



Chief Justice: A Biography of Earl Warren

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Earl Warren is rightly remembered not only as one of the great chief justices of the Supreme Court, but as one of the most influential Americans of the twentieth century. Warren Court decisions such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Miranda*, and *Baker v. Carr* have given us such famous phrases as "separate is not equal," "read him his rights," and "one-man-one-vote" - and have vastly expanded civil rights and personal liberties. A generation later the Warren Court's decisions still define American freedoms. Ed Cray recounts this truly American story in the finest and most comprehensive biography of Earl Warren. He has interviewed nearly all of the Chief's law clerks, four of his children, and more than one hundred others, many of whom recall for the first time their years with Warren. He has read thousands of personal letters and official documents deposited in ten libraries across the country, weaving them into a tale of political intrigue, judicial politics, family reminiscences, and a loving marriage.

Chief Justice: A Biography of Earl Warren Details

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Brent says

This was an advance copy that Marylin Hudson passed along. Cray writes well and informatively. The major roles Warren played in California and national history make for interesting reading.

LDS Apostle Dallin Oaks played a small role here, as he was a law clerk for Warren. Warren encouraged him to teach law rather than return to law practice in Chicago "due to the crookedness of the government (including the judiciary), the hoodlumism and racketeering which is prevalent, and the generally low moral tone prevailing." Oaks did end up living there anyway as a professor at the University of Chicago School of Law.

Steve Cawelti says

A very worthwhile read. Starts slow but necessary based on Chief Justice Warren's background. This was a landmark period in the Supreme Court, and Warren one of the greatest Chiefs in our country's history.

Stuart says

A cloying, fawning account of the life of a fascinating character in American history. There is great book to be written about the life of Justice Warren, but this is not it.

Josh Muhlenkamp says

I came into this book as somebody who was not a huge fan of Earl Warren, although I certainly respect what he did as Chief Justice, and can't say that I disagree with a lot of the major decisions of his court (Brown, Mapp, Miranda, Gideon, etc.).

Throughout the book, Mr. Cray stressed that Warren's judicial "philosophy" was whether the decision was fair. I do believe that fairness matters in the judiciary, but not the extent that Warren went to. According to Mr. Cray, Warren was results-driven, with little consideration of the reasoning behind the result. That might be acceptable from a judge on a federal district court or another low-level trial court, but on the Supreme Court, that doesn't cut it. The Supreme Court's purpose is to articulate meaning; this purpose requires that the Court's members take great care with the reasons for their decisions, with less of an eye on the actual outcomes.

I want to stress that my dislike of Warren does not stem from political differences, although those differences exist. I'm perfectly capable of admiring people from different ideological backgrounds, having admired

Harry Truman for a significant period of time now. My dislike of Warren stems from his inconsistency and lack of awareness of what his role as a justice of the Supreme Court actually was, which has caused problems for the Court and lawyers in later days.

Dustin Hartley says

This book took me about a month to read, but it was well worth taking my time to read about this great Justice. Very well-written and puts Warren in a good light.

Brooke says

I knew not one fact about Chief Justice Earl Warren before I read this book. He was amazing. Not an intellectual, but a down-to-earth, practical, principled man who loved his wife and family. How refreshing is that in today's world? I believe he was not only a man of his times, but a man for the times. Not everything that sprang from his court is neat and tidy, or wonderful I suppose, but I am glad I no longer live in a legally segregated United States. I enjoy knowing that I have basic civil rights. May we all live to be better people. For the most part this book is readable, but at 533 pages it can sometimes be a bit mind boggling. It seems to be carefully researched to me. It is very interesting to read the "back story" of many of the cases the court heard, and the personalities on the court.

Kirk Lowery says

Cray clearly admires Warren, and this plus his liberal political bias mars the narrative and the selection and emphasis of event. Nevertheless, as a native Californian, I was amazed at how little I knew about the history of California in the first half of the 20th century.

Judy says

Ed Cray delivers a detailed biography of one of the most influential Chief Justices of the Supreme Court, Earl Warren. Warren served as Chief Justice during a period of significant social change in American life. In the post-WWII years the country was on high alert for Communist infiltrators, resulting in unprecedented efforts to uncover those who disagreed with the government, or squelch their right to protest. The Jim Crow discrimination practices of the south made their way to the Supreme Court in *Brown v Board of Education* and related cases. The resulting rulings have had far-reach, life-changing impact.

