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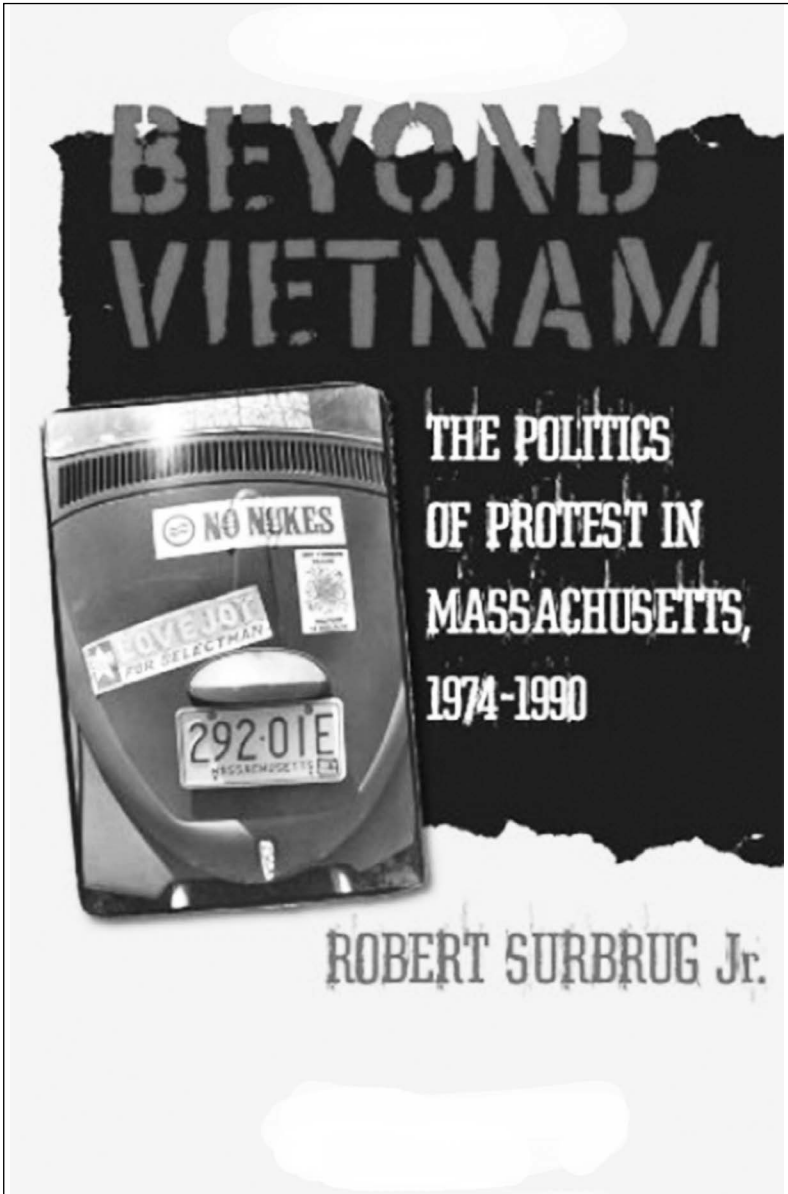
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**EDITOR'S CHOICE**

**Protest Politics:  
Liberal Activism in Massachusetts,  
1974–1990**

ROBERT SURBRUG JR.



**Editor's Introduction:** *Many histories of the activist movements of the Vietnam War era conclude with the killings at Kent State and depict the 1970s as an era of exhaustion and the 1980s as one of triumphant conservatism. In *Beyond Vietnam, The Politics of Protest in Massachusetts, 1974–1990*, Robert Surbrug Jr. challenges these interpretations by focusing on post-Vietnam era activist movements and their intersection with political liberalism. His examination of the anti-nuclear energy (“No Nukes!”) movement, the nuclear weapons Freeze movement and the Central American Solidarity movement reveal far greater continuity between the activist 1960s and subsequent decades than previously supposed. Surbrug reveals the pivotal activist role Massachusetts residents played in these decades, as well as all the movements’ influence on major Massachusetts liberals such as Governor Michael Dukakis, Senators Edward Kennedy and John Kerry, Speaker of the House Tip*

