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Guest Opinion: Reflections of a Freshman Senator

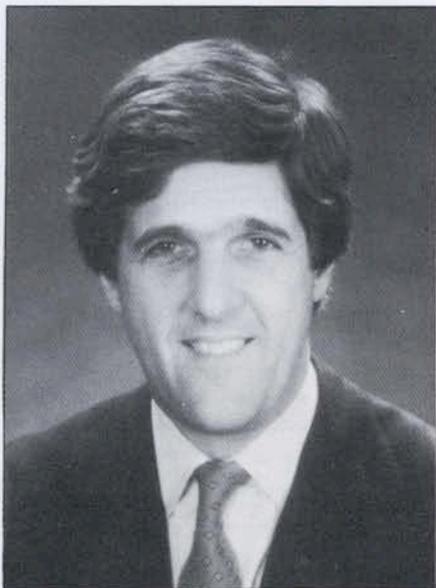
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Reflections of a Freshman Senator

John Kerry



Over a year has passed since I joined the United States Senate, and after reflecting on my first 12 months representing the people of Massachusetts, three major areas of concern occupied the bulk of my time: legislative initiatives that will benefit Massachusetts, working with local cities and towns to help them meet their needs and alleviate their concerns, and aiding constituents from across the Bay State with individual problems.

As has been the case for the last few years, issues relating to the budget and the budget deficit have been given high priority by Congress. Of special interest to me was the 1986 Budget Resolution which called for state and local governments to pay for Medicare and Social Security for state and local employees. Because of the harm that could befall states and local government from this Resolution, I testified before the Senate Finance Committee and helped postpone to September 30, 1986 the date that this would happen for Medicare and totally eliminate mandatory Social Security coverage for new hirings. This change in the proposed legislation will save Massachusetts \$7 million in 1986 and \$25 million in 1987. We do not solve our deficit problems by passing the cost of our deficit reduction efforts onto state and local governments, especially when they are already reeling from reductions in housing programs, economic development assistance, industrial revenue bonds, and the elimination of general revenue sharing.

One positive way of reducing the budget deficit, however, can be found in the Gramm/Rudman/Hollings amendment, of which I was one of the original Democratic cosponsors. The bill provides for a balanced budget by 1991 and mandates that the President submit a budget each

year that meets the prescribed targets for reducing the deficit. It forces clear accountability and leadership on the President and the Congress on how revenue is being spent and sets up a framework for hard choices to be made on which programs are maintained and which are eliminated or reduced.

Because the budget reduction legislation has the potential of cutting deeply into necessary social welfare programs, I was pleased that amendments I sponsored were added to this bill. They protect Social Security cost-of-living adjustments as well as cost-of-living adjustments for recipients of Supplemental Security Income and veterans' pensions. Another amendment calls on the federal government to report on the amount of revenue which could be raised through increased and improved tax enforcement and collections. The idea behind this measure is to find new revenue without raising taxes. The amendment is similar to an initiative by Governor Michael Dukakis which brought in more than \$200 million in new revenues for Massachusetts.

Although much of the attention in Congress has been directed to the effects of budget deficits on the health of the nation's economy, we in Massachusetts know that a key to the success of the economy lies with the small businesses. The strong Massachusetts economy with over 100,000 small businesses is a living testament to the importance of local entrepreneurs. To better represent the Massachusetts small business men and women, I chaired the first Small Business Committee field hearing since President Reagan announced his tax reform plan. The hearing was held in July in Boston and explored the effects of tax simplification proposals on small businesses. As the tax reform bill winds its way through Congress it is essential that we in the legislative branch maintain close contact with the business community and determine the impact of a major tax bill on the small business men and women.

In connection with small business and the economy, I was also concerned that the Small Business Administration was not meeting its special responsibility to Vietnam veterans. My office conducted a survey of 87 of the 1000 SBA offices around the country to determine each office's response to typical questions asked by Vietnam veterans seeking help in starting a business. The results showed that while many SBA offices know of the agency's

mandate to assist Vietnam veterans, more than 35 percent of the local offices did not know about specialized programs and 79 percent were unaware of the existence of the SBA's own veterans' business resource council. I have brought this survey to the Senate Small Business Committee which is now looking at ways to improve the SBA's handling of veterans' requests.

On another veterans' issue, I was able to secure an agreement to extend the Emergency Jobs Training Act until March 1986 and sponsored a bill to restructure employment training and job placement services for Vietnam veterans. The legislation extends the Act for three years, establishes a computerized national job bank and enhances counseling and support services for unemployed Vietnam and disabled veterans.

Also of interest to me in the past two sessions of Congress is the Economic Equity Act which has been the cornerstone of equity measures for women. The Act would improve equity in the areas of pensions, child care, insurance, employment and education. In particular I am committed to an enhancement of the child care aspects of the act which would strengthen the excellent programs Massachusetts has put into place.

Although legislative work occupied a good deal of my time I still found that one of the most rewarding aspects of being a Senator is the opportunity to talk and listen to the people. Since becoming a U.S. Senator I've discussed budget cuts with local artistic organizations, given speeches to high schools on the issue of war and peace, and met with mayors and citizens of various Bay State cities and towns to discuss their needs. Moreover, my staff has handled more than 3000 cases of Massachusetts residents who required assistance with some personal issue. Those cases dealt with topics ranging from immigration and housing to tax and veterans' issues. I was pleased to see that in over 50 percent of the cases we were able to achieve a resolution, and we continued to work on the remainder.

As I move into my second year in the Senate, I remain committed to helping the people of Massachusetts and representing their interests in Washington.

John Kerry (D-Mass.)
United States Senate