

## The Westside Slugger: Joe Neal's Lifelong Fight for Social Justice

**John L. Smith**

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Joe Neal served thirty-two years in Nevada's state legislature. He was the first African American state senator in the notoriously unequal state's history and emerged as an important voice for civil rights and economic opportunity. Longtime Nevada journalist John L. Smith tells Neal's story in *The Westside Slugger*, focusing on some of the key battles of Neal's memorable legislative career.

Smith uses an effective mix of interviews, news reports, and contemporaneous quotes to track Neal's political rise. The book begins with his early years in segregated Louisiana, where his initial activism included jumping through various hoops to try—in vain—to register to vote. After a stint in the Air Force, Neal moved to “the Mississippi of the West” and began his improbable political career.

Several of the causes Neal championed receive significant coverage, including his fierce but unsuccessful advocacy on behalf of the Equal Rights Amendment and his push for a state holiday honoring Martin Luther King Jr. Smith also discusses Neal's work on bread-and-butter issues, such as better jobs, a fairer state tax system, and a fight to end discrimination.

Neal often found himself at odds with the gambling industry, but he also ran afoul of the Democratic Party and received little help from the party leadership in his 1998 and 2002 runs for governor. Chapters devoted to each of these fights place Neal in his context.

That underdog persona is a clear part of Neal's appeal, and Smith's book portrays him as a man well respected even by his opponents for his consistency and convictions. With a daughter following in his political footsteps, Joe Neal's story isn't yet over, and *The Westside Slugger* does a nice job detailing what's happened so far.

JEFF FLEISCHER (January/February 2019)

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