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The Election of Father Robert F. Drinan To the House of Representatives

Philip A. Grant, Jr.

On February 21, 1970 Reverend Robert F. Drinan, S.J. announced his decision to seek the Democratic nomination for the House of Representatives in Massachusetts' Third Congressional District. On that date Father Drinan began an aggressive and highly publicized campaign to oust the veteran incumbent, Congressman Philip J. Philbin, in the September 15 Democratic primary. Father Drinan, forty-nine years of age and a graduate of Boston College, had entered the Society of Jesus in 1942. Prior to his ordination to the priesthood in 1953, he had received his law degree from Georgetown University. At the time he launched his congressional campaign, Drinan was in the midst of his fourteenth year as Dean of the School of Law at Boston College. In addition to his activities as a member of a religious order and his administrative duties, he had written three books, published extensively both in popular and scholarly journals, and delivered lectures throughout the nation on civil rights and social justice.¹

Seventy-two year old Congressman Philbin was a Catholic and an alumnus of Harvard College and Columbia Law School. Serving the final year of his fourteenth term in the House of Representatives, Philbin in 1970 was outranked in seniority by only fourteen of his 434 colleagues. Since his initial election in 1942, Philbin had repeatedly been elected by wide margins. Indeed Philbin was a typical New Deal Democrat, who over more than a quarter of a century had loyally supported the domestic policies of Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson.²

Historically the Third Congressional District had consisted of the northern and western portions of Worcester County and a few scattered communities within the counties immediately to the east and west. The district was overwhelmingly Democratic in terms of voter registration and heavily Catholic in religious affiliation. The most populous communities had been the cities of Fitchburg, Gardner, and Leominster and the towns of Clinton, Webster, and Southbridge. Since these six communities were largely industrial in orientation, organized labor for many years had been a major factor in the district's political life.³

After the Census of 1960, Massachusetts lost two of its fourteen congressional seats. When the Legislature undertook the task of reapportioning, the

boundaries of the Third District were drastically revised. In 1962 Philbin lost two of the largest towns in the western half of the district and acquired thirteen new communities in Norfolk County and Middlesex County to the east. Following the celebrated Supreme Court reapportionment decisions of the early 1960s, the Legislature approved an altered redistricting plan. According to the new plan, twenty-six Worcester County communities were detached from the Third District and six suburbs to the west of Boston were added.⁴

For two decades Philbin had been a member of the powerful House Committee on Armed Services and in 1965 had become the ranking Democrat on that panel. Although consistently liberal on domestic measures, he routinely voted for every Defense Authorization Bill and every Defense Appropriation Bill requested by President Johnson. Philbin seldom spoke on the floor of the House and was conspicuously silent on the issue of the Vietnam War. By 1968 many of his constituents felt that he should be less subservient to the dominant southern majority on the Armed Services Committee and more attuned to those citizens questioning the wisdom of continued American involvement in Southeast Asia.⁵

In the late winter and early spring of 1968 the American people were preoccupied, if not obsessed, with the Vietnam War, and President Johnson was being challenged for renomination by an uncompromising anti-war spokesman, Senator Eugene J. McCarthy of Minnesota. On April 30 McCarthy easily won the Democratic presidential primary in Massachusetts, carrying all twelve congressional districts. McCarthy's smashing victory in Massachusetts encouraged the critics of the Vietnam War, who a few weeks earlier had been elated by President Johnson's surprising and dramatic withdrawal from the presidential race. At the tumultuous 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, the Massachusetts delegation cast seventy of its seventy-two votes for Senator McCarthy and balloted 56-16 in favor of a minority plank denouncing the Johnson Administration's escalation of the Vietnam War.⁶

In September 1968 Philbin faced the first meaningful challenge of his twenty-six year political career. In that month he attracted three primary opponents, each of whom was unalterably opposed to the continuation of the Vietnam conflict. His opponents were State Representative Joseph G. Bradley, Massachusetts Historical Society President Thomas B. Adams, and novelist Joseph C. Dever. Although none of Philbin's primary opponents was especially well-known, collectively they received a majority of the Democratic primary votes on September 17. The final results were as follows:⁷

Philbin	17,139	(49.1%)
Bradley	11,836	(33.7%)
Adams	4,664	(13.3%)
Dever	1,377	(3.8%)

In the 1968 general election Philbin's opponents were State Representative Chandler H. Stevens, an Independent, and former Republican Congressman Laurence Curtis, who previously had represented a neighboring district. While Philbin was virtually certain to win re-election, there was considerable doubt

whether he would gain an absolute majority of the ballots cast. The election result was quite similar to the primary outcome. Philbin, although victorious, ran 33,340 votes behind the Democratic presidential candidate and recorded 35,077 fewer votes than in 1966. The official figures were:⁸

