

'Birch Bayh: Making a Difference'

by Julie Gray

In his new book about Birch Bayh, Indiana's Democratic U.S. senator from 1963 to 1981, author Bob Blaemire shows his hand up front, writing, "This biography was a labor of love." And the book couldn't be more timely. Sadly, Bayh died on March 14 at the age of 91.

The author, who served on Bayh's Senate staff for some dozen years, testifies that words can't adequately describe the impact Bayh had on his life. Perhaps not, but this biography testifies to the immense impact the senator had on all Americans, including, of course, his first son, Evan, who went on to serve as Indiana's governor and later held his father's former Senate seat from 1999 to 2011.

At a time when many dismiss all legislators as partisan, posturing, and inflexible, it can be easy to overlook lasting congressional accomplishments.

Blaemire reminds us that Bayh was the only person since the Founding Fathers to have steered two constitutional amendments to passage: the 25th, on presidential succession, and the 26th, which lowered the voting age to 18. Bayh also wrote Title IX, which ensured that women could participate equally in education, including sports.

From the beginning, Bayh recognized that outreach and compromise were important. When he was in his early 30s and serving as speaker of Indiana's General Assembly, he noticed one of the assembly's only two black members on the floor. It occurred to him that this member had probably never presided, so Bayh handed him the gavel the next time he took a break. Another time, in



1974, while being heckled at an Indianapolis public meeting he'd convened to discuss school busing, Bayh offered to turn the podium over to one of the disrupters. His invitation was declined, and the heckling stopped.

The biography is also full of interesting tidbits. Who knew that in the summer of 1944, Bayh won the statewide Campbell Soup Company Tomato Growing Contest? At the time, Bayh was living on his grandparents' farm near Terre Haute. The tomatoes he and his grandfather would go on to grow for Campbell's helped pay Bayh's tuition at Purdue University.

Blaemire bases the biography on his own detailed recollections as well as on extensive interviews with the senator's family, staff, and congressional colleagues like Rep. Lee Hamilton and Sens. Dick Lugar, Patrick Leahy, and Orrin Hatch. Somehow, though, I suspect the tribute Bayh himself might have savored the most is this one: "He never passed a Dairy Queen he didn't like." *



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