

2014

The Bill of the Century: The Epic Battle for the Civil Rights Act by Clay Risen

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Recommended Citation

Roper, John Herbert Sr. (2014) "The Bill of the Century: The Epic Battle for the Civil Rights Act by Clay Risen," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 89: Iss. 1, Article 18.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol89/iss1/18>

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Risen, Clay. *The Bill of the Century: The Epic Battle for the Civil Rights Act*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014. xv + 296 pages. Hardcover, \$60.00.

It has been fifty years since the Civil Rights Act became law. Although many of its provisions—that there is an inherent equality amongst and between all peoples, that the might of the federal government can and must protect those rights, that people have the right to basic services as they travel interstate commerce, that those rights extend beyond color and caste to gender and sexuality, and finally that the federal government stands as ultimate guarantor of natural rights even and especially where local voting majorities might deny those rights—are no longer controversial, this fine study reminds us how bold such assertions were in the period from 1961 to 1964. Even more important is the painstaking effort that author Clay Risen makes to show the parliamentary and political processes by which the *bill of the century* became law for the ages. Risen reminds us forcefully that nothing was a given during the Jack Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson administrations, even as he reminds us that such complex legislation becomes law by dint of parliamentary brilliance, effective pressure from changing public opinion, the actions and words of great people, the contingencies of timing and economic forces, and as much luck as Machiavelli ever assigned to Fortuna.

Risen, staff writer for *The New York Times* editorial page and longtime journalist with *The New Republic* and with *Democracy*, brings to his task the journalist's sense for the quotable and passion for the newsworthy. He also brings superb training in historical research from the University of Chicago. Already conversant with the broad themes of historical interpretation and with the concrete particularities of detail from daily newspaper coverage, Risen adds primary search work in newly opened presidential, media network, congressional committee, and FBI files, the latter of which had to be infamously forced open by lawsuit. He also includes party documents and interviews with principals (and with smalltime players in propinquity if not prominence).

Although he narrates weekly, sometimes daily, events in a tightly focused period of time, Risen remembers historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's important phrase, that the civil rights movement is a "Long Movement" whose genesis stretches back to slavery and whose teleological end lies on a distant, albeit widening, horizon. The grand personalities, including Richard Russell, Strom Thurmond, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Eugene "Bull" Connor, and Clarence Mitchell, all acting in tandem with Jack Kennedy's speechifying and Lyndon Johnson's arm twisting, are here in all their nuanced glory; but so too are actions and attitudes of the otherwise "inarticulate" among the citizenry.

The contingencies, sometimes comic, sometimes tragic, always in situational language ironic, are covered with a salute to the historian C. Vann Woodward, the great student of southern eccentrics and progressives. For instance, JFK's great televised speech—the best parts delivered after he abandoned notes and spoke with passion instead of precision—was punctuated at once by the brutal assassination of Medgar Evers in his own Jackson, Mississippi driveway; and it is revealed here that that murder at last moved Kennedy from his extraordinary efforts to placate southern conservatives. After Evers's vicious assassination, Kennedy admitted to historian and counselor Arthur Meier Schlesinger Jr. that he could not understand white southerners and must proceed without them. In something closer to comedy, Virginia's courtly Congressman Judge Howard Worth Smith attempted to "poison pill" the bill by including women's rights—but the bill passed anyway, and at the end of his career Judge Smith was proud of the changes he had wrought in civil rights for women. Risen shows readers that Judge Smith

may have been deservedly a hero to feminists, even as he attempted to be an enemy of black rights, one of those multi-layered ironies with which he seasons these narratives.

Also useful for those attempting to teach these complex issues is Risen's fine job of explaining some of the political and traditional reasons that Liberal Republicans (not then an oxymoron at all) preferred the Fourteenth Amendment with its equal protection clause to enable the provisions of the Civil Rights Bill, while Liberal Democrats preferred the Commerce Clause—it was the will of the Party Fathers, the former going back to abolitionist days of the first Republicans and the latter going back to New Deal days of FDR and Harry S Truman.

Amongst a very human narrative, often a human comedy of missteps, and always a very human story of vested interests, Risen yet reaches the sanguine conclusion: “If the Civil Rights Act is a landmark in the history of racial progress in America, it is also a testament to the power of ordinary citizens to band together and drive their government to move forward.” (p. 164). Specifically, he notes the work of the Midwestern church groups that lobbied in person 67 Republican Representatives—sixty-one of whom subsequently voted for the bill.

Withal, Risen maintains a well-paced narrative so that the book is at once a real page-turner and also one with natural pauses and breaks of a genuinely “good read.”

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