

GETTING THINGS DONE IN WASHINGTON: *LESSONS FOR PROGRESSIVES FROM LANDMARK LEGISLATION*

By
Joseph H. Boyett, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

This book is for liberals, progressives, and social democrats—all those who believe we can and should use the power of government to improve the lives of all Americans and who are disappointed that so often, particularly recently, government has not achieved that most important of missions. I want to accomplish three things with this book. First, I want through the stories that follow to inspire you as a fellow progressive or just someone who wants to get things done in Washington. Progressives and Americans in general everywhere are feeling somewhat disheartened today after the struggles over the last few years. I know I am. We expected so much from the audacity of hope and got so little. We expected the fight for change to be hard but we did not expect it to be this hard. I want to lift your spirit by revisiting hard fought legislative battles in the past that we won. I want to renew your faith in the possibilities of change by reminding you that our fathers, mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers who shared our desire to use the power of government to make the lives of their fellow Americans better won great victories. If they did it, we can too. I want to inspire you to commit to the struggle for what is right, not just for this year or this political season but also for your lifetime. I want you to commit to our country's future. I want to inspire you to do so by telling you the stories of your parents, grandparents and great grandparents that did just such a thing. There is a way forward if we are prepared to take it.

Second with this book, I want to derive lessons from these historic legislative accomplishments. I want to give you a set of actionable steps, things you can start doing to win current and future legislative battles. I want to give you a manual for getting things done in Washington.

Finally, I want to remind you of what this country was like before the legislation I discuss in this book was passed. Conservatives always engage in nostalgia about returning to the good old days of small government and limited, or no, federal regulation. I want to remind you of what it was really like to live in our country when the federal government was weak and the states were strong. I want to remind you what it was like when there was no federal oversight of the food and drug industry. I want to remind you what it was like when elderly people had no access to affordable health insurance. I want to remind you what it was like when labor had no rights to organize or fight for decent wages and working conditions. I want to remind you what it was like when there were no limits on big business and when minorities had no civil rights. I intend this book to be a history lesson and wake-up call. Conservatives say they want to take back the country. What they really want to do is send the country back, send it back to some very dark days. They will accomplish that goal if we let them. We must not.

Take heart. There have been moments in America's political history when the nation might never have progressed or would have taken a decidedly different course except for the political acumen and personal sacrifice of certain individuals who against great odds got things done in Washington. In each case, success was by no means certain and often was in doubt until virtually the last moment when a few individuals were able to persuade others of the wisdom of one direction for the country rather than another. There have been times in our history during which Americans just like you made impossible legislative action not just possible but reality. Legislation that no one thought could pass did and the country was fundamentally changed. This is the story of those times and more.

I have chosen the legislative achievements covered in this book for several reasons. First, of course, I chose them because they were great legislative achievements that literally changed the lives of all Americans. Second, they contain powerful lessons concerning the way our government works and often fails to work. Third, they involved social and political topics that we struggle with as a country even today such as access to healthcare, the right of labor to organize, the regulation of big business, protecting the safety of our food supply and, of course, civil rights. Finally, I chose these

accomplishments because sufficient time has passed so that the historical record of what happened and why is more complete than it is for more recent legislative achievements.

This is not just a book about glorious moments in our history or near super-human achievement, although it certainly discusses such things. It is a story about lessons we can learn in a free society about what it takes to right wrongs, move forward, and make this country a better nation. It is about sacrifice, compromise, faith, struggle, confidence, hard work, political smarts, and, most importantly, perseverance—not giving up. These are the stories of men and women who triumphed over inertia, who found a way to achieve the common good through the elevation of common purpose and desire. These are the stories of men and women who took us forward when we could have stood still or skidded backward. These are the stories of men and women who seized the moment and in the face of disaster when we could have fallen apart as a nation or sunk into the meaningless pursuit of selfishness showed us how we could achieve. This book examines the lessons that we can learn from these remarkable moments in American history. This is the story of men and women who rose above the pressures of their day to find pathways to take them, their followers and their country into a new world. A nation that forgets these people and their lessons of political and legislative accomplishment is a nation that will not reward or attract the quality of men and women we need to legislate in the future. We remember the fruits of their labors—the protections of the food and drug administration, anti-trust laws, the right of labor to organize, the Civil Rights Acts, Medicare, and so on—but we forget the struggle and the men and women who fought to make these protections and freedoms a reality. We appreciate their accomplishments but forget just how miraculous their accomplishments were. We have not learned from their experiences.

Today the challenge of legislative accomplishment looms larger than ever. Factions proliferate. The corrupting force of money for influence is stronger than ever. The manipulation of the media is pervasive and more sophisticated. The use of known psychology of influence is more problematic. Propaganda artfully disguised as truth is more widespread. All sides on every issue use these weapons of persuasion resulting in every side persuading just enough of those in the middle to keep the other side from winning. No side wins and we all lose. We cannot go forward, not because we have no

forward path, but because we have multitudes of paths all blocked by one interest or another. We are at stalemate. Has it always been that way? No. In fact, this nation exists and much of the protections and freedoms we enjoy rest on a foundation of great legislative accomplishment, not legislative gridlock.

