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Dinner Honoring Senator John J. Williams

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001

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REMARKS OF SENATOR MIKE MANSFIELD (D., MONTANA)

at the

DINNER HONORING SENATOR JOHN J. WILLIAMS

Hotel DuPont, Gold Ballroom

Wilmington, Delaware

Thursday, January 14, 1971, 7:00 p.m.

It is a pleasure to be in Delaware for this occasion. I come here out of respect and affection for John J. Williams. I am here, too, out of what can best be described as an affinity of the extremes. Your State, for example, is about 75 times smaller than mine. Delaware's hills would be lost in the shadows of Montana's high Rockies. Even Delaware's lovely ocean is dwarfed by the infinite blue of the Big Sky Country.

This contrast in dimensions has gone unnoticed in the Senate during the past few years. As a matter of fact, sometimes the roles were reversed 180 degrees. Delaware often appeared the giant. Not only did it appear to be, it was. It was so because of the man who brings us here tonight.

John J. Williams gave Delaware a towering presence in the Senate. His voice amplified the name of the State. The reputation of all Delawarians sparkled brighter in the mirror of his personal integrity.

Delaware took a town-councilman of Millsboro, little known outside this State, and sent him to Washington. Now, Delaware has got back a Senator of international renown and the nation's ombudsman for fiscal morality in the federal government.

Delaware's gain is the nation's loss. For me, John Williams' departure from the Senate is deeply felt in a personal sense. I miss, in particular, the breakfasts which we used to share regularly in the Senate cafeteria. Seven o'clock in the morning, as you know, is a nonsense time. It is no time for comedy. To put it bluntly, for many people, it is a grim and futile time. However, that hour with John Williams had another side. It was a time to put the problems of the nation and the world in clearer perspective. It was a time to match up our agreements and to define our disagreements.

Above all else, it was a time to establish an enduring friendship. Notwithstanding differences of party and approaches, our friendship has grown out of mutual candor and mutual respect.

As I told the Senate a short time ago:

"We have been at all times open with one another.

At all times we knew where we each stood; and most important, perhaps, we respected each other's opinions."

All too seldom is one privileged to have that kind of friendship and that kind of trust. You will understand, then, what I mean when I say simply that I will miss John Williams. I will miss my friend in the Senate.

The nation, as I said, is also going to feel the departure of John Williams from the Senate. He has been a friend of frugality. He has been a force for fiscal morality. He has been a paragon of common sense.

John Williams had the courage to tread in the darker recesses of government and to illumine them with vivid reports on what he encountered. He served as a kind of lightning rod, attracting to himself the flashes of malfeasance and ineptitude which occur from time-to-time in public life as they do in private life.

That is no easy responsibility to assume in government. It is even more difficult to discharge it with justice and integrity. The fact is that if one chooses to delve into matters of this kind, the invitation to a spectacular witch-hunt is ever present. The media of communication is available at all times for the sensational. It is to his everlasting credit, however, that John Williams declined to play the part of Inquisitor. Rather, he hewed, with rugged honesty, to the line of human decency. He never yielded to the temptation to become a mere mouthpiece for malcontents. He bore no false witness. He did not even bear hasty witness.

John Williams studied and pondered the evidence. Always he pressed for facts and more facts. He did not speak until he was persuaded that he had the facts. Even then, he invariably gave advance notice to persons who might be ^a affected by them. When he spoke out against malfeasance, he did so out of a sense of duty. It was never news to the individuals involved; they had already been put on notice. Often, however, it came as a shock to the rest of us. His exposition of the facts invariably pulled the wool away from our eyes.

John Williams made his weight felt in all parts of the federal government. He concerned himself with the Internal Revenue Service, the Commodity Credit Corporation, the Federal Housing Administration and other agencies. I am frank to say that he also found it necessary to concern himself with certain matters in the Senate. In the end, however, all of these institutions and others gained strength from the catharsis of his honest inquiry.

He probed the questionable doings of individuals in both parties and without reference to party. On occasion, his work led to the discovery of those whose ambitions or cupidity had exceeded their personal prudence and public dedication. More often, he encountered and revealed thoughtless wastages of public funds. The extent of the savings for which he was responsible will never be known. In all probability, many hundreds of millions of dollars of public funds were involved.

In the Senate, John Williams did what needed doing without pretense or fancy credentials. He had no high-powered staff. He had no image-makers. He had only the sheer force of an unadorned common sense--combined with an uncommon diligence. He is a living monument to the principle that an interested citizen--to be sure a gifted one in this instance--can master both the politics and the fiscal complexities of the federal government; he can do it, moreover, even in the absence of special training, tutelage, or political apprenticeship.

That is as it should be. Representative government in the United States is not and ought not to become the exclusive province of a specialized elite. A society of free citizens requires the participation in government of the range of free citizens. It is one of the vitalities of the Senate that its doors have been wide open in that respect.

In its long history, many paths have led to the United States Senate. Farmers, lawyers, workers, doctors, businessmen, teachers, artists, miners, soldiers, to mention a few, have trod them. The outstanding work of John Williams in the Senate now adds to that list. He came to the Senate from the chicken feed business. That occupation may well prove to be one of the best training grounds yet for the mastery of the not-se-chicken feed finances of the federal government.

John Williams left the Senate at his own insistence. He left at a pinnacle of political acceptance. He left not because he was unable to carry the taxing burdens of a Senator's office. Rather

he left because he has some stubborn ideas about retirement age. In this connection, as in some others, we are in disagreement. His departure from the Senate, in my judgment, was not timely; it was premature.

John Williams sees it another way. I admit that in withdrawing from the Senate, he was practicing what he preached. So I will not press the point. Since I am older than he and still a Member of the Senate, I would not like him to accuse me of preaching what I practice.

So far as I can see, only two good results emerge from the retirement of John Williams. In the first place, Caleb Boggs will be elevated to the role of senior Senator from Delaware. I know him well. I have been with him on two Presidential missions abroad. He wears well. He travels well. He has already made an outstanding contribution to the work of the Senate. There is more, much more, to come from him for the benefit of this State and for the nation.

The retirement of John Williams also strengthens the Montana influence in the Senate. I was delighted to note that Senator-elect Roth, whose roots are now imbedded in Delaware, was born in Great Falls, Montana. Indeed, he was once a student of mine at the University. His entering the Senate, not as a Democrat, but as a Republican, I trust, is not indicative of the negligible impact of my teaching on him.

We are waiting, now, in the Senate with great interest to see what new career will be pursued by our old colleague, John Williams. We do not regard it as likely that he will withdraw into the high Himalayas for a life of contemplation. There is always the possibility, of course, that he may join Ralph Nader. It seems to us much more likely, however, that he will simply transfer his base of operations from Capitol Hill to a sort of Olympus-in-Millsboro. From this delightful spot, he can continue to hurl well-aimed thunderbolts at targets across the land. We will be listening for the distant rumble of his voice--to the words of this outstanding American, this Senator for all seasons, John J. Williams of Delaware.