

## THE CENTER HAS HELD: TOM EAGLETON

WALTER MONDALE\*

When the United States Senate celebrated its bicentennial, it turned to Tom Eagleton, then a former Senator, to deliver the commemorative address in the magnificently restored original Senate chambers. His selection as the speaker on this profound historical moment tells us a lot about the special affection and respect that Tom enjoyed among his peers. You can bet that there were several past and present U.S. Senators who themselves would have liked to give that address but, in a remarkable moment, they decided that, after looking at all of the possibilities, it was Tom Eagleton that they most trusted to speak for the Senate, the most unique and powerful upper legislative body in the world.

They made the right choice. After describing the Senate's unique history, Tom Eagleton centered his remarks on that institution's remarkable history of managing the powerful forces of change and differences that have challenged our nation. In his words:

Here in this room has been sheltered the structural side of our democratic Government for decades. That government's life force—what makes it work and endure—is our capacity to accommodate differences and to find a way beyond parochial, partisan, and ideological concerns to live together as a free nation.

We remember the poet Yeats' very gloomy assessment: "things fly apart; the center will not hold." Well, in the United States, with the tragic exception of the Civil War which had to be fought, the center has held: through expansion to the continental boundaries; through the transition from an agricultural to an industrial to a technological society; through Depression and world wars; through McCarthyism[;] and nearly a half century of Cold War. It has held without religious or racial homogeneity. It has held without the reassuring and unifying symbol of a King or Queen. It has held without the built-in assurances provided by a parliamentary system.<sup>1</sup>

---

\* Walter F. Mondale's record of public service includes Vice President of the United States, U.S. Ambassador to Japan, U.S. Senator, and Attorney General for the State of Minnesota. He was also the Democratic Party's nominee for President in 1984. He is currently Senior Counsel with the law firm of Dorsey & Whitney, LLP, headquartered in Minneapolis with sixteen offices worldwide. He serves on the firm's Asia Law Practice Group.

1. 135 CONG. REC. 5686 (1989).

“The center,” Eagleton said, “has held because of our understanding of the importance of compromise. . . . [W]ithout some accommodation and compromise, our Government cannot function and we will not be able to preserve the values we hold in common and in trust for future generations.”<sup>2</sup>

Tom Eagleton will be remembered as one of the most important public men of our time. Brilliant, gutsy, funny, serious, loyal, progressive, and impatient, he was a central figure during our nation’s high tide of civic reform and social justice. If you ever wonder whether it is possible for a public officer to be honest, caring, selfless, and worthy of your trust, just take a look at the life of Tom Eagleton; Tom was that way every day of his life.

Tom was also very lucky. He arrived in the Senate just at the beginning of the watershed of progressive reform. He was young, as were so many of his colleagues. These were heady times; there had been nothing quite like it in American history. While the poet spoke of another time of sweeping change, he could have been writing about Tom’s times: “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive[;] But to be young was very heaven.”<sup>3</sup> For Tom, it was heaven. The progressives enjoyed a cooperative administration, a massive congressional majority, and the most liberal court in our nation’s history. All parts of American government were as one in dealing with a multi-generational backlog of social and economic reforms. It was stunning: civil rights, Medicare and Medicaid, basic environmental measures, aid to education and student assistance, the arts and humanities foundations, the war on poverty, legal services programs, food stamps, school lunches and Head Start, the elimination of disgraceful racial and ethnic discrimination endemic in our immigration laws, creation of the housing and urban affairs department, job safety and pension reform, and much more. Tom Eagleton was at the center of it all, and he loved it.

Tom was a gifted lawyer. He could think, and, as an editor of the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* told me, “He could write like an angel.” He spoke of compromise but he loved civic combat; he lived for debate and was always pressing for reform. Unlike some who reached the highest levels of government, Tom could hear the voices of the sad and forgotten who live unnoticed in our midst.

I hope history will report the broad, brilliant, and progressive legacy he bequeathed to American public life and overlook his brief flirtation with the Vice Presidency. But, if history decides to talk about this unnerving moment in his life, I hope their report will be faithful to the truth: when Tom stepped down as a vice presidential candidate, he and Barbara attended a University of Missouri football game at which the fans at the packed stadium rose as one to

---

2. *Id.*

3. WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, PRELUDE 285 (Mark L. Reed ed., Cornell University Press 1991).

encourage and embrace Tom Eagleton. They loved him and wanted him to know it. That was Missouri's verdict. For the rest of his elective career, Tom Eagleton was untouchable.

I am impressed that the *Saint Louis University Law Journal's* board of editors decided to dedicate this volume to one of Missouri's greatest public servants whom your students knew so well. I hope your future lawyers will study his career carefully, learn from it, and, if possible, help us be the special nation that, as he said, "will . . . be able to preserve the values we hold in common and in trust for future generations."<sup>4</sup>

---

4. 135 CONG. REC. 5686 (1989).

