“All Politics Is Local” and Global

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Massachusetts Congressman Thomas Phillip “Tip” O’Neill Jr. was an audacious liberal who graced American politics for half a century. At the risk of losing his political career in 1967, O’Neill rose to national prominence when he became the first Democratic member of the House of Representatives to publicly oppose President Lyndon B. Johnson on the Vietnam War (Britannica). O’Neill was the epitome of political courage, having faced extreme criticism from his constituents and opposition from the President of the United States himself during a perilous era in American history. This charismatic Irishman’s role in ending the war is an untold story. O’Neill was an indispensable voice for Vietnam War opposition, initiating a public movement against the war.

In 1964, North Vietnamese forces allegedly fired upon American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin in Vietnam. President Johnson asked Congress for permission to increase military forces to stop Communist aggression in Southeast Asia. O’Neill hesitated to vote for Johnson’s Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which increased troop involvement, ultimately escalating the Vietnam War (Milestones).

John McCormack, Speaker of the House, advised O’Neill not to oppose the resolution, stating, “You’ll be seen as a traitor to your country” (O’Neill 190). Conflicted, O’Neill supported the bill, feeling a responsibility to back the Democratic president. The
resolution passed 417 to 0 (Farrell 208). O’Neill reflected: “Of all the votes I cast during thirty-four years in the House of Representatives, the only one I really regret had to do with Vietnam, on August 6, 1964” (O’Neill 189).

An astounding moment in O’Neill’s life happened when the U.S. intelligence community made O’Neill a “clandestine back channel to Congress” to convey the agency’s opposition to Johnson’s war strategy (Farrell 226). Agency analysts presented O’Neill with classified information about the dire reality of the war, deeming it “unwinnable”. Here O’Neill stood with top intelligence experts confessing to him the unavoidable outcome of a war they were “powerless to end” (Farrell 228). They sought O’Neill’s assistance to stop the war.

O’Neill grew uncertain over the war. He feared his working class-families would be upset if he joined the “long-haired college students” who opposed the President’s agenda (Farrell 228). However, by September 1967, O’Neill confronted his constituents and President Johnson by publicly opposing the war. As “a citizen, a congressman, and a father,” O’Neill believed America was “paying too high a price in both human lives and money” and he radically split from the Johnson administration (O’Neill 195). O’Neill wasn’t intimidated by the fact that many politicians who were seen as soft on national defense lost re-election because his “desire to win or maintain a reputation for integrity and courage was stronger than his desire to maintain his office” (Kennedy 249). Of O’Neill’s regular constituents, a mere fifteen percent opposed the war. O’Neill signed his “political death warrant” by challenging the status quo (O’Neill 195).
In spite of immense opposition, O’Neill remained outspoken on the issue. A survey of 251 Congressional Democratic Districts found that ninety five percent of these districts supported the war (Farrell 216). His bold position was precarious; Many of O’Neill’s constituents who had relatives in Vietnam felt betrayed by him. O’Neill’s shift in position was noted as the most significant political change of all by the Congressional History of the Vietnam War (Farrell 243).

O’Neill’s changing position prompted headlines across the nation. The Washington Star read: "Member of the establishment splits with Leadership- Closest friend to Speaker McCormack Leaves the Administration” (Fry 139). Politicians on both sides of the aisle were shocked by O’Neill’s decision. President Johnson order O’Neill to the White House to hold a meeting. Johnson declared to his longtime friend, “Tip, what kind of son of a bitch are you? You, of all people!”(O’Neill 197). O’Neill reciprocated, “In my heart and in my conscience I believe your policy is wrong” (O’Neill 198).

President Johnson recognized that O’Neill was the first Democratic party member who opposed the war and he didn’t want O’Neill to “start the snowball rolling” (O’Neill 199). As John Kennedy professes in Profiles in Courage, intrepid politicians “cannot permit the pressures of party responsibility to submerge on every issue the call of personal responsibility” (Kennedy 29). The fact that O’Neill challenged President Johnson, a personal friend, proves that O’Neill prioritized his personal responsibility to stop the war over allegiance with fellow Democrats. O’Neill wrote that he made a commitment “to make the rough and unpleasant decisions as they came [and] to speak
out at times when remaining silent may be easier” (Farrell 240).

In 1969, a rising number of legislators disagreed with the Vietnam War. Due to an unrecorded teller voting system in the House, legislators could easily “sit on the fence” with their war votes (O’Neill 205). This was “an era when congressmen did what the leadership asked, and only a handful of Democratic lawmakers resisted the pressure” (Clift). O’Neill resisted pressure and sponsored the Unrecorded Teller Voting Bill, which made congressmen accountable for their votes. Consequently, the public discovered the mounting House votes on amendments against the war. In 1970, the bill passed thanks to O’Neill’s perseverance, stirring overwhelming war opposition.

In 1973, the House stopped funding the Vietnam War. Later, an author on the Vietnam War told O’Neill:

“More than any other person, you’re responsible for bringing the war to an end. There was your break with Johnson, your educating of your Democratic colleagues, ... and your role in putting an end to unrecorded teller voting.”

(O’Neill 206)

Tip O’Neill is the antagonist in a story of political courage, prompting international peace based on morals, not on partisanship in the face of adverse factions. Serving the public interest and advocating to end the Vietnam War, O’Neill stood by his nation, promoting peace instead of doing what was expedient. John Kennedy mentions,
“only the very courageous will be able to take the hard and unpopular decisions” and O’Neill did so by challenging obstacles and freeing himself from conformity (Kennedy 34). Fulfilling a lifetime of public service, Massachusetts Congressman O’Neill had a willingness to make difficult decisions on ideological crises, making one of the greatest political leaders of the late-twentieth century. His devotion to better American lives is a timeless lesson of selflessness and political courage.
Bibliography:


