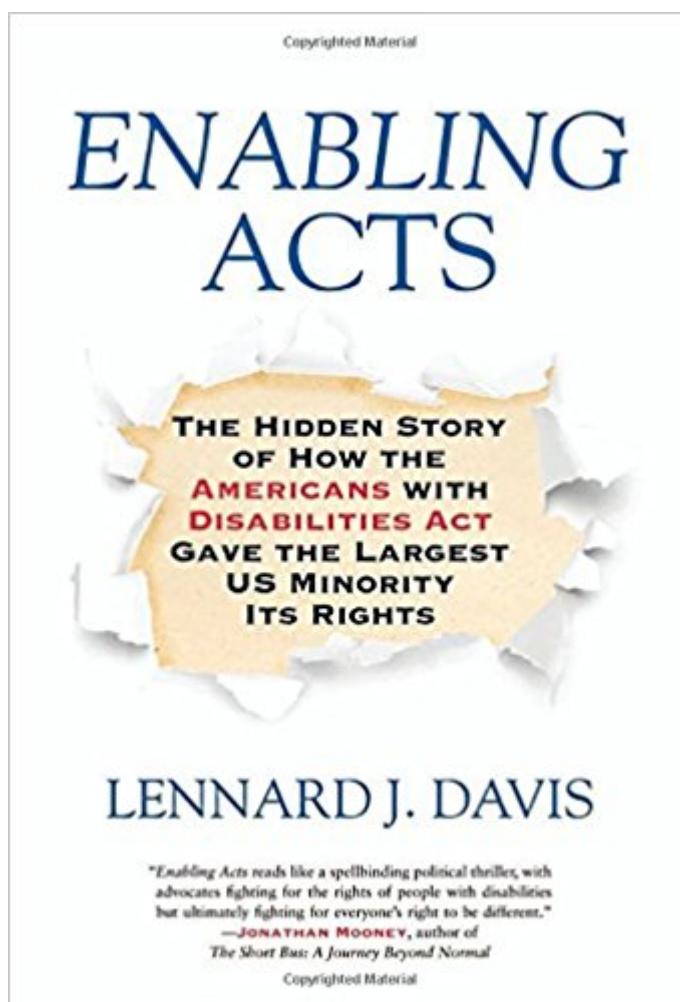


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# Enabling Acts: The Hidden Story Of How The Americans With Disabilities Act Gave The Largest US Minority Its Rights



## Synopsis

The first significant book on the history and impact of the ADA—“eyes on the prize” moment for disability rights. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is the widest-ranging and most comprehensive piece of civil rights legislation ever passed in the United States, and it has become the model for disability-based laws around the world. Yet the surprising story behind how the bill came to be is little known. In this riveting account, acclaimed disability scholar Lennard J. Davis delivers the first behind-the-scenes and on-the-ground narrative of how a band of leftist Berkeley hippies managed to make an alliance with upper-crust, conservative Republicans to bring about a truly bipartisan bill. Based on extensive interviews with all the major players involved including legislators and activists, Davis recreates the dramatic tension of a story that is anything but a dry account of bills and speeches. Rather, it’s filled with one indefatigable character after another, culminating in explosive moments when the hidden army of the disability community stages scenes like the iconic “Capitol Crawl” or an event some describe as “deaf Selma,” when students stormed Gallaudet University demanding a “Deaf President Now!” From inside the offices of newly formed disability groups to secret breakfast meetings surreptitiously held outside the White House grounds, here we meet countless unsung characters, including political heavyweights and disability advocates on the front lines. “You want to fight?” an angered Ted Kennedy would shout in an upstairs room at the Capitol while negotiating the final details of the ADA. Congressman Tony Coelho, whose parents once thought him to be possessed by the devil because of his epilepsy, later became the bill’s primary sponsor. There’s Justin Dart, adorned in disability power buttons and his signature cowboy hat, who took to the road canvassing fifty states, and people like Patrisha Wright, also known as “The General,” Arlene Myerson or “the brains,” “architect” Bob Funk, and visionary Mary Lou Breslin, who left the hippie highlands of the West to pursue equal rights in the marble halls of DC. Published for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ADA, *Enabling Acts* promises to ignite readers in a discussion of disability rights by documenting this “eyes on the prize” moment for tens of millions of American citizens.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Unique and moving history” A perfect celebration of the ADA’s twenty-fifth anniversary. • Booklist, Starred Review “Rather than a standard, legalistic history of legislation and case law, this nonlawyer author provides an engaging and even chatty account covering the personalities and political machinations that resulted in bipartisan passage of the law. A lively and well-researched legal saga suited to general readers interested in current events and disability issues. • Library Journal “A fitting tribute to the activists and advocates who worked for, wrote, and passed the law, and to the legions of people with disabilities who strive to be full participants in their communities and in our world. It is a book that everyone should read. • Health Affairs “A solid and wide ranging telling of the story of the passage of the ADA. • Choice “Lennard Davis’s book offers a historic glimpse into the creation of the ADA—legislation that has positively affected the lives of countless Americans living with physical and mental challenges. To adequately understand and celebrate this landmark legislation, *Enabling Acts* is a must-read. • Senator Bob Dole “Enabling Acts is the essential account of the determined activists, seasoned politicians, and unheralded citizens whose efforts a quarter century ago launched a transformation in American law and culture that still resonates today. Studded with one indelible character and colorful incident after another, this engrossing and well-researched chronicle makes a strong case for the ADA being an enviable, if imperfect, model of legislation—and a profound event in history’s long upward climb towards justice. • Rachel Simon, author of *The Story of Beautiful Girl* and *Riding the Bus with My Sister* “With *Enabling Acts*, Lennard J. Davis has given us a valuable history of a landmark piece of legislation, told with precision and insight that takes us from the activist ferment of San Francisco

