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The bold acts of a priest in Congress

by John Olinger

BOB DRINAN: THE CONTROVERSIAL LIFE OF THE FIRST CATHOLIC PRIEST ELECTED TO CONGRESS

By Raymond A. Schroth, SJ

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In the midst of President Richard Nixon's first term, the 1970 election sent to Congress a small band of liberals who helped shape the progressive legislation of the next three Congresses: the War Powers Resolution, and the Freedom of Information, Endangered Species, Legal Services and Budget Acts, not to mention the impeachment of Nixon.

Among those new members -- Bella Abzug, Paul Sarbanes, Charles Rangel, Ron Dellums -- one man stood out from the start, the first priest elected to Congress, Jesuit Fr. Robert Drinan.

Raymond Schroth's biography portrays a man whose own life and concerns followed the trajectory of American life and the American Catholic church in the 20th century. *NCR* readers are no doubt familiar through his columns with the range and depth of Drinan's mind and the durable power of his faith. To those who might be less familiar with Drinan, the strength of Schroth's work is that it portrays Drinan's public life in the full context of his life as a Jesuit.

In this telling, Drinan's formation as a Jesuit leads almost inevitably to his life as a congressman for Massachusetts. The energy and vision that led Drinan to make Boston College Law School a first-rate institution during his tenure as dean were the same attributes that drove him relentlessly during his congressional career.

Drinan acted out of a sense of certainty about his beliefs and actions, often without heed of the short-term consequences. Schroth tells of Drinan introducing a resolution to impeach Nixon without consulting the

Democratic House leadership. It was a bold act and it was, from a strategic point of view, premature.

Tip O'Neill, then the Democratic majority leader, realized the danger. A Republican could call up Drinan's resolution for a vote at any time. Given that the groundwork for impeachment had not been laid -- it was months before the Judiciary Committee hearings -- the resolution faced almost certain defeat. O'Neill had to station one or two of his lieutenants on the floor of the House to keep the resolution from coming to a vote until he could work out an agreement with minority leader Gerald Ford not to call for a vote on the bill.



Drinan was not concerned with the fine points of strategy. For him, the overriding issue was Nixon's secret bombing of Cambodia. That deserved impeaching. Therefore he acted.

Throughout his 10 years in Congress, Drinan had an uncanny ability to unsettle his allies, his enemies, his Jesuit superiors and colleagues, and ultimately the pope. As a priest, his outspoken opposition to the Vietnam War stood in marked contrast to the upper reaches of the American church, whose prelates often seemed more comfortable as military vicars than they did as advocates of peace.

His visible engagement in the civil rights movement seemed inappropriate to those who saw equal rights as coming at their expense. But for many people it was abortion that defined Drinan, often to his detriment. In the end, abortion was in no small measure the issue he wished to avoid and the one that would bring an end to his congressional career.

Schroth's analysis of Drinan's position on abortion is central to this book. Drinan believed, as he wrote in *Commonweal*, that *Roe v. Wade*, in removing government from abortion decisions, placed the responsibility where it belonged, in the medical community, which he believed would be responsible for developing and enforcing proper standards. As tortured as this reasoning was at the time, it became even more so as abortion became a flash point of American politics in a way unimagined by the majority of the Supreme Court or by Drinan.

In "The Supreme Court and Religion," a 1952 article, Drinan wrote that the court "generally reflects the pluralistic culture of the nation and the varied background of the justices."

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It was Drinan's belief in what Dean Roscoe Pound had earlier called the "harmonization" of interests that in Schroth's view led Drinan "to tolerate legalized abortion, as an action that many Catholics deplore but that the society at large demands."



However controversial a position this may have been for lay

Catholic officials, it was an incendiary one for a man wearing a Roman collar. It brought into stark relief the initial step that Drinan had taken when he decided to run for office. Schroth masterfully lays out the many internal maneuvers that cleared the way for Drinan's candidacy in the first instance. These involved his immediate Jesuit superior in New England, his two local bishops in Boston and Worcester, Mass., and the Jesuit superior general in Rome. Each successive candidacy seemed to involve more intricate negotiations than the one preceding. To say that the approval for Drinan to run was a gray area seriously understates the case. In fact, whether or not Drinan had the proper authorization became an issue in a number of his re-election campaigns.

A new pope, John Paul II, made his views clear about the proper role of priests, particularly in Nicaragua and in Washington. When ordered not to run again for re-election, Drinan, to the surprise and dismay of many of his congressional colleagues, many of his constituents, and those who shared his commitment to peace and justice, obeyed and retired from Congress. Drawing on his earlier portrayal of Drinan's embrace of a Jesuit vocation, Schroth makes comprehensible Drinan's acceptance of his fate.

In the almost two decades of life remaining to him, Drinan, as *NCR* readers well know, continued in his role as a public intellectual, teaching and writing about the priestly life. He never lost the ardor of his younger years to of deeper spirituality.

Raymond Schroth sketches a nuanced portrait of a man who found his calling early in life, never let the fire of his belief die, and who challenged his country and his church to live up to the ideals of their founders.

[John Olinger, a lobbyist in Washington, D.C., is a former congressional staff person.]



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