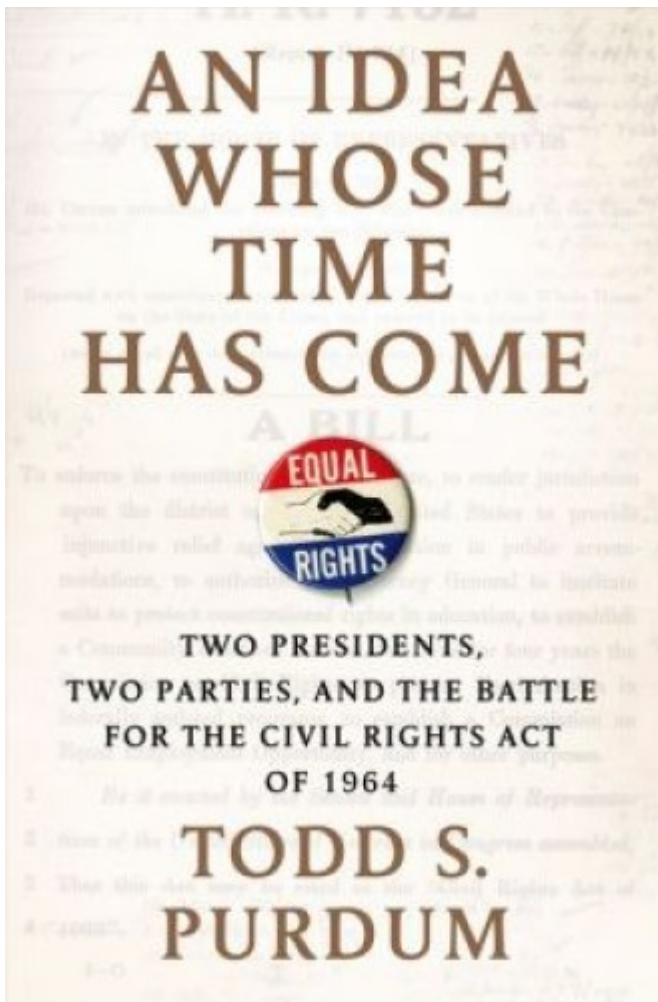


An Idea Whose Time Has Come, by Todd S. Purdum

reviewed by [Paul Harvey](#) in the [July 9, 2014](#) issue

In Review



An Idea Whose Time Has Come

By Todd S. Purdum

Henry Holt

If you saw the 2012 movie *Lincoln*—the one directed by Steven Spielberg and starring Daniel Day-Lewis as the martyred president—you have seen something like the 19th-century version of *An Idea Whose Time Has Come*. Both are emotionally

gripping stories of how epic and vitally important changes somehow made their way through the sausage-making machinery of Congress—the 13th Amendment in the case of *Lincoln* and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in the case of this book. Both, moreover, are consummate “inside baseball” stories. They leave you with memorable anecdotes and character sketches of backroom deals, politicians major and minor, and unlikely heroes who rose above themselves to help carry the day. They are both ultimately stories in which Washington does the right thing. The implications are clear for the present day, when Washington can seemingly do nothing at all—not even enact a minimal and inadequate gun control law, even after the slaughter of Newtown—never mind do the right thing.

Both, as well, exhibit some of the flaws of the inside baseball approach. The narrative takes over from an ultimately much more historically significant argument about the grassroots social movements that brought these measures to the halls of the lawmakers in the first place. This is more true of the movie than the book—the movie has just two and a half hours to tell its story, and the book enjoys the luxury of at least sketching the story of the civil rights movement that made the Civil Rights Act possible—but it is characteristic of the genre that the powerful people act, and just about everyone else is acted upon.

That being said, the inside baseball approach is also irresistible, precisely because it can be encapsulated in a snappy narrative. Compare this book to Taylor Branch’s trilogy on the civil rights movement, for example, or Robert Caro’s ongoing magnum opus on Lyndon Baines Johnson, and it’s easy to see the attraction. You can sail through this book in just a few sittings and learn a lot in the process. It’s also tailor-made for a PBS *American Experience* two-hour special.

