

The Art of Political Manipulation: An Addendum

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David Pfeiffer's stimulating article in the Winter DSQ tracing the history of the efforts to pass the ADA should stimulate considerable discussion within the disability community.

Several years ago, I discussed with Kenneth Jernigan, then President Emeritus of the National Federation of the Blind, the issue of why the ADA had been so long in coming in light of civil rights legislation enacted in the 1960s. He indicated NFB had pushed to have disabilities included at that time, but the leadership of the movement, particularly Congressman Adam Clayton Powell of Harlem, stated that such inclusion would result in a combined opposition powerful enough to defeat the effort. The result was the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 and an intervening period of 26 years before the disability community received its rights.

As Pfeiffer indicates, there was a need for unity within the organized segment of the disability community. NFB used this need to demand a provision within the law permitting disabled people to refuse any accommodation offered. If not for this provision, I might be forced to sit at the front of the bus or stay in an accessible hotel room. Since I am blind and do not need such accommodations, I can, as a result of the NFB's position, refuse inappropriate accommodations with equanimity.

An error in Pfeiffer's article is his reference to the American Federation of the Blind as one of the members of the coalition working for ADA passage. There are two consumer advocacy organizations of blind people in the United States. One is the National Federation of the Blind and the other is the American Council of the Blind.

[Editor's note: I accept Ed's correction hopefully with grace. It was the American Council of the Blind and not the National Federation of the Blind which part of the coalition pushing the ADA. And I thank him for this communication.]

[Editor's note: Phyllis Rubenfeld, an active member of the Society for Disability Studies and a member of the Board of Directors of the Society died at home on June 29, 2000, during the annual meeting of SDS. Sigi Shapiro and Elaine Makas presented remarks remembering Phyllis at the meeting. Here are the remarks made by Elaine.]