

3-21-2003

## Tip O'Neill: Irish-American Representative Man

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### Recommended Citation

O'Connell, Shaun (2003) "Tip O'Neill: Irish-American Representative Man," *New England Journal of Public Policy*: Vol. 18: Iss. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol18/iss2/5>

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# Tip O'Neill

# Irish-American Representative Man

*by Shaun O'Connell*

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*Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, Man of the House as he aptly called himself in his 1987 memoir, stood as the quintessential Irish-American representative man for half of the twentieth century. O'Neill, often misunderstood as a parochial, Irish Catholic party pol, was a shrewd, sensitive, and idealistic man who came to stand for a more inclusive and expansive sense of his region, his party, and his church. O'Neill's impressive presence both embodied the clichés of the Irish-American character and transcended its stereotypes by articulating a noble vision of inspired duty, determined responsibility, and joy in living. There was more to Tip O'Neill than met the eye, as several presidents learned. At key moments in his career he was a politician who took risks in the name of principle. In his fifty years in public life, Tip O'Neill grew in every conceivable way, from the size of the suit to the breadth of his vision. Tip O'Neill embodied a type of the Irish-American character that his own kind, even those who have succeeded in America beyond the wildest dreams of their ancestors, might profitably heed.*

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Two shouting, finger-pointing, Irish-American elders argue. Large, imposing men who are used to getting their way, by charm or intimidation, by hook or by crook. One is handsome, well-groomed, a man who might have been a radio and television announcer or a minor movie star; the other is fat, tousled, a man who might have been an old-time Irish political boss, closing deals in back rooms filled with cigar smoke and blarney. Here they are seated, leaning forward, their neck muscles taut, fire in their eyes, straining to get at each other. But their advanced age, their suits, and the decorum of the setting — white arm chairs set at an angle, before a fireplace — restrain them. For this is the White House Oval Office, May, 1981; President Ronald Reagan and House Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill are furious with each other. As the picture clearly shows, neither man heeds the other's angry words.

Yet "Reagan and O'Neill had much in common," notes O'Neill biographer, John A. Farrell, in *Tip O'Neill and the Democratic Century*. "They were broad-brush types who liked a joke and never let the facts get in the way of a good story. They could take a punch and come back swinging. . . . Each was sustained, in much the same way, by his own distinctive mythology."<sup>1</sup> Reagan, an Irish American, reared as a Protestant, was a small-town, Midwestern Democrat who went farther West, to Hollywood, and then went Hollywood Republican in his politics and world view. O'Neill, on the other hand, was a devoted Irish Catholic, an urban Easterner, and a life-long Democrat, committed to the politics of equity, who rose within a defined,

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Irish-American political system. In the Oval Office picture each man lives up to his self-image, justifies his vision and combats the heresy embodied in the other. O'Neill opposed the "Reagan Revolution," designed to cut back New Deal programs, particularly Reagan's plan to reduce Social Security benefits. As O'Neill put it in his autobiography, *Man of the House*, "Reagan has been a rich man's president. . . . It comes down to one word — fairness. The president's program wasn't fair." On the House floor O'Neill declared that "Ronald Reagan was Herbert Hoover with a smile. That he was a cheerleader for selfishness. That he had no compassion."<sup>2</sup> Reagan, in turn, called O'Neill a "demagogue," and O'Neill accused Reagan of being a "tightwad." Once, in the Oval Office, Reagan said "God damn it, Tip, we do care about all those people." O'Neill replied, "It's easy to say that you care but you aren't willing to do anything about it."<sup>3</sup> In his autobiography, *An American Life*, Reagan calls O'Neill "an old-fashioned pol" who could "turn off his charm and friendship like a light switch and become as blood thirsty as a piranha. Until six o'clock, I was the enemy and he never let me forget it."<sup>4</sup> O'Neill was equally judgmental about Reagan: "He and I came from the same side of the railroad tracks. I never forgot from where I came. He kind of forgot."<sup>5</sup> All of this testimony is implied in this revealing photograph of two Irish elks, locking horns.

However, what the photograph, a gift to O'Neill inscribed by President Reagan, says is: "Dear Tip. Then the one Irishman said to the other Irishman — 'top of the morning to ya' Ron."<sup>6</sup> Here Reagan clearly tries to soften their differences with his famous charm, suggesting that what they had in common, their Irishness, however ersatz and corny its expression, mitigated the contempt each held for the other's values and visions.

Both O'Neill and Reagan rose above partisan politics, after six o'clock. The president even invited O'Neill to the White House residence to celebrate the Speaker's seventieth birthday. Michael Deaver, Reagan aide, was amazed, watching "these two old Irishmen" telling "Irish jokes," and drinking. At the end of the evening, Reagan said "Tip, if I had a ticket to heaven and you didn't have one too, I would give mine away and go to hell with you."<sup>7</sup> In turn, O'Neill kidded Reagan, saying his Irish ancestral home, Ballyporeen, meant "valley of the small potatoes."<sup>8</sup> Irish blarney, then, was their common ground. But O'Neill and Reagan did more than tell Paddy and Bridget stories; they worked effectively together to bring pressure on Margaret Thatcher to make concessions on divided Northern Ireland. These "two old Irishmen" staked out the extremes of the Irish-American character in the latter half of the twentieth century; but they also presented a united front to England, America's closest ally and Ireland's long-standing enemy. (Yet Reagan never risked America's "special relation" with Britain or his friendship with Margaret Thatcher. Bill Clinton, descendant from Scotch-Irish immigrants, would do far more for the peace process in Ireland than any president before him.)<sup>9</sup> Bonded in their Irishness, Reagan warmly inscribed the pictorial record of their argument and O'Neill proudly included this picture in his autobiography.

