

Reagan's Real Catholics vs. Tip O'Neill's Maryknoll Nuns: Gender, Intra-Catholic Conflict, and the Contras[†]

A story circulates among Washington insiders that during a meeting about funding the contras, the counterrevolutionaries in Nicaragua who sought to overthrow the government, President Ronald Reagan grew frustrated with Democrat Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, Speaker of the House of Representatives. Reagan reminded O'Neill that his views were supported by intelligence from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). "Well," quipped O'Neill, "my information is much more accurate than that. I get mine from nuns."¹ O'Neill, a Catholic, sought the counsel of Maryknoll Sisters, the oldest U.S. missionary order of nuns, in framing his views of Central America. Whether the two men had this precise exchange is less important than what the story's existence indicates: Washington insiders held the perception that O'Neill depended on nuns for his understanding of Central America and that he considered the women to be better sources of information than U.S. intelligence. Though in the mid-1980s many in the United States and international press characterized O'Neill's reliance on Maryknoll Sisters as unusual and silly,² to conservative Catholics the connection between the speaker and the Sisters was powerful, even dangerous. O'Neill was already persona non grata in conservative Catholic circles because he refused to be a vocal pro-life advocate.³ When he associated himself with the Maryknoll Sisters, O'Neill legitimized the

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1. Timothy A. Byrnes, *Reverse Mission: Transnational Religious Communities and the Making of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC, 2011), 100.

2. See "Where the Top Figures Turn for Advice," *U.S. News & World Report*, May 20, 1985; Michael White, "US Backs 'Non-Lethal' Private Aid for Contras," *Guardian* (London), May 2, 1986; Joshua Muravchik, "Why the Democrats Lost," *Commentary*, January 1985; David Rogers and David Ignatius, "The Contra Fight: How CIA-Aided Raids In Nicaragua in '84 Led Congress to End Funds," *Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 1985; Editorial, "In Praise of Tip O'Neill," *Wall Street Journal*, May 10, 1985; Editorial, "The O'Neill Doctrine," *Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 1985; Jeffery L. Sheler et al., "Out of the Pulpit, Into the Streets; Church Activists Are on the March," *U.S. News & World Report*, April 21, 1986; Richard E. Cohen, "Getting Religion," *National Journal*, September 14, 1985.

3. See Patrick Reilly, "House Speaker O'Neill Is Under Close Scrutiny," *National Catholic Register*, October 29, 1978, criticizing O'Neill for doing "nothing to help this country's unborn children" despite his position as speaker.

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women's opposition to U.S. policy and their view of what being Catholic meant. Scholars have noted this connection, but have failed to explore what it reveals about the relationship between gender and religious identity, and the conduct of U.S. foreign relations.⁴

O'Neill's decision to oppose U.S.-Nicaragua policy based on Maryknollers' advice led the Reagan administration and its supporters to question O'Neill's authenticity as a Catholic and his masculinity. Non-Catholics, including the president, argued that true Catholics backed Reagan's contra policy because, as they incorrectly asserted, the pope supported U.S. policy. While 25 years earlier presidential candidate John F. Kennedy faced questions about his primary loyalty as a Catholic, Reagan and his allies promoted the stereotype that Catholics should fall in line behind the pope. Catholics' loyalty to Rome was no longer a liability but a true test of being a patriotic American. Likewise, the Maryknoll Sisters were bad nuns for failing to obey those among the male Church hierarchy who supported the contra cause. By opposing U.S.-Nicaragua policy, the Maryknoll Sisters challenged the shared male culture, or "imperial brotherhood," of the U.S. foreign policy establishment and of the Catholic Church.⁵ By analyzing the interconnectedness of gender and religious critiques of Maryknollers, this article builds on scholarship that examines how U.S. policymakers used gender and religious stereotypes to assess potential Cold War allies.⁶

I argue that an analysis of gendered discourse about both Tip O'Neill and the Maryknoll Sisters reveals how intra-Catholic conflict overlapped with and shaped U.S.-Nicaragua relations. Emily Rosenberg has proposed that "discourses related to gender may provide deeper understanding of the cultural assumptions from which foreign policies spring."⁷ Catholics' gendered critiques of O'Neill and Maryknollers were the connective tissue that linked their concerns about the direction of U.S.-Nicaragua policy and of the Church. At their heart, these

4. Many mention the O'Neill-Maryknoll connection, but do not explore it in detail. See William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000), 454-55; Roger Peace, *A Call to Conscience: The Anti-Contra War Campaign* (Amherst, MA, 2012), 82-83; Robert Surbrug, Jr., *Beyond Vietnam: The Politics of Protest in Massachusetts, 1974-1990* (Boston, MA, 2009), 229-30; Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (Chicago, IL, 1996), 381; Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987* (New York, 1987), 225; Dana L. Robert, "The Influence of American Missionary Women on the World Back Home," *Religion and American Culture* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 74; Byrnes, *Reverse Mission*, 98-100. Byrnes discusses how Maryknollers' information impacted O'Neill's views.

5. I borrow from Robert Dean's claim that a shared culture of manhood - "imperial brotherhood" - influenced the Kennedy and Johnson administrations' decision to escalate U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst, MA, 2001).

6. Andrew Jon Rotter, *Comrades at Odds: The United States and India, 1947-1964* (Ithaca, NY, 2000); Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957* (Durham, NC, 2006).

7. Emily Rosenberg, "Gender," *Journal of American History* 77, no. 1 (June 1990): 119.

gender-based critiques were about who could fight the Cold War, shape U.S. foreign policy, and define what it meant to be Catholic. Reagan and his non-Catholic allies adopted this gendered language because conservative Catholics influenced U.S. policy and because Reagan sought conservative Catholic support. As this article shows, both supporters and opponents of Reagan's Nicaragua policy employed gendered discourse: conservative and liberal Catholics, Catholics and non-Catholics, and U.S. and Nicaraguan Catholics.

Throughout the debate over contra funding, Reagan officials and their allies critiqued the Maryknollers' presence in foreign policy debates by relying on two different caricatures of the nun. At times, contra supporters evoked images of the nun as "an immature, incompetent, asexual being that floats around in medieval dress and has little knowledge of life in the real world."⁸ They argued that nuns were well-intentioned but naïve, child-like creatures subject to communist manipulation. They contended Maryknollers critiqued U.S. actions in Central America, condemned the contras, and supported liberation theology, because they did not understand what they were saying. The women were communist puppets, not real nuns or real Catholics. Those who followed Maryknollers' advice, like Tip O'Neill, were not authentic Catholics or true Americans either. At other times, Reagan officials and their allies evoked images of the nun as the "stern school marm."⁹ Nuns were powerful, but only regarding their influence over Catholic schoolchildren. In heeding Maryknollers' advice, Tip O'Neill was not a man, but a child blindly following nuns' orders presumably as he did in parochial school. Rather than defend Maryknollers, conservative Catholics used these tropes, revealing how intertwined their concerns about the Church and U.S.-Nicaragua policy were.

O'Neill's reliance on the Maryknoll Sisters attracted attention and derision because their relationship concerned U.S.-Nicaragua policy and because of what Maryknoll signified. In 1979, the Sandinistas overthrew Anastasio Somoza, member of the ruling family who had governed Nicaragua since 1936 with U.S. support. As a presidential candidate, Reagan warned of the Nicaraguan revolution spreading. His party's platform condemned "the Marxist Sandinista take-over of Nicaragua and the Marxist attempts to destabilize El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras."¹⁰ Like Reagan, conservative Catholics regarded Central America as part of the U.S. sphere of influence. But to them, the Sandinista revolution also threatened traditional Catholicism.

U.S. Catholics cared about Nicaragua not simply because it was predominantly Catholic, but also because they believed the country was key to the Church's future. The Nicaraguan revolution incorporated Christian principles and included

8. Cynthia Glavac, *In the Fullness of Life: A Biography of Dorothy Kazel, O.S.U.* (Denville, NJ, 1996), 24.

9. Bruce Buursma, "Where Are the Nuns?" *Chicago Tribune*, April 19, 1981.

10. Republican Party Platform of 1980, July 15, 1980, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25844> (accessed July 10, 2014).

many Catholics who supported liberation theology.¹¹ To its proponents, liberation theology stressed the poor's liberation from societal injustice through consciousness-raising. To its detractors, liberation theology was communism because it drew on Marxist ideas about developing consciousness among the poor.¹² U.S. conservative Catholics feared that liberation theology would infect the U.S. Church, especially via missionaries returning from Central America.¹³ To these Catholics, the fate of the Church and the United States was at stake.

It also mattered that O'Neill relied on Maryknollers. As the first U.S.-based missionary order of priests and nuns, Maryknoll held a unique place within the U.S. Catholic community. During the 1950s, Maryknollers cooperated with the CIA's and the State Department's anticommunist efforts. To many Catholics in the 1950s, incarcerated Maryknollers in China were model patriots, Catholics, and anti-communists.¹⁴ But in the 1960s, Catholics divided over the civil rights movement and Vatican II, the worldwide council of Catholic bishops running from 1962 to 1965 that brought sweeping reform.¹⁵ These divides deepened with the Vietnam War. At the same time, Maryknollers serving in Latin America began to question U.S. foreign policy. By the 1970s, the order challenged covert CIA interventions in Latin America and the agency's use of missionaries for intelligence purposes.¹⁶ Perhaps Maryknollers' most controversial position was their support for Somoza's overthrow. When Salvadoran National Guardsmen raped and murdered two Maryknollers, another nun, and a lay missionary in December 1980, conservative Catholics suggested that the women brought violence upon themselves because Maryknoll had abandoned its anti-communism. To more liberal Catholics, by contrast, the churchwomen were martyrs whose deaths symbolized an immoral U.S. foreign policy that supported and armed the Salvadoran security forces.¹⁷

Although the press portrayed the battle over contra funding as one between O'Neill and Reagan, the debate was much more than an executive versus legislative branch conflict or a Republican versus Democratic one. The two men represented two opposing camps in Catholic fights over the Church's direction. By following

11. Michael Dodson and Laura Nuzzi O'Shaughnessy, *Nicaragua's Other Revolution: Religious Faith and Political Struggle* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1990).

