

FOR THE HONORABLE EVERETT DIRKSEN

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SENATOR DIRKSEN INTERVIEWED

HUGH DOWNS: "Late yesterday, the Senate, in effect, killed the 1966 Civil Rights Bill for this session.

"The central figure in the Senate battle, as in previous Civil Rights Bills, was Republican Everett Dirksen of Illinois. With his help, the earlier bills passed. Without his help, this bill did not.

"What happens now, who is to blame, and will the Civil Rights Bill rise again? Well, NBC News White House Correspondent Ray Scherer took an NBC film crew to Senator Dirksen's office for an interview, and now, by way of film, to Mr. Dirksen's headquarters off the Senate floor, and Ray Scherer."

SCHERER: "Good morning. We are going to get right to the point. Senator Dirksen, why did the 1966 Civil Rights Bill fail when the other Civil Rights Bills all more or less went through?"

DIRKSEN: "Oh, Ray, you can assign many reasons, but if I were to assign what I think is the fundamental reason, is the defective thing about the bill, the weaknesses, the poor drafting, the poor approach, and the failure to come to grips with the real problems involved. Now, of course, they say that the marches and demonstrations had some effect on it. I have no doubt that they heightened the passions somewhat in the emotions of people. But still, you can make something out of nothing, or vice versus. You can't take a bill that is inherently bad and then expect to do something with it."

SCHERER: "Do you feel the country -- that is the voters -- do not want this bill?"

DIRKSEN: "Exactly so, and I think, of course, that everything that has come to my attention by way of communications, personal approaches, one thing or another, and not to underestimate what happened over in Maryland, is very significant that the people did not want it."

SCHERER: "What did happen in Maryland, Senator?"

DIRKSEN: "Well, they had an election over there yesterday and a strange thing, that one of the candidates for governor, on the Democratic ticket, had only one plank in his platform -- if he had any others, I never heard about it -- he said, 'A man's home is his castle'. He was absolutely opposed to open occupancy. He did not weasel, he did not go about it in a half-hearted way. And when they counted the results, he was on top. And I am confident that he didn't spend anywhere near the money, nor make the representations nor have the billboards and the workers, that these other candidates had. But people, of course, went for his brand of gospel, and to bear that out just a little further, I know of one Senate official whose wife had as an assignment calling up 300 voters in Maryland. She called up every one of them. They wanted to know the answer to only one question, and that was, 'What was the attitude of the Republican candidate on the subject of open occupancy?'. She was calling Republicans, of course."

SCHERER: "Senator, isn't Maryland a particular situation? Does the vote for Mahoney mean that Maryland didn't like open housing, or do you think it means that all people don't like open housing?"

DIRKSEN: "I don't know what other conclusion you can reach on the basis of that vote. They just did not like it. Now, of course, Finan had his friends, so did Sickles, and they would get a fair share of the vote. I don't know who had the regular organization, but Sickles, of course, had a special organization. He had the two Senators in his corner, and they seemingly were for open occupancy. Later on, they began to trim a little, as I understand, but here was Mahoney's statement just as clear as crystal, and that's all people had to know. That was the only guideline they needed to indicate how they were going to vote."

SCHERER: "Senator Dirksen, there's a good deal -- good deal being said about blame for this Civil Rights Bill going down. A lot of people saying you are the key to the blame. How do you feel about that, Senator?"

DIRKSEN: "Oh, Ray, I'm no atlas. They try to put that globe on my shoulder as much as to say that I carry the weight of the world when it comes to a matter of this kind. Well, that high flattery, but I'm afraid it doesn't sound in fact, in a matter of course. So, somebody has to take the leadership in asserting a position on this, or any other piece of legislation, and if it has to be me, all right. I can think of nobody, from the standpoint of title, who would have the responsibility for it better than I, if I'm opposed to it."

SCHERER: "How much of a push did you get from the White House on passing this bill?"