As the gap steadily widens between twenty-first century America and the 1840s Irish Famine, with its aftermath of massive Irish emigration, Irish-American identity becomes increasingly problematic. Irish identity is no easy issue, even for those who live on the island of Ireland; for those across its waters, Irishness is no longer an inescapable destiny. Perhaps a century and a half after the great immigration of the Irish commenced, affirming Irish-American identity has become something of an elective affinity.

Certainly Tip O'Neill qualifies as an Irish-American under any definition, for he possessed sociability and loyalty, he drank on occasion and he was true to his community, though he did not practice the self-effacement and pessimism some ascribe to Irish-Americans. But O'Neill has firmer grounds on which to base his ethnicity: he was the quintessential Irish-American representative man for at least half of the twentieth century because he spoke for and to his community, he remained loyal to the rituals and highest values of the Catholic Church and he was a devoted Democrat in both narrow and broad respects. For all that, O'Neill, usually seen as a parochial, Irish Catholic party pol, was a shrewd, sensitive and idealistic man who went beyond the limitations of his neighborhood, his party, and his Church.

O'Neill's exemplary autobiography, *Man of the House*, written with William Novak, makes a significant contribution not only to twentieth-century American political history, but helps to clarify the core values of the modern Irish-American character. At the end of the day, as they say in Ireland, Tip O'Neill was more than "a lovely spring rain of a man," as reporter Jimmy Breslin described him.<sup>10</sup> O'Neill was a man who evolved into one of the most important and influential Irish-Americans in the history of the nation; he was man whose sometimes overwhelming presence both embodied the cliches of the Irish-American character and transcended its stereotypes by articulating a noble vision of inspired duty, determined responsibility and joy in living.<sup>11</sup> Tip O'Neill's autobiography, then, beyond its partisan politics, its blarney and its lively opinions of twentieth-century movers and shakers, is a telling testament of Irish American life and faith.

Tip O'Neill's funeral was held in North Cambridge, at St. John the Divine, the family parish church, in January, 1994. Rev. J. Donald Monan, S.J., president of Boston College, O'Neill's alma mater, delivered the eulogy, saying, "Speaker O'Neill's legendary sense of loyalty, either to old friends or to God, was no dull or wooden conformity. It has been a creative fidelity to values pledged in his youth that he kept relevant to a world of constant change by dint of effort and imagination and the cost of personal sacrifice."<sup>12</sup>

In *The Irish Catholic Diaspora in America*, Lawrence J. McCaffrey wisely comments "Irish-American Catholics cannot retain their identity unless they know who they are and where they came from."<sup>13</sup> Tip O'Neill certainly knew who he was and where he came from. An appreciation of his life, recorded in his *Man of the House*, amplified by his *All Politics is Local*, a collection of political "rules of the game," and Farrell's *Tip O'Neill and the Democratic Century*, makes a compelling record for Irish-America of who we are, where we come from and points to where twenty-first century Irish-Americans should want to go. Tip O'Neill both led and recorded an exemplary life.

"I knew I was Irish even before I knew I was an American," states O'Neill.<sup>14</sup> His Irishness flowed in his veins and permeated the air he breathed; furthermore, as Irish-American mothers used to say, the map of Ireland was written across his face. His Irishness, from first to last, was a given which he never wished to repudiate. He could only shake his head with pity for those, like Ronald Reagan, who forgot where they came from and presumed to rise above their own kind.

O'Neill descended from Irish immigrants who settled in North Cambridge to work in the brickyards, a patch called "Dublin." For novelist and *Atlantic Monthly* editor, William Dean Howells, who described the adult miseries and infant mortality of this region in the 1870s in *Suburban Sketches*, "It is perhaps in a pious recognition of our mortality that Dublin is built around the Irish grave-yard." Howells expressed not only pity for the Irish immigrants, but fear of their surviving children:

it “appears probable, such increases shall — together with the well-known ambition of Dubliners to rule the land — one day make an end to us poor Yankees as a dominant plurality.” Howells was shaken by his visit to the Irish brickyards of North Cambridge and, a century later, might have seen his worst fears realized but also relieved in the person of Tip O’Neill, who, as first Irish-American Speaker of the Massachusetts House, wrested control away from Yankee domination before he was elected to Congress. When Howells left “Dublin,” returning home along Massachusetts Avenue, he felt relieved, for “the Mansard-roofs look down upon me with their dormer-windows, and welcome me back to the American community.”<sup>15</sup> Tip O’Neill, then, grew up in another country, a limbo between his Cork-born grandparents’ British-dominated Ireland and Howells’ Yankee-dominated America.