To understand Earl Warren's judicial philosophy it helps to understand the man. No legal scholar, by his own admission, he rose through the ranks of public service in California because he worked hard in the jobs he secured, he remembered the people who helped him get there, and he took a genuine interest in people. Reflecting on his years on the Supreme Court he said he always thought of the people his decisions would effect. Personal rights/liberties trumped states rights in Warren's mind. With little regard for legal precedent, Warren decided cases on the basis of his own instinct of fairness, right and wrong. As Cray relates, Warren sketched out the broad themes and directions he felt a ruling should go and then left the heavy lifting--

researching the legal precedent and drafting the decision--to his law clerks. He and his court became the object of virulent criticism from strict constitutional constructionists and the emerging right-wing politicians.

I was surprised to learn that the argument over judicial precedent and judicial activism goes back, nearly to the beginning of the republic. While I tend to be slightly right of center politically, I believe Warren was right to ask "What's right" in the matters of racial discrimination, rather than "What is the legal precedent." Clearly, the courts had allowed the injustices of discrimination to go on, hiding behind legal precedent. I was also surprised at the behind the scenes politics of how Warren secured his spot on the Supreme Court, how and when his successor was appointed, and the justices relationships with members of the legislative and executive branches. It seems like the lines between the three branches of government are frequently blurred and justice is not always blind.

Aaron Million says

Earl Warren was the rare politician, and later jurist, who both practiced and preached that honesty and integrity are the most important parts of a person's character. Ed Cray chronicles Warren's long and extraordinary career of a half-century in public service with objectivity and professionalism. Neither fawning nor overly critical, Cray is able to maintain a fairly personable stance on Warren, taking him to task when he felt that Warren's actions did not line up with his professed ideals. The result is a book that, while not making for riveting reading, carefully examines just who Earl Warren was, what was important to him, how his thinking was molded while growing up in California, and how he managed a relatively seamless major career change: going from Governor of California to Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

The book is roughly divided in half, page-wise, between Warren's career as a politician and Warren's career on the bench. As the title of the book hints, Cray's main interest is in the latter. However, this is a full biography and Cray knows that without examining and explaining Warren's pre-Supreme Court career, the reader would not fully be able to understand Warren the Chief Justice. Nothing was given to Warren; he worked for everything that he got, even the Supreme Court appointment (in a way). Warren was interested in the law from an early age and worked hard to make himself - successively - into a lawyer, then a county prosecutor, then California Attorney General, the Governor, and finally culminating in the pinnacle of the judicial profession.

Warren was a liberal Republican, even back then in the first half of the 20th century. It is questionable, perhaps even doubtful, if he would be a Republican at all today. Because Warren was scrupulously honest (although sometimes not fully as one might hope) and was guided by his own innate sense of integrity, he was a different kind of politician than most. He refused to engage in quid pro quos and refused to accept bribes. Undoubtedly, this highly moral manner of conducting his life made him many enemies (think of the "Impeach Earl Warren" billboards in the 1960s) and possibly cost him support when he wanted to make a run at the presidency in 1952. His sense of duty to his country that he swore an oath to protect was more important to him than any position that he could gain from it.

By far the biggest blemish on Warren's star is his acquiescence in and support of the horrible decision to intern all Japanese (both American citizens and foreign nationals) living in California in 1942 by placing them in armed camps. Warren got caught up in the hysteria following Pearl Harbor and, as California Attorney General, was firmly in support of this stupid policy. It was clear in later years, when he was Chief Justice, that Warren knew he was on the wrong side of history and the wrong side of humanity for playing his role in the internment. While never actually coming out publicly and admitting that he was wrong, in

private discussions with friends and family members and even in some of the Supreme Court decisions that he helped to hand down, one could see that Warren's view had changed. For a man who so prided himself on his own sense of fairness and justice for those who were ill-treated by society, this must have disturbed him until he died.

Cray tries to mix in Warren's personal life, and does a fairly decent job at it. Although, after going onto the Supreme Court, the book largely revolves around Warren's court management and decisions. Cray does divert for one chapter to discuss the Warren Commission (President Lyndon Johnson basically demanded of Warren that he head a commission to look into the assassination of President John F. Kennedy). This is quite interesting as Cray documents several things: how hard Warren worked - essentially doing two full-time jobs for most of 1964 when he was already seventy-three years old; how fractured the Commission was (Georgia Senator Richard Russell hated Warren because of the latter's desegregation ruling in the famous 1954 *Brown* case; Michigan Representative Gerald Ford was largely a partisan thorn even though he belonged to the same party as Warren); how Warren's intense involvement and dedication to doing a thorough job ran him afoul of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover; and how Warren did not believe that anyone else but Lee Harvey Oswald was involved.

