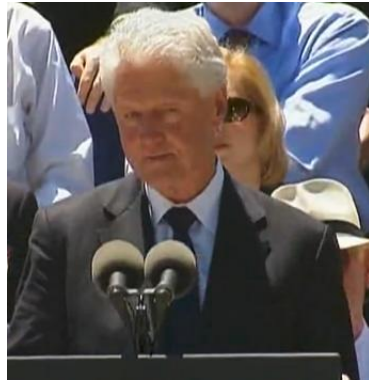




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William Jefferson Clinton

Eulogy for Robert Byrd



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Thank you very much. Governor, all the members of Senator Byrd's family, Mr. President, Mr. Vice President, Madam Speaker, Congressman Rahall, and all the House members here, Senator Reid, Senator McConnell, the senators; thank you, Senator Rockefeller and thank you, Vicki Kennedy.

I'd also like to thank all the people here who at the time of his passing or ever worked for Robert Byrd who helped him to succeed for the people of West Virginia. I thank them.

And, I want to thank the Martin Luther King [Jr.] Male Chorus. They gave us a needed break from all these politicians talking up here.

I want to say first that I come here to speak for two members my family. Hillary wanted to be here today and she paid her respects to Senator Byrd as he lay in state in the United States Senate before making a trip on behalf of our country to Central and Eastern Europe.

I am grateful to Bob Byrd for many things, but one thing that no one has given enough attention to in my opinion today is that while he always wanted to be the best senator, and he always wanted to be the longest-serving senator, he wanted every other senator to be the best senator that he or she could be. And he helped Hillary a lot when she came to represent the people of New York. I am forever grateful for that.



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Now I know this, everybody else has canonizing Senator Byrd. I'd like to humanize him a little bit, 'cause I think it makes it more interesting and makes his service all the more important. First of all, most people had to go all the way to Washington to become awed by -- you might even say intimidated by -- Robert Byrd.

Not me. I had advance experience before I got elected President.

'Cause the first time I ever ran for office, at the opening of campaign season in Arkansas, just below the Waccamaw and Ozark mountains, which once were connected to the Appalachians, we had this big rally. And the year that I started, don't you know, Robert Byrd was the speaker. 1974, April, I'll never forget it. It was a beautiful spring night. And he gave one of those stem-winding speeches. And then he got up and he played the fiddle, and the crowd went crazy. And you know, in 1974, in a place like Arkansas or West Virginia, playing the fiddle was a whole lot better for your politics than playing a saxophone.

So I am completely intimidated. And then all the candidates get to speak. They're all limited to four or five minutes. Some went over. All the candidates for governor and every state officer. And then the people running for the House of Representatives, there were five of us. We were dead last. And I drew the short straw. I was dead last among them.

By the time I got up to speak, it had been so long since Robert Byrd spoke, he was hungry again. And I realized, in my awed state, I couldn't do that well. So I decided the only chance I had to be remembered was to give the shortest speech. I spoke for 80 seconds. And I won the primary. And I owed it to Robert Byrd.

Now, when I was elected President, I knew that one of the things I needed to do before I took the oath of office was go to the Senate and pay my respects to Senator Byrd. In 1974, when I first met him, he had already been the leading authority on the institutional history of the Senate and the Senate rules for some years, and he certainly was by the time I was about to become President. So I did that. And I got a copy of his history of the Senate, and his history of the Roman Senate. And I read them. And they're, I'm proud to say, still on my bookshelves in my office in Harlem in New York City today because I was so profoundly impressed.

Now, Robert Byrd was not without a sense of humor. For example, I was once ragging him about all the federal money he was hauling down to West Virginia. And it was bad. I mean, I was from Arkansas. We weren't much better off than you. We weren't any better off than you. And every friend I had in Arkansas said, he's just a senator. You're sitting in the White House. We don't get squat compared to what they get. What is the matter with you? I was getting the living daylight's beat out of me about once a week.

So I said to him, early in my first term, I say, "You know, senator, if you pave every single inch of West Virginia, it's going to be much harder to mine coal."



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And he smiled, and he said, "The Constitution does not prohibit humble servants from delivering whatever they can to their constituents."

But let me say something seriously. He knew people who were elected to represent states and regions and political philosophies. We're flesh and blood people, which means they would never be perfect. He knew they were subject to passion and anger. And when you make a decision, that's important when you're mad, there's about an 80 percent chance you'll make a mistake. And that's why he thought the rules and the institution and the Constitution were so important. And he put them before everything, even what he wanted.

I'll never forget when we were trying to pass health care reform in 1993 and '94, Senator Byrd was a passionate supporter of the efforts we were making, just as he was of the efforts that President Obama has made. But we only had 55 votes, and we could not defeat a filibuster. And so I said, "Well, Senator, won't you just let me stick this on the budget -- 'cause it's the only thing you can't filibuster." That violated something called the "Byrd Rule."