12. C.f. John Coleman, "Sea Change 'Liberated' Theology," *National Catholic Reporter*, February 17, 1979 and Paul A. Fisher, "Liberation Theology: Subversion of Church and State," *Wanderer*, April 9, 1981.

13. See William F. Buckley, "Maryknollers vs. Christianity," *National Review*, July 10, 1981.

14. Penny Lernoux, Arthur Jones, and Robert Ellsberg, *Hearts on Fire: The Story of the Maryknoll Sisters* (Maryknoll, NY, 1993), 16, 126; Angelyn Dries, *The Missionary Movement in American Catholic History* (Maryknoll, NY, 1998), 161.

15. John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago, IL, 1996), 162.

16. Dries, *The Missionary Movement in American Catholic History*, 230; Charles Curry, "Various Reflections on CIA Missionary Issues," January 30, 1976, folder "1976," box 98, U.S. Catholic Mission Association (hereafter USCMA), Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, New York.

17. C.f. William F. Buckley, "Murder Outside the Cathedral," *National Review*, March 6, 1981 and Penny Lernoux, "In the 1980s as in the 1970s, 'Martyrdom' Routine for Latin American Church," *National Catholic Reporter*, January 9, 1981.

Maryknollers' assessment of the region, O'Neill elevated what conservative Catholics regarded as communist sympathy among Catholics. Likewise, the non-Catholic Reagan promoted the conservative Catholic viewpoint. The Reagan administration's use of conservative Catholic language was not simply propaganda. Rather, for many Catholics within and tied to the administration, such as White House Communications Director Patrick J. Buchanan and Republican Congressman Henry Hyde (IL), their fervent anti-communism and opposition to the Sandinista government reflected their religious and political outlooks.

Intra-Catholic conflict shaped Reagan's Nicaragua policy. Reagan appointed several conservative, staunchly anticommunist Catholics, such as CIA Director William Casey, Secretary of State Alexander Haig, Ambassador at-large Vernon Walters, and two national security advisors, Richard Allen and William Clark, who played instrumental roles in shaping U.S.-Central America policy.¹⁸ Their religious and political views were indistinguishable when it came to communism. As journalist Carl Bernstein explains, these men "saw their Church as the crucible of anti-Communist conviction. Like Reagan, their basic view of the Marxist-Lenin canon was theological: Communism was *spiritually* evil."¹⁹ With Reagan, these conservative Catholics had a platform to push their religious and political views. At the same time, Reagan and his allies took advantage of Catholic divides to sell contra policy.

This examination of intra-Catholic conflict in debates over U.S.-Nicaragua policy challenges scholarship that stresses evangelical Protestants' influence on Reagan.²⁰ The typical account of Catholicism and Reagan foreign policy centers on the Polish Solidarity movement or the U.S. Catholic bishops' 1983 pastoral letter that condemned the nuclear arms race and the country's refusal to rule out initiating nuclear war.²¹ Though scholars and Reagan administration officials have stressed the White House's preoccupation with communism, they have not analyzed how Catholicism may have shaped administration policy.²² Some works list the Catholic affiliation of numerous Reagan officials, but

18. Gary Scott Smith, *Faith and the Presidency: From George Washington to George W. Bush* (Oxford, 2006), 340.

19. Carl Bernstein, *His Holiness: John Paul II and the History of Our Time* (New York, 1996), 262 (emphasis in original).

20. Walter Russell Mead, "God's Country?" *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 5 (September/October 2006): 24-45; Smith, *Faith and the Presidency*; Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*, 1st ed. (New York, 2006).

21. See Smith, *Faith and the Presidency*; Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York, 2012), 591-93. Smith focuses on social concerns, such as abortion and school vouchers. Preston's discussion of the 1983 pastoral is his most in-depth of Catholic opposition to Reagan policies and the only time he notes White House efforts to enlist conservative Catholics to counter Catholic opposition.

22. Michael Schaller, *Reckoning with Reagan: America and Its President in the 1980s* (New York, 1992); Joseph E. Persico, *Casey: From the OSS to the CIA* (New York, 1990); Alexander Meigs Haig, *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy* (New York, 1984).

few attempt to connect officials' faith to their foreign policy outlook.²³ Likewise, scholarly works about U.S. foreign policy toward Central America do not discuss how Catholicism impacted the Reagan White House's understanding of the region or the administration's use of religion to promote its policies.²⁴

An analysis of intra-Catholic conflict provides a more nuanced view of religion's role in the Cold War. Existing scholarship prioritizes inter-religious conflict by contending that U.S. policymakers' stereotypes of non-Christian religions shaped U.S. foreign policy or by highlighting how the United States contrasted itself with godless communism.²⁵ Scholars have more recently examined religion and the Cold War beyond the United States and Soviet Union and an understanding of the conflict between Judeo-Christianity and atheism.²⁶

TIP AND NUNS

In revealing O'Neill's reliance on Maryknollers in September 1984, *New York Times* reporter Philip Taubman suggested that the speaker was a bad Catholic for listening to the women. Taubman characterized Maryknollers as out of step with the Catholic Church. As the reporter explained, "While some members of Congress base their foreign policy positions on elaborate briefings by aides, consultation with colleagues or public opinion polling of their constituents, Mr. O'Neill depends on the activist nuns and priests to help shape his views on Central America." Taubman then inaccurately contended, "the church hierarchy has not been outspoken" on Central America policy, suggesting that the "activist" nuns and priests acted neither appropriately nor in accordance with Church hierarchy.²⁷

23. Woodward, *Veil*, 36, 127, 130; Bernstein, *His Holiness*, 8, 11, 261-62, 320, 355; Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith*, 583, 586-87. Woodward highlights Casey's Catholicism. Bernstein discusses how the faith of Catholics in the administration shaped their foreign policy views and aided U.S.-Vatican relations. Preston lists Reagan's many Catholic appointees and notes how Casey's faith contributed to his push to help Afghanistan. Preston briefly notes Casey's fervent Catholic anticommunism as inspiring his support for Polish and Nicaraguan "freedom fighters."

24. John H. Coatsworth, *Central America and the United States: The Clients and the Colossus* (New York, 1994); LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*; Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, 1st ed. (New York, 1983); Betsy Cohn and Patricia Hynds, "The Manipulation of the Religious Issue," in *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua*, ed. Thomas W. Walker (Boulder, CO, 1987); Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, the President, and Central America, 1976-1993*, 2nd ed. (University Park, PA, 1993).

25. Rotter, *Comrades at Odds*; Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*; William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment* (New York, 2008); Dianne Kirby, "Divinely Sanctioned: The Anglo-American Cold War Alliance and the Defence of Western Civilization and Christianity, 1945-48," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 4 (July 2000): 385-412; Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle Against Communism in the Early Cold War* (New York, 2011).

26. See Philip E. Muehlenbeck, ed., *Religion and the Cold War: A Global Perspective* (Nashville, TN, 2012).

27. Philip Taubman, "The Speaker and His Sources on Latin America," *New York Times*, September 12, 1984.

In justifying his confidence in Maryknollers and his opposition to the contras, O'Neill argued that the missionaries' perspective was more accurate because it was not politically motivated. As he told Taubman, "I have great trust in that order. When the nuns and priests come through, I ask them questions about their feelings, what they see, who the enemy is, and I'm sure I get the truth. I haven't found any of these missionaries who aren't absolutely opposed to this policy."²⁸ In his 1987 autobiography, O'Neill elaborated, "People often ask me where my passion about Central America comes from. In fact, I have a special source—the Maryknoll priests and nuns, who are there as missionaries and health care workers. These people don't care about politics; their only concern is the welfare of the poor. And I haven't met one of them who isn't completely opposed to our policy down there."²⁹ With these remarks, O'Neill could have been arguing that these religious sought to live out their faith, not pursue political goals, or that given their status as priests and nuns, they were incapable of thinking in political terms.

Although the press and O'Neill cited Maryknollers as the reason he opposed Reagan's policies, his biographer contends it was not the only reason. Other explanations included the Vietnam War and Eddie Kelly, one of O'Neill's friends from Cambridge, Massachusetts. Kelly went to Nicaragua as a Marine in the 1920s during the U.S. military intervention. When O'Neill asked why the Marines were there, Kelly responded, "We're taking care of the property and rights of United Fruit."³⁰ On at least one occasion, O'Neill publicly mentioned Eddie Kelly as a reason for his opposition to U.S.-Nicaragua policy, yet the Reagan administration and its allies focused on O'Neill's ties to Maryknollers and on one Sister in particular: Peggy Healy. O'Neill connected with Peggy Healy, his main source on Nicaragua, through his Aunt Annie. Aunt Annie, or Sister Eunice, entered Maryknoll in 1920 and died in 1981. O'Neill maintained contact with his aunt no matter where she served, including her time in China. As he wrote in 1987, "I continue to be inspired by her convictions."³¹ Aunt Annie visited O'Neill's office to share her experiences abroad, and she encouraged other Maryknollers to do so.³² Peggy Healy continued this Maryknoll connection with legislator O'Neill after Sister Eunice's death.

Healy kept the speaker informed about Nicaragua by sending him materials and by visiting him whenever she was in the United States.³³ From Long Island, New York, Healy served as a health worker and assisted Christian base communities outside Managua from 1975 to June 1978. Though she initially returned to the United States for a year of studies focused on theology and economics, she stayed

28. Ibid.

29. Tip O'Neill and William Novak, *Man of the House: The Life and Political Memoirs of Speaker Tip O'Neill*, 1st ed. (New York, 1987), 370.

30. John A. Farrell, *Tip O'Neill and the Democratic Century* (Boston, MA, 2001), 612.

31. O'Neill and Novak, *Man of the House*, 370.

32. "Who Fooled Tip," *Crisis*, June 1, 1989.