*O'Neill and Congressmen Edward Markey, Edward Boland, and Gerry Studds, as well as moderate Republican Congressman Silvio Conte. What emerges is a new understanding of activism and liberalism in the 1970s and 1980s, and the major role Massachusetts politicians played on the national stage in contesting the rising tide of the Right.*

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## **MASSACHUSETTS: CRADLE OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION**

As the Watergate scandal unraveled Richard M. Nixon's presidency in 1973 and 1974, a bumper sticker that read, "Don't Blame Me, I'm From Massachusetts," began to appear on vehicles in the state. Implicit in this reminder that Massachusetts had been the only state to vote for George McGovern in 1972 was a reproof of the rest of the country for having taken the wrong fork in the road. The sense that the United States was straying from the right path seems deeply ingrained in Massachusetts's politics in the decades after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The idea that Kennedy's death interrupted the promise of a national trajectory toward a brighter future (ushering in the disastrous detour into the Vietnam War led by Johnson) remains a powerful idea in the national psyche—and that of Massachusetts in particular. The myth of aborted promise, of the road not taken, continued to give post-1960s Massachusetts liberalism a sense of legitimacy as the executor of the legacy of Kennedy and the unfulfilled hopes and ideals of the 1960s.

Massachusetts liberals frequently invoked Kennedy's name in support of policies far to the left of anything embraced by the president while he was alive. None laid claim to being the heir of the martyred president's legacy more than his younger brother Edward, the senator from Massachusetts, who for the nation as a whole became the embodiment of Massachusetts liberalism. Many other Massachusetts liberals invoked the legacy of the late president, from Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill (who rose to be Speaker of the

House in 1976) to three-term governor Michael Dukakis (who frequently sought to associate himself with the Kennedy administration during his own ill-fated presidential campaign) to John Forbes Kerry (a Vietnam veteran turned lieutenant governor turned senator who sought to strike a Kennedyesque pose throughout his career). As the political center drifted to the Right in the wake of the 1960s, Massachusetts liberals associated themselves with nostalgia for “Camelot” to put themselves forward as the trustees of the unfinished journey of John F. Kennedy.

The post-1960s liberalism of Massachusetts politicians may have sought legitimacy by association with John Kennedy; however, in many ways during the post-Vietnam era it was the radical activism of the 1960s that most shaped Massachusetts liberalism. The civil rights and antiwar movements were especially strong in Massachusetts. Massachusetts colleges and churches, powerful incubators for the civil rights movement, produced a disproportionate share of northern civil rights activists who headed south as the “new abolitionists” in SNCC and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Although the campus-based wing of the New Left and antiwar movements had their origins in the Midwest (the “Third Coast”) and in the San Francisco Bay area, by the late 1960s Massachusetts had become a stronghold of the Movement. Counted among the largest demonstrations in the nation were the 1967 draft card burning in Boston, and the October 15, 1969, moratorium against the war in Vietnam (which attracted more than 250,000 participants) that took place in the Boston Commons. By 1970, the inroads of the New Left into mainstream liberalism were highlighted in Massachusetts when the state legislature became the first in the nation to pass a resolution calling for the immediate withdrawal of United States military forces from Vietnam.

Massachusetts radicalism had grown from the same baby boom, prosperity, and cold war dynamics that produced the youth rebellion nationwide, but the roots of radical activism in the state could be traced well beyond John Kennedy to the revolutionary heritage of the commonwealth—from the Boston Massacre of 1770, the Tea Party of 1773, the tttDaniel Shays Rebellion in 1786, the abolitionist movement and utopian politics of the nineteenth century, and the campaign to save Sacco and Vanzetti in the 1920s all the way up to the modern civil rights and peace movements. A close examination of Bay State activism in the 1960s and beyond reveals the degree to which Massachusetts radicals sought to lay claim to the revolutionary heritage of the nation.

