

Legislation

The Balancing Act

Benjamin Zelenko, Counsel, House Judiciary Committee

Benjamin Zelenko recounts the delicate position of trying to move on the civil rights bill while keeping key players happy.

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But the whole strategy here was to get Republican support for a bill to get to the floor. And in order to do that you had to keep your partners in crime here content. And that was a delicate balance. And generally speaking Celler was very sympathetic and supportive of McCulloch. But McCulloch was a key to getting this thing through. And Celler didn't always remember that. He was very sensitive to the wishes of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, which was a group of labor and religious groups in support of civil rights legislation. And they were demanding a tougher bill than what the Kennedy administration sent up. So the relationship of the subcommittee to the chairman on the Democratic side, the relationship of the minority Members to the ranking minority Member were different. And the subcommittee spent a lot of time going over this bill line by line. And the Republicans were very cautious that the Democrats didn't leave them stranded by putting in too strong a bill, and then they would be accused of being against civil rights. They didn't want to be placed in that position. After the hearings were over that seemed like the way things would go, that the Democrats would be very sensitive to the Republicans' needs. That changed.