Cray also provides context behind Warren's relationship with his one real enemy: Richard Nixon. Warren ultimately lost to Nixon twice: first when Nixon finagled him out of any shot at becoming the Republican Presidential nominee in 1952 (ironically this led to Warren's appointment as Chief Justice by a reluctant and later regretful President Dwight Eisenhower), and second at the end of Warren's career. Warren wanted to retire in 1968 and submitted his resignation to President Johnson stating he would retire at the President's pleasure. This set the ball rolling on a fiasco: Johnson nominated Associate Justice Abe Fortas to become Chief Justice, the Senate balked - embarrassing both Fortas and Johnson while attacking Warren, Fortas withdrew his name when he saw the writing on the wall, Nixon then becomes President and is the one to appoint Warren Burger as Warren's successor. This is definitely not what Warren wanted. Nonetheless, despite that episode, Warren was and remains one of the most important and influential Chief Justices in history and helped to redefine and broaden rights for many people who previously had been marginalized by society.

While this book is not written poorly, it was a struggle at times to get through. Cray does not provide any breaks once he begins a chapter, so often times the subject switches markedly from one paragraph to the next. Warren lives a long life, and lived through many societal changes and was present for some big moments. But sometimes that sense doesn't make it through the narrative. Cray spends as much time on the 1948 presidential election as he does on Warren's time as a student at the University of California. Warren's personality never really seems to come out here. In someone else's hands, a more vibrant Earl Warren might very well appear.

Doug Jakway says

Decent book spanning a very influential career of Earl Warren.

Dale says

Life does not change just the time on our clocks. After reading Ed Cray's biography of Earl Warren called

Chief Justice my quote is justified. Amazing what one can learn by reading. I strongly recommend it.

President Dwight Eisenhower said that his appointment of Earl Warren ""was the biggest damn fool thing I ever did."" He was exasperated, he complained to Warren himself, about ""those Communist cases."" When Warren asked whether he had read any Supreme Court decisions, however, Eisenhower acknowledged he had not though he knew what was in them. From school integration to one man-one vote and the application of the Bill of Rights to recalcitrant states, the court's fundamental shifts toward liberalism were not all of Warren's making but were managed under his activist leadership. As unstylish as its subject, Cray's prose fits in all the useful facts about the pragmatic district attorney in Oakland who would become, as governor, the ""California Roosevelt.""

Responsible in part for the panicky post-Pearl Harbor herding of Japanese residents to inland camps, he had not always put civil rights atop his agenda, but experience more than ideology drove his judicial philosophy. His placement at the head of the highest court made him the most influential jurist since John Marshall.

I remember growing up in Nebraska during the 1960's and many midwestern's considered Warren a Communist. Now I remember anyone that wanted Civil Rights was declared a Communist. All of Warren's actions are still being debated today. Truly, nothing does change except the time on our clocks. Oh, but our clocks now have a computer attached to them.

Chris Miller says

I enjoyed this deep dive into the formative experiences of Chief Justice Earl Warren, and the landmark opinions he delivered from the U.S. Supreme Court. I was intrigued by the background provided by Ed Cray's interviews with former law clerks and colleagues. The tone set throughout this lengthy biography was highly sympathetic to its subject, pressing up against sycophantic. I would have appreciated more discussion of the hatred he inspired among conservatives and Southern Democrats, who pressed so hard for his impeachment. However, the author seems to have adopted Earl Warren's perspective toward those viewpoints, which is simply that one's moral compass should guide a judge's decisions just as much as the Constitution. I am proud of the steps that Chief Justice Warren took to advance social justice in the 1950s and 1960s. Our country is better for it.

Lenny says

Very good bio. Didn't know anything about Earl Warren. Now I come away with Ed Cray's assistance much better informed on The Supreme Court and all its functions.

Thomas says

I so wanted to enjoy this book, but gosh it's a slog. A real kitchen sink of a biography. The author can't leave out a single, minute detail. In his obsession to cram in every little fact, he loses touch with what made Earl Warren so great. This book needs much less information and much more insight. The first half, to Warren's appointment as chief justice, is worse than the second half, which features explanations of his judicial philosophy, his leadership of the court, and factual back stories of the big cases: Brown v. Board of

Education, Baker v. Carr, Mapp v. Ohio, and others. Still, in the second half I wanted to quit reading several times and instead pushed on when the book was pivoting, as when Warren finally buckled under President Johnson's forceful pressure to chair the commission investigating President Kennedy's assassination. Bottom line: Earl Warren deserves a much better biography than this.

Doug Wells says

Earl Warren as Chief Justice blazed an amazing legal path starting with Brown v. Board of Education and through the 60s. This is a great biography.