But young Tip soon learned that his “Dublin” was far from Ireland, for most immigrants discouraged Gaelic speaking, expecting their children to become “‘real’ Americans.” He learned a little Gaelic and a few Irish song and dances, “but my Irish education didn’t last very long.” His teacher, the sister-in-law of Terrence McSweeney, the lord mayor of Cork who died in a hunger strike in 1920, labeled “narrowbacks,” or those born in America, as insufficiently Irish.<sup>16</sup> Thus O’Neill’s identity was early fixed as Irish-American.

As a lad, Tip saw the “No Irish Need Apply Signs” and the contempt in which his people were held by the Brahmin-Yankee descendants of British settlers. On the other hand, growing up around Boston, his patriotism was stirred by historical sites like Bunker Hill and the Old North Church; O’Neill “felt a firsthand connection to the brave men and women who fought the American Revolution.”<sup>17</sup> The Irish American counter history of victimization was kept alive in the Boston Irish community, but, young Tip was surprised to learn, the oft-recounted burning of the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, an outrageous attack by Protestant nativists against Irish Catholic settlers, occurred long before his time, in 1834. America in his day, he saw, was more open and less dangerous to the descendants of the Famine immigrants.

Baseball became a passion and served as an entry into American culture for Tip, as it did for so many Irish Americans of his generation, though they liked to believe that the game was “stolen from the Irish game of rounders.”<sup>18</sup> His nickname came not from the racetrack or the political backroom, but from one Ed “Tip” O’Neill, who played for the St. Louis Browns. He was famous for an ability to keep fouling off (“tipping”) pitches until he walked or got one good enough to hit. “Tip”: an apt nickname for a man who knew how to wait patiently and then, when he saw his opportunities, as George Washington Plunkett of Tammany Hall so famously expressed it, take them. Young Tip would rush to Lynch’s drugstore on Mass. Ave., just across from St. John the Divine, to get the Red Sox results or to talk about the local teams on which Irish-American heroes with even more colorful nicknames played: Gaspip Sullivan, Tubber Cronin, Cheese McCrehan, Chippie Gaw.<sup>19</sup> O’Neill notes with satisfaction that in 1953, just after he had been elected to Congress, his father died quietly, after watching on television Red Sox star Ted Williams — O’Neill family hero, though he was not only not Irish but a Republican! — hit a home run. His father, O’Neill implies, had a fulfilled Irish-American life: the immigrant’s dream of success was realized by the political triumph of his son and the achievement of his hometown baseball hero.

Throughout his life, then, O’Neill’s Irishness was inescapable, irrepressible and improvisatory, shaping a persona he played to the hilt. For his biographer, O’Neill used jokes

and stories, played the happy Irishman with no small element of calculation. He had won the affection of his colleagues, while masking his ambition from potential rivals. It was a natural way for an immigrant's grandson who wanted to win hearts but — cast in the ethnic resentments of his youth and struggling to overcome the ancestral injunction that he mind his place — closely guarded his dreams and hopes.<sup>20</sup>

*New York Times* reporter, Christopher Lydon, remembers O'Neill as "a studied performer, polished enough to make most of us forget the years of artifice in the role," whose "whole method is indirection and blarney."<sup>21</sup> Presidents Kennedy, Nixon, Carter, and Reagan personified O'Neill as a mere Irish pol of the old school — cigar chomping, whiskey drinking, deal making — and lived to regret their under-estimations. (O'Neill's old friend and Senate colleague, Gerry Ford, knew better.) The Reagan public relations team, led by Michael Deaver, made a particularly damaging mistake by airing television ads in 1980 which portrayed an overblown actor, who resembled O'Neill, running out of gas as an illustration of the overspending and overreaching Democratic Party. However, Republicans succeeded in making a national personality out of O'Neill, who bent the image to his own ends. "The President took me as the symbol of the Democratic Party — that I was fat and big and out of shape and a big spender. He thrust me into the prominence of the most important Democrat in America because he thought I was going to be easy to handle. But he kind of misjudged."<sup>22</sup>

On the continuing "troubles" in Ireland, O'Neill first showed his reflex Irish-Americanism, then later his capacity to see deeper into the vexing "Irish question" and finally to transcend his inherited, parochial mindset. As a boy, growing up with Irish Republican loyalties in the aftermath of the Irish Rising and the Irish Civil War, Tip, along with most of his constituents in North Cambridge, was a staunch IRA supporter. Well into the 1960s he periodically called for "Brits out" of Northern Ireland. However, under the influence of Sean Donlon, who would become Irish ambassador to the USA, and John Hume, leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, representing non-violent Catholic nationalists in Northern Ireland, O'Neill changed his views. His attitude evolved from unquestioning IRA support to a more subtle and flexible position which included political pressures on England and negotiations in Ireland. Along with Senators Ted Kennedy and Pat Moynihan, and New York Governor Hugh Carey, O'Neill made up the "Four Horsemen," who, in 1977, renounced violence as a means of settling Ireland's problems. O'Neill persuaded President Jimmy Carter to bring pressure on British government to settle the Irish question. He had even more success with President Reagan. O'Neill's idea of Ireland, then, went from the exclusive and vengeful version of the IRA, "ourselves alone," to the inclusive and forgiving vision of Ireland embodied by Republic of Ireland President Mary Robinson. O'Neill commenced his career as an unquestioning supporter of his community's Irish Republican values and ended by leading them to back the peace process in Ireland.

