Honoring Mike Mansfield’s Legacy of Leadership

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Hello, I’m Deena Mansour, Associate Director of the Mansfield Center at the University of Montana. For several years, we’ve had the honor and the pleasure of engaging directly with you through our monthly commentaries. As I deliver this final commentary on behalf of our Center, I reflect on who we are, and how we can best serve the people of Montana.

I’ve been fortunate to conduct work in Mike Mansfield’s honor for five terrific years. That engagement pales in comparison to that of Dr. Paul Lauren, co-founder and first director of the Mansfield Center. He explains that the inspiration for the Center derives from Mike Mansfield’s distinguished career, and the two subjects with which he long has been identified: a staunch commitment to high ethical standards in public affairs, and insightful contributions to the nation’s Asia policies.

Mike Mansfield’s reputation as a public official is based upon his numerous achievements and personal qualities. Following service as a faculty member at the University of Montana, he represented our state for ten years in the House of Representatives, and then for 24 years in the Senate. He served as Senate Majority Leader longer than anyone else in American history. He was appointed as U.S. Ambassador to Japan in 1977, serving through 1988. Mike Mansfield served in this ambassadorial position longer than any other individual.
As a result of this tremendous service, Mansfield leaves behind a significant legacy of leadership, in both domestic and foreign policy. I’d like to draw from a series of essays that the Mansfield Center funded for the Mansfield Library’s digital exhibit series to highlight some of his most important work.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 ranks among the most important and influential pieces of American legislation of the twentieth century. Yet the proposed bill divided the Senate into pro- and anti-civil rights factions, which threatened irreparable damage to the Senate by exacerbating ideological differences. The fact that the civil rights bill passed at all, and that the debate did not divide the Senate beyond repair, is owed in no small part to the persistently fair and even-handed guidance of Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield.

As we honor our veterans this week, consider Mike Mansfield’s campaign, “Old Enough to Fight, Old Enough to Vote.” On June 1, 1970, Mansfield gave a commencement speech at Flathead High School in Kalispell. The title of the address was “Problems and Prospects,” a fitting theme during a turbulent period in America. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, increasing numbers of the nation’s youth were protesting against racial injustice, gender discrimination and the war in Vietnam. Among the topics of Mansfield’s speech was the national campaign to lower the voting age to 18, a goal Mansfield had consistently promoted as Senate Majority Leader, and one he was soon to play a prominent role in achieving.

As President Obama meets with Chinese President Xi Jinping, consider Mike Mansfield’s work to open the U.S. to China. President Richard Nixon ended more than twenty years of economic and political isolation between Communist China and the United States in 1972, when he became the first U.S. President to visit the People’s Republic. Nixon’s historic visit, widely considered one of the most
successful policy initiatives of his presidency, became the first step in the normalization of U.S.-China relations. President Nixon’s overture to China would not have been possible, however, without the efforts of Mike Mansfield, one of Congress’ top policy experts on East Asian affairs. Not only did Mansfield receive an offer to visit the People’s Republic before Nixon—an offer which paved the way for Nixon’s own visit—but Mansfield’s view of the necessity of a Chinese overture largely accorded with Nixon’s own, and helped launch a new era of peaceful Chinese-American relations.

In recognition of Mike Mansfield’s numerous and varied contributions, the Mansfield Center’s two principal programs are Ethics and Public Affairs and Modern Asian Affairs. Our programs support not only our campus, but citizens from across the state. We travel from St. Regis to Miles City to engage people like you in the legacy of leadership Mansfield has left behind.

As our monthly commentaries come to a close, I want to ask you to keep engaged with us. Reach out to us as we work with the community to provide opportunities for Montana. Keep up with us through the web, and by reminding us of the issues most important to you.

I want to thank KUFM for this opportunity. Most of all, I thank you, the listeners, for your tremendous feedback over the years. In the name of Mike Mansfield, we look forward to a continued partnership with those we serve.