They knew he was running the Senate. They just go ahead and named the rule for him. And I said, "You know, you really ought to suspend this, because the budget is going to be bankrupt if we don't quit spending so much money on health care, and we can't do it if we offer health care to everybody." And he looked at me and he said, "That argument might have worked when you were a professor in law school. But you know as well as I do, it is substantively wrong." He wouldn't do it.

Then in his defense, he turned right around and he worked his heart out to break that filibuster, and he was trying till the very end not to get me to give up the fight, because he thought if we just tried, we could find some errant Republican who would make a mistake and vote with us. He would never give it up. The point I want to make is, he made a decision against his own interests, his own conviction, his own fight. And that's one reason I thank God that he could go in his wheelchair in his most significant vote at the end of his service in the Senate and vote for health care reform and make it a real law.

Now, I will say this. If you want to get along with Senator Byrd, and you were having one of these constitutional differences, it was better for your long-term health if you lost the battle. I won the battle over the line-item veto. Oh, he hated the line-item veto. He hated the line-item veto with a passion that most people in West Virginia reserve for blood feuds, like the Hatfields and the McCoys.

You would have thought the line-item veto had been killing members of the Byrd family for 100 years. It made his blood boil. You've never been lectured by anybody -- Nick Rahall said that. Till Bob Byrd has lectured you, you have never known a lecture. I regret that every new President and every new member of Congress will never have the experience of being dressed down by Senator Robert Byrd. And I'll be darned if he wasn't right about that too -- the Supreme Court rule for him instead of me on the climb -- on the line-item veto. All right?



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The point I want to make here is a serious one. Yeah, he did as good a job for you as he could. As far as he was concerned, there was no such thing as too much for West Virginia. But the one thing he would not do, even for you, is violate his sense of what was required to maintain the integrity of the Constitution and the integrity of the United States' Senate so that America could go on when we were wrong, as well as right. So we would never be dependent on always being right.

Let me just say, finally, it is common place to say that he was a self-made man, that he set an example of lifetime learning. He was the first, and as far as I know, maybe the only member of Congress to get a law degree while serving in the Congress. But he did more learning than that. And all you've got to do is look around this crowd today and listen to that music to remember.

There are a lot of people who wrote these eulogies for Senator Byrd in the newspapers -- and I read a bunch of them -- and they mentioned that he once had a fleeting association with the Ku Klux Klan. And what does that mean? I'll tell what you it means. He was a country boy from the hills and hollers of West Virginia. He was trying to get elected. And maybe he did something he shouldn't have done, and he spent the rest of his life making it up. And that's what a good person does.

There are no perfect people. There are certainly no perfect politicians. And so, yeah, I'm glad he got a law degree. But by the time he got a law degree, he already knew more than 99 percent of the lawyers in America, anyway. The degree he got in human nature and human wisdom, the understanding that came to him by serving you and serving in the Senate, that the people from the hills and hollers of West Virginia, in their patriotism, they provided a disproportionate newspaper of the soldiers who fought for our independence from England. And they have provided a disproportionate number of the soldiers in every single solitary conflict since that time, whether they agreed or disagreed with the policy.

The family feeling, the clan loyalty, the fanatic independence, the desire for a hand up, not a hand out, the willingness to fight when put into a corner -- that has often got the people from whom Senator Byrd and I sprang in trouble, because we didn't keep learning and growing and understanding that all the African-Americans who have been left out and left down and lived for going to church and lived to see their kids get a better deal, and have their children sign up for the military when they're needed -- they're just like we are.

That all the Irish Catholics, the Scotch Irish used to fight -- everybody -- the Italian immigrants, the people from Latin America who have come to our shores, the people from all over the world; everybody who's ever been let down and left out and ignored and abused, or who's got a terrible family story -- we're all alike. That is the real education Robert Byrd got, and he lived it every day of his life in the United States Senate to make America a better, stronger place.



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So not long after, maybe right before Senator Byrd lost Erma, I said in a fleeting world of instant food and attention deficit disorder, he had proved and so had she that some people really do love each other till death do them part. I've been thinking about that today, thinking maybe we ought to amend the marriage vows and say that till death to us part and till death do bring us back together.

I admired Senator Byrd. I liked him. I was grateful to him. I loved our arguments. And I loved our common causes. But most of all, I loved it that he had had the wisdom to believe that America was more important than any one individual, any one President, any one senator -- that the rules, the institutions, the system had to enable us to keep forming "a more perfect union" through ups and downs and good times and bad.

He has left us a precious gift. He fought a good fight. He kept the faith. He has finished his course, but not ours. If we really would honor him today and every day, we must remember his lessons, and live by them.

Thank you.