Born in the Irish-American community of North Cambridge in 1912, O'Neill remained a man of the neighborhood all his life, representing his district first in the Massachusetts House of Representatives (1936–1952; Speaker 1947–1952), then in the U.S. House of Representatives (1952–1987; Speaker 1977–1987). His most famous maxim, "all politics is local," was passed onto him by his father, known as "the Governor" for his ability as Cambridge superintendent of sewers to arrange jobs for constituents. O'Neill's second abiding principle, "people like to be asked," was imparted by a neighbor, Mrs. Elizabeth O'Brien, who, despite her closeness to the

young candidate for the Massachusetts House, did not want her vote taken for granted.<sup>23</sup>

O'Neill's close-knit, Irish-American community ingrained in him values of service and loyalty. As a boy, he helped his father pass out food baskets for the needy and watched "the Governor" distribute patronage jobs: men waited outside the O'Neill house to collect "snow buttons" so they could shovel streets after storms. Drawing on the pain of Tip's own experience, the loss of his beloved mother, who died of tuberculosis when he was nine, and incorporating the Catholic religion's core of mercy and forgiveness, he was, as his biographer suggests, sensitive to others' suffering.<sup>24</sup>

O'Neill proudly admits "I was a very sociable kid" around Barry's Corner, where three North Cambridge streets converged on Rindge Ave.<sup>25</sup> Barry's Corner remained the geographic and ideological center of O'Neill's world; home from Congress, he would walk his district and renew his ties; dying, his last words to his son was a wistful recollection of nearby Verna's Doughnut Shop: "God, those honey-dipped doughnuts . . ."<sup>26</sup> In a sense, the streets that radiated from Barry's Corner were an Irish village for O'Neill, who retained sweet remembrances of Irish-American things past.

Always a party man, O'Neill worked to get out the vote for Al Smith in 1928 because Smith was one of his own kind.<sup>27</sup> "Everybody in our neighborhood was enthusiastic about Smith, not only because he was a Democrat but because he was a Catholic."<sup>28</sup> When O'Neill ran for a seat on the Cambridge City Council in 1935, while still a student at Boston College, he wanted, as he recollected, "to try to help people in my backyard."<sup>29</sup> Though he lost that election, he won a seat in the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1936 and never looked back. In 1934 a North Cambridge neighbor, Missy LeHand, who worked in the White House, introduced him to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Roosevelt was "a God to me," O'Neill remembered. In his autobiography O'Neill declares he "came to Washington as a New Deal liberal who believed that government has a moral responsibility to help people who can't take care of themselves" and adds, "I still feel that way today."<sup>30</sup> His voting consistently supported "work and wages" for half a century.

Though always a constituency man, Tip O'Neill on key occasions of conscience had the courage to go against the grain of his largely Irish American supporters. In 1937, he voted to repeal a loyalty oath for public school teachers, despite popular support for the measure; his sister, Mary, was a teacher and O'Neill found the oath humiliating. Though, as a result, he was opposed in 1938 by the American Legion, which attacked his patriotism, with the help of his father and with his strong record of constituent service, O'Neill was reelected. O'Neill concluded, "The whole experience had the effect of freeing me and conferring on me an independence that I carried though a lifetime in politics."<sup>31</sup>

However, O'Neill did not always present a profile in courage. In August, 1964, he was reluctant to vote for Lyndon Johnson's Tonkin Gulf resolution, which expanded the war in Vietnam, but Speaker John McCormack urged him not to cast a no vote that would ruin his career. O'Neill went along with McCormack's advice but regretted doing so. "I just didn't have the courage," he admits, though he grants McCormack's warning was sound.<sup>32</sup> By September 1967, though, O'Neill stood against Johnson (and McCormack) as well as the majority of his constituents when he issued a newsletter to his constituency opposing the war.

I knew it was the right thing to do. I had been in a parallel situation thirty years earlier, when I opposed the teacher's oath bill during my first term in the state legislature. In the

case of Vietnam, now that my decision was made, I had no choice but to follow my conscience.<sup>33</sup>

O'Neill addressed voters in his district at Brighton's St. Columbkille's Church Holy Name Breakfast, answering their objections for four hours, making them understand his call to conscience. O'Neill's conversion to the anti-war camp was a major turning point in the war and had the unforeseen consequence of making him eligible to lead a House turning against the war. Good conscience, in this case, became good politics.

As it did when he took on Richard Nixon. O'Neill again went against the wishes of the majority of his constituents when he became, as the press dubbed him, "the architect of impeachment" of Nixon, but again O'Neill explained and won over the opposition.<sup>34</sup> O'Neill utilized a style of "legislating by affection" and could be very persuasive; as his House colleague, Dan Rostenkowski, put it, "Tip was a very, very tough guy to dislike when he really put his arm around you and gave you the ol' darlin' stuff."<sup>35</sup>

O'Neill was more equivocal in response to U.S. District Court Judge Arthur Garrity's order, in June, 1974, to integrate Boston's public schools through a busing plan, a decision that inflamed Boston and divided its Irish-American community, as eloquently described by J. Anthony Lucas in *Common Ground*.<sup>36</sup> At first O'Neill opposed busing, siding with the blue-collar Irish-Americans of Charlestown and South Boston, districts selected by Garrity for integration, but then O'Neill voted against anti-busing legislation, siding with the so called "two-toilet" (or "lace-curtain") Irish elite, which included Garrity, Senator Kennedy, and editors of the *Boston Globe*. Here it took a while for O'Neill to sort out the conflicting claims of conscience and constituency, but he ended up opposing bigotry, while risking offending Boston's defensive Irish-American community.

