On a warm November day in 1962, Everett Dirksen arrived at a run-down building in the South Side of Chicago for an education session hosted by the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (NACWC). He was stunned at the mile long line of unemployed black men and women, waiting to head into a makeshift classroom. Dirksen approached them one by one to hear their stories. One explained how she had been trekking from town to town, unable to find anyone who would hire her. “I am female and I am black. Who is going to hire me?” Another told him how he had been fired after two weeks and replaced by a white man. In the classroom, Dirksen saw in their eyes an anguish that they were denied the lives they deserved. Dirksen vowed to each person at the event that their children would not experience the same deprivations.

Everett McKinley Dirksen was a Republican senator from the state of Illinois. His biggest accomplishments come in the realm of Civil Rights. Not only did he play a crucial role in helping the most famous Civil Rights Act, of 1964, get passed, but was also responsible for passing the Civil Rights Act of 1957, 1960, and 1968. He was an extremely talented orator with a florid style in his speeches. He grew up in Pekin, Illinois, to immigrant parents. His political career all started on the Pekin city council. He then became a representative for Illinois in the House of Representatives where he spent 16 years before getting elected to the Senate in 1950. He went on to become the Minority Leader of the Senate from 1959 to 1969. He died in August 1969 at the age of 73 due to lung cancer. Overall Dirksen had made it his life’s mission to pass legislation that would affirm racial, religious, and ethnic equality for all.

The legislative process to create and pass the Civil Rights Act began by hitting a wall. The Southern Democrats brought ferocious opposition to any Civil Rights legislation as their constituency was profiting off segregation. Desiring bipartisan cooperation, Dirksen came to their caucus often, expressing the miserable stories he had heard. Senator Robert C. Byrd was not sympathetic when he started his historic filibuster on June 10. As Byrd rambled on for 14 hours and 13 minutes. Dirksen fumed at their immoral opposition, did Southern Democrats really not want every human to have basic rights? Little did Dirksen know, something external was about to make the process that much harder.

Dirksen not only faced opposition from the opposing party but from his own circles as well. After two incomplete Acts, Dirksen’s constituency and party were against any more efforts. Even those who he was fighting for, including Civil Rights proponents and African Americans, did not support him. Despite Dirksen’s conservative upbringing, he stood against his party because an outcome of equality was in the best interest of the nation. In order to achieve cloture, ending the filibuster to send the Bill to vote, he needed to garner 16 Republican votes. Dirksen took it upon himself to achieve this, working 16 hour days, barely leaving any time home in Pekin with his wife and daughter. Dirksen would think about the time he was missing with them while he was in his office amending the Bill at 11 pm after a full day of tireless negotiating. He knew battling through the intricately complex legislative process would be worth it.

On the evening of February 3, 1964, Dirksen was admitted into Sibley Hospital for a bleeding ulcer. Lying in his bed in immense pain, he would struggle to sit up, and then pick up his pencil and glasses from his bedside table, and study the bill sentence by sentence. He evaluated each idea and thought of improvements to make policies more inclusive. When the doctor was working on his ulcer and he was unable to read the Bill, he pondered those who urgently needed his help regardless of his health (“Everett Dirksen: Forgotten Champion of Civil Rights”).

As his ulcer recovered, he continued progressing with the bill relentlessly. On June 19, 1964, Dirksen’s 20 years of work all boiled down to one cloture voting session; if cloture was achieved, the Bill was destined to become a law, since President Johnson strongly supported it. Despite the countless hours Dirksen spent convincing the adequate number of senators, he watched the count anxiously, knowing that anyone could flip their vote. After what seemed like years of holding his breath, the presiding officer called 71 for the aye and 29 for the nay, Dirksen felt tears in his eyes as he thought of the people at the NACWC education event, those who could not get a normal education or jobs. Finally, they would get freedom in their lives.

Many of Dirksen’s supporters gave up their support when the Act passed. One evening, as Dirksen sat by his fireplace reading letters of appreciation, he heard loud insults being screamed outside. He realized he was being picketed by a massive crowd of infuriated constituents. He reflected on the history he made, shocked that he would be welcomed home this way. If they were mad that others would now have the rights that they took for granted, he thought, maybe that was not such a bad thing.

Dirksen prioritized racial justice over politics, even to the detriment of his career.. With racial tensions flaring in the US today, the issue of Civil Rights could not be more pressing. The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others remind us of the fundamental civil injustices that linger over society. Dealing with this requires the bipartisan government action which Dirksen championed in 1964. If Everett Dirksen were alive today, I believe he would recognize the shortcomings of the 1964 Act and take on the monumental task of producing another bipartisan Civil Rights Act. With the immense polarization of the current political climate, he would push elected officials to be politically courageous and work together so that “there is not a liberal America and a conservative America - [but] the United States of America.”