

Everett McKinley Dirksen. *The Education of a Senator.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998. li + 256 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-02414-6.



Reviewed by Scott Neumann

Published on H-Pol (June, 1999)

Senator Everett Dirksen was famous for filibusters of length, verbosity and color. We now know that he wrote as he filibustered. This autobiography of his early years (up to his entry into the Senate in 1951) is long, verbose, and colorful. Unfortunately, like a good filibuster, it also contains little of substance.

The book is certainly long. There are over ninety pages on Dirksen's life as a schoolboy, dough boy, baker, amateur actor and city councilman before he entered Congress. Verbosity abounds. Chapter Five opens with a page-long dissertation on the adjective "floundering." Certainly Dirksen did not stint on colorful anecdotes. He tells us that Congressman Huey Long, the colorful, dictatorial, former governor of Louisiana, felt himself to be in common company with religious martyrs such as Joan of Arc, John Hus, and Jesus Christ. Dirksen also claims to have personally stopped Appropriations Committee Chairman Clarence Cannon from choking Congressman John Taber to death in the Committee office. But there is little of substance here. *Education of a Senator* covers Dirksen's life from his birth in Pekin, Illi-

nois, through his education, his stint as a dough boy in World War One, his years as a city councilman and a member of the House of Representatives during the early Depression, but ends just as his Senate career was beginning.

Dirksen died before he could write a planned second volume on those later years. Unfortunately, most people find Dirksen's Senate years, not covered here, the most interesting years of his life. Even in the period Dirksen did cover, he left surprising gaps. For example, during World War One, while Dirksen was serving in the army, his German-immigrant mother was threatened with violence if she did not remove a picture of Kaiser Wilhelm from her home. This incident is fascinating for what it reveals both about the hyperpatriotism of the time and perhaps the roots of Dirksen's later isolationism. However, in Dirksen's autobiography, anti-German hysteria receives only two widely scattered paragraphs and no reflection. Dirksen pays little attention to the beginning of the Depression and mentions almost nothing about the years between 1941 and 1945, or of the early Cold War, periods during which he was be-

coming a leader in the Republican isolationist wing.

Everett Dirksen lived a long life during which he was often at the center of important decisions and changes. It is frustrating how little of that life is discussed here. In the introduction Fred Mackaman indicates that Dirksen wrote the book during the turbulent sixties to urge American youth to return to national traditions. However, if there is any lesson which Dirksen is urging on the reader, it is ambition. By his own account Dirksen, from his voyage to France in 1918 as a young soldier, was constantly thinking about becoming a Senator. When he was elected City Councilman in his small Illinois home town of Pekin, Dirksen immediately wondered if this was a step toward the Senate. Many chapters end with Dirksen considering the question "Do I want to be a Senator?" Always, the answer is yes. If ambition is an American tradition, then Dirksen provides the youth of America with a persuasive plea for it.

Everett Dirksen was an important, interesting man, central in the reconciliation of Old-Guard Republicans with Ike's moderates, and a leader of both Republican battles and Republican compromises with Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. As much as anyone he was responsible for ensuring that the pivotal civil rights legislation of the mid-sixties was passed. He is worthy of study. Unfortunately, this book does little to advance that study. If readers have enough time to dig for interesting anecdotes, there may be something here for them. If readers are interested in Dirksen, then they are better advised to turn to the biographies by Edward and Frederick Schapsmeier (*Dirksen of Illinois*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), or that by Neil MacNeil (*Dirksen: Portrait of a Public Man*, New York: World Publishing Company, 1970).

This review was commissioned for H-Pol by Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit

educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

Citation: Scott Neumann. Review of Dirksen, Everett McKinley. *The Education of a Senator*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. June, 1999.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3196>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.