Thanks to Dirksen

EVERY WORKING DAY since March 30, the U.S. Senate has "debated" the civil rights bill. No one pretends that the millions of words spoken in the Senate chamber, usually to empty seats, have thrown much new light on the bill or affected many votes. The whole force of this longest filibuster in U.S. history has been to prevent a vote, to nullify the process by which decisions are made in a democracy.

The time is fast approaching for the attempt to stop the filibuster. A vote on cloture, or the closing off of debate, may come next week, and the indications are that it will succeed. The pro-civil rights leaders believe they have the two-thirds majority necessary to force a vote. The Southern bloc of bitter-end foes of the bill concedes this may be the case.

The Southern Democrats turned down a proposed compromise to limit debate that would have made cloture unnecessary. Sen. Richard Russell (D-Ga.) prefers to cast the Southerners in the role of martyrs who may be overcome but will never surrender their principles. This view of principle, however, appears to most Northerners as a distortion that ignores the larger principles of justice and democratic process.

The delay has not been completely barren. While the talkathon was going on to no purpose on the Senate floor, the real work on civil rights was being done behind the scenes. Consequently, what the Senate will finally vote on, assuming that cloture is successful, is a product of a bipartisan effort to reshape and to improve the House version of the civil rights bill.

One man will be primarily responsible for this Herculean effort — Sen. Everett McKinley Dirksen of Illinois. By dint of meticulous study and eloquent persuasion such as only he can muster, the Republican leader has produced a rewritten bill on which most of the Senate can agree. Dirksen believes he can bring enough Republican votes to join with Northern Democratic supporters to win the showdown on cloture and the rights bill itself.

It wasn't long ago that Dirksen was the target of abuse from the more vocal liberals who said he was against civil rights. They were wrong. And now that he has completed his revisions, even such a liberal journal as The New Republic concedes that Dirksen deserves a word of appreciation for improving the bill. Vague language has been clarified; possible pitfalls have been foreseen and skirted.

Until the votes are counted, it won't be certain that Dirksen's work is successful; but it is already clear that without him the civil rights bill would have no chance.