

Biden and Brooke Face the Issues

By MARTHA V. GOTTRON

WASHINGTON — Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr., D-Del., doesn't seem totally confident in his new role as the northern liberal who turned the Senate around on the busing issue. "It's not a comfortable feeling for me. I mean, I've never been there before," he says.

If Biden was uncomfortable, then Sen. Edward W. Brooke, R-Mass., was lonely. Almost single-handedly, he led the unsuccessful opposition to the anti-busing amendments, two of which were authored by Biden. And with Biden leading the way, several Northerners voted against busing for the first time, tipping the balance in the Senate.

Biden's commitment to civil rights is deep-seated, beginning with his participation in civil rights sit-ins during high school and continuing through his career as an attorney in criminal law with a largely black clientele before his election to the Senate in 1972 at the age of 29.

But his opposition to busing is also longstanding. Biden openly opposed the practice during his Senate campaign when busing was not a particularly hot issue in Delaware.

Now it is. The U.S. Supreme Court has been asked to review a lower court finding that Wilmington, the state's major city, and its surrounding suburbs have deliberately segregated their schools. If that finding stands, a remedy could well involve busing.

Biden admits that the Wilmington situation has "telescoped" his efforts and acknowledges that there has been more pressure from home, with constituents saying, "You said you were opposed to it. Now what are you doing about it?"

Biden's anti-busing position during the September Senate debate has drawn criticism from both the pro-busers and the anti-busers. While that did not daunt him, it made him uneasy.

Once during the debate, he recalls, he was in a colloquy on the floor with staunch busing foes such as Sens. James B. Allen, D-Ala., Jesse A. Helms, R-N.C., and Strom Thurmond, R-S.C.

At one point, he looked over his shoulder toward the spot where Brooke was meeting with several of his liberal supporters. For a brief moment, Biden said, he was convinced he was in the wrong meeting.

"It's a hard, hard thing," he says, "especially when you've pictured yourself and been pictured by your peers as being someone who has been out front the other way."

Brooke's losing fight was lonely, he says. "You know, when I first came to the Senate . . . you had the Javitses, the Mondales, the Birch Bayhs. There was quite a civil rights coalition. On all of these issues they took the leadership and there was a lot of debate on the floor. Now all of a sudden they're silent.

"I regret the loss of these liberal stalwarts that we have had before who I think were giving in to what they believed to be the emotional pressures of the day."

Brooke also says that northern liberal absenteeism hurt his cause during the debate. "I don't want to say why they were absent," he says, "but if we had all of our people (on any one of the key votes), we could have carried the day."

Brooke, the first black in the Senate since Reconstruction, says he is hopeful that some good will come out of the entire busing debate. "I think the quality of education is going to improve for whites as well as blacks," he says. Nevertheless he is "disturbed, concerned, by what happened in the Senate those two weeks. It certainly was not the Senate's finest hour by far. It was a retreat, a retreat on our commitment. It was an abdication and I regret it, I deplore it and I'm ashamed of it."



Sens. Biden and Brooke

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