An Idea Whose Time Has Come is a fulfilling work of journalistic history. It provides the pleasures of lots of great stories, you-are-there dialogue, quick and effective character sketches, and the drawing out of relatively unknown figures who prove central to the story. The civil rights bill, of course, had to pass both the House and the Senate, and in both, Republican votes were vital. On the House side, William Moore “Bill” McCulloch, a fiscally conservative Ohio Republican, proved instrumental in ensuring that the bill “could draw enough Republican support to pass the House and survive the Senate.” On the Senate side, Everett Dirksen, the Illinois Republican whose name now graces the Dirksen Senate Office Building, proved a skillful operator who wore down even the most avid of southern revanchists, such as Richard Russell of Georgia. Both McCulloch and Dirksen were conservatives who

believed in equal opportunity and, unlike any number of present-day libertarian conservatives (such as Rand Paul), recognized that sometimes governmental action is required to override private prejudices and manifest injustice.

Churchpeople play a sizable role in this story, and fleshing out this role is a major contribution of this book. Denominational leaders pressed particular members of Congress known to be fellow worshipers, and at one critical juncture of the Senate debate, the Washington representative of the National Council of Churches, James Hamilton, engineered effective grassroots activism nationally and produced an impressive volume of letters to members of Congress. They clearly had some effect. “THE EFFORTS OF THE RELIGIOUS FORCES OF OUR NATION WILL AGAIN BE THE DECIDING FACTOR,” read a bulletin of the NCC on March 6, 1964.

Meanwhile, and luckily for the country, much religious right sentiment at the time ran along the lines of Jerry Falwell’s famous sermon “Ministers and Marches,” which just a year later excoriated ministers who would sacrifice the pure gospel message for a mess of political porridge. As a result, religious conservatives nationally were largely absent from the fight over the civil rights bill, while mainstream and progressive church leaders skillfully turned up the political heat. That left Russell without a religious constituency to back him up when he helplessly and incoherently sermonized about how God had separated the races somewhere or other in the book of Genesis. Falwell and the religious right learned their lesson, and their tactics and effectiveness changed soon thereafter.

The efforts of mainstream churchpeople were necessary especially in the Senate, where members such as Russell dawdled, filibustered, and inveighed against the bill as a measure that would give “such vast governmental control over free enterprise in this country so as to commence the process of socialism”—language almost exactly duplicating southern Democrats’ harangues opposing New Deal measures in the second half of the 1930s. Meanwhile, Strom Thurmond questioned the constitutionality of the 14th Amendment, and other southern senators explained that the use of cattle prods against civil rights demonstrators wasn’t really all that painful. Senate leaders, including both Dirksen and Hubert Humphrey, were smart enough to let them spit into their own wind.

This work corrects much ridiculous nonsense that has appeared recently in conservative and libertarian fulminations about governmental power, including Senator Paul’s revival of Dixiecrat arguments against the civil rights bill. The

positions of the southern racist contingent may not have come from the same place as opposition by Barry Goldwater and the *National Review* crowd, but ultimately they all tried to stand athwart history and yell “Stop!” Fortunately, they failed.

The story of the Civil Rights Act is much more than that it miraculously made it through Congress in 1964. The story is also in the social movement that produced the bill in the first place and in the litigation that influenced the law’s application. The extent to which the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was effective was due to the efforts of black and female pioneers who sued in court and demanded that the law be enforced. Ultimately, the law worked—and revolutionized American life for the better in every way—because black and female litigants *made* it work.

This latter point shows why deep historical analyses remain necessary alongside excellent journalistic accounts such as this one. It’s fun to read about how the civil rights bill survived the slings and arrows of outrageous misfortune and became one of the signal achievements of 20th-century American history, but the fullest accounting of why the bill passed and what happened in the aftermath of passage depends on historical research that extends far beyond the Beltway.