



Champion of Civil Rights: Judge John Minor Wisdom (Southern Biography Series)

Joel William Friedman

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One of the least publicly recognized heroes of the civil rights movement in the United States, John Minor Wisdom served as a member of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit from 1957 until his death in 1999 and wrote many of the landmark decisions instrumental in desegregating the American South. In this revealing biography, law professor Joel William Friedman explores Judge Wisdom's substantial legal contributions and political work at a critical time in the history of the South.

In 1957, President Eisenhower appointed Wisdom to the Fifth Circuit, which included some of the most deeply segregated southern states: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. In the tumultuous two decades following its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court issued only a few civil rights decisions, preferring instead to affirm Fifth Circuit Court opinions or let them stand without hearing an appeal. Judge Wisdom, therefore, authored many of the decisions that transformed the South and broke down barriers of all kinds for African Americans, including the desegregation of public schools.

In preparing this first full-length biography of Judge Wisdom, Friedman had unrestricted access to Wisdom's voluminous repository of personal and professional papers. In addition, he draws on personal interviews with law clerks who served under Judge Wisdom, resulting in a unique, behind-the-scenes account of some of the nation's most important legal decisions: the admission of the first black student to the University of Mississippi, the initiation of contempt proceedings against Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett, and the destruction of obstacles that had previously kept black Americans from voting. Friedman also explores Wisdom's political life prior to joining the federal bench, including his pivotal role in resurrecting the Louisiana Republican Party and in securing the Republican presidential nomination for Eisenhower.

A compelling account of how a child of privilege from one of America's most socially and racially stratified cities came to serve as the driving force behind the legal effort to end segregation, *Champion of Civil Rights* offers judicial biography at its best.

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