

STATEMENT OF SENATOR WILLIAM S. COHEN

RANKING REPUBLICAN MEMBER

SENATE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

OCTOBER 23, 1991

THE THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF

THE SENATE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

**I am very pleased to be with you this evening to
celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Senate Special
Committee on Aging. First, I want to thank the Leadership
Council of Aging Organizations for sponsoring this**

anniversary celebration and to congratulate each of the groups that are members of the Leadership Council for their excellent work over the years in championing the needs of the aging.

While this reception is honoring the Aging Committee, neither the members of the Committee nor our staffs could do our job without the assistance of you, in the trenches, so to speak, representing the interests of senior citizens. I look forward to working closely with each of you as I begin my partnership with Senator Pryor in leading the committee into its fourth decade.

The Senate Special Committee on Aging has a rich, distinguished tradition of advocating on behalf of our nation's senior citizens, and shaping our national policies with respect to the elderly, and I am most honored to now serve as its Ranking Republican member.

While I have only recently assumed this position on the Aging Committee, I am proud to have been a member of this distinguished committee since coming to the Senate in 1979, after having served on the House Select Committee on Aging since its creation in back in 1975.

I recall that when I served on the House Aging Committee under its legendary chairman, Claude Pepper, one of the first witnesses appearing before the committee at a hearing was Will Geer, or Grandpa Walton, as he was then better known. When he came to the witness table, he said:

"A man or a woman's got to have a pulpit to pound on. If you take that pulpit away, you take away that person's reason for living and zest for life."

He said, in very moving testimony, how critical it was to have a pulpit from which he could tell the Congress, and

indeed, the whole country, the needs of his generation.

The committee was greatly inspired by that testimony and I think it sums up best why the Senate Aging Committee is such an important voice in the Congress. It acts as the pulpit for the millions of Americans who have reached the age of 65, as well as for the rest of us who are children, families, or caregivers of the elderly -- and those millions more Americans who are reaching retirement age.

Now, as the committee begins its fourth decade, the challenges facing it are more formidable than ever. There are now more than 31 million Americans over 65, and, by the year 2030, one of every four Americans will be a senior citizen.

At the same time that the number and proportion of senior citizens are growing dramatically, we have fewer and fewer federal dollars to spend. To make the task even more

Herculean, our health care system for senior citizens, especially in the area of long-term care, is in serious disarray. More and more, the Senate and the entire country will look to the Aging Committee to play a pivotal role in crafting the policies to protect and promote our nation's elderly through these difficult times.

Further adding to the task of the committee is the extent to which the needs of the elderly differ so tremendously. I would offer, as way of example, my own father, Ruby Cohen. At the age of 82 years young, he still works fourteen hours a day, six days a week in his bakery in Bangor, Maine, with no thought of retirement. Ruby's philosophy is, in short, "work yourself to death - it's the only way to live."

My father has, however, been blessed with good health in his later years. Many other senior citizens, are far less

fortunate and need substantial help in keeping their quality of life.

Far too often, senior citizens are cast as one monolithic group. Far from it, senior citizens themselves are rich in diversity, bound together only by their common age.

As it has done so well in the past, this committee must seek out, investigate, and respond to the needs of the many segments of the elderly, such as by recommending ways to improve the quality of life for the millions of seniors who are vibrant and well, and promoting adequate health care and other assistance to those who have been stricken with serious illness. Once more, the committee must anticipate and address the emerging issues that will face the millions of Americans who will soon fall into the class of senior citizens.

I am confident that the committee, under the leadership

of my good friend from Arkansas, Senator David Pryor, is ready and able to meet these new challenges. As we all know, the entire Senate, the aging community, and especially this committee, missed him sorely during his absence, and we are all delighted to have him back with us. I look forward to working closely with him to forge a strong bipartisan spirit in the committee so that, together, we can tackle the issues facing senior citizens at the threshold of a new century.

I also want to pay tribute to the man whose chair I now occupy, our good friend and former colleague, Senator John Heinz. John's chair as Ranking Republican member of the committee is indeed a hard one to fill. As you all know firsthand, he was a tireless champion of issues affecting the elderly. While we have all been enriched by his presence on the committee over the years, we will be deeply impoverished by his absence for years to come.

It has often been said that the test of a civilization is in the way that it cares for its most helpless members. While not all senior citizens are helpless, undoubtedly we have a special obligation to care for, respect, and respond to the needs of our older Americans. The Special Committee on Aging has been in the forefront of this effort for the past thirty years, and I look forward to working with you all to meet this special responsibility for years to come.