



# The Long, Hard Furrow: Everett Dirksen's Part in the Civil Rights Act of 1964

*Frank H. Mackaman*

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Historians have naturally focused a spotlight on the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a landmark piece of legislation in the civil rights movement. Without exception, their work has called attention to the role of Everett McKinley Dirksen (R-IL), Senate minority leader during Congress's consideration of the bill. But the full story of his involvement has never been told. That is the purpose of this publication—not to provide a comprehensive history of the legislation but to affix Dirksen's role in it. His story helps us understand him, the constructive role of the minority in the legislative process, and the convoluted process by which big ideas become powerful law. The Dirksen chapter of the civil rights story should be taken in the context of other fascinating chapters: how President Lyndon Johnson plied his formidable persuasive skills behind the scenes, southern Democrats' rear guard action to prevent the bill from passing, the way pro-civil rights senators worked with activists outside Congress to keep the pressure on, and the relationship between the social context and legislative action—all these are stories better told by others. But the comprehensive use of Dirksen's archival materials yields a much clearer picture of his role in the saga.

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