Philbin	92,587	(47.6%)
Stevens	53,947	(27.2%)
Curtis	48,860	(25.2%)

Realizing that Philbin had been both renominated and re-elected in 1968 with a minority of the popular vote, a group of activist liberal Democrats in the Third District prepared to unite behind a single anti-war candidate in 1970. Seeking the formal support of these anti-war Democrats were Father Drinan and John F. Kerry, a recently discharged Vietnam veteran who later would be Lieutenant-Governor of Massachusetts and a United States Senator. At a caucus of independent Democrats, held at Concord-Carlisle High School on February 21, Drinan commanded the support of nearly two thirds of the 852 participants. Sensing that Drinan would win the endorsement of the caucus, Kerry graciously withdrew from the contest and moved that Drinan be chosen by acclamation.⁹

During the spring of 1970 it was widely assumed that Philbin would sweep the Worcester County portion of the Third District and that Drinan would easily carry most of the suburban communities in the Middlesex County part of the district. A slight complication developed when State Representative Charles Ohanian also announced his candidacy for Congress. Ohanian, a moderate Democrat from Watertown, portrayed himself as a reasonable alternative to the extremes of Philbin and Drinan. Since Ohanian was popular in Watertown, it was anticipated that he might draw two or three thousand votes from Drinan. There was a consensus that Ohanian would attract at least fifteen percent of the total primary vote.

Throughout the primary campaign Congressman Philbin constantly asserted that he was a mainstream Democrat, reminding his constituents that he had steadfastly supported Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson. He also stressed the value of his considerable seniority on Capitol Hill and his close personal friendship with Speaker of the House, John W. McCormack. Since Philbin's voting record was perfect by the standards of the AFL-CIO, he frequently appeared in the district's industrial centers and reiterated his longstanding support of the objectives of the labor movement. Although awkward as a public speaker, Philbin was an unusually good-natured man and he had always been accessible to the people of his district. He hoped that the citizens of the Third District would remember his many years as a congressman and his sincere concern for their problems. Philbin chose to ignore the issue of Vietnam, although he occasionally suggested that Father Drinan and some of his followers espoused radical ideas.¹⁰

Unlike Philbin, Father Drinan was an energetic campaigner and a superb orator. From the outset, Drinan deliberately attempted to make the primary a referendum on the Vietnam War. Early in the campaign, he castigated President

Richard M. Nixon and Vice-President Spiro T. Agnew, and his attacks on the Nixon administration's foreign policy became even more strident after the Cambodian incursion. Drinan characterized Philbin as a docile member of the Armed Services Committee, who had never raised a single objection to the fateful decisions of the Johnson and Nixon Administrations in Southeast Asia. Drinan also identified himself with the Shea Bill, an anti-Vietnam measure passed by the Massachusetts Legislature in April of 1970. While definitely concentrating on international affairs, Drinan also emphasized his background in the legal profession and he assailed Nixon and Attorney-General John M. Mitchell for having proposed Clement W. Haynsworth and G. Harold Carswell to fill vacancies on the United States Supreme Court. Based on his commitment to liberal causes, Drinan received the formal endorsements of the Americans for Democratic Action, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, and the National Committee for an Effective Congress.¹¹

The Democratic primary was held on September 15. The early returns indicated that Drinan was maintaining a small but steady lead over Philbin. By midnight Philbin was trailing by approximately five thousand votes, a margin which proved to be insurmountable. The official tabulation was as follows:¹²

Drinan	28,605	(46.9%)
Philbin	22,133	(35.6%)
Ohanian	11,434	(18.4%)

Based on the Third District's past voting patterns, Drinan was regarded as the likely winner in the general election. His Republican opponent was State Representative John A. S. McGlennon of Concord. McGlennon initially tried to cultivate the support of thousands of the registered Democrats who had habitually voted for Philbin. Both Drinan and McGlennon were somewhat surprised when Philbin on October 7 announced that he would be a write-in candidate for re-election.¹³

While Drinan continued to condemn the Vietnam War, he also devoted a great deal of attention to economic issues during the six week general election campaign. McGlennon, implicitly embracing the Nixon Administration's foreign policy, branded Drinan's demand for an immediate withdrawal from Vietnam as irresponsible. Philbin, having no realistic chance of victory, ostensibly entered the race to weaken Drinan. The question was whether Philbin's belated independent candidacy would be more harmful to Drinan than to McGlennon.¹⁴

As in the September primary, Father Drinan assumed an early lead on election night. It was soon apparent that Drinan was winning handily in the most densely populated cities and towns in the Middlesex portion of the district. Within three hours after the polls had closed Drinan was assured of a narrow victory over Representative McGlennon. The precise numbers were:¹⁵

Drinan	63,942	(37.8%)
McGlennon	60,575	(35.6%)
Philbin	45,378	(26.6%)