O'Neill had, as we have seen, no trouble knowing where he stood against the policies of Ronald Reagan, though Reagan was very popular among the Irish-American voters of his district. Not only Reagan's domestic agenda came under O'Neill's attack; the Speaker set his will and his party against Reagan's support of the Contras in Nicaragua. O'Neill's passion for justice in Central America derived, in large part, from his ties with Catholic priests and Maryknoll nuns who kept him informed, particularly after four missionaries, three of them nuns, were murdered in 1980. The Contras were "marauders, murderers and rapists," said O'Neill, who voted for the "Boland Amendment" to cut off funds in October, 1984.<sup>37</sup> Here he claimed the moral high ground from Reagan, who thereafter had to resort to illegal means to support the Contras. O'Neill's constituents again came to understand and accept his vote of conscience.

There was more to Tip O'Neill, then, than met the eye: at key moments in his career he was a politician who took risks in the name of principle. "I lived in my times," he grants. "Always in mind that the day I leave that I hold up my head and say, hey, I left a good family name, and never betrayed my God or my country."<sup>38</sup>

"The Catholic Church was arguably the single most important institution in the lives of Irish immigrants in the nineteenth-century United States," says Kevin Kenny in his study of the American-Irish. The importance of the Catholic Church in all aspects of Irish-American life, public and private, carried over into Tip O'Neill's era. For him as for most of his kind, the Church "was at least as important as the neighborhood tavern, the Democratic party and the labour movement; and in its cultural authority the Church often exceeded the power of these three, exerting an



influence on the emergence of Irish-American ethnic identity.”<sup>39</sup> O’Neill predictably followed the dictates of his Church, though in his last decades he came to interpret the Catholic Church’s mission and doctrine in increasingly liberal fashion.

O’Neill says little about his life-long commitment to Catholicism in *Man of the House*; his faith is unspoken, understood, unquestioned. Young Tip received the Catholic sacraments, First Communion and Confirmation, and graduated from St. John’s High School in 1931. Sister Agatha, a teacher at St. John’s introduced him to Millie Miller, who would become his wife in 1941, and the nun urged Tip to make something of himself by going to college. O’Neill entered Boston College in 1932, graduating in 1936. (Later, after Boston College rejected the application of Tip’s son, Tommy, Sister Agatha went to the college to insist that he be accepted, which he was.) In turn, O’Neill did not turn his back on his Church. When elected Speaker of the Massachusetts House in 1949, he saw himself not only as “the first Democrat” but also “the first of my faith” to hold the position; he vowed to leave office with his reputation in tact.<sup>40</sup> O’Neill saw legislation in moral terms, at its best a means to show, as his father told him, that he was his brother’s keeper. When putting through a bill to improve conditions in mental hospitals, for example, he “figured there was a place in heaven for me, when the Good Lord opened the book . . . that will offset the black marks.”<sup>41</sup>

He could be certain that his marks were high in the book of Boston’s Archbishop, then Cardinal Richard Cushing when O’Neill carried his Church’s agenda into politics. In 1948, the Massachusetts House passed a bill that allowed newly married public school teachers to continue teaching. However, O’Neill received a call from the archdiocese, informing him that the Catholic Church feared these teachers might practice birth control to retain their jobs. As a result, O’Neill immediately called the bill up for reconsideration and killed it. One hand washing the other, Cushing supported O’Neill’s reelection. The same year, again following the wishes of the Boston archdiocese, he voted against a bill sponsoring limited birth control. Despite his affection for President Kennedy, O’Neill, following the wishes of Speaker McCormack and then Cardinal Cushing, helped kill a Kennedy-sponsored school-aid bill in the Rules Committee because it contained no funding for Catholic (or other religious) schools. A peeved Senator Mike Mansfield said, “the bells of St. Mary had begun to peel.”<sup>42</sup>

Though O’Neill, an old fashioned Irish-American Catholic, liked to gamble and take a drink on occasion, acceptable vices in his community, he drew the line at swearing, infidelity, and the use of birth control. “O’Neill was a religious man, a church-going Catholic who almost always fulfilled his obligation to attend Mass on Sunday or Holy Days of Obligation and who scheduled the House so he could get ashes on Ash Wednesday.”<sup>43</sup> He voted for a constitutional amendment in 1971 to restore prayers to the public schools but later reconsidered. Even O’Neill’s firm position against birth control evolved. By 1973, after *Roe v. Wade*, he dropped his opposition to abortion, but then switched back, believing it a mortal sin; finally he decided, despite moral convictions, that he did not have the right to deny others the choice and supported pro-choice legislation.

