



# A People's History of the Supreme Court: The Men and Women Whose Cases and Decisions Have Shaped Our Constitution: Revised Edition

By Peter Irons

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**A comprehensive history of the people and cases that have changed history, this is the definitive account of the nation's highest court**

Recent changes in the Supreme Court have placed the venerable institution at the forefront of current affairs, making this comprehensive and engaging work as timely as ever. In the tradition of Howard Zinn's classic *A People's History of the United States*, Peter Irons chronicles the decisions that have influenced virtually every aspect of our society, from the debates over judicial power to controversial rulings in the past regarding slavery, racial segregation, and abortion, as well as more current cases about school prayer, the Bush/Gore election results, and "enemy combatants." To understand key issues facing the supreme court and the current battle for the court's ideological makeup, there is no better guide than Peter Irons. This revised and updated edition includes a foreword by Howard Zinn.

"A sophisticated narrative history of the Supreme Court . . . [Irons] breathes abundant life into old documents and reminds readers that today's fiercest arguments about rights are the continuation of the endless American conversation." -*Publisher's Weekly* (starred review)

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## **Editorial Review**

### *Amazon.com Review*

The savvy, chatty author of *The Courage of Their Convictions* brings us a scholarly reckoning of the 200-plus years of decisions made by the highest court in the land. Not surprisingly (and justifiably, given his erudite arguments), Peter H. Irons represents the court's work as a never-ending appeal of the powerless to the powerful: of the just over 100 supreme justices who have sat on the court, all but two have been white, all but two have been men, and all but seven have been Christian, whereas the supplicants to our nation's highest bar are typically racial minorities, women, and deviants in some way from the religious and social mainstream.

Taking a representative (if not comprehensive) accounting of the Supreme Court's most significant decisions, Irons puts cultural and political context--and a human face--to the parties involved, painting an absorbing and involving picture of landmark cases that readers are likely to recall but not fully understand. Whether he's explicating the tortuous history of freedom-seeking slave Dred Scott or explaining the "a Jap's a Jap" reasoning behind the legal exculpation of World War II internment camps, Irons reminds us of the court's spotted history while still conveying the deep affection he has for it. (Includes a thoughtful appendix with the complete text of the Constitution and suggestions for further reading.) --*Paul Hughes*

### *From Publishers Weekly*

Presenting a sophisticated narrative history of the Supreme Court, Irons (*The Courage of Their Convictions*, etc.) illustrates the beguiling legacy left by the Constitution's framers, who conjured up the high Court without providing an instruction manual. Irons is clear about where his ideological sympathy lies, calling Justice William Brennan "my judicial ideal and inspiration" and quoting Brennan's famous formulation that "the genius of the Constitution" rests in "the adaptability of its great principles to cope with current problems and current needs." Irons traces the development of the Court's peculiar institutional workings from its first proceedings under Chief Justice John Jay to the struggle for individual liberties during the successive Warren, Burger and Rehnquist Courts. In characterizing the Court as a bastion of racism, classism and sexism prior to Earl Warren's ascendancy, he often tends to use extended arguments when quick jabs would suffice. But as he delves into the personalities of litigants, justices and senators (who, as far back as 1831, fought fiercely over the confirmations of Supreme Court nominees), Irons proves himself a master of American legal and political history. He is particularly lucid when recounting how Reconstruction reforms, such as the Fourteenth Amendment, that were intended to ensure the liberties of individuals were co-opted by the Gilded Age Court to protect the liberties of business. Irons combines careful research with a populist passion. In doing so, he breathes abundant life into old documents and reminds readers that today's fiercest arguments about rights are the continuation of the endless American conversation. BOMC selection. (Aug.) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

### *From Library Journal*

Irons, professor of political science and director of the Earl Warren Bill of Rights Project at the University of California, San Diego, as well as the author of eight other books on the U.S. Supreme Court, provides an excellent general history of the Court accessible to lay readers. The main theme is the attempts of ordinary citizens to attain their rights (especially of free speech, religious practices, and personal privacy) through appeal to the Court and to change the shape and meaning of our Constitutional system. Irons briefly discusses judicial opinions in major cases throughout history and shows when the Justices chose to apply constitutional principles, often to the detriment of civil rights and to the rights of disadvantaged groups, such

as blacks and women. The book ends with the Casey (1992) decision and the presidential election of 1992. This book will give the general populace better understanding of the Constitution and its history. A Steven Puro, St. Louis Univ.  
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