



# The Bill of the Century: The Epic Battle for the Civil Rights Act

*Clay Risen*

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The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the single most important piece of legislation passed by Congress in American history. It gave the government sweeping powers to strike down segregation, to enforce fair hiring practices, and to rectify bias in law enforcement and in the courts. The Act so dramatically altered American society that, looking back, it seems preordained-as Everett Dirksen, the GOP leader in the Senate and a key supporter of the bill, said, "no force is more powerful than an idea whose time has come.?? But there was nothing predestined about the victory: a phalanx of powerful senators, pledging to "fight to the death?? for segregation, launched the longest filibuster in American history to defeat it.

The journey of the Civil Rights Act was nothing less than a moral and political epic, a sweeping tale of undaunted activism, political courage, historic speeches, backroom deal-making and finally, hand-to-hand legislative combat. The larger-than-life cast of characters ranges from Senate lions like Hubert Humphrey and Strom Thurmond to NAACP lobbyist Charles Mitchell, called "the 101st senator?? for his Capitol Hill clout, and industrialist J. Irwin Miller, who helped mobilize a powerful religious coalition for the bill. Looming over all was the figure of Lyndon Johnson, who deployed all his legendary skills to steer the controversial act through Congress.

This critical turning point in American history has never been thoroughly explored in a full-length narrative. Now, *New York Times* editor and acclaimed author Clay Risen delivers the full story, in all its complexity and drama.

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