DIRKSEN: "Well, we had a meeting at the White House just a day or two before. The President called; he thought, of course, that I might be persuaded at the last minute, even as they thought I was persuaded in '57, '60, '64 and '65 on these other rights issues and bills. But, I have calculated pretty carefully, and I knew what was in the mill, and from that, there was no retreat, because if I retreated, it would be a miserable surrender of conscience."

SCHERER: "How hard did the President lay it to you this time?"

DIRKSEN: "Well, I hesitate to comment on that. Obviously, if his heart is really in it, he can give you quite a bad time if he wanted to."

SCHERER: "Senator, if this bill comes back next year, in more or less the same form, will it have a better chance?"

DIRKSEN: "I'm not sure, because you're likely to have a different Congress. That would be notably true so far as the House is concerned. I still think there'll be very substantial Republican gains in the House of Representatives. There'll be some gains in the Senate, I hope. And that will give it a different frame and a different jazz. So if they come along with an identical bill, or something substantially the same, it may have even greater difficulty. We shall see."

SCHERER: "Suppose the bill comes back with the jury provision, but without the open occupancy provision. Would that engender your support?"

DIRKSEN: "Well, there's a good deal of controversy about those two jury titles. I could mention in detail, probably time doesn't permit, but Senators Hruska and Erwin have given special attention to Title I, dealing with Federal juries and state juries. There are bugs in it. I don't know how many Federal judges we've had who said they just would not work. We brought in numberless clerks of court, who've said you can't make it work. So what do you do in the face of expert testimony like that?"

SCHERER: "Senator, does the fact that Hubert Humphrey was not sitting in the Senate as a United States Senator make any difference in what happened to this bill?"

DIRKSEN: "No, it wouldn't have made a particle of difference."

SCHERER: "Do you think that even if he'd been there with all the fervor that he showed in the other bills..."

DIRKSEN: "Yes."

SCHERER: "...it still would have gone down?"

DIRKSEN: "That's right. Because you didn't have it with which to work."

SCHERER: "You mentioned demonstrations before. Didn't the activities of Stokely Carmichael make it difficult for you to sell this bill to your fellow Senators?"

DIRKSEN: "Yes, but don't limit it to Mr. Carmichael. Think of the other leaders who've gone into the white areas of Chicago, for instance; that is, after all, calculated harassment. It's a species of intimidation. It's like saying they're either gonna do this or else. Well, the Congress has gotten to that point where it's got its hackles out, and it doesn't propose to legislate in that kind of atmosphere and under that kind of implied compulsion."

SCHERER: "Senator, some of your fellow Republicans are saying that your action in not being for this bill has hurt the Republicans nationally."

DIRKSEN: "Is that the great question, or is the bigger question, 'What does my party do from a standpoint of principle?' And with me, this is a case of principle."

SCHERER: "If you were to write your own Civil Rights Bill, to fit these times, what would be in it?"

DIRKSEN: "Oh, that's hard to say. Now, we have worked and labored and stewed and fretted with this Title IV for months. Together with staff, we've thought up substitutes, alternatives, new approaches, we couldn't think up anything that was acceptable."

SCHERER: "Senator, what do you think about the political demise of your old friend, Joe Martin?"

DIRKSEN: "Well, it hurt me a great deal, because Joe was assistant leader in the House when I came there in 1933. I saw him come up through the chairs; when old Bert Snell(?) of New York passed away, Joe then became the Republican leader, subsequently became speaker, and we set high store by him, because he had a heap of common sense, always, in approaching any kind of problem in government, and, of course, that's all too evident to people if you go out on the platform and campaign, or if you make any television appearances. That camera is a cruel instrument, I can tell you, because it'll catch every blemish, every crow's foot, every mark of Father Time is chiseled right there so you gotta be careful about it. Well, I don't know if he went on television or not, but if he did, obviously his age and his health became all too transparent and all too obvious to people."

SCHERER: "Thank you, Senator Dirksen. I'd like to think that our camera has been kind to you this morning."

DIRKSEN: "Well, if the camera hasn't been kind, you're always kind."

SCHERER: "Thank you so much."

"And now back to Today in New York."

DOWNS: "On that kind note, we thank Ray Scherer and Senator Dirksen."