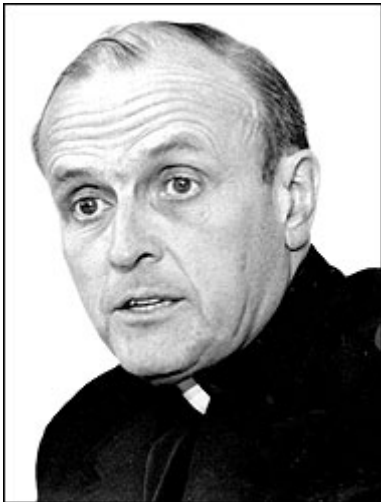


Congressman-priest Drinan dies

Mass. Jesuit, 86, served five terms in House



(1971 Globe file photo)

By Mark Feeney, Globe Staff | January 29, 2007

The Rev. Robert F. Drinan, who left Boston College's administration to become the first Roman Catholic priest elected to Congress and who in 1973 filed the initial impeachment resolution against President Richard M. Nixon, died yesterday at Sibley Memorial Hospital in Washington, D.C. He was 86.

The cause of death was pneumonia and congestive heart failure, said a spokeswoman for Georgetown University, where Father Drinan taught legal ethics and other subjects to more than 6,000 students during the past 26 years.

"Father Drinan was a forever gentle, resilient, tenacious advocate for social justice and fundamental decency," said Senator John F. Kerry, who was Father Drinan's campaign manager in 1970. "He lived out in public life the whole cloth of Catholic teachings. In the most divisive days of Vietnam when things were coming apart, this incredible man and most unlikely of candidates showed America how a man of faith could be a man of peace."

A five-term member of the House of Representatives, Father Drinan was one of its most liberal members. His strong anti administration stands earned him a place on the Nixon "enemies list." His upset victory over US Representative Philip J. Philbin, a 14-term incumbent who was vice chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, in the 1970

Democratic primary in Massachusetts Third Congressional District was a high-water mark in the New Politics, which brought the antiwar movement to the ballot box.

Father Drinan's election was also a landmark in US church-state relations.

A Catholic priest, the Rev. Gabriel Richard, had served in Congress in 1822 as a nonvoting delegate from Michigan Territory, but he had been appointed. And many Protestant clerics had served as US representatives. Yet the sight of Father Drinan in the halls of Congress in his Roman collar was startling. Some even questioned the propriety of his wearing a cleric's collar and black suit on the floor of the House. Father Drinan had a standard response. "It's the only suit I own," he'd quip.

Before entering politics, the Jesuit priest had long served as dean at Boston College Law School.

Supporters saw his entering Congress as a logical union of his legal and spiritual vocations. "Our father, who art in Congress" became a popular, if unofficial, campaign slogan.

Yet many of Father Drinan's most vehement detractors were Catholics who opposed him politically because they saw his electoral career as detracting from his priestly calling. He further angered some Catholics with his show of independence from the church, supporting federal funding of abortions and opposing constitutional amendments that would have banned abortion and allowed prayer in public schools.

In 1980, Pope John Paul II ordered Father Drinan to either forgo re election or leave the priesthood. With "regret and pain," Father Drinan announced he would not seek re election.

"It is just unthinkable," he said of the idea of renouncing the priesthood to stay in office. "I am proud and honored to be a priest and a Jesuit. As a person of faith, I must believe that there is work for me to do which somehow will be more important than the work I am required to leave."

Father Drinan's unexpected announcement set off a scramble among prospective successors. The winner was US Representative Barney Frank, then a state representative from Beacon Hill.

In announcing that he would not run again, Father Drinan described himself as "a moral architect." It was an apt description of his political career. His election in 1970 was as much crusade as campaign, charged with a moral fervor that would characterize his entire political career. Father Drinan's critics called him 'the mad monk.' In the context of those highly charged times, it could as easily be considered praise.

"He envisions political power as a moral power," Ralph Nader, the consumer advocate, once said. More advocate than legislator, Father Drinan was an outsider on Capitol Hill.

("You have collegiality much more in the church than you do in Congress," he said in a 1974 Globe interview.) A wag likened his membership on the House Internal Security Committee, the successor to the House Committee on Un-American Activities, which Father Drinan wanted to dissolve, to "an atheist belonging to the World Council of Churches."

As a member of the House Judiciary Committee, Father Drinan gained a national profile in the summer of 1974 when the committee's hearings considering Nixon's impeachment were televised. The hearings would have taken place a year earlier, had Father Drinan had his way. On July 31, 1973, he introduced the first resolution to impeach the president -- though not for any high crimes and misdemeanors relating to the Watergate scandal, but rather over the administration's secret bombing campaign in Cambodia.

