with the kind of personnel that can provide the two committees with the research and technical analysis of overall budgetary matters that is so vitally needed for making valid judgments. A great deal will ride on these three instrumentalities—that is, the two budget committees and the Congressional Office of the Budget. Largely on the basis of their work, the Congress is expected by the law to lay down the national budget—issuing it early each session, then reviewing and revising it as the year progresses. The law affirms that it is up to the two Houses, in the final analysis, to determine the nation's priorities—where federal spending is to be increased and where it is to be cut. To that end, the start of the fiscal year is reset to October 1, and a timetable is established for Congress to make its decisions regarding spending and revenue throughout each year.

Having convened this meeting for the purpose of highlighting the significance of the new law, I would note that it is largely the task of this Conference of the Democratic Majority—in consultation with the Republican Minority—to assure that the undertaking gets off on the right foot. The initial responsibility which confronts us involves setting up the new Committee—the
Senate Budget Committee. Bear in mind that this Committee is established not under the Senate's rules but has been mandated by law so there is less flexibility than might otherwise be the case.

The law provides for a fifteen-member Committee and under the current ratio, that would allow nine seats for Democrats and six for Republicans. To fulfill our responsibilities under the Act, it seems to me that this Committee needs to be so equipped and balanced that it can address the national fiscal situation in a national perspective. We cannot be responsible for the Republican assignments, but we are responsible for our own. As in all cases of Democratic committee assignments, the prerogatives rest in this Conference. This Conference will say, in the end, who among the Majority members is to serve on this new Committee and who is to take the Chair, subject only to ultimate approval by the Senate as a whole.

Inasmuch as the Budget law presents for us and for the Senate a matter of new and surpassing importance, it is my judgment that we should not proceed as though we were dealing with a routine matter of committee assignments in which the policies of the Conference are already established, and with which we are fully familiar. If that were the case, in the Steering Committee, great weight would be given to years of continuous service. Other Committee memberships of an applying member would be considered. Attempts would also be made to accommodate younger members, as possible, with an interest in the Committee, on the basis of granting such members at least one stated preference. Members would be assigned more or less permanently to the Committee, with the most senior probably designated as Chairman, and once assigned, they would continue to accumulate seniority until such time as their seats were vacated. On the basis of past experience, moreover, the work of the Steering Committee in making these assignments might be expected to be upheld by a unanimous or near-unanimous Conference.
It is not yet clear, however, that routine consideration is necessarily the best way of approaching this new situation. To the Budget Committee, Congress has assigned, by law, responsibilities that are different and of enormous significance. We have authorized its support by what amounts to its own independent Congressional agency. We have bound ourselves to a timetable of legislation which is keyed to the Committee's recommendations. All of this, we have seen fit to embed in the law, subject to change only by law.

I reiterate that the decisions which are made, initially, in regard to the new Congressional budgetary structure are of the greatest importance. Their effect on the nation as a whole can be very profound. So, too, will be the effect in the Senate and the Congress. A whole new sense of timing in the way we conduct our business will be brought into play by this Act. A whole new set of inter-committee relationships may well emerge. As yet, unforeseen problems may well confront this Conference and the Leadership in the future. With this law, we have probably reached a watershed not only in terms of the responsibilities of Congress to serve as the arbiter of the nation's finances, but in terms of the Senate's internal organization and procedures.

In the circumstances, therefore, it seems to me that the shaping of the Democratic part of this new Committee is hardly a matter for routine handling. In the first instance, at least, it would appear to be a matter for consideration by the Conference itself, rather than by the Steering Committee, as an arm of the Conference. If the Conference shares that judgment--and I shall put the question shortly--then the question of how to proceed will be open for discussion.

I want to emphasize my belief, if I may, that there is an imperative need for balance as among geographic areas and ideological nuances in the Democratic membership of the Budget Committee. The Democrats who sit on the Budget Committee should be so selected, in my judgment, that they will reflect
an accurate cross-section of the Democratic members of the Senate. May I say that criteria of this kind, by specific direction of the Democratic Conference, have governed the selection of membership on both the Policy and Steering Committees for all the years that I have been your Majority Leader. In consequence, both have operated in a highly responsive and responsible manner regarding the general inclinations of this Conference.

I would also state my view that I do not believe that members should be designated to the new Committee unless they are prepared to give up now—not two years hence, but now an existing membership on other major Committees. At the very least, this readiness should be considered in making assignments. I know that there is a grandfather clause in this law which permits sitting members to add membership on this Committee on top of others which they already hold. That is permissive, not binding, and I think that we would be well-advised to look for a quid pro quo from any member desiring this assignment.

The challenges of the new Budget Committee are too great to be treated as a mere add-on to the responsibilities already carried by individual members. Those who serve on it must give it preponderant attention if it is to function effectively; and if I may underscore the point, I would stress that it requires the direct contributions of Senators not the mere presence of staff aides. As it is now, excessive Committee assignments of individual members already leave Committees and subcommittees fragmentarily served or ill-served and, often, largely in the hands of staff. At the same time, younger members of the Senate are insufficiently used in the basic decision making processes. In this fashion, the principle of equality among all members tends to be honored more in form than in substance. So, again, whatever the decisions of this Conference, I would hope that they will include recognition of the principle that whoever seeks assignment on this new Committee should be prepared to yield, now, a major
Committee assignment which he already holds. By the same token, it would be
my hope that this Conference will consider selecting the first Chairman of
the new Committee on the basis of its best judgment as to who among those
designated is prepared and equipped to make the greatest contribution of
knowledge, time and effort to its operation.

With that by way as background, I should like, now, to put the follow­
ing question of procedure:

Is it the wish of the Conference that the Steering Committee shall
proceed in the customary manner to select the Democratic nominees for the Senate
Budget Committee?

If the Conference votes negatively on this question, the Chair will
open the matter for discussion and will entertain from the floor suggestions on
how to proceed in this matter. If the Conference votes "aye" it would be my
intention to call a Steering Committee meeting in the very near future to
prepare the slate of proposed Democratic Members for the new Budget Committee.

What, then, is the decision of the Conference?