In 1974, when the antinuclear energy activist Sam Lovejoy toppled a weather tower in Montague, Massachusetts, to protest the planned

construction of a nuclear power station there, he chose February 22, George Washington's birthday, as the date of action. When Randy Kehler, Judith Scheckel, and other Massachusetts activists launched the nuclear weapons freeze movement in 1980, they repeatedly invoked the legacy of nineteenth-century abolitionists, proclaiming that just as their predecessors had abolished slavery, they would abolish nuclear weapons. In the 1980s, moreover, Massachusetts Central American solidarity activists repeatedly compared Central American revolutionaries to the (North) American revolutionaries of 1776. Massachusetts radicals were not alone in laying claim to symbols of America's revolutionary past, but such rhetoric was inextricably woven into the discourse of Bay State activists and seemed to give them a unique sense of historical continuity and legitimacy.<sup>1</sup>

Although Massachusetts was not the only state with a special sense of identity, it played a disproportionately influential role in the national politics of the 1970s and 1980s. It was the birthplace of two of the major post-Vietnam War activist movements to sweep the United States. The first, the direct action campaign against nuclear power, began in Western Massachusetts in 1974, when the antiwar activist Sam Lovejoy committed a dramatic act of sabotage by toppling the weather tower of a proposed nuclear plant. This action sparked a mass movement against nuclear energy, which spread throughout New England in the span of a few years and culminated in the mass protests in Seabrook, New Hampshire in 1977 and 1978. By the late 1970s, Massachusetts was exporting activists such as Sam Lovejoy, Anna Gyorgy, and Harvey Wasserman to the rest of the country to help mobilize a national movement. In 1980, Western Massachusetts peace activists took the idea of a nuclear weapons freeze and put it on the ballot in three Western Massachusetts counties as a nonbinding referendum.

Massachusetts freeze activists became apostles of the new movement throughout the United States. Within two years, the freeze movement had swept the United States to become the largest peace movement of the post-Vietnam War era. The third major post-Vietnam War activist movement to sweep the United States was the opposition to U.S. intervention in Central America. Although this movement had originated on the West Coast, the Bay State quickly became one of its strongholds. The first Witness for Peace mission to the Nicaraguan-Honduran border in 1983 included a disproportionate number of Massachusetts activists. During the massive civil disobedience swept the country in 1985 to protest the Reagan administration embargo against Nicaragua, the single largest number of arrests (more than 500) occurred in Boston.<sup>2</sup>

The pioneering role of grassroots radicalism in Massachusetts percolated up (as the national freeze movement activist Randall Forsberg has described it) to shape the mainstream politics of the Commonwealth, mirrored in the profound influence of state politicians on national politics in the 1970s and 1980s. Foremost among the Democratic heavyweights from Massachusetts was Senator Edward (“Ted”) Kennedy. Unlike his brothers, John and Robert, Ted did not see the Senate as a stepping-stone to the White House. Ranking among such masters of the Senate as Lyndon Johnson and Daniel Webster, Ted has deftly used his power in the Senate to advance the liberal agenda. In Massachusetts, Kennedy was able to straddle the blue-collar, union, ethnic, “Old” Democratic Party of the New Deal and the activist, college educated, middle class “New” Democratic Party.<sup>3</sup> Kennedy became an early critic of nuclear power; in the 1980s he drafted a Senate freeze resolution and coauthored a book with maverick Republican senator Mark Hatfield of Oregon: *Freeze: Or How You Can Help Prevent Nuclear War*.<sup>4</sup> One Massachusetts antinuclear activist commented about Kennedy, “He has defined what is legitimate. His presence did not allow anyone to move the political center to the right ... I think the stability and direction he has provided has given an umbrella under which a lot of things could be done [on the Left].”<sup>5</sup>

