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THE WHITE HOUSE

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

PEKIN, ILLINOIS

AT 3:26 P.M. CDT

Howard Baker, my dear friend Louella, Senator Chuck Percy, Senator Jennings Randolph, Senator Roman Hruska, Governor Walker, my very good and dear friend, Charlie Halleck and, of course, my long time friend and great helper, Les Arends, Mayor Waldmeier, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

As one of the many, many Americans who knew and loved Everett Dirksen, obviously I am pleased to be in his hometown for the dedication of this great building in his honor.

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

How delighted Ev 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.

And as I said a moment ago, I did want to be here representing Minority Leaders. Unfortunately, as Charlie Halleck and I both know, our fraternity has been overwhelmingly Republican in recent years, though we keep trying to recruit more Democrats every day. (Laughter)

We take some comfort, however, in the obvious fact that leading the Minority in the House or the Senate is a much more demanding job than leading the Majority and, if ever a Minority Leader could be said to dominate either body, the House or the Senate, that man was Everett 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, his profound gift for friendship and his consummate legislative skills.

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When I was elected Minority Leader in January of 1965 of the House of Representatives, Ev Dirksen was already the sage and the seasoned Minority Leader of the United States 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 masters, and he taught me the trade. He knew as much about the House as I did, and, of course, he knew everything about the United States Senate.

He knew every wheel and every cog that makes the Congress tick. And he knew a thing or two about some Presidents.

In our relationship, I was the spear carrier, and I must say, we used to aim some short ones in the direction of the then occupant of the White House. But Ev's were always softened with a chuckle. I suspect he was much more effective.

Every couple of weeks, as has been noted by Louella, we would hold a two-headed press conference that became known as the "Ev and Jerry Show". It really should have been known as "Dirksen and Company". (Laughter)

The "Dirksen and Company Show" -- because it is obvious, you know, who was the star.

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

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. Is that right? (Laughter)

I learned an awful lot from Ev, and it is only fitting that others should learn from him also. The Dirksen Research Center, with mementoes and papers from his long and productive career will enable generations of students to learn more about the United States Congress and how it works.

The Senator believed, as you all know, the opportunities to examine the papers and documents of top legislators were far too limited. He had an idea for a research center long before his death. And I agreed with him, as I think most of the Members of the House and Senate would, that the study has been far too long neglected. Ev knew every piece of legislation, and he knew that every piece of legislation could have a lasting imprint on our society and this country.

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He believed more historical attention should be given to the drafting and the approval of Federal legislation. With the Dirksen papers and those of other Congressional Leaders, this center will give students in many universities and colleges in this area a very special viewpoint on American history.

One of the most facinating areas of study in the Dirksen papers will be to trace just how influential a single dedicated man can be. His career expanded almost four decades and six Presidents.

From the very first of the 100 days of President FranklIn 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

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

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

The person who knew and loved him best, Louella, his wife and partner for 42 years, wrote this of Ev, and I quote: "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 some of my old files for some of Ev Dirksen's words from the "Ev and Jerry Show" that perhaps I might include in my remarks here this afternoon. I thought maybe I could find one of his hilarious stories about his adventures as an Army balloonist in World War I or some other particularly funny observation.

Instead, I found a comment which Ev said he had pounded out on his trusty portable because he was in a special 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 wrote this, and I think it is appropriate at this time: "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, their dreams, their tears and their 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" -- as Ev Dirksen said it -- "three words can state the whole case -- dedication, discipline and duty."

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

Yes, Louella, his words still echo.

Thank you very much.

END (AT 3:38 P.M. CDT)