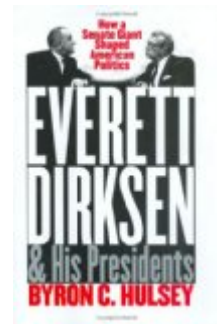


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Byron C. Hulsey. *Everett Dirksen and His Presidents: How a Senate Giant Shaped American Politics*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000. x + 342 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1036-5.

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Mr. Republican?

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It is a fine time to be a historian interested in congressional biography. Recently, biographies of Henry Jackson and Daniel Patrick Moynihan have added immensely to historical understanding of congressional power in the Cold War. Byron Hulsey's pleasurable biography, *Everett Dirksen and His Presidents*, contributes to our knowledge of executive-legislative relations in post-World War II America, while also highlighting the importance of a Republican legislator often forgotten in the annals of contemporary political history.

There are many reasons Dirksen, a long serving senator from Illinois, never merited the attention of a full scale scholarly biography. First, he was a political chameleon, a flexible politician willing to entertain offers from either side of the aisle if it matched his views. This is not to say he was unprincipled – his patriotism, to cite just one example, was a bedrock principle of his entire career. Rather it suggests his seeming impenetrability. He was no Barry Goldwater, not someone who was going to spark defiance or even political revolution. He was no Daniel Moynihan, a policy intellectual improbably capable of the democratic touch. He was charming, ambitious (especially in his early Senate career) defensive of colleagues like Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy, and was caricatured, as Hulsey explains, as “a purposeless ham, well-meaning and good-natured but nevertheless a puppetlike buffoon” (p. 273). He was known more for his melodic, silky voice – his presentation of argu-

ment – rather than the positions he argued. As Hulsey demonstrates, nothing could be further from the truth.

A second reason Dirksen does not get the credit he deserves was that he was a practitioner of what Hulsey calls, using an awkward term, suprapartisanship. Dirksen was able, and indeed, quite willing, to work with executives from other parties. He was an establishment figure, reveling in his connection to men in power at a time of growing challenge to the imperial Presidency. He was a consensus figure, bland, non-ideological, moderate. He worked well with John F. Kennedy and Hulsey refers to the “codependent” relationship between the two men (p. 161). As Hulsey's biography reveals, Dirksen was not going to shake the ground from under the bipartisan foreign policy created in the early 1950s. His suprapartisanship, thus, was predicated on the continuation of such consensus, even when it was clear, by the late 1960s, that such a consensus was doomed.

In the end, such a suprapartisan outlook did Dirksen some good in terms of how he was viewed by Democrats in the nation. He supported Kennedy's and Johnson's Vietnam policy. To the end of his life, Dirksen remained committed to America's role in Southeast Asia. He used his influence as Senate Minority Leader to gain Republican support for the 1964 Civil Rights Act and could typically be used by Johnson to cement GOP backing for other parts of his legislative agenda.

Why would Dirksen do this? Did he fail to see the coming conservative wave within the GOP? Hulsey an-

swers these questions by suggesting that one of Dirksen's defining characteristics was his respect, even reverence, for the Presidency. Dirksen was in awe of the office of President, so much so that he supported the extension of power in that office while many of his Republican colleagues began, by the mid-1960s, to decry it. Dirksen was simply a man of the establishment, Hulsey concludes, and that perspective dominated his outlook. The conservative revolution within the GOP was much more a development of political outsiders, representing the "thrill of treason" according to many participants of the conservative revolt. Dirksen was the consummate insider, a man of power who respected Washington folkways and the prestige of office. While Dirksen could be conservative – he did introduce Goldwater as the Republican candidate for president at San Francisco in 1964 – he was more flexible than his more conservative Senate colleagues, like Texan John Tower or Goldwater. If Dirksen

had lived past 1969 to see what befell the GOP and the nation, he may not have understood fully the cumulative change which ripped apart the beloved consensus he helped construct. Much like his Senate colleague Democrat Henry Jackson during the 1970s, Dirksen was a man of the past by his death in 1969, someone who no longer fit well in his changing political party.

Hulsey's book is, probably, the most definitive study of Dirksen and his effect on post-World War II American politics that will appear. Hulsey has examined the scattered papers of Dirksen and his Senate colleagues, weaving far-flung archival material with the secondary literature to produce a seamless narrative. Well written and absorbing, Hulsey's book represents an important effort to recapture the essence of political history in the Cold War as well as the crucial role Congress played in shaping, rather than just being shaped by, the postwar consensus and its imperial Presidential offspring.

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