

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2010

Eulogy at the Funeral Service for Senator Robert C. Byrd in Charleston, West Virginia

July 2, 2010

Thank you. To Mona and Marjorie and to Senator Byrd's entire family, including those adorable great-granddaughters that I had a chance to meet, Michelle and I offer you our deepest sympathies.

To Senator Byrd's friends, including the Speaker of the House, the majority leader, the Republican leader, President Clinton, Vice President Biden, Vicki Kennedy, Nick Rahall, and all the previous speakers; Senator Rockefeller for the outstanding work that you've done for the State of West Virginia; to his larger family, the people of West Virginia: I want you all to know that all America shares your loss. May we all find comfort in a verse of Scripture that reminds me of our dear friend: "The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

It's interesting that you've heard that passage from several speakers now, because it embodies somebody who knew how to run a good and long race and somebody who knew how to keep the faith, with his State, with his family, with his country, and his Constitution.

Years from now, when I think of the man we memorialize today, I'll remember him as he was when I came to know him, his white hair full like a mane, his gait steadied with a cane. Determined to make the most of every last breath, the distinguished gentleman from West Virginia could be found at his desk until the very end, doing the people's business, delivering soul-stirring speeches, a hint of the Appalachians in his voice, stabbing the air with his finger, fiery as ever, years into his tenth decade.

He was a Senate icon. He was a party leader. He was an elder statesman. And he was my friend. That's how I'll remember him.

Today we remember the path he climbed to such extraordinary peaks. Born Cornelius Calvin Sale, Jr.—Corny, he joked, for short—his mother lost her life in the great influenza pandemic of 1918. From the aunt and uncle who raised him, amid West Virginia's coal camps, he gained not only his Byrd name but a reverence for God Almighty, a love of learning that was nurtured at Mark Twain School. And there he met Erma, his sweetheart for over 70 years, by whose side he will now rest for eternity.

Unable to afford college, he did what he could to get by, finding work as a gas station attendant, a produce salesman, a meat cutter, and a welder in the shipyards of Baltimore and Tampa during World War II. Returning home to West Virginia after the war, he ran for the State House of Delegates, using his fiddle case as a briefcase, the better to stand out on the stump.

Before long, he ran for Congress, serving in the House before jumping over to the Senate, where he was elected nine times, held almost every leadership role imaginable, and proved as capable of swaying others as standing alone, marking a row of milestones along the way: longest serving Member of Congress; nearly 19,000 votes cast; not a single loss at the polls—a record that speaks to the bond that he had with you, the people of his State.

Transplanted to Washington, his heart remained here, in West Virginia, in the place that shaped him, with the people he loved. His heart belonged to you. Making life better here was his only agenda. Giving you hope, he said, was his greatest achievement. Hope in the form of new jobs and industries. Hope in the form of black lung benefits and union protections. Hope through roads and research centers, schools and scholarships, health clinics and industrial parks that bear his name.

His early rival and late friend, Ted Kennedy, used to joke about campaigning in West Virginia. When his bus broke down, Ted got hold of the highway patrol, who asked where he was. And he said, "I'm on Robert Byrd Highway." And the dispatcher said, "Which one?" [Laughter]

It's a life that immeasurably improved the lives of West Virginians. Of course, Robert Byrd was a deeply religious man, a Christian. And so he understood that our lives are marked by sins as well as virtues, failures as well as successes, weakness as well as strength. We know there are things he said and things he did that he came to regret. I remember talking about that the first time I visited with him. He said, "There are things I regretted in my youth. You may know that." And I said, "None of us are absent some regrets, Senator. That's why we enjoy and seek the grace of God."

And as I reflect on the full sweep of his 92 years, it seems to me that his life bent towards justice. Like the Constitution he tucked in his pocket, like our Nation itself, Robert Byrd possessed that quintessential American quality, and that is a capacity to change, a capacity to learn, a capacity to listen, a capacity to be made more perfect.

Over his nearly six decades in our Capitol, he came to be seen as the very embodiment of the Senate, chronicling its history in four volumes that he gave to me just as he gave to President Clinton. I too read it. I was scared he was going to quiz me. [Laughter]

But as I soon discovered, his passion for the Senate's past, his mastery of even its most arcane procedures, it wasn't an obsession with the trivial or the obscure; it reflected a profoundly noble impulse, a recognition of a basic truth about this country that we are not a nation of men, we are a nation of laws. Our way of life rests on our democratic institutions. Precisely because we are fallible, it falls to each of us to safeguard these institutions, even when it's inconvenient, and pass on our republic more perfect than before.

Considering the vast learning of this self-taught Senator—his speeches sprinkled with the likes of Cicero and Shakespeare and Jefferson—it seems fitting to close with one of his favorite passages in literature, a passage from "Moby Dick":

"And there is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he forever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than any other bird upon the plain, even though they soar."

Robert Byrd was a mountain eagle, and his lowest swoop was still higher than the other birds upon the plain.

May God bless Robert C. Byrd. May he be welcomed kindly by the Righteous Judge, and may his spirit soar forever like a Catskill eagle, high above the Heavens. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 1:09 p.m. at the West Virginia State Capitol. In his remarks, he referred to Mona Byrd Fatemi and Marjorie Byrd Moore, daughters of Sen.

Byrd; Victoria R. Kennedy, wife of former Sen. Edward M. Kennedy; and Rep. Nick J. Rahall II. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Vice President Joe Biden.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Byrd, Sen. Robert C., funeral service in Charleston, WV.

Locations: Charleston, WV.

Names: Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Byrd, Robert C.; Clinton, William J.; Fatemi, Mona Byrd; Kennedy, Victoria R.; Moore, Marjorie Byrd; Obama, Michelle; Rahall, Nick J., II; Rockefeller, John D. "Jay," IV.

Subjects: Deaths : Byrd, Sen. Robert C.; West Virginia : President's visits; West Virginia : U.S. Senator, death.

DCPD Number: DCPD201000571.