PASSING OF GEORGE MC GOVERN

STATEMENT OF CATHERINE BERTINI

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It is tempting to write of the person the world has just lost. I would prefer to speak of the gift that we have had - the ninety years of the life of George McGovern.

For people of a certain age - baby boomers and older, Senator McGovern was an icon. When he ran for president in 1972, he captured the imagination of a generation. Literally millions of young Americans flocked to his brand of politics. I wasn’t one of them, as I played a leadership role in the Young Voters for the President campaign. But his legacy carried forward in the senior staffing of the next three Democratic presidents

The Senator kept working, in the Senate and later, on issues important to him, unceasingly working to end hunger in the US and throughout the world. When President Bill Clinton nominated him to be the United States Ambassador to the United Nations in Rome, it was the most appropriate choice ever. George McGovern, as President Kennedy’s Food for Peace director, had convinced FAO and the UN to create the World Food Program to use rich countries’ harvests to feed the hungry in the developing world. Now he was the American representative to WFP, FAO and IFAD.

On the day he first arrived at WFP, its distinguished senior staff lined up with great excitement to meet him. After all, they were born between 1940 and 1960, but in Malaysia, Germany, Canada, Myanmar, Cameroon and elsewhere, and they were just as aware of the McGovern campaign and his anti-hunger legacy as their American contemporaries.

It was there we saw his vision. "We should have a world where every child has a meal at school," he told me early on. And he set out to achieve that. He recruited a Republican colleague and friend, Senator Bob Dole, to join him, and he convinced President Clinton to make a budget commitment to this. WFP and many NGOs and governments ramped up school feeding efforts. George and Bob were named the 2008 World Food Prize laureates in recognition of this work.

When George was stepping down as ambassador, he accepted my request to become our first UN Ambassador Against Hunger, and he continued to travel the world and the US to make a difference. He kept up his prolific writing as well as his busy speaking schedule. He and Eleanor were honored with a beautiful library created in their names at their alma mater, Dakota Wesleyan University. Then sadly, Eleanor died in 2007.
Since then, my friends and family and I have continued to be inspired by George - in his moving speech to staff at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in Seattle, on the book tour we hosted in Central New York and Albany, in meetings in DC, Mitchell, Des Moines, and in Florida. That Florida visit was just six months ago; four of us spent the weekend planning the next steps to be taken on George’s mission to have all children in the world have meals at school.

George McGovern's gift to millions of young Americans was the inspiration that one can make a difference in politics and government. His gift to colleagues like me with whom he worked later in life was the importance of vision, and how one needs to set a high bar and strive, life long, to achieve it. But his most important gifts of all were to hundreds of millions of children in the United States and throughout the world who will never know his name, but who survived, and thrived.

May he rest in peace.