Drinan's victory was accomplished by accumulating more than fifty thousand votes in the Middlesex County section of the district. The Middlesex results were as follows:

Drinan	50,494	(43.5%)
McGlennon	44,070	(38.3%)
Philbin	21,181	(18.2%)

Within Middlesex County itself, Drinan outpolled McGlennon in the three most populous communities, Newton, Waltham, and Watertown. The figures from these three communities, containing forty percent of the Third District's inhabitants and located on its eastern edge, were:

	Drinan	McGlennon	Philbin
Newton	19,587	13,129	2,415
Waltham	8,032	6,378	2,229
Watertown	<u>7,964</u>	<u>4,712</u>	<u>2,806</u>
	35,583	24,219	7,450

A review of the statistics for both the primary and the general election warranted the conclusion that Drinan was harmed by the candidacies of Ohanian in September and Philbin in November. It seemed highly probable that Drinan would have won the primary by a more substantial margin in a two-man contest with Philbin and prevailed in the general election by several thousand additional votes in a two-man race with McGlennon. In the September primary, Ohanian polled 4,091 votes in his home community of Watertown and 2,179 and 1,715 in Newton and Watertown respectively. Indeed Ohanian's 7,985 votes from these three adjacent communities amounted to 69.5 percent of his total ballots throughout the district. Philbin was especially weak in Newton, Waltham, and Watertown; it might be safely assumed that the vast majority of Ohanian's votes would have been cast for Drinan in a two-man primary. The impact of Ohanian's presence in the primary was particularly evident in Watertown, where Drinan's proportion of the vote escalated from 38.6 percent in September to 51.4 percent in November.

Although Philbin was obviously handicapped both by his humiliating primary loss and the logistical difficulties in waging a write-in campaign, he actually carried the Worcester County portion of the Third District. Under ordinary circumstances, the Democratic congressional nominee would have easily prevailed in the Worcester communities, suggesting that Philbin drew as many as twenty thousand votes from Drinan. The election statistics were quite noteworthy in the industrial communities of Fitchburg, Leominster, Gardner, and Clinton. These results were as follows:

	Drinan	McGlennon	Philbin
Fitchburg	4,964	4,532	5,636
Leominster	2,578	3,225	5,991
Gardner	2,820	1,922	2,398
Clinton	243	446	4,698
	<u>10,605</u>	<u>10,145</u>	<u>18,723</u>

These four communities were heavily Democratic, but chose to cast more than eighteen thousand votes for a veteran congressman. Seeking re-election to the United States Senate in 1970 was Democrat Edward M. Kennedy. Kennedy overwhelmed his Republican challenger, Josiah Spaulding, in Fitchburg, Leominster, Gardner, and Clinton. The figures were:

	Kennedy	Spaulding
Fitchburg	11,228	3,980
Leominster	8,344	3,485
Gardner	5,276	1,963
Clinton	<u>3,532</u>	<u>1,626</u>
	28,380	11,054

The mere fact that Senator Kennedy ran 17,775 votes and nearly forty-five percentage points ahead of Drinan constituted rather convincing evidence that Philbin's write-in candidacy harmed Drinan substantially in these four key communities.¹⁶

Although Father Drinan's primary triumph over Congressman Philbin attracted considerable attention, it was certainly not an isolated development. In the 1970 primaries throughout the nation several elderly Democratic congressmen were defeated for renomination by younger challengers. In each case, the victorious Democrat was a vocal critic of the Vietnam War.

Congressman Philbin had served his district well during his twenty-eight year tenure on Capitol Hill. To a large extent his political fate was determined by the changing complexion of the Third District. Between 1962 and 1970 Philbin had gained roughly two hundred thousand new constituents, and his district had become primarily suburban in character. Unopposed for re-election in 1964, Philbin had polled 177,817 votes in that year. His total of the district's ballots had declined precipitously to 126,864 in 1966 and to 92,587 in 1968. As a senior member of the Armed Services Committee, he had acquiesced in an increasingly unpopular military venture in Southeast Asia. Philbin was ultimately to be vanquished by a challenger who was more sensitive to the priorities of the 1970s and who was firmly committed to the proposition that the Vietnam War was a disaster for the nation.

Father Drinan was the first Catholic priest ever elected to Congress. Re-elected to four additional terms in the House of Representatives, Drinan in each subsequent campaign was renominated without primary opposition and emerged victorious in general elections by margins ranging from 8,686 to 111,363. Drinan was to be the first member of Congress to endorse the presidential candidacy of

Senator George S. McGovern and was to serve on the Judiciary Committee throughout the deliberations over the impeachment of President Nixon. Drinan was highly intelligent, extremely idealistic, and one of the country's most eloquent spokesmen in opposition to the Vietnam conflict. Father Drinan was a representative of the scores of issue-oriented liberal Democrats who entered Congress in the late 1960s and early 1970s and he was a public servant who articulated the views of millions of Americans who had become disenchanted with the thrust of the nation's foreign policy.