33. Byrnes, *Reverse Mission*, 99.

until 1981. During that time Healy worked with church and human rights organizations, including the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA). WOLA monitored how U.S. policy impacted human rights in Latin America, yet its critics decried the organization as “an apologist for the Sandinistas.”³⁴ Healy organized fact-finding missions for journalists and Congress members. She also spoke to congressional representatives and staff.³⁵

Healy's congressional testimony and public writings offer insight into the advice she gave O'Neill. She criticized U.S. support for Somoza, highlighted Latin Americans' negative perceptions of U.S. power, and questioned communism as the source of the region's turmoil. In testifying before Congress on WOLA's behalf in September 1979, just two months after the Sandinista revolution, Healy pushed for economic aid. Though she acknowledged that WOLA previously opposed both economic and military aid, she contended that U.S. support for the new Nicaraguan government would help the war-torn country rebuild and have “the potential for reversing the U.S. image in Nicaragua.” As Healy explained, “Having backed Somoza for so long, the United States now has a moral obligation to undo the damage wrought in the war to oust him.”³⁶

In the press, Healy urged Americans to look beyond communism as a source of Central America's problems. In a 1980 *Newsday* op-ed, she criticized Americans' tendency to see “the false specter of Cuban subversion” while overlooking the hunger, sickness, and joblessness that plagued the region. Healy saw the Senate Budget Committee's decision to freeze government spending, including aid for Nicaragua, as a missed opportunity. As she contended, it was another example of “the extraordinary case of myopia which has afflicted this country in its dealings with Nicaragua and with Central America as a whole.” Instead, the United States should help Nicaragua rebuild its economy and in the process, “be on the right side for once in Latin America.”³⁷

34. *Foreign Assistance and Related Programs Appropriations for 1980: Hearings before a subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations*, Subcommittee on Foreign Operations and Related Programs, House Committee on Appropriations, 96th Cong., 153, 164 (1979); Roger Fontaine, “Accuracy, Balance of WOLA Found Lacking By Its Critics,” *Washington Times*, April 10, 1985, folder 45 “WOLA,” box 22, David Jessup Papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

35. Washington Office on Latin America, “You are cordially invited to hear Sister Peggy Healy MM talk about Current Events in Nicaragua,” folder 2 “Nicaragua – Background & Briefing Reports, 1978-1984,” box 19, Kirk O'Donnell Files (hereafter KOD), Thomas P. O'Neill Papers, John J. Burns Library, Boston College (hereafter ONP).

36. *Foreign Assistance and Related Programs Appropriations for 1980*, House Committee on Appropriations, 154, 157.

37. Margaret Healy, “A Lost Opportunity for Nicaragua – and for Us,” *Newsday*, March 19, 1980, folder 13 “MSA/OSC/Nicaragua Insurrection 1979,” box 1-Office of Social Concerns, Maryknoll Sisters (hereafter MSA), Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, New York. Despite O'Neill's reliance on Healy, his files contain only two examples of their correspondence. The Maryknoll archives do not contain Healy's correspondence because she left the order. Letter, Peggy Healy to Tip O'Neill, December 1981, folder 7 “KOD, Nic – Correspondence, Memos and Press Releases, 1978-1986,” box 19, KOD, ONP; Letter, Tip O'Neill to Peggy Healy, December 10, 1984, folder 1 “KOD, Speaker's Correspondence, 1984,” box 10, KOD, ONP.

Looking back more than 20 years later, Healy described how her commitment to Central Americans motivated her actions. “Your job was not to change U.S. foreign policy because it was entirely unenlightened, although it was entirely unenlightened. Your job was to try to be a voice for people who were suffering because of it. It had to be changed because of the day-to-day results of it. Not once in a while, not in some vague way, but every single day it affected their survival. It needed to be changed and in the end that was the reason for why we did it.”³⁸

O’Neill’s decision to follow Maryknoll Sisters’ recommendations appears to have rested on the power of personal relationships and O’Neill’s life-long connection to and respect for nuns. In his autobiography, nuns loom over nearly every significant experience in O’Neill’s early life. O’Neill recognized some nuns’ stern attitude, yet he never strayed from a respectful tone. In describing his childhood, O’Neill noted that grammar school “discipline was pretty strict,” as “the nuns would hit you on the hand with a piece of rattan” for tardiness or failing to know catechism. At the same time, he observed, “All through my childhood, the nuns, knowing I didn’t have a mother, kept watch over me.” In high school, O’Neill went to his teacher Sister Agatha with his problems. Sister Agatha introduced O’Neill to Millie Miller, his future wife, “was responsible for getting” him into Boston College, and was instrumental in persuading him not to run for governor of Massachusetts.³⁹

Nuns played a prominent role in the speaker’s description of key political events. In 1928, fifteen-year-old O’Neill worked for Al Smith’s presidential campaign. Although he noted that his neighborhood supported Smith, a fellow Democrat and Irish-Catholic, O’Neill specifically mentioned nuns’ role. “The nuns in school were praying for his success, and they urged all of us to make sure that our parents were registered to vote.” O’Neill also described nuns’ involvement in the 1960 presidential race. While campaigning with John F. Kennedy in Missouri, O’Neill saw nuns standing outside of a Catholic school “holding their Kennedy signs.” In response, JFK said, “Stop the car” and then left to shake “hands with all the sisters.” As O’Neill wrote, “I loved him for it.”⁴⁰

O’Neill’s respect and affection for nuns and priests continued during his time in Congress from 1953 to 1987. When asked about their visits to the speaker’s office, O’Neill’s long-time personal secretary Eleanor Kelley “rolled her eyes at all the priests and nuns who dropped by over the years” as the speaker catered to their requests. Kelley noted how priests’ and nuns’ arrival at the office “shattered the speaker’s schedule” or prompted a lunch “with the handiest available aide.”⁴¹

While Tip O’Neill did not label nuns’ activities as political, Maryknollers and other Sisters participated in political discussions and in politics during the 1970s and 1980s. Beginning in the early 1970s, Maryknollers reached out to U.S.

38. Byrnes, *Reverse Mission*, 104–105.

39. O’Neill and Novak, *Man of the House*, 11, 20, 21.

40. *Ibid.*, 23, 170.

41. Farrell, *Tip O’Neill and the Democratic Century*, 431.

Catholics as part of their “reverse mission,” which included speaking to parishioners, appealing to U.S. bishops to take specific actions, and communicating through *Maryknoll* magazine.⁴² The practice grew out of Vatican II and by 1975, the order saw reverse mission as “an integral part” of its work.⁴³ Rather than just asking for financial support, Maryknollers invited U.S. Catholics to question U.S. actors’ role abroad. Other nuns, as shareholders, forced corporations to be more socially responsible.⁴⁴ Nuns held political office, including serving as a mayor in Iowa and as a legislator in Arizona. One also ran as the 1980 vice-presidential candidate for the Social Party, U.S.A.⁴⁵

Perhaps no political involvement by Sisters attracted more attention than the lobby NETWORK, founded in the early 1970s. Many original members served as missionaries or worked in poor areas of the United States. Although religious women comprised the majority of NETWORK’s members, the organization welcomed anyone to join. Members wrote letters, visited Congress members, and used “the media to focus on local social justice issues.” By the late 1970s, NETWORK contacts existed in half of the congressional districts.⁴⁶

Catholics contested the propriety of nuns’ involvement in NETWORK. In 1978, Representative Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) praised NETWORK’s “essential role in the efforts to extend the time for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment.” Besides the organization’s “truly professional lobbying skills,” Mikulski noted NETWORK’s “unique ability to bridge the gap between traditional Catholic values and contemporary issues.”⁴⁷ But to conservative Catholics, this behavior was naïve, uninformed, and inappropriate. An editorialist for the traditionalist Catholic newspaper the *Wanderer* claimed that “more could be done by one Sister in a classroom teaching what Catholic social principles truly are, than by the 200 nuns in Washington who have only the faintest notion about such principles.”⁴⁸ To him, NETWORK nuns were ignorant of politics and Church doctrine outside the schoolhouse, yet qualified to teach young Catholics Church doctrine within it. The response to NETWORK revealed opposition to nuns’ involvement in political issues before O’Neill disclosed his reliance on Maryknollers.

42. J. Bryan Hehir, “A View from the Church,” *Foreign Policy* 43 (Summer 1981): 86.

43. Gary MacEoin, “U.S. Mission Efforts Threatened by CIA ‘Dirty Tricks,’” *St. Anthony Messenger*, 1975, 34, folder “The CIA and Missionaries 1974-1976,” box 98, USCMA.

44. “Stinging Nuns: Sisters of Loretto Seeking Status as Shareholders of Record from Blue Diamond Coal Company,” *Time*, October 1, 1979.

45. John Dart, “Socialist Banner Carried by Nun,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1980.

46. Carol Coston, OP, “Network’s New Image” and Sally Thomas, SP, “Network Organizing,” *NETWORK* Newsletter, October 1978, folder 40, box 28-Outside Organizations, Network Newsletters, 1978-1981, Leadership Conference of Women Religious (hereafter LCWR), University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend, IN (hereafter UNDA).

47. Carol Coston, OP, “ERA Reflection,” *NETWORK* Newsletter, December 1978, folder 40, box 28 - Outside Organizations, Network Newsletters, 1978-1981, LCWR, UNDA.

48. Frank Morriss, “Network Nuns Need Course in Church’s Social Teaching,” *Wanderer*, July 15, 1976.

Although O'Neill first publicly opposed U.S.-Nicaragua policy in the spring of 1983, the critiques of him did not begin until he disclosed his association with Maryknoll Sisters. O'Neill generally supported Reagan's foreign policy; Central America was one of a "few key exceptions."⁴⁹ O'Neill gradually became an outspoken opponent of Reagan's Nicaragua policy, leading conservative columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak to describe O'Neill in April 1983 as "emerging as a behind-the-scenes power shadowing."⁵⁰ But by September 1984, a *New York Times* reporter wrote, "No one in Congress has been more caustically critical of the Reagan Administration's policies in Central America than the Speaker of the House, Thomas P. O'Neill."⁵¹

By focusing on the Maryknoll Sisters, the Reagan administration exposed its felt loss of control over its Central America agenda, especially given the large, religiously-inspired protest movement. The Reagan administration regarded "much of the church criticism as naïve or unfair," yet one senior administration official admitted that it was "the toughest nut we have to crack." Catholic missionaries provided firsthand experience, which as the *Wall Street Journal* alleged, gave them "a distinct air of authority and emotion" and added to their effectiveness as lobbyists.⁵² Even the State Department complained that O'Neill took Central America briefings from the Sisters, rather than its officials.⁵³ The speaker's trust in Maryknollers so infuriated Assistant Secretary of State Elliot Abrams that he described O'Neill's reliance on Sister Peggy Healy as "ludicrous" and "irresponsibly narrow."⁵⁴

The Maryknoll Sisters' participation in foreign policy debates also disrupted the image Reagan projected of himself as an exemplar of masculinity. Pointing to the 1979 Iranian and Nicaraguan revolutions, and the Iran hostage crisis, presidential candidate Reagan offered himself as providing strong U.S. global leadership in contrast to President Jimmy Carter's "weak" approach. Then, as president, Reagan turned first to Central America to demonstrate this U.S. strength. The Cold War required manly men to battle communism, as the government's antigay purges—the Lavender Scare—decades earlier demonstrated.⁵⁵ In this context,

49. Farrell, *Tip O'Neill and the Democratic Century*, 609, quoting Mike Deaver.

50. Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "A New Role for the Speaker," *Washington Post*, April 13, 1983, folder 6 "Nicaragua—Clipping, 1978-1985," box 19, KOD, ONP.

