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Alumni Association for the Catholic University of America

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001

REMARKS OF SENATOR MIKE MANSFIELD (D., MONTANA)

BEFORE THE

ALUMNI ASSOCIATION FOR THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

AT THE

SHERATON PARK HOTEL, WASHINGTON, D.C.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 26, 1974, 8:30 P.M.

This medal is awarded in the name of a great priest and it honors the recipient only in reflection of his achievements. It is accepted by me with gratitude and humility. The First Cardinal of Baltimore, the founder of this University was an advocate among advocates of the rights of man and, in particular, of the rights of American labor.

Cardinal Gibbons confronted a situation no less enmeshed in crises than that in which we live today. In a nation in which there is much that is right, there are still many wrongs and inequities. We cannot in good conscience overlook them. We dare not ignore them. I am persuaded that new laws and Constitutional changes can redress these wrongs and inequities as they come to sufficient public awareness. Law was the medium, for example, for asserting the rights of workers in which Cardinal Gibbons was so interested. It was the medium for affirming the civil rights of all Americans in the 1960's amd in regard to other issues of social justice.

New legislation and Constitutional change, however, can do little to bring about a deeper sense of public responsibility on the part of those who hold public trust and those who bestow that trust on them. It seems to me that we have yet to muster the moral strength to resolve the political dilemnas of our times. More than two months have now passed since the Presidential succession. We have witnessed the resignation of one President, elected less than two years ago, and the swearing in of another elected by the people neither to that office nor to the Vice Presidency, to which he succeeded by appointment on the resignation of the elected incumbent. This was more than a unique Constitutional event. In retrospect, it amounted to a near-miss which grazed the stability of our political system and brought the nation to the brink of Constitutional chaos. It revealed, notwithstanding the 25th Amendment, the inadequacies of the emergency system under which Presidential succession is provided for in the Constitution.

Today, with an appointed President and another appointed Vice Presidential designee awaiting Congressional confirmation, we find ourselves for the first time in history with a total break in the continuity of elected Presidential leadership. It is to his credit that President Ford is fully cognizant of the unprecedented circumstances surrounding his Presidency. He is to be commended for conducting the office with responsible regard for the implications of these circumstances. Personally, I have only the highest regard for his understanding and tact in this situation. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the people of the nation are now unrepresented, in a direct sense, in the two most vital offices in the land.

The collective voice of several hundred members of the Senate and House comes closest to providing that national representation. I hasten to add, however, that an elected Congress is not and cannot be a substitute for an elected President. The Congress can do its Constitutional part and, in the circumstances, even something more. But, I repeat, it cannot substitute for an elected President.

The imperfections in the Constitutional system regarding the Presidency, have been known for a long, long time. Until now, we have treated the most dangerous as highly improbable occurrances at most. On the basis of the recent political nightmare, it is obviously time that these imperfections be recognized for what they are--a source of political uncertainty and a potential threat to national stability. That we have survived the crisis this time says a great deal for the underlying strength of our institutions and their capacity to withstand enormous pressures. It says something, too, of the respect for and dedication to these institutions which exists on the part of the great bulk of the men and women who serve in elected and appointed office.

The task of correcting weaknesses in the Constitutional process of selecting Presidents is one to which the Congress can and should address itself. The 25th Amendment should be reviewed, and if need be, it can be revised. We can look again at the whole archaic system of the electoral college. The machinery is available in the Congress for this purpose. The job can be done.

But what of the condition which produced the Constitutional dilemna of 1974 in the first instance? What of a nation's political faith and fabric rent by personal arrogance, cynicism and an obsession with power, fused in disdain for the law and Constitution? For the removal of this kind of impediment to a decent national life there is no machinery readily available. There are no fool-proof formulas. Where are the laws and reforms which can once again turn on a public turned off in disenchantment and disillusionment?

We have passed laws in the wake of Watergate. We have established new safeguards in campaign practices and financing. Congress has gone much further in this respect than is generally realized. These changes, however, are not enough in themselves. If the rhythm of the nation's political life in freedom is to be sustained, there is a need for a feed-in of new social concern, new political energy and a reawakened sense of human decency. In my judgement, the stimulus for that kind of change can come only from the new generations. We will have to open the doors wider to the participation of the young in our common institutions. We will have to open our ears to their ideas and advocacies.

The price of Watergate cannot be minimized in terms of what happened to the trust of the people in government. We have flayed ourselves with the flaws which were revealed by that obscenity--the human flaws and the institutional flaws. We must turn now to those least touched by this strange political interlude and ask them to join us fully in doing better in the future. We must ask them, not only for the sake of the future which they are, but for the needs of the present in which we all live. Today's young people have already proved to be the most politically active in our history. They will be tested in their ability to persevere in restoring a concerned interest and a new dedication to the public affairs of the nation. We need to look for in them-- and pray God we find it--the kind of passion for humanity which was possessed by the man in whose name this medal is struck.