At the core of his being, then, Tip O’Neill was a true Catholic, in both parochial and profound ways. Inconsistently, he opposed loyalty oaths for teachers but supported the ban on married teachers because his Church said so. At the same time, he chose his party over his Church on issues of prayer in schools and abortion rights. Deeper still, O’Neill drew upon the Catholic Church for his commitment to public service. In 1969, at the commencement address before his graduating son’s

Matignon High School, he articulated his Catholicism in most exalted terms. "In everything you do, you must recall that Christ loved man and wished us, for our own sakes, to love him. The method by which we exercise that love is by loving our fellow man, by seeing that justice is done, that mercy prevails."<sup>44</sup> As his biographer aptly notes, "He didn't tell the students to respect their elders or make sure they attended Mass each Sunday or to eat fish on Fridays — but rather to honor the Christian ideal of social justice."<sup>45</sup> Tip O'Neill, as Catholics say, kept the faith.

Tip O'Neill used many Irish-American models to define himself as a politician. Both his autobiography and the biography make clear that he learned from "the Governor" to break down barriers of exclusion, symbolized by the "Irish Need Not Apply" signs that barred his people from employment. O'Neill took elocution lessons from James Michael Curley and studied his bold moves. John McCormack, the shrewd South Boston leader in the House of Representatives, adopted Tip when he became a Congressman. O'Neill closely watched the rise of John Kennedy, whom he admired, and Robert Kennedy, whom he disliked, with ambivalent feelings of brotherly love mixed with disapproval of the independent Kennedy style. Finally, O'Neill completed his self-definition by standing up to Ronald Reagan, his Irish-American antithesis.

In one of Tip O'Neill's stories, repeated so often it took the shape of an illustrative parable, he successfully intimidated a bank officer who refused to hire a man because he was Catholic by threatening to organize a boycott of his bank. This, of course, is something James Michael Curley might have done. Curley, legendary Boston mayor (sixteen years), Massachusetts governor (two years), Congressman (eight years), and convicted criminal (two jail sentences), was the figure presidents Nixon, Carter, and Reagan wanted to hear about when they first met O'Neill. (Reagan, O'Neill dryly notes, had not read Edwin O'Connor's popular novel based upon Curley, *The Last Hurrah*, but Reagan, of course, loved the movie, starring his friend, Spencer Tracy.) O'Neill enjoyed telling Curley stories: about how he built his house with the shamrock shutters on Boston's Jamaica Way, how he gave the City Hall scrubwomen long-handled brushes so they would not have to stoop, how he took money *out* of the pot to give to passing friends when Curley and O'Neill were collecting charity offerings for the Boston *Post* Santa at Downtown Crossing. O'Neill appreciated that Curley gave him, a young Cambridge politician at the time, advice on the effectiveness of quoting poetry during his speeches, though O'Neill's taste in poetry remained mawkish. O'Neill even ran some political risks during his congressional campaign of 1952 when he backed a pension for the disgraced Curley. "Curley was a great Irish folk hero," grants O'Neill, who insists "the Yankees looked down on him as a shanty-Irish rogue, but Curley did a tremendous amount for the people of Boston."<sup>46</sup>

But O'Neill importantly learned a great deal about what *not* to do from Curley. He kept "a certain distance" from the colorful rogue, "not only because I didn't approve of his ethics, but also because I was determined to be my own man."<sup>47</sup> O'Neill set himself against the self-serving and vengeful style of Curley. No one would ever say of O'Neill what biographer Jack Beatty says in *The Rascal King: The Life and Times of James Michael Curley*: "James M. Curley was not a party man. He was a James M. Curley man."<sup>48</sup>

In 1948, O'Neill confronted Curley over delegate seating at the Democratic Convention, condemned him as a Boss and kept his distance from the aging legend. Yet O'Neill includes a picture of himself along side a seated statue of James Michael Curley in *Man of the House*. O'Neill sits beside Curley on a park bench, in apparent

conversation, paralleling the Reagan-O'Neill photograph. But it is clear that O'Neill was more comfortable with Curley as myth and source for comic tales of Irish American rascality than he was with him as a venal man. "I was an organizational Democrat," said O'Neill, while Curley "had his own individual group."<sup>49</sup> Other local, notable Irish politicians would serve as better models.

When O'Neill was elected to Congress in 1952 he came under the tutorship of John McCormack, senior Boston Congressman, who showed him the ropes and included O'Neill in his legislative breakfasts, where an inner circle determined policies and strategies. In turn, McCormack persuaded House Speaker Sam Rayburn to appoint O'Neill to the powerful Rules Committee. McCormack: "O'Neill was my man on the committee. A Roman Catholic that represented my views. When he spoke, he spoke for me."<sup>50</sup> O'Neill saw himself as McCormack's political "son," so his break with Johnson and McCormack over Vietnam was a bold repudiation of political patriarchs. Though always grateful to Speaker McCormack, O'Neill came to speak for himself.

*Man of the House's* contrasting of John McCormack with John F. Kennedy reveals O'Neill's sensitivity to Irish-American political styles and his independent relation to the genre. Although Kennedy "and McCormack were both Irish Catholics, they couldn't have been more different. McCormack was a South Boston man with parochial interests who was devoted to the Church and lived a very proper life. As for Jack, let's just say that during his years in the House he showed considerably more interest in his social life than in legislation." However, despite their differences, McCormack campaigned for Kennedy. O'Neill draws the apt moral and political conclusion: "John McCormack understood loyalty."<sup>51</sup> Despite his reservations, O'Neill, too, remained close to these Irish-American politicians, though, delicately balancing party, ethnic and personal loyalties, he was remained own man.

