

He is known across his State for his unflagging support for his constituents and the future and welfare of those people of West Virginia. In 2001, he was named by his State "West Virginian of the 20th Century."

Today marks a great achievement for the senior Senator, but in some ways it is also bittersweet.

Today, Erma Byrd, the Senator's wife of nearly 7 decades, would have turned 89 years old. The Senator has said that his love for Erma was greater than anything in his life. Without her, he could not have reached such great heights, nor could he have endured the inevitable rough patches of political life.

On the occasion of their 65th wedding anniversary, the Senator paid an eloquent tribute to his high school sweetheart. His words:

Erma and I are complete and whole, a total that is more than the sum of its parts. In my life, Erma Byrd is the diamond. She is the priceless treasure, a multifaceted woman of great insight and wisdom, of quiet humor and common sense.

Senator BYRD has said that, for him, today's achievement will pass with little fanfare or pride. Today, he will do what he has always done on June 12. He will honor his dear wife Erma, remember her and pray for her.

So we will celebrate on his behalf and pay honor to them both—Senator BYRD for his lifelong service to his country, and Erma for her quiet and steady support for the country gentleman from West Virginia.

When history is written, I am certain that Senator BYRD will hold a prominent place as a Senate legend—and in no small part because of the love of a kind and gentle lady, Erma Ora Byrd.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. The minority leader is recognized.

TRIBUTE TO SENATOR ROBERT C. BYRD

Mr. REID. Mr. President, it is Monday. The Galleries do not have many people in them. We have a new batch of pages. Others graduated recently. But everyone here—pages and those in the Gallery—should recognize that today is a day of history in America.

Public service is about personal sacrifice for the greater good. It is about reaching for the better angels of our human nature.

That quote is a great quote for today, but that quote is from ROBERT BYRD, which should come as no surprise because the description fits him to a tee.

As we have heard from the distinguished majority leader, Senator BYRD passes Strom Thurmond, who I had the good fortune to serve with, and becomes the longest serving Senator in American history, with 17,327 days—17,327 days—of service in the Senate.

You add that to his 6 years in the House of Representatives, and ROBERT

BYRD has served in the Congress 25 percent of the time we have been a nation. Seventy-five percent of the time other people served in the Congress. But this one man has served 25 percent of the time we have been a country. This gives us some perspective of what a significant day this actually is. The U.S. Senate first met in New York City in 1789.

ROBERT C. BYRD has served a distinguished career. His career in the Senate is significant, important, and impressive. But his life is impressive.

America is a place where everyone has a chance. It does not matter that you are an orphan at age 1. It does not matter that you are raised with an aunt and uncle. It does not matter that your new parents work very, very hard in the coal mines of West Virginia. Because, you see, in America people can succeed no matter what the status of their parents.

ROBERT BYRD is testimony to that. He graduated valedictorian of his high school class. He went to work in the depths of the Great Depression because he had no way of paying to go to college. He worked at a number of different jobs. He worked odd jobs wherever he could find them, pumping gas, selling produce, working as a meat cutter, a butcher, and even during World War II doing some welding on "Liberty" and "Victory" ships.

After the war, he returned to West Virginia and began his distinguished career of public service.

The West Virginia House of Delegates was his first elected position. Then he was elected to the West Virginia Senate. Then he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in the early 1950s. In 1958, he was elected to the U.S. Senate.

His career of leadership is unsurpassed and will always be unsurpassed. He has been a mentor to me for all these many years and a leader for whom all of us in this body have the highest respect.

But as we have already heard, for all of his accolades—and there have been many—Senator BYRD himself will tell you his greatest success truly came on a late day in May, 1937, when he put on his best suit, traveled to the nearby town of Sophia, WV, and married his high school sweetheart, Erma. Today is her birthday.

Now, I had the good fortune to travel, on a couple of occasions, with Erma Byrd and the Senator. We had work to do around the world. What a wonderful, wonderful woman. She was kind, thoughtful, and quiet, but with a great presence about her. I remember having the honor, really—and it was that—of Senator BYRD asking me to go to West Virginia. We had a parliamentary exchange with the British Parliament.

I had heard this song, "West Virginia Hills," but it never meant anything to me until that occasion in a mesa in West Virginia where we gathered with those British parliamentarians for an evening event to listen to some blue-

grass music, to watch the Sun go down in those West Virginia hills. That is something I will always remember of ROBERT BYRD and his lovely wife Erma.

There has been no greater advocate in the almost 18,000 days this man has served in the Senate, and the more than 18,000 days he has served in the Congress, no greater advocate for the State of West Virginia than Senator ROBERT BYRD.

He has fought to improve access to education and health care. The things he has done for transportation in West Virginia are legend. He has brought jobs there. He has done things to protect pensioners.

We just passed on May 24 an example of what Senator BYRD does for West Virginia. The Mine Improvement and New Emergency Response Act of 2006 was passed on May 24. President Bush will sign this into law. Again, it is important legislation for miners across the country. It means a lot to me. I have spoken to Senator BYRD about miners. My father was a miner. And I am proud of the work Senator BYRD has done for West Virginia because it helps all miners.

I asked, as I was coming here, my long-serving personal assistant Janice Shelton: What do you want me to say about Senator BYRD? She has worked with me all the time I have been in the Senate.

She said: No Senator comes and talks to the country like Senator BYRD.

The Fourth of July you prepare your own speech; you read your own speech about the Fourth of July. Thanksgiving, if we are here, you give a speech on Thanksgiving. Christmas, Mother's Day, wonderful—I can still remember your speeches on Mother's Day. The reason those speeches are so important to every one of us—of course, they are important to you; they reflect upon your mother, the woman who raised you—is because it causes us to reflect on our own mothers. Every time you gave one of those speeches, I thought of my red-haired mother working so hard, taking in wash so that I could have clothes like the other kids. So every speech you give is not only for the people of West Virginia. It is for the country. It is for the people who work here with you.

I have had the good fortune—in fact, I visited with one of my friends who I practiced law with for 12 years. A brilliant man, he is so smart. He reads books, has from the time he was a boy until now, many books each week. I have always admired Rex Jemison and how smart he is. But Senator BYRD, to those of us who have worked with you, you have no peer.

I can remember as if it were yesterday when you decided you were going to take over the Appropriations Committee and no longer have a leadership position. We had an event in the Russell Building, the caucus room. There was no press, Senators, very limited staff. You stood and talked to us a little bit. You told us things we thought