51. Taubman, "The Speaker and His Sources on Latin America."

52. Gerald F. Seib, "Catholic and Other U.S. Church Groups Oppose Reagan's Hard-Line Policy on Central America," *Wall Street Journal*, December 8, 1983, folder 4, box 22, Religious Task Force on Central America and Mexico Archives (hereafter RTFCAM), Maryknoll Mission Archives.

53. Mary McGrory, "Two Democrats: One Lost, One Found," *Washington Post*, February 7, 1988.

54. Farrell, *Tip O'Neill and the Democratic Century*, 613.

55. See Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood*; David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago, IL, 2004); Naoko Shibusawa, "The Lavender Scare and Empire: Rethinking Cold War Antigay Politics," *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 4 (September 2012): 723-52.

Reagan's foreign policy approach left no room for the Maryknoll Sisters, whose analysis of Central America challenged the factual substance of U.S. policy and Reagan's more "masculine" approach.

Several developments made O'Neill's opposition to U.S.-Nicaragua policy more problematic for Reagan in the fall of 1984. During the president's first term, Congress hampered his ability to pursue his foreign policy goals regarding Central America. In 1981, 29 Congress members sued Reagan, charging that his El Salvador policy violated the War Powers Resolution, which limited the president's power to send combat troops abroad without congressional authorization.⁵⁶ To maintain aid to El Salvador, Congress required that the president certify that the country was making progress regarding human rights, including investigating the churchwomen's murders. The next year, Congress passed the first Boland amendment, which prohibited the use of contra funding for overthrowing the Nicaraguan government. The amendment's namesake, Edward Boland (D-MA), was a Catholic and O'Neill's D.C. roommate while the two served in Congress.⁵⁷

The speaker's use of the Sisters for foreign policy information aggravated the government's fears that it was losing the public relations battle over the contras. In July 1983, Reagan called on the State Department to develop a public relations campaign to "relieve" congressional restrictions on U.S. aid to Central America, especially through the certification process and the Boland amendment.⁵⁸ Declassified government documents also reveal that the administration and its allies regarded public relations as key to gaining public support. As a private advertising agency explained to the contras' corporate arm, the Nicaraguan Development Council (NDC), in August 1984, "It is clear Nicaraguans are losing their freedom more because of words than because of bullets." Yet, the agency argued, the NDC had not found a way "to counter the Sandinistas, the liberal media, and the outlandish charges of political leaders like Tip O'Neill." In promoting its services, the agency concluded that without "a major public relations and lobbying campaign," the contras could not be successful.⁵⁹ Given that the battle for hearts and minds centered on public relations, any interpretation that challenged the administration's portrayal of Nicaragua threatened the president's program.

In the fall of 1984, the administration's problems increased as Congress ended aid to the contras and further circumscribed intelligence activities. In October, Congress immediately cut off contra funds after Republicans postponed the issue

56. *Crockett v. Reagan*, 588 F. Supp. 883 (D.D.C. 1982).

57. Arnson, *Crossroads*, 73-74, 109, 112; O'Neill and Novak, *Man of the House*, 146.

58. Memorandum, Ronald Reagan to William J. Casey, John W. Vessey, Caspar Weinberger, George Schulz, Central America: Public Affairs/Legislative Action Plan, c. July 12, 1983, Nicaragua Collection, Digital National Security Archives (hereafter DNSA).

59. Gray Orfila International, "Proposal to Nicaraguan Development Council for Intensive Public, Affairs/Public Relations Campaign in the United States - Cover Letter Attached," August 9, 1984, Iran-Contra Affair Collection, DNSA.

rather than risk a potentially bruising political fight a month before the 1984 presidential election.⁶⁰ As part of the compromise between the House and Senate, the White House could request additional funds on or after February 28, 1985, but any new funds required both chambers' approval. Also in October, Congress passed the second Boland amendment, which prohibited funds for "any agency or entity of the United States involved in intelligence activities" from being used to support "directly or indirectly, military or paramilitary organizations in Nicaragua."⁶¹ Part of the support for Boland II came from senators' frustration over the discovery that the CIA played a role in mining Nicaragua's harbors without fully briefing Congress and while publicly claiming the contras were responsible. Then, just days before the presidential election, the press reported on the *Freedom Fighters' Manual*, a CIA-issued comic book that advised the contras on psychological operations.⁶² The manual disputed administration claims that it did not seek to overthrow the Sandinistas.

The O'Neill-Maryknoll link also emerged during the 1984 presidential campaign, in which the first major-party female vice-presidential candidate, Geraldine Ferraro, highlighted the issue of women's ability to conduct foreign policy. Democratic presidential candidate Walter Mondale announced Ferraro as his running mate at the party's convention on July 12, 1984. Tip O'Neill, whom Ferraro described as playing the role of "mentor and father figure" to her, was instrumental in Ferraro's selection. As speculation began regarding whom Mondale would choose, the speaker announced his preference for Ferraro.⁶³ O'Neill asserted that Ferraro's gender and her faith made her uniquely qualified: "she's a woman, she's a Catholic and she's compassionate."⁶⁴ Just as criticism of the Maryknoll Sisters intensified as the debate about contra funding grew, so did criticism of Catholic Ferraro's qualifications for office as the election neared. As the *Washington Post* declared in September 1984, Ferraro's candidacy "reopened" the contentious debate over women's role in society and politics.⁶⁵

Views of Ferraro, like those of Maryknollers, vacillated between seeing her as a threatening figure to portraying her as a weak woman incapable of handling the job. Barbara Bush referred to Ferraro as "that \$4 million . . . I can't say it, but it rhymes with rich." Despite Bush's later claim that she meant "witch," George Bush's press secretary said Ferraro was "too bitchy." Reagan campaign manager Ed Rollins stated, "It's a macho game we play," when talking about Republicans'

60. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 45.

61. Amson, *Crossroads*, 178-79.

62. Central Intelligence Agency, "Freedom Fighters' Manual," c. October 1983, Nicaragua Collection, DNSA.

63. Farrell, *Tip O'Neill and the Democratic Century*, 644-45.

64. Mary McGrory, "Ferraro Could Make the Democrats' Ticket - Ruin the GOP's Day," *Washington Post*, June 28, 1984.

65. Bill Peterson, "Ferraro Candidacy Highlights Debate Over Women's Role," *Washington Post*, September 18, 1984.

descriptions of Ferraro. On the other hand, some reporters implied Ferraro's gender made her unable to do the job. During a vice-presidential debate Ferraro was asked, "Do you think in any way that the Soviets might be tempted to try to take advantage of you simply because you are a woman?" Three days later, *Meet the Press* co-moderator Marvin Kalb asked Ferraro if she could push the button. As a reporter reflecting on the exchange opined, "The assumption behind Mr. Kalb's question has to be that somehow a woman is less capable than a man of making the tough decisions about national security and defense."⁶⁶

But to conservative Catholics, it was Ferraro's status as a Catholic that presented a problem for the United States and the Church. They saw the pro-choice Ferraro as the poster child for what was wrong with the Catholic Church. The vice-presidential candidate personally opposed abortion, but she was against removing the option for others. For this stance, New York's Cardinal, John O'Connor, chastised Ferraro, along with Governor Mario Cuomo who shared her views. As O'Connor explained, he could not see "how a Catholic in conscience could vote for an individual explicitly expressing himself or herself as favoring abortion."⁶⁷ But to a *Wanderer* editorialist, the stakes were higher than the next election: "Geraldine Ferraro personifies to a high degree the Modernist rot which infects large segments of the Catholic Church in America today. By that I mean she manifests, in a clear and living manner, those characteristics which comprise the Modernist heresy."⁶⁸ Unlike JFK, Ferraro did not enjoy overwhelming Catholic support. Her status as a Catholic was not the issue; it was the *kind* of Catholicism she represented.

As the administration fought congressional opposition to its Nicaragua policy and as Americans debated women's ability to conduct foreign policy, contra supporters pounced on O'Neill's relationship with the Maryknoll Sisters. They stressed Maryknoll's danger and challenged O'Neill's masculinity and his standing as a Catholic. The *News-Sun* of Waukegen, Illinois, argued that O'Neill's "emotional" position was naïve and not well-reasoned. The editorial board challenged Maryknoll's Catholic authenticity by describing it as "radical-tinged." The paper noted that Maryknoll supported liberation theology, which the Vatican "condemned as Marxist," and equated the order's concern for the poor and oppressed with Marxism. Ultimately, the board characterized O'Neill as subject to the sway of naïve nuns who did not understand the realities of Central America.⁶⁹ In doing so, the paper implied that O'Neill was blindly following the stereotypical nun like a parochial schoolchild.

Conservative Catholics warned that O'Neill was the tip of the iceberg; Maryknoll was the real problem. As Michael Novak, Reagan's former

66. Sydney H. Schanberg, "George the Gender Bender," *New York Times*, October 20, 1984.

67. Timothy Byrnes, *Catholic Bishops in American Politics* (Princeton, NJ, 1991), 119.

68. Stanley Interrante, "Ferraro - The Personification of Modernist Hypocrisy," *Wanderer*, October 4, 1984.

69. Editorial, "One-Sided Advice," *News-Sun*, October 1, 1984.

Ambassador to the U.N. Human Rights Commission asserted, O'Neill's confidence in the Sisters demonstrated liberation theology's growing influence in the United States. Maryknollers who returned from Latin America infected U.S. Catholics with a communist doctrine that masqueraded as Catholicism. Even worse, Maryknollers brought liberation theology "to many Catholics in Congress," including the speaker.⁷⁰ In stressing Maryknollers' sway over Catholic politicians, Novak implied that Maryknoll simultaneously threatened to derail the Church and the nation.

Just as Novak warned, O'Neill was not the only Catholic Congressman who drew inspiration from the order. In a letter to *Maryknoll*, Representative James L. Oberstar (D-MN) described his life-long connection to Maryknoll and the community's impact on his work. "For years I have been reading *Maryknoll* at my parents' home in Chisholm, Minn." Its articles are "a bountiful and powerful insight into the problems of Third World countries and a constructive inspirational influence on my legislative work in Congress, particularly on the issues of Central America." In fact, Oberstar revealed, "I can truthfully say that my first inclination to visit El Salvador was inspired by articles in *Maryknoll* which brought home in a graphic and unforgettable way the cruel toll human rights abuses have exacted on an innocent civilian population."⁷¹

Besides persuading Congress members and other Catholics to oppose U.S.-Central America policy, Maryknoll became a bigger problem for the White House when contras kidnapped Sister Nancy Donovan. In January 1985, members of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), one of the two main contra groups, kidnapped 52-year old Donovan for six hours. After the ordeal, the missionary with 29 years of experience in Central America said of the contras, "It appears that they have directions to kill, to terrorize civilians."⁷² She also provided a list of contra atrocities against civilians and she criticized the U.S. government for funding them. Donovan explained that her faith and her patriotism prompted her to speak out. "As a Christian and as a U.S. citizen I am deeply pained by the fact that my government has been responsible for arming and training these forces which have caused the deaths of so many. I continue to join my voice and my prayer to that of the U.S. Catholic Bishops, and of the churches and faithful across the United States who have protested the U.S. government's covert war against Nicaragua, and who are calling for a peaceful solution to the conflict."⁷³ Upon her return to the United States, Donovan traveled

70. Michael Novak, "The Case Against Liberation Theology," *New York Times*, October 21, 1984.

71. James L. Oberstar, Letter to the Editor, *Maryknoll*, June 1986.

72. Steven Dozinger, "Kidnapped American Nun Blames US Govt," *UPI*, January 11, 1985.

73. Press Statement, Nancy Donovan, January 11, 1985, in Letter, Sr. Helene O'Sullivan to Tip O'Neill, January 18, 1985, folder 7 "KOD, Nic - Correspondence, Memos and Press Releases, 1978-1986," box 19, KOD, ONP.

the country speaking out against U.S. policy. Both she and Peggy Healy appeared on *The Phil Donabue Show*.⁷⁴

Accusations like Donovan's complicated the Reagan administration's ability to present itself as promoting human rights in Nicaragua, especially after the president admitted in late February that the United States sought to overthrow the Sandinista government. The stated policy was no longer to stop the flow of arms or to pressure the Sandinistas into negotiations. To sell its position, the administration pursued a two-track strategy. First, the White House argued that the contras defended Nicaraguans against the Sandinistas' human rights abuses. To underscore this point, on April 15 Reagan attended the dinner of the Nicaraguan Refugee Fund, which raised money for refugees and educated the U.S. public.⁷⁵ The event featured a photo-op between the president and a young "refugee," who was born in the United States to international civil servants.⁷⁶ Second, Reagan officials and their Catholic supporters questioned Donovan's standing as a Catholic and portrayed the contra cause as the true Catholic one. The task, however, was difficult because Donovan challenged the moral righteousness of U.S. policy. Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, the Maryknoll nun called U.S. contra aid "an evil, inhumane, and illegal policy." She also stressed that her motivation came from faith, not communist manipulation. As she clarified: "I do not owe my faith, convictions, nor my mission, to any ideology, economic or political system but to the life and message of Jesus Christ and the living tradition and teachings of the Catholic Church. Together with my Sisters in Maryknoll I have chosen to understand and interpret our world today in the spirit of the Gospel and from the point of view of the poor with whom we live and work."⁷⁷ Donovan disputed the president's claim that the contras were the moral equivalent of the Founding Fathers.

Because Donovan's experience gave her credibility and her status as a nun provided her with an air of moral authority, it fell to another Catholic—Henry Hyde—to challenge her. Hyde described his Catholicism as a "combative faith." Like many Catholic supporters of Reagan's Nicaragua policy, Hyde lamented what he saw as the "drift of the Activist Church in America," and he criticized Church leaders for this move "towards the secular Left." In particular, Hyde cited some Catholics' tolerance for liberation theology and their failure to "recognize communism as the mortal enemy of Christianity."⁷⁸ To Hyde, his faith was

74. Suzanne DeChillo, "Maryknoll Pursues Its Vision of Mission: Maryknoll Pursues Activist Mission," *New York Times*, March 31, 1985.

75. "Nicaraguan Refugee Fund," December 1984, folder "Nicaraguan Refugee Fund 1/22/85 (2)," box OA 1242, Robert Reilly Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA (hereafter RRPL).

76. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 419.

77. *U.S. Support for the Contras: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 99th Cong., 268-70 (1985).

78. Henry Hyde, "Ruminations of a Conservative Congressman," *Crisis*, September 1983, 46-47.

inseparable from his actions in Congress. As he noted, "I have great difficulty in justifying a sequestration or separation of public life from private life and private convictions." Hyde could not see how others could make such a distinction. "I find it hard to understand people who claim a religious affiliation, who claim to personally believe things but do not seek to implement their beliefs or act out their beliefs."⁷⁹ Through his questioning of Donovan, Hyde reiterated conservative Catholics' charge that Maryknoll was a religious and political problem. First, Hyde inferred that because Donovan criticized the contras, she supported the Sandinistas, whom he believed sought to corrupt the Church. Hyde pointed to Managua's *Iglesia Santa Maria de Los Angeles*, which featured a mural "of Christ as a guerrilla" behind the altar and ended all Sunday Masses with "Hate America," according to "a regular attendee." The political talk did not seem to bother Hyde, but rather the animosity toward the United States. Second, Hyde stressed what he saw as Maryknoll's questionable activities. Hyde noted that Maryknoll Father Miguel d'Escoto served as Nicaragua's foreign minister and that Maryknoll's press, *Orbis*, was the largest publisher of liberation theology works in the United States.⁸⁰

Besides Hyde, the White House used its own religious figure to undermine Donovan—Father Thomas Dowling. Oliver North of the National Security Council arranged for the priest to testify before Congress. Donned in Roman Catholic priestly garb, Dowling introduced himself as "a Catholic priest" even though he was a member of the Old Catholic Church, a sect not approved by the Vatican.⁸¹ Unlike Donovan, Dowling praised the contras. He stressed that they were Christian in an implicit contrast to the allegedly communist Sandinistas. As he explained, "The Contras are overwhelmingly religious. One sees tremendous artifacts of Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, tremendous amounts of Bibles, crucifixes, et cetera." Nor did the contras commit human rights abuses; it was Sandinistas dressed in contra uniforms. Although Dowling admitted that his knowledge came from what he heard at a press conference, no Congress member challenged him.⁸² The flimsiness of Dowling's testimony revealed the White House's desperation to counter the Catholic contra opposition.

The president himself implied that contra aid opponents were at odds with the Vatican and therefore, bad Catholics. In the midst of the congressional hearings, Reagan informed attendees at the Conference on Religious Liberty at the White House, "I just had a verbal message delivered to me from the Pope urging us to

79. Angela Grimm, "Henry Hyde-Conscience of the Congress," *Crisis*, March 1988, 16.

80. *U.S. Support for the Contras*, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 312.

81. Robert Parry and Peter Kornbluh, "Iran Contra's Untold Story," *Foreign Policy* 72 (Autumn 1988), 15. The Old Catholics formed in the late nineteenth century because they disagreed with some of Vatican I's changes, such as papal infallibility. *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Old Catholics," 2nd ed. (Detroit, MI, 2003).

82. House Committee, *U.S. Support for the Contras*, 304.

continue our efforts in Central America.”⁸³ The conference brought together 200 delegates from 17 countries.⁸⁴ The next day, Reagan said that Pope John Paul II “has been most supportive of all our activities in Central America,” yet both the Vatican and its U.S. ambassador denied any endorsement.⁸⁵

The tactic of accusing Catholic contra opponents of not being true Catholics likely came from a Catholic. Renowned conservative strategist Paul Weyrich, who had close connections to the White House, encouraged the argument as one of the nine “classic elements of strategy” he proposed conservative Catholics use to counter liberal Catholics’ claims. In training workshops sponsored by his Catholic Center for Free Enterprise, Strong Defense and Traditional Values (Catholic Center), Weyrich told attendees to label their Catholic opposition as people “who do not follow the pope” because doing so “takes the moral high ground away from them.”⁸⁶ The Catholic Center worked to combat the leftward tilt of Church leadership, including some leaders’ efforts “to turn Latin America into a communist satellite.”⁸⁷ Ironically, when employed by non-Catholics, Weyrich’s strategy turned on its head the old stereotype that Catholics placed their loyalty to Rome ahead of the United States.⁸⁸ Reagan and other non-Catholics criticized Catholics for *not* following the pope.

Reagan’s move to align himself with the pope revealed not only his desire to appeal to conservative Catholics, but also how respect for John Paul II transcended Catholics. In early 1984, the White House announced the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Vatican, which had been suspended since 1867. Although some challenged the move on First Amendment grounds, February 1984 Gallup polls suggested that most Americans approved because of Pope John Paul II. As Moral Majority Vice-President Ronald Godwin declared, Protestants’ traditional concerns “about recognizing the Vatican are no longer seen as relevant or as important as they did years ago.” Given “the important contribution that the Vatican and this Pope have made to world peace in the last several years, it seems to be an appropriate time in history to extend this recognition and to enhance his efforts.” Leaders from the National Association of Evangelicals and the Southern Baptist Convention echoed these sentiments. But others accused Reagan of more sinister motives. As the *Boston Globe* alleged, Reagan sought “to make an end run around the Catholic bishops

83. Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at a Conference on Religious Liberty,” April 16, 1985, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=38486> (accessed August 13, 2012).

84. “Conference Denounces Religious Persecution in the World,” *Wanderer*, May 2, 1985.

85. Sari Gilbert, “Vatican Disputes Reagan Statements,” *Washington Post*, April 19, 1985, folder 9, box 53, RTFCAM.

86. “Winning Strategy: Say Foes, ‘Don’t Follow Pope,’” *National Catholic Reporter*, August 3, 1984.

87. Casey Crandall, “Talented Priest Challenges Leftist Bishops,” *Conservative Digest*, August 1982, 8, folder 1 “IRD,” box 24, RTFCAM.

88. Perhaps no work post-World War II articulated this fear of Catholics following Rome more than Paul Blanshard’s *American Freedom and Catholic Power* (Boston, MA, 1949).

in the United States” who opposed his nuclear program and Central America policy.⁸⁹

Despite his efforts, Reagan lost the vote for aid in the House, leaving his Catholic allies to blame fellow Catholics, especially Maryknollers. In a letter on the final day of the hearings, Michael Novak shared his frustration with Henry Hyde: “A number of Congressmen have expressed to me their doubts about voting to cut off funds to the revolutionaries in Nicaragua, although they feel under pressure from activist Catholic clergy to do so.”⁹⁰ CIA Director William Casey was more specific; the problem was Maryknoll. As he remarked, “If Tip O’Neill didn’t have Maryknoll nuns who wrote letters, we would have a Contra program.”⁹¹ Casey’s conclusion was unsurprising, given his unflinching anticommunism, which reflected his conservative political and religious beliefs. As one friend explained, “Bill believed in the American flag, the Catholic Church, and nothing else.”⁹²

Two months later, on June 12, 1985, the House approved non-lethal aid to the contras for the first time. Several developments aided the administration’s cause. First, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega’s visit to the Soviet Union frustrated contra opponents’ claims that it was not a shared communist outlook, but U.S. behavior that drove the Sandinistas into Moscow’s arms. Second, Reagan sent a letter to Democratic Representative Dave McCurdy (OK) asserting that he desired a political solution in Nicaragua, that the United States did not seek the “military overthrow of the Sandinista government,” and that the United States condemned “in the strongest possible terms, atrocities by either side.” The letter provided an opening for Congress members to support Reagan for a reason other than intimidation. Unbeknownst to Congress, McCurdy and a pro-contra lobbyist wrote the letter for the president’s signature. Finally, Reagan successfully targeted Southerners, who comprised 21 of the 26 Democrats who switched sides on contra funding from April to June.⁹³

To mobilize congressional support, Reagan appealed to Southern notions of manhood, implicitly contrasting himself with O’Neill, who presumably exhibited a feminine weakness by relying on the Maryknoll Sisters. The White House engaged in a Southern “mediablitz” that, according to Tom Turnipseed, Southerner and staffer on George Wallace’s presidential campaigns, exploited “the most deep-seated and dangerous psycho-cultural flaw in white Southern manhood - a fear of defeat that dates back to Dixie’s greatest lost cause, the Civil War.” Although Congressmen were swayed by their “fear of dark-skinned

89. Marie Gayte, “I Told the White House If They Give One to the Pope, I May Ask for One”: The American Reception to the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the United States and the Vatican in 1984,” *Journal of Church and State* 54, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 4, 9–12, 23.

90. Letter, Michael Novak to Henry Hyde, April 18, 1986, folder 9, box 53, RTFCAM.

91. Woodward, *Veil*, 402.

92. Persico, *Casey*, 574.

93. Arnson, *Crossroads*, 198–200, 202.

hordes crossing the Rio Grande” and of upsetting defense contractors in their region, Turnipseed opined that the notion of Dixie manhood won the day for the president. For white Southern men, Turnipseed alleged, manhood since the Civil War meant not appearing afraid to fight. Playing on those fears, Reagan argued that Southern Congressmen who voted against the contras would be labeled “soft on communism.”⁹⁴ The success of Reagan’s gender-based campaign was surprising as polls from late May and early June revealed that Southerners cared little about Reagan’s Central America policy.⁹⁵

Reagan’s allies aided his efforts by attacking O’Neill’s masculinity and his standing as a Catholic. In his nationally syndicated column in June 1985, Moral Majority Vice-President Cal Thomas urged O’Neill to abandon his opposition to contra funding. After reminding readers that during a presidential debate Jimmy Carter revealed that he and his 12-year-old daughter Amy discussed nuclear weapons, Thomas charged that O’Neill “has gone Carter one better” by relying on Maryknoll nuns. Presumably to Thomas, the Sisters were more naïve than a 12-year old on foreign policy matters. Thomas described O’Neill as a “San Francisco Democrat,” a slur Republicans used to question a politician’s heterosexuality and suggest that he was weak on defense. Thomas also continued the trend of non-Catholics challenging Catholics’ fidelity to the Church. Like other contra supporters, Thomas implied that O’Neill was a bad Catholic for following the counsel of illegitimate Catholics: the Maryknoll Sisters.⁹⁶

Thomas and others, including the president, could challenge Maryknollers’ standing as nuns because the missionary Mother Teresa served as a high-profile alternative. The habit-wearing Mother Teresa was apolitical because she focused on poverty’s immediate effects, not its structural causes. In 1979, she won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work with India’s poor, bandaging the sick and caring for the dying. Though she was “the world’s best known Roman Catholic nun,” *Chicago Tribune* religion editor Bruce Buursma pointed out, Mother Teresa was “hardly typical of the 750,000 nuns scattered throughout the world” because “the watchword among international sisters increasingly is becoming political activism.” And, Buursma noted, Maryknollers were “[a]mong the chief symbols of

94. Tom Turnipseed, “Reagan Whistles Dixie’s Tune,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1985; Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics*, 2nd ed. (Baton Rouge, LA, 2000), 301, 392, 433.

95. William Hamilton, to Congressman Coehlo and blind-copied to Kirk O’Donnell, Memo Regarding the Survey of Southern Voters on U.S. Policy toward Nicaragua in Eleven Southern States, June 4, 1985, folder 3 “Nicaragua – Background & Briefing Reports, 1985,” box 19, KOD, ONP.

96. Cal Thomas, “O’Neill Listens to Wrong Voices on Nicaraguans,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, June 17, 1985; “Why Tip Opposes Contra Aid,” *Daily News* (Philadelphia, PA), June 14, 1985; “O’Neill’s Stance on Nicaragua Shows a Shallow Understanding,” *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester, NY), June 13, 1985; “O’Neill’s Stance on Nicaragua Shows a Shallow Understanding,” *Journal Star* (Peoria, IL), June 13, 1985.

this spirit.”⁹⁷ In the midst of battles over contra funding, Reagan honored Mother Teresa. In June 1985, he awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom—the nation’s highest civilian honor—and six months later, the White House hosted a showing of a documentary about her life.⁹⁸

Reagan further bolstered the contrast between him as tough and masculine and O’Neill as “emotional” by linking himself with the movie character Rambo. In 1985’s *Rambo: First Blood, Part II*, Rambo embarks on a top-secret mission to investigate POWs in Vietnam. He decides to rescue them himself, battling communist Vietnamese and Russians as well as corrupt U.S. officials in the process. A month after *Rambo*’s release, Reagan watched it at the White House while waiting to hear the fate of 39 U.S. hostages held in Lebanon. After learning of their release the president joked, “Boy, I saw Rambo last night. Now, I know what to do next time this happens.”⁹⁹ Three months later, Reagan quoted Rambo when discussing his tax plan: “In the spirit of Rambo, let me tell you, we’re going to win this time.”¹⁰⁰ In October 1985, fiction and reality came together when the president invited the film’s star Sylvester Stallone to a state dinner at the White House.¹⁰¹

Reagan’s friends and foes associated his Nicaragua policy with Rambo. Both U.S. and international press, including the *Wall Street Journal* and England’s *Observer*, connected the two men through headlines, such as “Rambo Rides High in Washington” and “Reagan Promise on Rebel Aid Has Signs of Rambo Rhetoric.”¹⁰² Critics of contra aid decried the president for his “Rambo tactics,” “Rambo-style intervention,” and “Rambo-like causes.”¹⁰³ Even the Soviet Union denounced Rambo as reflecting the bullying nature of the United States.¹⁰⁴ By contrast, Reagan’s Catholic supporters praised the movie character as a model for a strong United States post-Vietnam. As Phyllis Schlafly explained, “Rambo expresses the collective outrage of Americans that we let a two-bit backward

97. Bruce Buursma, “Internationally, the Fervor Is Political,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 19, 1981.

98. Remarks of the President at Presentation of Medal of Freedom to Mother Teresa, June 20, 1985, folder “Mother Teresa,” box OA 17958, Juanita Duggan Files, RRPL; Memo, Linda Chavez, Photo-Op With Mother Teresa, December 16, 1985, December 13, 1985, folder “Mother Teresa Film 12/16/85 (1 of 2),” box OA 17967, Carl Anderson Files, RRPL.

99. “Reagan: A Reel Glimpse of the Man Behind President,” *New York Times*, June 1, 2007; Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York, 2007), 339.

100. Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Santa-Cali-Gon Days Celebration in Independence, Missouri,” September 2, 1985, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1985/90285a.htm> (accessed June 5, 2013).

101. For a discussion of how Rambo reflected the “hard body” images of the Reagan years versus the “soft body” images of the Carter years, see Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1994), 13.

102. “Rambo Rides High in Washington,” *Observer* (London), March 30, 1986; Robert S. Greenberger, “Reagan Promise on Rebel Aid Has Signs of Rambo Rhetoric,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 3, 1986.

103. See Michael Hirsch, letter to the editor, *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 1985; Emergency Committee to End Contra Funding, advertisement, *New York Times*, March 17, 1986; Marianne Means, “Will Reagan Change in 1986?,” *Tri-State Defender* (Memphis, TN), March 5, 1986.