If John McCormack was O'Neill's respectable and responsible Irish-American political father, Jack Kennedy was his dashing, sometimes reckless brother. Unimpressed when Kennedy ran for Congress in 1946, O'Neill supported his opponent in the primaries. (Kennedy, who unsuccessfully courted O'Neill, admired his loyalty.) O'Neill put party first and abided by its hierarchy, but Kennedy, like Curley before him, was too much the maverick. "I'd have to say he was only nominally a Democrat. He was a Kennedy, which was more than a family affiliation. It quickly developed into an entire political party, with its own people, its own approach, and its own strategies."<sup>52</sup> Yet O'Neill came to like Jack Kennedy and ran for his vacated seat in the House when Kennedy ran for the Senate in 1952. He campaigned vigorously for Kennedy in 1960 but, after the election, felt "frozen out of the White House" by the so-called "Irish Mafia" (Kenny O'Donnell, Larry O'Brien, Dick Donahue), led by Robert Kennedy, who referred to O'Neill as "that big fat Irish bastard."<sup>53</sup>

The O'Neill style, discovered around Barry's Corner, developed in pub and street corner campaigns, was deeply personal. ("With O'Neill, everything was personal relationships," said former aide, Chris Matthews.)<sup>54</sup> Boston Congressman Joe Moakey said Tip liked to work people over in enclosed, dark rooms, full of cigar smoke. He "had a way. He just had a way of putting his arm around somebody and putting that Irish face in your face and just making a friend out of you."<sup>55</sup> In contrast, the Kennedy style was more detached, cool, ironic, and subtle.

O'Neill felt patronized by the Kennedys and particularly disliked Robert Kennedy, "a self-important upstart and know-it-all. To him I was a street-corner pol." When he learned that Jackie Kennedy had not voted for him on her 1960

absentee ballot, O'Neill was deeply hurt. But, at the end of the day, Kennedy became "my beloved Jack" to O'Neill, who made (perhaps embellished) a redemptive Irish-American myth out of his final conversation with the president before he flew off to assassination in Dallas in November 1963.

O'Neill's unsupported version of his final talk with Kennedy has the president promising to get troops out of Vietnam after the 1964 election, just as O'Neill wished. He also recalls Kennedy asking after the fortunes of old Boston cohorts: Billy Sutton, Patsy Mulkern, Joe Healey and, as Farrell puts it, of "all the other Boston pols who had worked to help make the career of the first Irish Catholic President, and been discarded along the way." The story might have been an idealized memory, a way for Tip to say that John F. Kennedy, just before the end, just as O'Neill would have wanted him to do, remembered where he came from.<sup>56</sup>

For all his resentments, O'Neill also successfully incorporated Robert Kennedy into a redemptive myth. In June, 1968, after Robert Kennedy's death in Los Angeles, O'Neill told the House of Representatives that he "saw the ills of our society, the inequities and injustices that have no place in our democracy, and with equal clarity he saw that his duty lay in trying to end them." O'Neill even cited the last letter of Padriag Pearse — "I have my joy. They were faithful and they fought." — before the leader of the 1916 Irish Rising was shot by the British.<sup>57</sup> Thus O'Neill included both assassinated Kennedys into an Irish composite myth that includes loyalty, service, sacrifice, and a touch of sentimentality, his own essential values.

If O'Neill incorporated the Kennedys into redemptive parables, he made an anti-type out of Ronald Reagan. At a White House meeting, in 1986, to discuss unemployment, Reagan said these people "don't *want* to work." The speaker was furious with the president.

Don't give me that crap. The guy in Youngstown, Ohio, who's been laid off at the steel mill and has to make his mortgage payments — don't tell me he doesn't want to work. Those stories may work with your rich friends. . . Mr. President. I thought you would have grown up in the five years you've been in office, but you're still repeating those same simplistic explanations.<sup>58</sup>

Tip O'Neill grew in every conceivable way, from the size of his suit to the breadth of his vision, in his fifty years in public life. Reared as a reflex Irish-Catholic Democrat who believed that all politics began and ended with local issues, he came to stand for a more inclusive and expansive sense of his region, his party and his Church. In addition, he learned what he could from the major Irish-American politicians of his time, but, at the end of the day, he went his own way, persuading his party and his voters to follow.

