

SENATOR PAUL TSONGAS

The Alfred Ernest Stearns Lecture

Phillips Andover Academy

Andover, Massachusetts

November 30, 1979

There are conflicting clichés about your generation -- and that's nothing new. Some say you are the "me generation," dedicated to the proposition that self-service is the way to greatest satisfaction. Others talk about "idealistic young people," as if it were a phase we all have to outgrow. Each of these stereotypes is, at best, a half truth. My hunch is that those of you on the right side of the room are the idealists, and over there on the wrong side are the ones along for the ride. Many of you are in between. Many of you haven't yet chosen a career, or decided to what degree you will work for the public good.

Tonight my goal is simple. I intend to convince someone leaning toward the selfish side of life that there is nothing in the world more satisfying than serving others. That's not wishful thinking or any other strain of "idealism." It is practical, and provable.

It was proved to me over and over during three years in the Peace Corps. I spent most of that time in a small village in Ethiopia, teaching school to Ethiopians and learning from them. My formal education took place in Lowell public schools, Dartmouth, and Yale Law, but none of them taught me as much as my friends in Ethiopia. My experience and the experiences of many other volunteers here and overseas make me support some form of Voluntary National Service for young Americans. I'm sponsoring legislation for a one-year study of all aspects of National Service, and a conference in Boston to discuss various plans. I welcome your ideas on this issue.

I look at service as a way to nourish the national spirit, to bring Americans together. One of the duties of public servants is to find common interests, to foster the public interest. Yes, it's dramatic to hype up clashes such as energy needs vs. the environment, the present vs. the future. Many dichotomies are exaggerated in the media, but the "present vs. future" equation is not. The new era of resource limits challenges us to save our earth and ourselves--but not by sacrificing our children's future. We must make public policy in the 1980s with future generations in mind.

Tonight I will talk about energy and the environment as we look to the future. They are aspects of the same tragedy--our thoughtless abuse of the earth's natural wealth. We have endangered our own prospects for survival. Like other animals, we are supposed to have at least an instinct for survival--plus all that "selfishness"--and yet we have disregarded prudent measures for self-preservation.

You must be convinced: the current situation of our natural resources is not some abstraction, but a crisis that will affect you personally. All of us will make real sacrifices in the last one fifth of this century--the question is whether or not we plan for them and choose the policies that are least costly in the long run.

The threat of energy dependency to our security and survival is more obvious right now in Washington than serious environmental dangers. We struggle constantly in Washington to avoid sacrificing the environment in the name of energy. And yet we are still failing to act responsibly on either the environment or energy.