LESSONS ABOUT GETTING THINGS DONE

Given all of the institutional and societal barriers to getting anything of substance done in Washington, it is amazing that anything truly important has ever gotten done. However, major change has occurred, not often and not without tremendous effort, but it has occurred. That is what this book is about. It is the story of men and women who found a way to accomplish meaningful change in public policy against great odds and the lessons they can teach us.

If you are interested in politics, particularly if you are a progressive interested in harnessing the power of government for the common good then you should find this book very interesting and informative. Even if you are not interested in politics that much, I think you will find value in what follows. Most of us go through life trying to accomplish something of value. After all, what is the point of life without accomplishment? Washington is one of the most difficult places in the world to accomplish anything so any accomplishment there contains lessons that have a broader implication.

As we examine their accomplishments, we will discover a number of important lessons these stories teach us about what achieving real change in public policy demands. For example,

1. Grassroots organizing—One of the key lessons we'll learn from the stories in this book is that real change never starts getting done in Washington. In fact, if you leave getting things done to Washington, nothing will ever get done. Contrary to what they might say, most people do not run for office to get things done. They run for office to fulfill their own personal need for power, prestige, position, and so on. They run for office and run for office and run for office to get the office, not to get things done. Those things of substance that get done are started in most cases by ordinary citizens in ordinary towns far away from Washington most often by people with little, if any experience, in

politics but with a simple conviction and determination to right a wrong. In short, an important lesson to learn from the heroes in this book is that if you think something is wrong with this country do not wait for your president, congressman or senator to do something about it. They will not. Look in the mirror if you want to know where change has to start. That is a political lesson. It is a life lesson also.

2. Patience and perseverance—In the pages that follow, we'll learn the uncomfortable fact that real change takes time, often a lot of time. It never comes instantly or easily. This book is not about policy victories won in a single legislative session or two or five for that matter. These victories often took decades. This is not a book for those who are faint of heart or who want instant legislative gratification. If your purpose for reading this book is to find a way to change the world, or at least those parts of the world that you do not like, without exerting too much effort or having your efforts take too much time, look elsewhere. If you think 70 years is just too much time to spend to accomplish something, if you shudder at the thought of setting out on a journey that you may not complete in your lifetime, then this book is not for you. However, if you want to learn how real people undertook the challenge of addressing real social problems and got breakthrough legislation passed, this book is for you. It will show you how they achieved the legislatively impossible and teach you the lessons to help you do the same. These are stories of people who never gave up, who never lost sight of their goal, and who never gave in. Here you will learn that the power of NO is ultimately no match for the politics of YES, WE CAN.

3. Confrontation—Those who would change the world in a major way must confront the world in a major way. They must be willing and able to stage image events to garner attention and raise the consciousness of average voters often at the real risk of physical harm. Often the confrontation necessary to spur change is led by a polarizing figure who becomes a liability to the cause once the stage is set for actual legislation.

4. Knowledge-Base—Someone or some group must take responsibility for amassing the evidence for the need for change and developing the reasoning to counter the arguments of the opposition. This usually requires someone who is not only adept at doing the research and uncovering the facts but who can present these facts in a persuasive way.

5. Compromise and Coalition Building—The change leadership must stay focused on the main objective and make compromises to expand the base of support without alienating those who are truly committed to the cause in order to get anything done. This requires leaders who can see the big picture and have the ability to tap into the needs of widely diverse interest groups to find common advantage in moving ahead by marshaling the facts and structuring the argument for change to appeal to the greatest number while not alienating those in the change movement that are most devoted to change.

6. Vote Buying—Change requires legislative expertise, the knowledge and power to negotiate, trade votes and exchange favors with Senators and Congressmen who are neutral or only weakly opposed in order to build a sufficient majority to secure passage of the legislation. Politics is a dirty business where shady backroom deals are required to construct good legislation.

7. Pivotal Image Event—Real change frequently requires a catastrophe, crisis or shocking expose either real or manufactured to spur the general population to demand action.

8. Piecemeal Legislation—A single piece of legislation is rarely enough to accomplish real change. As hard as it is to pass a much-needed law, the first success usually falls short of the goal. Additionally legislation is usually required.

9. Threat from the Courts—Opponents of change never accept defeat gracefully. Beaten in the halls of Congress, they inevitably turn to the courts seeing to have the entire law or major features declared unconstitutional. Frequently they succeed, either significantly weakening the legislation or forcing proponents of change to launch efforts to enact new legislation to undo the damage.

10. Threat from Public Apathy—Finally, there is the threat of time. Aroused to demand change, the public can gradually lose interest over time. Opponents take advantage of the ebb in public concern to pass new legislation stripping the original legislation of much of its power or cutting funding for enforcement.

These are just a few of the lessons I will elaborate upon in much greater depth as I tell the stories of the genuine heroes profiled in this book. We will begin more than 200 years ago. Fifty-five men met in Philadelphia over one hot summer in 1787. They

sought to fix a constitution that was preventing anything from getting done in Washington. Their struggle and the compromises they made to get their constitution adopted contains important lessons concerning what it takes to get things done in Washington and why it is frequently so hard for progressives to get anything done.

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