

Senator Fulbright and His Work
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It is a real pleasure to be here to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Fulbright Program in Greece with my good friend Artemis Zenetou and to talk about the man who created it and his work. Since so many of you here have heard a great deal about the accomplishments of Senator J. William Fulbright, I thought I might give you a bit of background as to where his inspiration came from – what in his early life might have encouraged him to think so deeply and intuitively, to come up with ideas so far ahead of his time.

Young Bill Fulbright grew up in the small university town of Fayetteville, Arkansas, the middle child of parents who were university trained – something most unusual in that era. Both mother and father felt that a first rate education was extremely important for both boys and girls, and they sent their children to the lab school at the University of Arkansas where the curriculum emphasized self reliance, intellectual assertiveness and experimental learning as advocated in the writings of John Dewey. While the content was largely that of a classical education, it also incorporated a good deal of psychology, sociology and political economy.

His father also had another method of instilling in his son an appreciation of school. When Bill was 12 he was sent off in the summer to work on a nearby farm and given the task of shoveling grain into big feed bags. At the end of each day he was not only sweltering from the humid 90+ heat but he was covered with chaff and dust. The next spring he was given the choice of doing the same work for another summer or going to school, and his preference for learning was hardly a surprise. Bill subsequently advanced quickly through school and graduated from the University at the age of twenty.

During his senior year his English teacher encouraged him to apply for a Rhodes Scholarship, and it was truly suited for him because candidates are judged not only on their grades but on athletic prowess and leadership potential. While not first in his class, Bill Fulbright had a very good academic record and was a football hero and president of his class. For the rest of his life he claimed that the three years of rigorous training at Oxford in how to write with precision and therefore how to think clearly was one of the greatest determinants in his life.

From the moment he entered Congress, Fulbright always studied a situation before he put forward an idea or a piece of legislation. As a first term Representative during the Second World War, he looked with dismay at the massive destruction and loss of life and wondered why the Senate had rejected President Wilson's urgent request to join the League of Nations after World War I, for it might have helped prevent another worldwide war. His subsequent study of our history revealed that Wilson had not begun his campaign to join the League until well after the end of that war, when the whole nation had turned its attention away from anything beyond US borders. As a result of this insight, he began in 1943 at the height of World War II to turn his

attention to the creation of another international body and conferred with the leadership of both parties, and the Secretary of State and President Roosevelt as well. By the time he submitted his resolution, it won by a landslide, paving the way for the establishment of the United Nations soon after the fighting stopped.

There was another event that troubled him deeply, however, and that was the enormous power of the new bomb used to bring the war to and end more quickly. To examine the long term effects of the atomic explosions over Hiroshima and Nagasaki Senator Fulbright set up public hearings and chose those who testified before him for their ability to educate the country in the broadest possible manner. They were not only scientists and economists but doctors, biologists, even psychologists, and what they related to him was so horrific that he spent the next several months searching for another way to help prevent World War III.

After pestering everyone he knew with probing questions for months, he slowly came to the realization that his three years as a student in Oxford turned the island of England into the home of a wonderful group of friends and colleagues who continued to influence his life and actions. Perhaps, he thought, if he could persuade future potential leaders to spend enough time in another country, for long enough to appreciate a different way of being and interacting as a community, they might be willing to settle differences through dialogue instead of conflict.

Thus was born in 1946 the idea of an international education exchange program, but how to pay for it was a problem because his Senate colleagues had again turned inward. Ever watchful and creative in his thinking, he suddenly lit up when he saw on his desk a bill to sell all the surplus military goods spread around the world at the end of the war for credits. As the bill left his desk, it had tacked on to it an added sentence: these credits shall be used only for international education exchange. Two years later the first boat loads of eager students crossed both oceans, and began a program now known the world over. It is recognized worldwide that the Fulbright Program has fundamentally changed the attitudes and life paths of hundreds of thousands of leaders on every continent.

I would like to mention one last Fulbright act that has had a profound influence on the city of Washington, and it came about because of his close association with the Ambassador of the USSR. Convinced that it is important to keep one's friends close but one's enemies even closer, he often extended invitations to Ambassador Dobrinin of the Soviet Union to dine at his home. One evening he was in turn taken to a performance of the Bolshoi Ballet as it was performing here. Fulbright enjoyed it immensely but saw that the theater was quite inadequate for such a troop, and he immediately began a search for the land and the money to build something befitting the great artistic companies, both American and foreign, which would enrich the lives of those who live in this capital city.

For the first few years the work of establishing a National Center for the Performing Arts was slow and unrewarding. Neither the Congress nor the District's residents were enthusiastic or focused enough to raise the funds necessary for such a large undertaking, but Fulbright and his creative thinking was able to find success in tragedy. Two weeks after the assassination of President Kennedy, he re-introduced his bill; what better way, he said, to honor the fallen President than to name a national center for cultural events after him. So over the next few years

the money came from all over the world, and the Kennedy Center slowly rose on the banks of the Potomac. In other words he used his expanded vision of human life to enhance it beyond the confines of the issues that normally consume the daily lives of elected officials.

As you can easily see, Senator J. William lived up to his own words: “We must dare to think ‘unthinkable’ thoughts,” he said. “We must learn to explore all the options and possibilities that confront us in a complex and rapidly changing world. We must learn to welcome and not to fear the voices of dissent. We must dare to think about ‘unthinkable’ things because when things become unthinkable, thinking stops and action becomes mindless.”

Thanks to his extraordinary creative thinking and actions, we are all here today on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of his program in Greece, and I thank all of you for being here for the celebration.