to the corridors of power in Washington. It is a welcome addition to the growing canon of civil rights history, and a gripping read to boot. • Clay Risen, author of *The Bill of the Century: The Epic Battle for the Civil Rights Act* “An eye-opening account, *Enabling Acts* not only tells the insider story of a crucial event in twentieth century history, it does so in a way that inspires a renewed conversation around disability rights in America. Even though I was the lead sponsor of the bill that became law, I learned even more about this dramatic civil rights fight. • Senator Tom Harkin (Ret.) “Lennard Davis has vividly captured a complex and fascinating story. It is impossible to describe briefly how much the ADA changed my life. Davis’ page-turning account puts the reader on the ground along chanting disability rights advocates and behind closed doors within the walls of Washington. An important and outstanding contribution. • I. King Jordan, first deaf president of Gallaudet University “Davis has written a vital book for anyone who cares about human rights, social change, and the empowerment of people with cognitive and physical differences. *Enabling Acts* reads like a spellbinding political thriller with advocates fighting for the rights of people with disabilities but ultimately fighting for everyone’s right to be different. • Jonathan Mooney, author of *The Short Bus: A Journey Beyond Normal* “Brimming with memorable characters, Lennard Davis has restored this often ignored or forgotten civil rights fight as a significant moment in U.S. history. No celebration of the ADA and democracy should be without *Enabling Acts*. • Kim E. Nielsen, author of *A Disability History of the United States* “With vivid details, Davis paints the personal and political histories of key players in the fight for the ADA . . . an important contribution to the fields of disability studies and disability history. • Audra Jennings, H-Disability

An award-winning author of eleven books, including *My Sense of Silence*, Lennard J. Davis is Distinguished Professor of Liberal Arts in the departments of Disability Studies and English at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He has written for the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Nation*, and *Chronicle of Higher Education*, among other publications. He lives in New York City.

This is an extraordinary book with layers of insights about the key ADA people, the process, the politics, the consumers with disabilities collaborations/negotiations. One of my most positive “take-aways” from this book is the reminder about the incredible leadership of Sen. Tom Harkin and his Chf Counsel, Bobby Silverstein. I highly recommend the book to those who will carry the disability civil rights ball to the next level. By p. 8 of this book the author and Sen. Harkin note that

the ADA, like the Disability Treaty, would not pass the Congress today. Ask yourself why as you prepare to vote in the next election.

Many sections of this book read like an episode of The West Wing. It is a pleasant read and a solid introduction to the ADA. The extensive notes allow for further research.

The author Dr. Lennard J. Davis is answering an enormous need for disabled individuals with this book!

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the passing of the American with Disabilities Act (ADA). Author Lennard J Davis, whose own parents are deaf and who saw them be discriminated against in every facet of life, marks the history of the ADA from its first activist movements in Berkeley to the demonstration outside the Capitol and the often emotional verbal exchange of lobbyists and politicians. Davis uses a variety of sources, both primary and secondary, to describe the many small events that led to the passing of the ADA. He talks to the activists, he reads memoirs, he goes through legislative reports, White House testimonies, legal journals and newspaper reports. While Davis' personal experiences as a hearing child of deaf parents has given him an emotional connection to the ADA, his prose lacks the emotion. He credits a bi-partisan passage of the bill and equal energy from both activists and lobbyists to get the ADA passed, and the chapters are well presented. No one alone is heralded as a hero, which may disappoint some readers who will call this book boring. It's far from boring in both narrative and message. The book's one flaw is perhaps the slow start, but this is Davis' way of giving credit to everyone. He profiles the many activists and lobbyists, many with horrific stories of discrimination because of their handicap of being wheelchair bound, being an amputee, or being deaf or blind. But there are also people with mental handicaps who are profiled. All these varied handicaps led to the broad definition of the ADA, but it took some work on all sides. The legislative fun starts half-way through the book, in Chapter 8, "A New Day, a New ADA." While there is Rep (R-TX) Steve Bartlett, Chief of Staff to President George H.W Bush John Sununu (who doesn't always come off as being a nice guy), and Secretary of Transportation Sam Skinner, there are others who play a crucial part behind the scenes. Was the recitation of the poem "Elegy on a Country Church Yard" by Thomas Gray what convinced some lawmakers like Bartlett to get the ADA passed? Whatever the true account is, subsequent chapters now document the back-and-forth debate among all the activists and lobbyists, supporters and opponents and all the legal, and financial corners that had to be considered. This was all taking place during the AIDS