NOTES

1. Drinan's academic background was as follows: A.B., M.A., Boston College; LL.B., LL.M., Georgetown University. He was Associate Dean of Boston College Law School, 1955-1956, and Chairman for the Advisory Committee for Massachusetts of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1962-1970. Drinan's books were *Religion, the Courts, and Public Policy* (1963), *Democracy, Dissent, and Disorder; The Issues and the Law* (1969), and *Vietnam and Armageddon; Peace, War, and the Christian Conscience* (1970).
2. United States Congress, *Congressional Directory, 1970* (Washington, 1970), pp. 238-250; Lawrence F. Kennedy (comp.), *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1971* (Washington, 1971), p. 1539; *Guide to U. S. Elections* (Washington, 1975), pp. 797, 802, 807, 812, 817, 822, 827, 832, 837, 842, 847, 852, 857, 862, 867.
3. The Third District had produced such prominent Democrats as David I. Walsh, Joseph Casey, and Joseph D. Ward. Walsh served twenty-six years in the United States Senate, during the latter portion of which he was Chairman of the Naval Affairs Committee. Casey, Philbin's predecessor in the House, was the Democratic nominee for the United States Senate in 1942. Ward was Massachusetts' Secretary of State and the Democratic candidate for Governor in 1960.
4. Because of the legislative redistricting bills, the population of the Third District increased from 318,447 to 431,956 (35.6%) between 1960 and 1968.
5. The Armed Services Committee was chaired by Carl Vinson of Georgia (1949-1953 and 1955-1965) and L. Mendel Rivers of South Carolina (1965-1970). Among the other southerners on the committee were F. Edward Hebert of Louisiana, O. C. Fisher of Texas, Charles E. Bennett of Florida, and Alton Lennon of North Carolina.

6. *Source Book of American Presidential Campaign and Election Statistics, 1948-1968* (New York, 1971), pp. 20, 98, 193; David S. Broder, "Election of 1968," *History of American Presidential Elections, 1789-1968* (4 vols. New York, 1971), IV, 3705-3752.
7. *America Votes, 1968* (Washington, 1970), p. 181; *New York Times*, September 18, 1968, p. 22.
8. *America Votes, 1968*, p. 179.
9. *Boston Herald-Traveler*, February 22, 1970, p. 35; February 23, 1970, p. 7; *New York Times*, February 23, 1970, p. 18.
10. *Congressional Quarterly*, September 4, 1970, p. 2188; *Wall Street Journal*, September 8, 1970, pp. 1, 20.
11. *Boston Herald-Traveler*, September 13, 1970, p. 8; September 14, 1970, p. 7; September 15, 1970, p. 11; *Washington Post*, September 15, 1970, p. A-9; William Kennedy, "Father Runs For Congress," *Look*, September 22, 1970, pp. 18-22.
12. *America Votes, 1970* (Washington, 1972), p. 155; *Congressional Quarterly*, September 18, 1970, pp. 2263-2264; *New York Times*, September 16, 1970, p. 24; September 17, 1970, p. 34; *Washington Post*, September 16, 1970, p. A-5; September 17, 1970, pp. A-1, A-7, A-8; *Time*, September 28, 1970, p. 12; *Newsweek*, September 28, 1970, p. 27.
13. *Boston Herald-Traveler*, October 8, 1970, pp. 1, 8; October 9, 1970, p. 13.
14. *Congressional Quarterly*, October 2, 1970, p. 2365; *Boston Herald-Traveler*, September 17, 1970, pp. 1, 3; October 2, 1970, p. 16; October 4, 1970, p. 10; October 14, 1970, p. 9; October 16, 1970, p. 52; October 25, 1970, p. 5; October 28, 1970, p. 22; October 30, 1970, p. 3; October 31, 1970, p. 5.
15. Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *Manual of the General Court, 1971-1972* (Boston, 1972), p. 357; *Congressional Quarterly*, November 6, 1970, p. 2751; *Boston Herald-Traveler*, November 4, 1970, pp. 1, 25; November 5, 1970, pp. 1, 6; *New York Times*, November 4, 1970, p. 23; November 5, 1970, pp. 40, 43; *Washington Post*, November 5, 1970, pp. A-1, A-12.
16. An analysis of the statistics in Drinan's future campaigns confirmed that Philbin's write-in candidacy was a meaningful factor in the major Worcester County communities. After the 1972 reapportionment, Clinton was detached from the Third District. Fitchburg, Gardner, and Leominster, however, reverted to their traditional Democratic voting habits and provided consistent support for Drinan.