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THE WHITE HOUSE

TEXT OF REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT  
AT THE DEDICATION OF THE DIRKSEN WING  
OF THE ILLINOIS PUBLIC LIBRARY

PEKIN, ILLINOIS  
August 19, 1975

As one of the many Americans who knew and loved Everett Dirksen, I am pleased to be in his hometown of Pekin for the dedication of this building in his honor. How delighted he would be that the dedication coincided with your third annual Marigold Festival. This city really looks beautiful today with so many thousands of Ev's favorite flowers in bloom.

I wanted to be here today in a special capacity; not as President of the United States, not as former President of the United States Senate, but as the spokesman for a very exclusive fraternity -- Minority Leaders of the United States Congress.

Unfortunately, our fraternity has been overwhelmingly Republican in recent years, though we keep trying to recruit more Democrats. We take comfort in the obvious fact that leading the minority in the House or Senate is a much more demanding job than leading the majority. And if ever a Minority Leader could be said to dominate either body, that man was Senator Dirksen.

He was a power to be reckoned with, and he did it not by the numbers of his minority, but by the sheer power of his unique personality, his persuasiveness and profound gift for friendship, and his consummate legislative skill.

When I was elected Minority Leader of the House in 1965, Ev Dirksen was already the sage and seasoned Minority Leader of the Senate. I was the new boy, but he never put me down. Instead, he took me in.

I met almost every day and sometimes oftener with the master and he taught me the trade. He knew as much about the House as I did, and everything about the Senate. He knew every wheel and cog that makes the Congress tick. And he knew a thing or two about Presidents, too.

Every couple of weeks, we would hold a two-headed press conference that was known as the "Ev and Jerry Show." It really should have been known as the "Dirksen and Company" show because you know who was the star. I was a spear-carrier and I must say we used to aim some sharp ones in the direction of the Johnson White House -- but Ev's were always softened with a chuckle.

It seems that some of the legacy of homespun humor left in this part of Illinois by Abraham Lincoln was reborn in Everett McKinley Dirksen. He had a little quip or story for every occasion.

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He was the only politician I have ever known who could walk into a press conference like the Prophet Daniel and walk out leaving the lions all purring and without a scratch on him.

I learned a lot from Ev, and it is only fitting that others should learn from him also.

The Dirksen Research Center, with mementos and papers from his long and productive career, will enable generations of students to learn more about how the U.S. Congress works. The Senator believed the opportunities to examine the papers and documents of top legislators were too limited. He had the idea for a research center long before his death. I agreed with him then that study of the Congress had been neglected.

Ev knew how a single piece of legislation could have a lasting imprint on our society. He believed more historical attention should be given to the drafting and approval of federal legislation. With the Dirksen papers and those of other Congressional leaders, this center will give students in the many universities and colleges in this area a special viewpoint on American history.

One of the most fascinating areas of study in the Dirksen papers will be to trace just how influential a single dedicated man can be. His career spanned almost four decades and six Presidents. From the "First Hundred Days" of President Franklin D. Roosevelt to Ev's eventful ten years of service as Minority Leader in the Senate, Senator Dirksen participated rigorously in the enormous social and political changes of those years.

I've sometimes wondered whether Ev Dirksen ever regretted that he promised his mother not to pursue a career on the stage. But he got around it by playing on a much larger stage, and we were lucky to have been in his company.

I think it's wonderful the tapes of the Senator's speeches will be available to students, because his voice and presence were part of his political magic.

The person who knew and loved him best, Louella, his wife and partner of 42 years, wrote this of Ev: "My husband loved life. It seemed to love him also. He was awed by the beauty of the flower and the spoken word. He could cultivate them as no other man could. His flowers continue to grow. His words still echo."

I was looking through my old files of some of Ev Dirksen's words from the "Ev and Jerry Show" that I could include in these remarks. I thought maybe I could find one of his hilarious stories about his adventure as an Army balloonist in World War I or a particularly funny joke.

Instead, I found a comment which Ev said he had pounded out on his trusty portable because he was in a philosophical mood. It was in 1968, a few days after the assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy. There were riots and violence all across the land.

Senator Dirksen said: "The time has come to rethink our history. It should have emphasis in every school, church and forum in the land. The legacy which is ours came from those who were here before us. Into this land they built their skills and

talents, their hopes and dreams, their tears and sacrifices. Today we are the trustees of America. Upon us is a two-fold duty. The one is to those who came before us and gave us this land for our inheritance. The other is to those who shall come after us.

"Perhaps three words can state the whole case -- dedication, discipline, and duty."

I know that those words, spoken as only Ev Dirksen could, are somewhere in this edifice, reminding Americans of their continued need for dedication, discipline, and duty.

Yes, Louella, "his words still echo."

Thank you.

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