Another titan of Massachusetts politics, Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill, magnified the influence of Massachusetts liberalism. His Cambridge district embraced both the activist elements of academia and the old ethnic neighborhoods of the city. Like Ted Kennedy, Tip O’Neill, who moved rapidly from whip to Majority leader to Speaker of the House in the 1970s, was a master parliamentarian who bridged the gap between New Deal Democrats and the younger generation of “New Democrats” who grew out of the activist politics of the 1960s. O’Neill helped set the agenda in the House, and in the 1980s the burly Irish American became for many Americans the personification of liberal opposition to Reagan. O’Neill’s position in the House ensured the influence of Massachusetts liberals in the national debate on the nuclear weapons freeze and U.S. policy in Central America.<sup>6</sup>

The influence of young Bay State firebrands complemented Massachusetts powerhouses such as Kennedy and O’Neill. In the early 1980s, Congressman Gerry Studds, from the district that encompassed Cape Cod, became synonymous with outspoken opposition to Reagan administration policies in Central America. His 1980 “Studds Report” was influential in its delineation of a left-liberal Congressional position on Central America. By mid-decade, newly elected Senator John Kerry, a Vietnam Veteran and former antiwar activist—who had traveled to Nicaragua on a peace mission in 1985 and

later in the decade conducted a series of hearings into drug smuggling by the United States supported Contras—had taken up the mantle of opposition to Reagan's Central American policies.<sup>7</sup> Another of the Young Turks from Massachusetts was Congressman Edward Markey, who represented a mixed blue collar and professional district north of Boston. In the late 1970s, Markey developed a reputation as an ardent opponent of nuclear power and was the only member of Congress invited to speak at a mass rally against nuclear power in New York City in 1979. In the 1980s, Markey spearheaded the congressional campaign to pass a nuclear weapons freeze resolution, making the same name for himself in the nuclear freeze movement that Gary Studds had made for himself in the Central American solidarity movement.

The influence of Massachusetts Young Turks such as Markey and Studds and party stalwarts like Kennedy and O'Neill, was further enhanced by the influence of lower-profile veteran politicians like Senator Paul Tsongas and Congressman Edward Boland from Western Massachusetts. Both enjoyed national reputations for integrity that helped cement Massachusetts influence in Congress. As chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Boland lent a great deal of legitimacy to efforts to contain the more adventurist policies of the Reagan administration with respect to Central America. In 1983 and 1984, Congress passed a series of Boland amendments designed to end covert U.S. support for the right-wing Contras, who were trying to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. It was the illegal efforts of the Reagan administration to circumvent the Boland amendment that led to the worst scandal of the Reagan years: The covert arms for hostages deals made by the administration exploded into the Iran-Contra Affair.

Finally, the lone Massachusetts Republican in Congress, the moderate Silvio Conte from the western part of the state, greatly augmented the influence of the Massachusetts delegation. Elected to Congress in the 1950s, Conte had a reputation for independence. In 1968 he was one of the first members of Congress from Massachusetts to speak out against the Vietnam War. His good nature and earthy sense of humor made him a popular member of Congress with influence in both parties. By the 1980s, Conte represented one of the most activist districts in the nation, Western Massachusetts, which had been a pioneer of both the movement against nuclear energy and the freeze movement and a stronghold of Central American solidarity activism. Conte thus became an advocate of the nuclear weapons freeze and a defender of human rights in Central America, lending a bipartisan imprimatur to the work of the state delegation on these issues.

By the early 1980s, the Massachusetts delegation had become the congressional flagship in the fight for a nuclear weapons freeze and the fight



to oppose U.S. intervention in Central America. Whereas other states, such as New York and California, boasted immensely influential liberal members of Congress, no state, liberal or conservative, boasted as unified a delegation as the eleven Democrats and one moderate Republican who constituted the delegation of Massachusetts. Through the united and unusually effective unit, Bay State activists held a special influence over mainstream national politics. That influence was often felt first at the state level. In the 1980s, Massachusetts freeze, antinuclear, and Central American solidarity protesters were particularly active in state politics, which they viewed as the springboard to national influence.