104. Vladimir Posner, “USA Acted Like a Bully’ Against Libya, Moscow,” BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, April 21, 1986.

country in Southeast Asia defeat us," how the United States "has allowed our POWs and MIAs to languish" and how "brainwashed U.S. citizens" spat on veterans and "called them 'baby-killers.'"¹⁰⁵ Supporters of U.S.-Nicaragua policy saw Rambo as such a role model that they implored Sylvester Stallone to attend a Miami rally for the contras. As Paul Weyrich wrote to Stallone, he hoped the *Rambo* star would appear "because of the roles you have played and the perception that you also are sympathetic to these roles." As additional incentive, Weyrich enclosed letters from Republican Senators Pete Wilson (CA) and Bob Dole (KS) asking Stallone to appear.¹⁰⁶ It is unclear if Stallone attended the rally, as press coverage does not mention him.

U.S. conservative Catholics were not the only ones who appropriated Rambo for the contra cause. Nicaraguan contra supporters living in the United States tried to use a sexualized image of Rambo mixed with Catholic symbols to attract U.S. support. Two Nicaraguan exiles paid \$4,000 for posters depicting a Nicaraguan woman, "Maria," wearing a wet t-shirt, holding an M-16 draped in a rosary. Behind her in the jungle were the words, "I love Nicaraguan Freedom Fighters." The plan was to sell the posters, along with a rosary, for \$5 to raise money for the contras. Rene Quiñones, the poster's producer, contra supporter, and Anastasio Somoza's former attorney, saw Comandante Maria as "our Ramba, representing Christ, sex appeal and *la lucha* [the struggle]." As he noted, the best shot "was when we wet the shirt so that her sex appeal could show through." To Quiñones, the poster brought together Nicaraguan and U.S. ideals. "Our Maria stands for a return to values, for Nicaragua and the American way." While contra supporters promoted Comandante Maria's sexuality to sell U.S. support for the contras, other Nicaraguan contra supporters described Comandante Maria as "inauthentic" and complained that she wore "nothing beneath her shirt."¹⁰⁷

MARYKNOLLERS VS. THE WHITE HOUSE AND ITS ALLIES

Though Reagan gained House support for non-lethal aid for the first time in June 1985, the president still faced a robust religious protest movement in which Maryknollers played a visible role. Besides Sisters Peggy Healy and Nancy Donovan, throughout 1985 and 1986 other Maryknollers encouraged people to arrange meetings with their congressional representatives and to send letters to

105. "Who Shapes U.S. Foreign Policy? Rambo and That 'Other War,'" *Phyllis Schlafly Report*, May 1986, Northwestern University Special Collections, Evanston, IL.

106. Letter, Paul Weyrich to Sylvester Stallone, May 1, 1986, Letter, Bob Dole to Sylvester Stallone, May 2, 1986, Letter from Pete Wilson to Mr. Stallone, April 30, 1986, attached to Memorandum, Eric Licht to Paul Weyrich, Freedom Fighters, May 2, 1986, folder 12 "Correspondence-1986," box 4, Paul M. Weyrich Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY.

107. Debbie Sontag, "A Revolt Over 'Ramba' Contra Poster: A Symbol or Sinful," *Miami Herald*, January 30, 1986.

local media explaining their opposition to contra aid.¹⁰⁸ In response, the administration shifted gears as non-Catholic supporters of contra aid promoted themselves as more concerned with the Church's fate than Catholic contra opponents. White House Communications Director and Catholic Pat Buchanan attacked contra opponents and targeted Maryknollers. In a *Washington Post* op-ed, "The Contras Need our Help," Buchanan challenged "San Francisco Democrats" to stand up to communism. He questioned their patriotism, arguing that they could either side with Reagan and freedom or Daniel Ortega and communism. Buchanan warned of the peril to Central America should Nicaragua fall to communism. He recounted the Sandinistas' crimes against their fellow Nicaraguans, which even Lenin's "useful idiots"—"liberated nuns and Marxist Maryknolls"—no longer could defend.¹⁰⁹ Buchanan's accusations that Democrats supported communism generated controversy, but scholars have overlooked how Buchanan singled out Maryknoll.¹¹⁰

Buchanan's reference to Maryknoll revealed how the order brought together conservative Catholics' fears of a wayward Catholic Church and a weak foreign policy. To Buchanan, Maryknoll represented how the Church had gone astray since the 1950s, or as he noted, "The Church I Knew, That Is No More." A self-described "traditionalist" who occasionally attended Latin Mass at a Greek Melkite Catholic Church, Buchanan saw himself as a "pre-Vatican II Catholic" because he believed the council harmed the Church.¹¹¹ As he explained, while Maryknoller Bishop Walsh was tortured and imprisoned in China in the 1950s, Maryknollers of the 1980s "seemed permanently enraged" that the U.S. government worked to stop the Sandinistas from inflicting "the same evil system" upon Nicaraguan Catholics. The change in the Church was not due to an external enemy, but had been "surrendered from within." Buchanan catalogued the changes he witnessed: how the Liturgy was now "a communal meal celebrated in the vernacular" and many nuns were "in acrimonious rebellion against the 'patriarchal' Church." Buchanan recounted his frustration over seeing a priest give "half the congregation" the Sign of Peace: "As he went on and on, shaking hands, hugging people, smiling up a storm, it was all I could do to contain myself from shouting, 'Get back up on that altar!'"¹¹²

The Church he loved was gone. As Buchanan wrote, "Visiting the modern churches today is like coming back to the town where you grew up and finding the oldest landmark, the great mansion on the hill, has been gutted and rebuilt to fit

108. See "Reagan to Fight for Contra Aid Despite U.S. Bishops' Nicaragua Peace Tour," *News Notes* (Maryknoll, NY), March 1985; "Citizen Pressure Needed to Stop U.S. Contra Aid, Central America Week Coming," *News Notes*, January 1986.

109. Patrick J. Buchanan, "The Contras Need Our Help," *Washington Post*, March 5, 1986, folder 4 "Patrick Buchanan," box 13-communications, MSA.

110. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 447-48.

111. "Dialogue with Patrick J. Buchanan," *National Catholic Register*, March 1, 1987.

112. Patrick J. Buchanan, "Tales from 'Blessed Sacrament': The Church I Knew, That Is No More," *Crisis*, April 1988, 22-23.

in architecturally and devotionally with the bustling suburban scene. Outside a sign reads UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT.¹¹³

Though other Catholics shared Buchanan's frustration, as White House Communications Director he had the platform to voice his concerns about Maryknoll and to influence the packaging of U.S. policy.¹¹⁴ In fact, Reagan's "tough rhetoric" on Nicaragua came from Buchanan. He controlled the speechwriters and crafted Reagan's characterization of the contras as the moral equivalent of the Founding Fathers.¹¹⁵

Echoing Casey's conclusion that Maryknollers' letter-writing prevented a contra program, Buchanan saw the order as the key impediment to U.S.-Nicaragua policy. He was not alone. A cartoon in the *Dallas Morning News* depicted Daniel Ortega holding an AK-47 emblazoned with the word "propaganda" and featured a "G" that was the sickle and star of the Soviet Union. The first two bullets in Ortega's propaganda gun were "Maryknolls."¹¹⁶

The Sandinistas and their supporters, including Maryknoll, threatened more than the U.S. Catholic Church or U.S. foreign policy, other Catholics alleged. As Cuban émigré Fr. Enrique Rueda argued, the debate over Nicaragua revealed the "war going on within the Roman Catholic Church between those who still believe in the teaching and tradition of 20 centuries and those for whom this is not acceptable in the 20th century." The battle pitted faithful Catholics like himself who worked to save fellow Catholics from communism's grip and from religious persecution against "enemies of the Faith" who "infiltrated the Church" and aided in its destruction. In identifying these traitors, Rueda singled out Maryknoll.¹¹⁷

To remedy the situation, the former prisoner during the Bay of Pigs and leader of Weyrich's Catholic Center called on U.S. Catholics to support contra funding and to end their contributions to Maryknoll.¹¹⁸ As he wrote, this approach was "moral" because a contra victory "would restore religious freedom to Nicaragua" and would "save" Nicaragua and the Church from the communist Sandinistas and their presumed takeover of Central America.¹¹⁹ Rueda's tactic was effective, as other Catholics sent their own disapproving letters to Maryknoll and copies to Rueda.¹²⁰ Some used his language. An unsigned editorial (presumably written by

113. *Ibid.*, 23 (emphasis in original).

114. See Robert Royal, "Maryknoll's Failed Revolution," *Crisis*, March 1985, 22.

115. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 413.

116. Bill DeOre, Cartoon, *Dallas Morning News*, August 19, 1985.

117. Fr. Enrique Rueda, "The Faithful in Nicaragua Need Our Support," *Wanderer*, August 29, 1985; Fr. Enrique Rueda, "Some Positive Steps to Help Rescue the Church in Nicaragua," *Wanderer*, February 27, 1986.

118. A. J. Matt, "Welcome Aboard, Fr. Rueda," *Wanderer*, July 18, 1985.

119. Rueda, "Some Positive Steps to Help Rescue the Church in Nicaragua"; Fr. Enrique Rueda, "Catholics Are Suffering for the Faith in Nicaragua," *Wanderer*, January 30, 1986.