Father Drinan prided himself on having filed that resolution. But its timing dismayed the House Democratic leadership, which thought it premature and counterproductive.

"Morally, Drinan had a good case," then-House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. noted in his memoirs. "But politically, he damn near blew it. For if Drinan's resolution had come up for a vote at the time he filed it, it would have been overwhelmingly defeated -- by something like 400 to 20. After that, with most of the members already on record as having voted once against impeachment, it would have been extremely difficult to get them to change their minds later on."

In 1975, Father Drinan filed an impeachment resolution against US ambassador to Iran Richard Helms for his activities as director of the Central Intelligence Agency. That same year, Father Drinan was chief plaintiff in a suit filed by 21 Democratic congressmen to block US military involvement in Cambodia. It was later dismissed.

Robert Frederick Drinan was born in Boston , the son of James John Drinan and Ann Mary (Flanagan) Drinan. Father Drinan grew up in Hyde Park. He played clarinet with the Boston Civic Symphony and participated on the debating team at Boston College. He entered the Society of Jesus in 1942, after earning his bachelor's degree at Boston College.

Father Drinan did his seminary work at Weston College in Cambridge. (Daniel Berrigan , who would later become a noted peace activist, was a classmate.) He received a master's from Boston College in 1947 and two law degrees from Georgetown University Law Center, the first in 1949 and a master's in law in 1951. Ordained in 1953, he received a doctorate in theology at Rome's Gregorian University.

In 1955, he returned to Boston College as associate dean and professor at its law school. He became dean a year later, a position he held until 1969. Father Drinan served as Boston College's vice president and provost from 1969 to 1970. During his deanship, the law school went from being "a moribund institution," as a federal judge once described it, to ranking among the nation's more highly regarded law schools.

Father Drinan found himself increasingly involved in public issues. He served as chairman of the advisory committee for Massachusetts of the US Commission on Civil Rights. As part of an ecumenical group, he went to South Vietnam in 1969 to assess the state of religious and political freedom there.

Asked in a 1970 Globe interview why he was running for Congress, Father Drinan answered with a series of questions. "Why? Why not? Jesuit priests always have been avant-garde. Right?"

His candidacy drew nationwide attention. The conservative columnist William F. Buckley Jr. called Father Drinan "the greatest threat to orderly thought since Eleanor Roosevelt left this vale of tears." He won a three-way race in November by 3,000 votes.

Also elected to Congress in 1970 were such vehemently anti war Democrats as Ron Dellums of California and Bella Abzug of New York. Yet Father Drinan drew particular attention. In January 1974, George H. W. Bush , who was then Republican Party chairman, said there wasn't another congressman whose defeat he more strongly hoped for than Father Drinan's. He promised a major GOP drive to unseat him. None materialized.

Last night, several of Father Drinan's colleagues said his character and conscience made him a strong voice on Capitol Hill. In a statement, Senator Edward Kennedy cited Father Drinan's principled commitment to, among other causes, ending the war in Vietnam. "He was a profile in courage in every sense of the word, and the nation has lost one of the finest persons ever to serve in Congress," Kennedy said.

"When I arrived in Congress, Father Drinan was already serving as the conscience of the House of Representatives with every vote he cast," US Representative Edward Markey of Malden said. " He was a man of faith who never stopped searching for truth, and he was a committed educator who stayed true to his faith."

After leaving Congress, Father Drinan returned to academe, teaching international human rights, legal ethics, and constitutional law at Georgetown University Law Center. He published "Can God and Caesar Coexist? Balancing Religious Freedom and International Law" (2005).

In addition to keeping a heavy schedule of speeches and writing, Father Drinan served on the board of Common Cause, the citizens lobbying group, and spent two terms as president of the liberal organization Americans for Democratic Action. While in Congress, he had been a founder of the National Interreligious Task Force for Soviet Jewry. (Father Drinan was a strong supporter of Soviet Jews seeking emigration.) He also served on the board of Bread for the World, an organization dedicated to feeding the hungry. In a 1992 Globe interview, Father Drinan called ending world hunger his "number one passion."

In that interview, Father Drinan was asked what he felt about the Vatican's forcing him to choose between the clergy and Congress. "History will have to judge whether or not that was a wise decision," he said.

He leaves a sister-in-law, Helen, of Newton Highlands, and three nieces .

Funeral arrangements had not been made last night.

David Abel of the Globe staff contributed to this obituary.

(Correction: Because of an editing error, the obituary of the Rev. Robert F. Drinan on Page One yesterday wrongly said John Kerry had been campaign manager for Drinan's run for Congress in 1970. Kerry was chairman of that campaign.)■