epidemic, the conflict in Panama with Noriega, the growing tension with China and the Tianemen Square confrontation and now HIV-positive people were also included as disabled. President George H W Bush, who in 1964 did not support the passage of the Civil Rights Act, now was distracted with more pressing issues. American History buffs like me will appreciate this work. This story is not just about the passage of the ADA, but about how many of the people involved with this, both pro and con, were swayed to change sides. It's about the definition of a disability, who all is included, and what all must be done to support Americans with disabilities. This is not just about building wheelchair ramps or street curbs, but wider, more even paths, elevators, wider hallways, lower water fountains, electric lifts on public buses, and about how opening up housing, transportation, education and communication to all kinds of disabilities has made life more comfortable for everyone. Many disabilities are temporary, but by giving disabled people these rights, it has given them more freedom to a more quality of life as well as lessened the burden on the caregivers of these people. The narrative may be dull at first, but reading this book is certainly an eye opener. Davis says that the ADA would have a harder time getting passed today. Reading this book explains why.

ÃƒÂ¢Ã  ¬Ã  Ã“The ADA is an excellent example of a bipartisanship no longer extant but made possible when a Republican President, George H. W. Bush, worked together with a Democratic House and Senate.ÃƒÂ¢Ã  ¬Ã  Ã•I received this book as part of the Goodreads First Reads program for an honest review. One in Five of every American is disabled, so I would venture to say that unless you are a hermit, you or someone you love is disabled. It is so easy to forget what life was like for the disabled in this country before the Americans with Disabilities Act gave people their freedom. When you look at a city bus and see the ramp, take the time to realize before the ADA people in wheelchairs had to stay home. It was difficult to get jobs or go to school with everyone else. The entire story of how this act was conceived and finally passed is in ÃƒÂ¢Ã  ¬Ã  Ã“Enabling ActsÃƒÂ¢Ã  ¬Ã  Ã• by Lennard J. Davis a man whose parents were deaf. I enjoyed reading this book because I like to see how government works when it works, and how to make it work. I also am disabled with arthritis, my husband has epilepsy, a son is autistic and a daughter suffers from Multiple Sclerosis. I donÃƒÂ¢Ã  ¬Ã  â„¢t get SSDI and donÃƒÂ¢Ã  ¬Ã  â„¢t expect to but it is helpful for my son and hopefully my daughter will be able to get assistance soon. I think the most important thing to come out of the ADA was the integration of the disabled into normal life. It is less costly in the long run to accommodate and allow people to contribute to this country. This is a fascinating story of the ins and outs of selling an idea and

encouraging people on both sides to work together and come up with a plan that works. Sometimes this book worked like a thriller to me, as I wasn't sure how they could do it with so much opposition from businesses and the transportation industries. There are many heartwarming stories like Senator Tom Harkin from Iowa whose older brother was deaf. In the early days, there were outside programs that would train deaf people for certain jobs and Frank was forced to become a baker. He hated the job and one day a man came in and bought his bread and asked him if he liked his job. He shook his head and this man, who happened to own a factory, asked him if he would like to come and work for him, the end of the story is that Frank did great in his factory job, because he wasn't bothered by the noise. Soon the man hired more deaf workers. It is a great story and one of the reasons the bill was able to pass was the fact that so many people know someone with a handicap and know that they are no different from anyone else. The last chapter in this book shows me that the work is not complete. Too many businesses, state, and federal government are doing their best to undo the hard work that the ADA requires. Lennard J. Davis wrote a great book about the Americans with Disabilities Act and how it passed and became the law of the land. Anyone who loves politics will enjoy this book, anyone who is disabled or knows someone who is disabled will like this book, and if you enjoy a thriller and mystery that happens to be true, you will enjoy this book.

The author, a child of deaf parents, has crafted a significant if sometimes awkward history of the ADA. Davis has more passion and first person experience than writing skills. If you can overlook that, this is a solid primer as to how ADA came about, especially on the political side. I can vouch for the accuracy of the historic problems; I was a sign interpreter for several years of section 504 implementation meetings in my home state. The public had a fundraiser to put in a curb cut on Main Street. Deaf people couldn't order a pizza without volunteers at a relay phone network. ADA has created a far more accessible world for everyone. Davis has done a solid job telling the story of how it happened. I think the book gets a little too enmeshed into the politics which I saw first hand so is of less interest for me. Definitely a good read if you have no prior background in ADA and disability issues.

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