

BEN FERENCZ EULOGY

On April 4, 2024, Federica D'Alessandra* delivered a eulogy for Ben Ferencz.

Thank you, Mr. President, and to the entire Society for the privilege of joining you in eulogizing our late friend and hero, the inimitable Benjamin Berell Ferencz, iconic figure who defied all classification, and whose impact and contributions demand revisiting.

Ben Ferencz fought many battles throughout his life, each evincing a deep-rooted and visionary wisdom. There was nothing ever “ordinary” about him or his life, and his achievements are indeed far greater than we often credit to him.

A committed internationalist and lawyer who witnessed the dehumanization that characterized the Holocaust, repeated in every atrocity committed since, Ben Ferencz espoused a vision for world peace through international law that rested squarely on the protection of human life and dignity.

Tireless and unrelenting, he was known to have pounded on every door and have stalked every hall of power to “give a voice to the voiceless” during his “75 plus years of service to humanity,” as he called his lifelong advocacy for global justice and accountability.

You might know Benjamin Ferencz as a World War II veteran and infantry soldier who landed at Omaha beach and was among the first to encounter and liberate Nazi lagers in western Europe; as a war crimes investigator for General Patton’s Third Army turned Chief Prosecutor in the trial of Otto Ohlendorf and the savage *Einsatzgruppen* at the Nuremberg Military Tribunal; as a lawyer and advocate for victims, who pioneered the first reparation and restitution program dedicated to them in human history; as a scholar, teacher, and public intellectual, and even as a philanthropist; as one of the architects and biggest champions of the International Criminal Court; as “Mr. Aggression” for his advocacy for the inclusion of the Crime of Aggression within the latter’s jurisdiction; and, certainly, as a long-time and proud member of this Society.

The list of his accomplishments is endless. As is that of his recognitions: the most important of which is, without a doubt, the Congressional Gold Medal, one of the country’s highest civilian honors, which Congress announced in July of last year it would award him for “his service to the United States and the international community.” Ben Ferencz was immensely proud of it, and would want me to thank the efforts of those who worked hard to make it happen while he was still alive, both in Congress and within the Biden-Harris administration.

I could speak at length to any of Ben Ferencz’s feats and professional contributions. As I stand before you today, however, I wish to take this opportunity to speak instead about the “real” Ben, the Man behind the Legend. The one I and others around this room knew intimately as a friend, and whose personality and mindset are equally deserving of celebration as any other aspect of his legacy.

A self-described “idealist,” Ben always put a premium on critical thinking and challenging conventional wisdom. Aware that, sometimes, survival necessitates the expedient, he was not afraid to skirt some rules, even as he sought to push for the development of others.

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Deeply serious and dedicated to his cause, Ben Ferencz rarely passed up the opportunity for a joke, and always encouraged levity in others. His charm was legendary, as were his generosity, portentous mind, and ingenuity.

Ben was the embodiment of a “civic leader” never once moved by the prospect of material rewards, but always by his deeply held ideals and convictions, the sincerity of which have inspired, through the years, both admiration and criticism. Yet, Ben Ferencz never cared: he was focused on his message, which has always been one of unabating hope.

To those who knew him, Ben’s “moral compass” was clearly the lodestar orientating him, his ideational goals, and the fortitude with which he pursued them through the years.

To an external observer, and certainly to me when I first met him, Ben Ferencz might have all but morphed into the abstractness of virtues, and come to personify our ideals of courage, strength, resilience, rectitude, and decency. It is easy to forget that he was, after all, “just one man,” as he put it, a living human being with his own internal frailties and contradictions. Understanding this side of his story is crucial to understand his legacy in full.

I have often wondered, for example, where he found his almost superhuman strength to never lose hope, no matter the challenges he encountered. I have often asked myself whether 103 years of perspective might be the requisite for such transformative power of the mind and unflinching human resilience—or whether they, alone, can even be enough.

As the world appears today to be at a breaking point, and too many continue to suffer the cruelty of war, we should find inspiration in my friend Ben Ferencz, who embodied the qualities of leadership we so badly need.

If he were here tonight, I imagine he would say that only moral agency, visionary leadership, and the true courage of consistently committing to the values of justice and world peace can, as they once did, chart a new course for history.

This, in my view, is the morale of Ben Ferencz’s story, the very heart of his enduring legacy—for which we all owe him a debt of gratitude. As we say one last thank you to the one and only Ben Ferencz, let us all ask ourselves, how do we pay this debt forward?

I thank you sincerely for the opportunity to stand before you this evening, and to honor one of history’s truest heroes.