

**William Brennan (1906–1997)**  
**A Life of Justice**  
**By TERRY ELLIS, Contributing Editor**

Imagine a political appointment that spanned eight presidents — from Dwight Eisenhower to George Bush. A time that took America from *Leave It To Beaver* to *Beavis and Butthead*. From segregated schools and bus strikes in the South through the Cuban missile crisis and political battles over abortion, the death penalty and civil rights.

That was the life of retired Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan Jr., who died July 20 at the age of 91. He managed through the most difficult of political and legal controversies to remain a person respected by both sides in an argument — a man who was known as much for his big heart and ability to forge consensus as for his tireless work and penetrating intellect.

During the memorial service at St. Matthew’s Cathedral in Washington, D.C., Supreme Court Justice David Souter pointed out that Brennan left behind a legacy of 1,360 written opinions “on about every subject known to us.”

“We will either have to accept his direction or grapple, year after year, subject after subject of national law,” said Souter, who was appointed to the court by President Bush in 1990 when Brennan’s health was failing. “We will either accept the inheritance of his thinking or we will have to face it squarely and make a good challenge.”

Born on April 25, 1906, in Newark, N.J., Brennan was the son of an Irish Catholic immigrant and labor leader. When President Eisenhower selected him for the Supreme Court in 1956, Brennan already had made a name for himself on the New Jersey Supreme Court as a leading reformer of the state courts and outspoken critic of Sen. Joseph McCarthy’s witch hunt against communists and communist sympathizers.

One of Justice Brennan’s favorite references in legal opinions was to “human dignity.” It reflected his belief that the Constitution exists to protect the rights of individuals. He saw the Constitution as a living body of great principles that adapt to the needs of the time.

“His devotion to the Bill of Rights inspired millions of Americans and countless young law students, including myself,” President Bill Clinton said. “The force of his ideas, the strength of his leadership and his character have safeguarded freedom and widened the circle of equality for every single one of us.”

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