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Posted on Sun, Apr. 02, 2006

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Proxmire called `a profile in courage'

BY KATHERINE M. SKIBA
 Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

WASHINGTON - The late Sen. William Proxmire was memorialized Saturday at the Washington National Cathedral at a service featuring tributes from the Democratic Party's elder statesmen.

Sen. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, the first to pay homage to the longtime senator from Wisconsin, said: "I certainly would call him a profile in courage - and I'm sure Jack and Bobby would agree."

He referred to his late brothers, president and senator, who served with Proxmire, whose 32-year service stretched from 1957 to 1989. He said Proxmire was a special friend to the Kennedys and characterized the senator as tactically helpful during the 1960 Wisconsin presidential primary, which John Kennedy won.

Without Proxmire, "there may have never been a New Frontier," Edward Kennedy said, in an allusion to John Kennedy's administration.

Kennedy said Proxmire personified a belief that government must be a force for humanity and justice and act for the common good, not powerful special interests. He singled out the more than 3,000 speeches Proxmire gave to urge the Senate to ratify an anti-genocide treaty.

"Bill Proxmire made America a better place, and he made the world a better place, too," Kennedy said.

He also heralded Proxmire's record for consecutive roll call votes amassed over more than 20 years. He said that whenever he missed a vote, the Massachusetts press was sure to bring it up. "A Lou Gehrig record that no one will ever break until Cal Ripken wins a seat," he remarked.

Others remembered Proxmire's "Golden Fleece" awards to highlight wasteful government spending, his low-budget political campaigns and genius for retail politics.

On the legislative front, he was remembered for truth-in-lending laws and the Community Reinvestment Act to help poor and rural areas.

Saturday's 70-minute ceremony drew hundreds on a spring morning to the ornate cathedral, the second largest in the United States, after St. John's in New York.

Mourners were given an eight-page booklet titled "In Thanksgiving for and in Celebration of the Life of The Honorable William Proxmire." There was prayer, psalm, a homily and song, including a selection in German from Johannes Brahms' "Ein Deutsches Requiem."

Other tributes came from Walter Mondale, former vice president and senator from Minnesota, and Paul Volcker, former chairman of the Federal Reserve Board.

Mondale remembered disdaining a "miserable" red-eye flight from the capital to Chicago that left at midnight. Aboard he found Proxmire boasting that such overnight trips let him get to plant gates in Milwaukee by 5:45 a.m., where "Prox" did some of his legendary handshaking.

"Bill Proxmire represents almost the last of one of America's most remarkable generations," Mondale said, pointing to Midwestern progressive senators including George McGovern of South Dakota, Harold Hughes of Iowa, Hubert Humphrey and Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, and Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin.

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"Together with Bill Proxmire, they built a more decent and hopeful nation," he said.

Proxmire died at age 90 in Sykesville, Md., on Dec. 15, after a battle with Alzheimer's disease.

He was buried in his native Lake Forest, Ill., and memorialized in February in the state Capitol in Madison. Saturday's tribute, then, was the final send-off, attended by family, friends, followers and former colleagues.

Among those on hand were McGovern, who in 1972 ran unsuccessfully for president; Sen. Paul Sarbanes, Democrat of Maryland; Wisconsin Rep. Dave Obey, Democrat from Wausau; and former Wisconsin Reps. Robert Kastenmeier, Democrat from Sun Prairie, and Toby Roth, Republican from Appleton.

Readers included two of Proxmire's children, Douglas and Theodore, and political commentator Mark Shields, a former aide.

Afterward, Proxmire's wife, Ellen, and children met guests for lunch at the University Club. There the reminiscing was more personal—old campaigns, old friends, and, to much laughter, Golden Fleece awards still so memorable they might have been issued last week.

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