



Harry A. Blackmun: The Outsider Justice

Tinsley Yarbrough

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When appointed to the Supreme Court in 1970 by President Nixon, Harry A. Blackmun was seen as a quiet, safe choice to complement the increasingly conservative Court of his boyhood friend, Warren Burger. No one anticipated his seminal opinion championing abortion rights in *Roe v. Wade*, the most controversial ruling of his generation, which became the battle cry of both supporters and critics of judicial power and made Blackmun a liberal icon.

Harry A. Blackmun: The Outsider Justice is Tinsley E. Yarbrough's penetrating account of one of the most outspoken and complicated figures on the Supreme Court. As a justice, Blackmun stood at the pinnacle of the American judiciary. Yet when he took his seat on the Court, Justice Blackmun felt "almost desperate," overwhelmed with feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy over the immense responsibilities before him. Blackmun had overcome humble roots to achieve a Harvard education, success as a Minneapolis lawyer and resident counsel to the prestigious Mayo Clinic, as well as a distinguished record on the Eighth Circuit federal appeals court. But growing up in a financially unstable home with a frequently unemployed father and an emotionally fragile mother left a permanent mark on the future justice. All his life, Harry Blackmun considered himself one of society's outsiders, someone who did not "belong."

Remarkably, though, that very self-image instilled in the justice, throughout his career, a deep empathy for society's most vulnerable outsiders--women faced with unwanted pregnancies, homosexuals subjected to archaic laws, and ultimately, death-row inmates. To those who saw his career as the constitutional odyssey of a conservative jurist gradually transformed into a champion of the underdog, Blackmun had a ready answer: he had not changed; the Court and the issues before them changed. The justice's identification with the marginalized members of society arguably provides the overarching key to that consistency.

Thoroughly researched, engagingly written, *Harry A. Blackmun: The Outsider Justice* offers an in-depth, revelatory portrait of one of the most intriguing jurists ever to sit on the Supreme Court. Relying on in-depth archival material, in addition to numerous interviews with Blackmun's former clerks, Yarbrough here presents the definitive biography of the great justice, ultimately providing an illuminating window into the inner-workings of the modern Supreme Court.

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