Robert Ferdinand Wagner Biography

Robert Ferdinand Wagner

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Robert Ferdinand Wagner

Robert Ferdinand Wagner (1877-1953) was probably the most effective legislative leader in the history of the U.S. Senate and one of the principal architects of modern American political liberalism.

Robert F. Wagner was born in Nastätten, Germany, on June 8, 1877, into a staunch Lutheran family, the youngest of nine children. In 1886 the family emigrated to New York City. Robert was unable to speak English when he entered school, but he proved a diligent student. He sold newspapers and worked as a grooery boy to supplement the family's income. He graduated from the City College of New York in 1898, a Phi Beta Kappa. Two years later he graduated from the New York Law School and gained admittance to the state bar.

Attracted to politics, Wagner associated himself with the Democratic Tammany Hall machine. In 1904 he won election to the New York Assembly and 4 years later to the Senate, becoming Democratic floor leader. He helped push through legislation pertaining to workmen's compensation and other social welfare measures.

In 1926, after eight years as a member of the New York Supreme Court, Wagner won election to the U.S. Senate. He was reelected three times. He became chairman of the Senate Banking and Currency Committee in 1931; 2 years later, after the election of Franklin Roosevelt and solid Democratic majorities, Wagner moved to the center of the liberal reform movement. He drafted the crucial National Industrial Recovery Act, and in 1933-1934 he chaired the new National Labor Board. During the remainder of the 1930s Wagner authored and sponsored a long list of far-reaching social legislation. In 1935 his career reached its pinnacle with the passage of the National Labor Relations Act--commonly called the Wagner Act--which committed the Federal government to protecting and encouraging unions.

Wagner was a loyal supporter of Roosevelt's policies. During World War II Wagner's main concern was warbred inflation. In the Employment Act of 1946 he helped bring about Federal responsibility for maintaining a healthy economy, and at his urging Congress significantly expanded social security coverage and benefits.

Wagner gave up his Senate seat in 1949. He died in New York City on May 4, 1953. His son, Robert Wagner, Jr., was mayor of New York City from 1954 to 1965.