Massachusetts activists had a strong impact on Governor Dukakis, especially during his two terms in the 1980s. More a good government progressive than a New Deal liberal or post-1960s “McGovern” Democrat, Dukakis nevertheless embraced causes dear to the activist left. In 1977 Dukakis was the only New England governor to refuse the New Hampshire authorities request to send state police to assist in the arrest of the 1,414 protestors who occupied the Seabrook nuclear power plant site. By refusing to submit a federally mandated evacuation plan for Massachusetts communities falling within the ten-mile “Emergency Planning Zone” (EPZ), Dukakis delayed the Seabrook nuclear power station from going online. He also refused to participate in “Crisis Relocation Planning” (CRP), a civil defense measure pushed by the Reagan administration as part of its efforts to prepare the nation for possible nuclear war. An early advocate of a nuclear weapons freeze effort, Dukakis commissioned a state group to study the impact of the arms race on Massachusetts and to find ways for the commonwealth to promote disarmament. In 1985 Dukakis became one of the first governors to refuse to allow the state National Guard to participate in military exercises in Central America. He later joined other governors in fighting the Honduras exercises in federal court.

During his 1988 campaign, the Republican candidate, George H. W. Bush, sought to make the election a national referendum on Massachusetts liberalism by tying Dukakis to his past support for activist causes. By 1988, the two issues that helped breathe so much life into the left in the early 1980s—war in Central America and the nuclear arms race—had faded from the national radar screen. The Bush campaign worked to distance the Republican candidate from the unpopular Central American policies of the Reagan administration, and the Reagan administration pursued serious negotiations on nuclear weapons with President Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union. The ugly but effective campaign to tar Dukakis as an unpatriotic member of the American Civil Liberties Union who furloughed

convicted black rapists and allowed school children to refrain from reciting the Pledge of Allegiance set the stage for a resounding defeat.

To many, the 1988 Dukakis presidential campaign was a swan song for post-1960s Massachusetts liberalism, which paved the way for the emergence of centrist southern Democrat Bill Clinton.<sup>8</sup> Although some Massachusetts politicians indeed moderated in the 1990s, the state nevertheless continued to play a disproportionate role in national affairs, through John Kerry's 2004 bid for the presidency and beyond. As the first decade of the 21st century marched on, Massachusetts would remain a stronghold for activism on the left.

HJM

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## Notes

1. For a discussion of Americanism on the left and right, see Gary Gerstle, *Working Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914–1960* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
2. *Boston Globe*, June 13 and 14, 1985.
3. Burton Hersh, *The Shadow President: Ted Kennedy in Opposition* (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 1997). For Kennedy's early years, see Burton Hersh, *The Education of Edward Kennedy: A Family Biography* (New York: Morrow, 1972).
4. Edward M. Kennedy and Mark O. Hatfield, *Freeze! How You Can Help Prevent Nuclear War* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982).
5. Interview with Vincent O'Connor, April 3, 2003.
6. John A. Farrell, *Tip O'Neill and the Democratic Century* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 2001).
7. Gerald Nicosia, *Home to War: A History of the Vietnam Veterans Movement* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001). See also Michael Kranis, Brian C. Mooney, and Nina J. Easton, *John F. Kerry: The Complete Biography by the Boston Globe Reporters Who Know Him Best* (New York, Public Affairs, 2004) and Douglass Brinkley, *Tour of Duty: John Kerry and the Vietnam War* (New York: William Morrow, 2004).

8. Charles Kenney and Robert L. Turner, *Dukakis: An American Odyssey* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1988); Richard Gaines and Michael Segal, *Dukakis and the Reform Impulse* (Boston: Quinlan Press, 1987).