Mike Mansfield’s “Message to American Youth”

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With Thanksgiving and the beginning of winter, we look forward to the weeks ahead as a festive time of the year. We gather with family and friends, express thanks by giving each other gifts, and exchange season’s greetings filled with hope for peace, joy, health, and goodwill. It’s also a time of reflection and hope for those less fortunate than we, and for our children and young people.

In looking at words of advice that respected leaders have given to our country’s youth in the past, I recently came across a short speech titled “A Message to American Youth” that Senator Mike Mansfield delivered in 1989, when he was 86 years old. Because of its relevance for today and its economy of words, I would like to read a portion of it here.

“We are living in a fast changing world,” Senator Mansfield’s message began. “You are young enough to keep up with it. You are living in a world that is shrinking, the globe is becoming a neighborhood. We are going to have to understand each other better. And we’ll have to recognize that regardless of where we come from, no matter what our color or background, we all initially sprang from the same source.

We’ll have to learn to get along with one another. We’ll have to be more aware of responsibilities which go with this rapidly speeding up world. We’ll have to set examples for those who will follow us and recognize that we don’t know it all. So we should listen to the other person, and [understand] that [the] other person sometimes is right and sometimes we are wrong. It will be a matter of accommodation and compromise, knowledge and understanding.
I have no doubt that future generations will be able to cope with events as they occur no matter how rapidly, if for no other reason than they have no choice. And we can cope – our predecessors could, you can too. I hope you’ll devote your efforts to preserving the environment, and preserving the rights guaranteed to all under the First Amendment, Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Assembly, and Freedom of the Press. I hope you will not violate any of those rights because there are limitations. “ [END QUOTE]

Despite the conciseness of his words, Senator Mansfield’s message speaks to us as much today as it did in 1989. Indeed, probably more so. Our world is more of a neighborhood today than in the past. Our stores are filled with more foreign products than ever before, modern technologies connect us almost instantaneously with people in every part of the world, and we rely heavily on our foreign allies and friends to maintain peace and security at home and abroad.

It is essential that not only our young people but Americans of all generations become less “America-centric” and listen more carefully to others, and that we be ready to acknowledge that none of us – nor anyone else -- has a monopoly on truth. And to protect our freedoms, it is imperative that we educate ourselves better and gain greater knowledge and understanding of the cultures and histories -- as well as the hopes and fears -- of all our neighbors, regardless of where they live in the world.

Mansfield concluded his message by saying, “You (the younger generation and we as Americans) haven’t been given much of an historical legacy, but you have been given a great challenge and what you do will determine what your successors (the subsequent generation) will be. So I wish you all good luck and, as the Asians usually say, good health, good fortune, much happiness, and a long life.”

All of us at the Mansfield Center wish you the same. Thank you for listening.
Otto Koester (recorded December 5, scheduled for December 14 broadcast)