120. Fr. Enrique Rueda, "Open Letter to Maryknoll Created a Stir," *Wanderer*, June 5, 1986.

the pastor or with his approval) in a Rhode Island parish bulletin echoed Rueda's condemnation of Maryknoll and other contra opponents.¹²¹

The White House encouraged conservative Catholics like Rueda in their efforts. Before the March 1986 congressional vote, Reagan met with leaders whose organizations had been spearheading grassroots campaigns to "educate" Congress and "the general public on the importance of the restoration of democracy in Nicaragua." As a preparatory memo informed the president, most attendees had been working for nearly a year and were about to begin an aggressive lobbying campaign. While the meeting's stated purpose was "To give inspiration" to attendees, Reagan's appearance also communicated the importance of the group's efforts to the White House. The invitation list included Catholics, such as Paul Weyrich, Phyllis Schlafly, the Heritage Foundation's Ed Feulner, and the Knights of Columbus's Virgil Dechant.¹²²

REAGAN VS. TIP

Despite the efforts of conservative Catholics like Rueda, the press portrayed the 1986 battle over contra funding as a personal struggle between Reagan and O'Neill ahead of the speaker's upcoming retirement. Reagan delivered 11 speeches urging support for the contras in the two and a half weeks before the House vote.¹²³ At the same time, non-Catholic contra supporters lectured O'Neill on the proper way to be Catholic. On the morning of the House vote, Ben Wattenberg, co-founder and chair of the neoconservative Coalition for a Democratic Majority, accused O'Neill of being a bad Catholic for relying on Maryknollers. In an op-ed, Wattenberg praised the speaker as "a great American," but determined that O'Neill was "making a great mistake." Wattenberg concluded that O'Neill did not understand what Maryknoll stood for, especially "within the deeply divided Catholic community." As Wattenberg asserted, "Tip O'Neill – who is as far from Marxism as you can get – has never gotten the word." Though "many" Maryknollers served the poor, according to Wattenberg, they also praised Castro's Cuba, supported communist guerrillas in the Philippines, and backed the Sandinistas. By contrast, Managua's Cardinal Obando y Bravo described the Nicaraguan government as "totalitarian." Though O'Neill stressed in reference to the Maryknollers "They are not going to mislead me," Wattenberg implied that Maryknoll's influence blinded O'Neill to the reality of Nicaragua, an issue that Catholics like Obando y Bravo recognized.¹²⁴

121. Editorial, *St. Augustin Bulletin*, March 9, 1986, folder 9, box 13-communications, MSA.

122. Memorandum, Linas K. Kojelis to Ronald Reagan, Meeting with Private Sector Supporters of Nicaraguan Freedom Fighters, March 1, 1986, Iran-Contra Affair Collection, DNSA.

123. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 448, 454.

124. Ben Wattenberg, "Tip is Sincere, But He's Wrong," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 27, 1986, folder 24, box 13-communications, MSA. Wattenberg's op-ed also ran as "Tip Following the Wrong Orders on Nicaragua," *Star Ledger* (Newark, NJ), March 28, 1986 and "When Maryknoll Talks, Tip Listens," *Washington Times*, March 27, 1986.



Figure 1: Tip O'Neill as a Nun (*Washington Times*, March 27, 1986).

While Wattenberg's claim that O'Neill's reliance on Maryknollers made him less of a Catholic was not new, the *Washington Times* visual portrayal of O'Neill was. The paper accompanied Wattenberg's piece with a cartoon of O'Neill in a dress resembling a pilgrim's and a habit inspired by the *Flying Nun's*. His hands rested piously atop one another. In a stark contrast to Reagan as Rambo, O'Neill was not just listening to nuns; he was one.

Despite the attacks, O'Neill's "impassioned speech to close the debate," and his early vote against funding that broke with his previous practice,¹²⁵ the House voted against contra aid. Henry Hyde then intensified his attacks on the Maryknoll Sisters. While Buchanan served as the White House's Catholic attack dog, Hyde assumed the mantle in Congress. Echoing Buchanan's charge that Maryknollers were Lenin's "useful idiots," Hyde contended that the Sisters blocked U.S.-Nicaragua policy, which sought to save the Catholic Church and the Western Hemisphere from communism's spread. To Hyde, U.S.-Nicaragua policy did not affect the Catholic Church; the policy *was* a Catholic issue.

Hyde authored a letter by Catholics in Congress to their colleagues, in which he urged fellow members of Congress to follow two Catholic bishops and support contra aid. Referring to themselves as "members of Congress who are Roman

125. Farrell, *Tip O'Neill and the Democratic Century*, 671.

Catholics,” the 22 representatives contended, “Religious persecution is not a peripheral issue as we resume debate on aid to the Nicaraguan democratic opposition.” In support, they attached a letter from Archbishops Bernard Cardinal Law of Boston and John Cardinal O’Connor of New York acknowledging that the Sandinistas persecuted all faiths, but arguing, “no group has suffered persecution on as great a scale as the Roman Catholic Church.”¹²⁶ Even the orthodox National Committee of Catholic Laymen described the letter as “blistering.”¹²⁷ By stressing the U.S.-based bishops as authorities on the matter, Hyde implicitly contrasted the men with the Maryknoll Sisters who worked in Nicaragua and presumably supported the communist Sandinistas.

Two months later, on the morning of the pivotal June contra aid vote, Hyde criticized the Maryknoll Sisters and implied that as women, they were ignorant about politics. In a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, Hyde discussed the persecution of the Nicaraguan Church and lamented how Maryknoll’s support for the Sandinista regime indicated an abandonment of its anticommunism. Although Hyde used the term Maryknoll, implying priests, brothers, and nuns, he focused on the Sisters. “Persecution of the Catholic Church by Marxist-Leninists is a constant of our times; only the cast of persecutors changes. It is Cardinal Obando y Bravo – not Miguel d’Escoto, and not those Maryknoll nuns who have, for whatever reasons of confused compassion, systematically misled House Speaker Tip O’Neill about the realities of Nicaragua – who truly represents the heritage of Maryknoll and Bishop Walsh.”¹²⁸ To Hyde, the Maryknoll Sisters did not understand the Nicaraguan situation, yet they held mysterious influence over Tip O’Neill.

On the same editorial spread, the *Wall Street Journal* board echoed appeals from Catholics in Congress to ignore wayward Catholic women. In arguing that O’Neill was not only misguided, but also no longer the party’s future, the board wrote, “The influence the Sandinista apologists have been able to bring to bear in the House has been little short of amazing. It owes much to Tip O’Neill, who spends more time listening to the Maryknoll Order than to the pope, a man who knows infinitely more than the Maryknolls seem to about communism. What Democrats should keep in mind today, however, is that Tip O’Neill does not represent the future of the Democratic Party.”¹²⁹ Besides stressing O’Neill’s upcoming retirement, the *Journal’s* editors argued that Maryknollers, as women, were not as knowledgeable as the pope, and they suggested that the women failed to act deferentially. Rather than Catholics defending their status as Americans first and Catholics second, the *Wall Street Journal*, like Reagan and

126. Dear Colleague Letter from Catholic Members of Congress Concerned about Religious Freedom under Marxist-Communist Sandinista Government, April 10, 1986, folder 7 “Nicaragua - Correspondence, Memos and Press Releases, 1978-1986,” box 19, KOD, ONP.

127. “Why Would the USCC Deny It?,” *catholic eye*, 1986, folder 1 “Religious Right,” box 22, RTFCAM.

128. Henry J. Hyde, “Maryknoll Memories and Managua,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 25, 1986.

129. “Contras and Democrats,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 25, 1986.

other non-Catholic contra supporters, encouraged them to follow Rome in making policy decisions.

O'Neill got the message: it was the Gipper and his macho men versus the speaker and his nuns. Just before walking onto the House floor for the vote, O'Neill explained the White House's approach to reporter Jimmy Breslin. "The first time Haig was here, five years ago, he sat right there and said, 'Oh, we have to go in there and show them.'" And with a new secretary of state, the story had not changed. "They have to show they're strong. I don't know what it is, but they have to do it." O'Neill's chief assistant interjected: "And we're left with the ladies in the long dresses." As O'Neill explained, the president says, "Tip listens to the ladies in the long dresses." O'Neill then defended his reliance on Maryknollers and their credibility: "Am I wrong in listening to women who live in Nicaragua and follow the Sermon on the Mount? Or am I supposed to just sit here and believe generals?"¹³⁰ The choice was clear for O'Neill: missionary nuns over the U.S. military.

Reagan won the House vote. But three months later, the White House still lamented religious communities' influence. The memo, "Public Diplomacy Plan for Explaining U.S. Central American Policy to the U.S. Religious Community," noted that "church based supporters of the Sandinistas have been able to frame much of the public debate on Nicaragua." The memo cited religious communities, rather than the media, as the influential sources of information: "these networks have been successful in dominating the flow of information to local parishes, churches, and synagogues." To counter these views, public diplomacy efforts should "increase the U.S. religious community's awareness of the experiences and situation of their religious brethren in Nicaragua."¹³¹ While still acknowledging religious communities' role, the memo's omission of the Maryknoll Sisters perhaps reflected Reagan's success in gaining congressional support for contra funding and Tip O'Neill's retirement at the end of the 1986 term.

But O'Neill's retirement did not end the controversy, as Henry Hyde and other Reagan defenders blamed the speaker and Maryknollers for Iran-contra. The speaker's reliance on Maryknollers' advice, Hyde argued, forced the White House to make an end run around the Boland amendment.¹³² Then, upon O'Neill's death, countless obituaries mentioned the O'Neill-Maryknoll

130. Jimmy Breslin, "There's No Protection Against Moral Fatigue," *Toronto Star*, July 6, 1986.

131. U.S. Department of State, Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean, Memorandum, Public Diplomacy Plan for Explaining U.S. Central American Policy to the U.S. Religious Community, September 18, 1986, Iran-Contra Affair Collection, DNSA.

132. *Iran-Contra Investigation*: Joint hearings in executive session as declassified before the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan opposition and the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran, 100th Cong., 164 (1987) (Testimony of Dewey R. Clarridge, C/CATF and Clair George).

connection among the highlights of the speakers' 34-year career in the House.¹³³ The papers' decision to do so revealed the continued fascination with O'Neill's apparently unusual decision-making and with the nuns' role in shaping foreign policy.

Reagan's and his supporters' gendered critiques of O'Neill and the Maryknoll Sisters highlighted how Catholics' disagreements over the Church's direction shaped U.S. contra funding debates. For Catholics, U.S.-Nicaragua policy was both a political and religious matter. Though Reagan saw U.S. intervention in Central America as vital to rolling back communism, U.S. involvement meant much more for Catholics. With contra aid, the United States bolstered one side in the intra-Catholic battle over the Church's future. At the same time, the White House exploited Catholic divisions in its attempt to generate support for the contras. The intra-Catholic conflict helps explain why, for some Americans, the debate over U.S.-Central America policy was so bitter.

133. See "Thomas 'Tip' O'Neill, Former Speaker, Dies," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 6, 1994; John A. Farrell, "A Man of History Whom Caricature Cannot Define: O'Neill Recalled as Insider and Rebel," *Boston Globe*, January 7, 1994; Adam Clymer, "Crowd of 1,700 Attends O'Neill Funeral," *New York Times*, January 11, 1994; Mary McGrory, "Tip O'Neill: Tales and Tears," *Washington Post*, January 11, 1994.