



An Idea Whose Time Has Come: Two Presidents, Two Parties, and the Battle for the Civil Rights Act of 1964

By Todd S. Purdum

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A top Washington journalist recounts the dramatic political battle to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the law that created modern America, on the fiftieth anniversary of its passage

It was a turbulent time in America—a time of sit-ins, freedom rides, a March on Washington and a governor standing in the schoolhouse door—when John F. Kennedy sent Congress a bill to bar racial discrimination in employment, education, and public accommodations. Countless civil rights measures had died on Capitol Hill in the past. But this one was different because, as one influential senator put it, it was "an idea whose time has come."

In a powerful narrative layered with revealing detail, Todd S. Purdum tells the story of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, recreating the legislative maneuvering and the larger-than-life characters who made its passage possible. From the Kennedy brothers to Lyndon Johnson, from Martin Luther King Jr. to Hubert Humphrey and Everett Dirksen, Purdum shows how these all-too-human figures managed, in just over a year, to create a bill that prompted the longest filibuster in the history of the U.S. Senate yet was ultimately adopted with overwhelming bipartisan support. He evokes the high purpose and low dealings that marked the creation of this monumental law, drawing on extensive archival research and dozens of new interviews that bring to life this signal achievement in American history.

Often hailed as the most important law of the past century, the Civil Rights Act stands as a lesson for our own troubled times about what is possible when patience, bipartisanship, and decency rule the day.

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Editorial Review

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As we approach the golden anniversary of this landmark equal-rights and public-accommodations bill, veteran journalist Purdum painstakingly details how its passage came about. In short, not easily. Contributing editor of *Vanity Fair* and former White House correspondent for the *New York Times*, Purdum is well qualified to retell this epic from a fresh angle. The book is less for the specialist than for an audience that may be stimulated by anniversary-related publicity (or by recent congressional gridlock) to learn more. The Kennedy brothers' initial resistance to aggressive civil rights legislation may surprise some readers. Lyndon Johnson's immediate commitment to the cause, after assuming the presidency following JFK's assassination, shouldn't—others have established this convincingly. The diligent efforts of Senators Everett Dirksen and Hubert Humphrey are recalled, but Purdum also emphasizes the crucial role played by Congressman William McCulloch (Republican). It is instructive to read about the hard work, passion, intense political negotiation, and collegial respect that went into the enactment of this historic legislation 50 years ago. --Mark Levine

Review

"Excellent . . . An astute, well-paced, and highly readable play-by-play of the bill's journey to become a law." *?The Atlantic*

"Worthy, timely, and intelligent." *?The New Yorker*

"Authoritative...A first-rate narrative." *?The Wall Street Journal*

"Compelling." *?The New York Times*

"Today's reader will be startled, if not astonished, by how the bill made its way through Congress." *?The Washington Post*

"*An Idea Whose Time Has Come* is brilliantly rendered and emotionally powerful – a riveting account of one of the most dramatic and significant moments in American history. The story Todd Purdum tells is absolutely mesmerizing." *?Doris Kearns Goodwin*

"Todd Purdum's fascinating behind-the-scenes account of the birth of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is a timely and hopeful reminder that sometimes the good guys do win, even in Washington." *?Jeffrey Toobin, author of The Oath and The Nine*

"Todd Purdum's history of the 1964 Civil Rights Act is a masterful reconstruction of a seminal American event. He brilliantly captures the actors and drama that made this transformation in the country's social relations a reality. Everyone interested in contemporary America will want to read this book." *?Robert Dallek, author of An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963 and Camelot's Court: Inside the Kennedy White House*

"Todd Purdum brings alive Congress's great historic achievement: the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The heroes are J.F.K. and L.B.J., but also those Midwest Republicans who stayed true to Lincoln. Those are the quietly eloquent stories here, the profiles in decency and guts, where members of Congress honored values greater than current popularity. *An Idea Whose Time Has Come* shows once again that the real action

in American politics takes place in the back room – and in that quieter place: the beating hearts of the decent and courageous.” ?*Chris Matthews*

“In Todd Purdum's gripping account of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, we can see, from nearly every angle, how the federal government began making good on the ‘promissory note’ of equal rights that Dr. King had invoked at the March on Washington. Purdum provides both an invaluable education in the political process and a keen understanding of how personalities (the famous and the unsung) and the best of both parties overcame every roadblock to ‘make real the promises of democracy,’ as Dr. King had challenged.” ?*Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Alphonse Fletcher University Professor, Harvard University*

“The story behind the passage of the landmark Civil Rights Bill of 1964 is one that all Americans should know. *An Idea Whose Time Has Come*, Todd Purdum's insightful and elegantly written narrative, brings this history to life with deft portraits of the people who made the law and those who fought against it. It is a must read for all who are interested in the transformative power of the law and government to make positive changes in the lives of citizens.” ?*Annette Gordon-Reed, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of The Hemingses of Monticello*

“Todd Purdum's remarkable *An Idea Whose Time Has Come* brings back to life the historic fight waged on behalf of civil rights by JFK and LBJ. Purdum is a superb writer, never dull, and his grasp of the Sixties milieu is foolproof. This is a marvelous and much needed book of lasting importance.” ?*Douglas Brinkley*

About the Author

Todd S. Purdum is a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair* and senior writer at *Politico*. He previously spent more than twenty years at *The New York Times*, where he served as diplomatic correspondent, White House correspondent, and Los Angeles bureau chief. A graduate of Princeton University, he lives in Washington, D.C., with his wife, Dee Dee Myers, the political commentator and former White House press secretary, and their two children.

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