O'Neill spoke at Harvard's 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in 1986 and received an honorary degree in 1987 from the university in his district which he felt had never wholly accepted him. His best friend on the Harvard faculty, John Kenneth Galbraith, told Tip, "They don't understand you. They think you're another Curley."<sup>59</sup> O'Neill assured Lyndon Johnson that he opposed the Vietnam War *in spite* of the Cambridge academic community's anti-war position, not because of it. When he was finally awarded his honorary degree, he jokingly described Harvard as "the Stanford of the East."<sup>60</sup> O'Neill, a Boston College man, never forgot that Harvard had long embodied Yankee-Brahmin values that oppressed Irish-Americans. On the day O'Neill was born, his father stood on a picket line at Harvard, protesting the university's hiring of non-union bricklayers. More pointedly, in 1986 O'Neill recounted before the assembled dignitaries at the anniversary celebration in Harvard

Yard — Irish poet Seamus Heaney and Britain’s Prince of Wales in attendance — that when he was fourteen he worked as a summer groundskeeper in the Yard, for seventeen cents an hour. He recalled how the class of 1927 gathered under a large tent, young men resplendent in white linen suits, ready to take their places among America’s ruling elite, an Irish-American laborer watching from afar. Young Tip was struck by the fact that these Harvard graduates blithely laughed and talked while they drank champagne under the tent, though alcohol was illegal during Prohibition. “Who the hell do these people think they are, I said to myself, that the law means nothing to them?”<sup>61</sup> Sixty years later, O’Neill was still angry at the presumptuousness of their apparent belief that they occupied a different America, where such laws did not apply.

O’Neill opens and closes *Man of the House* with his Harvard epiphany. It beautifully articulates his sense of himself as an Irish-American and implies his life’s purpose: “As I watched the privileged sons of America drinking their champagne, I dreamed of bringing my own people — and *all* Americans who weren’t born to wealth or advantage — into the great American tent of opportunity.”<sup>62</sup> Tip O’Neill thus embodied a vision of the Irish-American character that his own people, even those who have succeeded in America beyond the wildest dreams of their ancestors, might profitably heed. ❧

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## Notes

1. John Aloysius Farrell, *Tip O’Neill and the Democratic Century* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company), 541.
2. Thomas P. O’Neill, Jr., with William Novak, *Man of the House: The Life and Political Memoirs of Speaker Tip O’Neill* (New York: Random House, 1987), 348-349.
3. Farrell, 599.
4. Farrell, 620.
5. Farrell, 598.
6. Farrell, picture caption.
7. Farrell, 621.
8. Farrell, 623.
9. “Reagan followed a consistently pro-British policy throughout his two terms in office, maintaining an exceptionally close relationship with Margaret Thatcher. He supported Thatcher against the hunger strikers early in his first term, for example, and during his second term he pressed for the deportation of IRA men and signed a stringent new extradition treaty with Britain. Only in an age of confused and diluted Irish-American ethnicity, perhaps, could so pro-British and anti-Irish a president have masqueraded as an Irishman.” Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: A History* (UK: Longman, 2000), 254.
10. Farrell, 382. Jimmy Breslin, *How the Good Guys Finally Won* (New York: Viking, 1975).
11. Farrell, 382.
12. Farrell, 691.
13. Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *The Irish Catholic Diaspora in America* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press), 199.
14. O’Neill, *Man*, 7.
15. William Dean Howells, *Suburban Sketches* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1898 [1871]), 64.72.
16. O’Neill, *Man*, 8.
17. O’Neill, *Man*, 8.
18. O’Neill, *Man*, 11.

19. Farrell, 40.
20. Farrell, 279.
21. Farrell, 332.
22. Farrell, 598.
23. Tip O'Neill, with Gary Hymel, *All Politics is Local and Other Rules of the Games* (Holbrook, Mass.: Bob Adams, Inc., 1994), xv, 8.
24. Farrell, 49.
25. O'Neill, *Man*, 17.
26. Farrell, 690.
27. "But was he Irish?" Al Smith's biographer asks. Smith may have had close Italian ancestors. "But in America, particularly in an age bubbling with new immigrants, heritage is only partially derived from birth; it is also the product of experience and memory, community and upbringing." Smith did not have much contact with his hard-working father, who may have been Italian. "His mother raised him, shaped his views and his values, giving him roots in his Irish identity." Robert A. Slayton, *Empire Statesman: The Rise and Redemption of Al Smith* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 15.
28. O'Neill, *Man*, 23.
29. Farrell, 64.
30. O'Neill, *Man*, 5.
31. O'Neill, *All*, 57-58.
32. O'Neill, *Man*, 190.
33. O'Neill, *Man*, 195.
34. Farrell, 364.
35. Farrell, 289.
36. J. Anthony Lucas, *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families* (New York: Vintage, 1986 [1985]).
37. Farrell, 620.
38. Farrell, 503.
39. Kenny, 71.
40. Farrell, 112.
41. Farrell, 114.
42. Farrell, 187.
43. Farrell, 519-520.
44. Farrell, 5.
45. Farrell, 261.
46. O'Neill, *Man*, 28.
47. O'Neill, *Man*, 37.
48. Jack Beatty, *The Rascal King: the Life and Times of James Michael Curley (1874-1958)* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1992), 248.
49. Farrell, 65.
50. Farrell, 167.
51. O'Neill, *Man*, 118-120).
52. O'Neill, *Man*, 76.
53. O'Neill, *Man*, 169. Farrell, 4.
54. Farrell, 425.
55. Farrell, 422.
56. Farrell, 193.
57. Farrell, 261.
58. O'Neill, *Man*, 362. Farrell, 658.
59. O'Neill, *Man*, 196.
60. Farrell, 675.
61. O'Neill, *Man*, 6.
62. O'Neill, *Man*, 378.



