

Lennard J. Davis. *Enabling Acts: The Hidden Story of How the Americans with Disabilities Act Gave the Largest US Minority Its Rights.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2015. 296 pp. \$26.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8070-7156-4.

Reviewed by Richard K. Scotch

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Commissioned by Michael J. Pfeifer (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York)

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the disability rights movement came together, an amalgam of local activist and self-help groups of diverse people with disabilities, organizations working for the advancement of those with specific impairments such as the blind or the deaf, and organizations promoting the status of veterans, disabled children, survivors of restrictive public institutions, and members of other social categories of disability in need of supportive services to promote independent living. A primary goal of the emerging movement was to end discrimination on the basis of disability, and movement activists sought public policies to prohibit discriminatory facilities and practices that excluded people with disabilities from social, economic, and political life.

The first federal antidiscrimination act, the Architectural Barriers Act, was passed in 1968, and was followed in the 1970s by laws that drew on racial civil rights models to ban discrimination in public services and federally supported programs, including public education. These laws were successful in removing some barriers to participation, but they fell short of ensuring the full inclusion of people with disabilities in American society. The disability rights movement rallied around the passage and implementation of these antidiscrimination laws in the 1970s, and in the

1980s movement activists, through a combination of public mobilization and exerting influence within policy institutions, sought a comprehensive law to broadly expand antidiscrimination policies. That law would become the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Disability rights advocates hoped that the ADA would become a legal landmark that would eliminate discriminatory barriers to participation, resulting in social and economic equality for Americans with disabilities, while business and interests representing affected service providers and governmental entities worked to narrow and minimize any mandates for accommodation. After more than a decade of policy development and political debate, disability rights advocacy culminated in the passage of the ADA, which President George H. W. Bush signed into law on July 26, 1990.

In *Enabling Acts*, Lennard Davis, a long-established disability studies scholar and a prolific and thoughtful commentator on the lives of people with disabilities, has given us an inside look at the creation of the ADA, both as a manifestation of the changing status of Americans with disabilities and as the product of their determined and skillful political mobilization and political engagement. Davis has collected a wide range of first-hand accounts of participants and combined them

with material drawn from published sources to offer a carefully and colorfully constructed narrative of how this law was first proposed and then successfully enacted through a lengthy and often uphill process of drafting and consensus building that culminated in legislative approval.

This story of the ADA is told in intriguing detail, with a particular focus on the various policy “insiders” working for disability advocacy groups, including iconic movement figures such as Justin Dart, congressional disability advocates such as Senator Tom Harkin and Representative Tony Coelho, and disability legal activists such as Pat Wright. There are also descriptions of key opponents of the ADA, and of policy gatekeepers whose cooperation was required to advance the legislation. We are given a full account of how the various advocates worked to influence key figures in Congress such as Senator Edward Kennedy and Representative Steve Bartlett, and Bush administration figures such as White House Chief of Staff John Sununu and Attorney General Richard Thornburgh.

In many respects, the book reads as much like a Washington insider memoir as a scholarly history of important legislation. The reader gets to know the key players in the policy process along with their motivations and personal foibles, and to follow the process of advancing policy through step by excruciating step of education, persuasion, and use of leverage. However, Davis does not merely provide a journalistic recitation of who did what, when. He offers us both historical context and analysis from disability studies scholarship to offer an informative and intellectually engaging account. The book describes the many connections between policy insiders and outsiders as well as the grand bargains, the swaps and concessions, and parallel tracks along which public policies are made and refined. Davis also provides a wealth of information about the personal background of many of the characters in his narrative, information which helps to explain

how people came to pursue advocacy or why they were willing (or unwilling) to respond to it.

The book is organized roughly chronologically. Davis introduces the cast of characters in disability rights advocacy in the early 1980s, with frequent side trips to describe the personal histories that led each of them to join the movement. He then follows these key figures and continues to introduce new ones as the idea for a comprehensive disability rights statute is developed and refined during the Reagan administration. The bulk of Davis’s story focuses on the two years from the ADA’s introduction in Congress in 1988 to its ultimate passage in 1990, during which the “dance of legislation” occurs in Congress, within the administration, and among interest groups seeking to influence the law’s content. The narrative is largely wrapped up with the bill’s signing ceremony on the White House lawn, although a final chapter discusses subsequent events.

Davis’s account allows the reader to locate the debate over disability rights within some of the related policy issues and the evolving political landscape of the Reagan-Bush era. However, the book is not the best source to understand the broader grassroots rise of the disability rights movement that culminated in the ADA, or the sociopolitical oppression of people with disabilities that the ADA was intended to address. Nor does this volume analyze the complex consequences of the ADA in the quarter-century since its enactment, when a great number of barriers have been removed or at least reduced as the result of the law, yet many Americans with disabilities still remain on the margins of society.

The fine-grained level of explanation provided will most appeal to those readers who are very interested in the details of policy development or in how the ADA came to its final provisions, but perhaps less so to those readers whose interest is more in whether laws like the ADA can bring about the goals of equity and participation. As with most major legislation, numerous policy

compromises were made to accommodate competing interests and hold together a legislative majority, much to the chagrin of both supporters and critics. This account is not where readers can examine the origins or larger social meaning of disability discrimination, or of how best to overcome social inequality, or of the impact of this legislation on the lives of people with disabilities.

However, Lennard Davis has given us the definitive account of how our most important disability law was created. If one wants to comprehend how disability policy concepts get translated into public policy, or how a pluralistic system accommodates competing interests on disability access, or how personal history shapes disability policy stances, *Enabling Acts* is a thoughtful, well-written, and engaging narrative. It should be read by anyone interested in disability politics and policy and how they shape disability rights, as well as by the general reader who is curious about how the only civil rights statute of the conservative Reagan-Bush administrations came to be enacted, or even by someone who might want to know how a good idea became the law of the land in an increasingly cynical era for faith in government.

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