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A hell of a senator

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Ted Kennedy's death leaves a messy hole in American public life

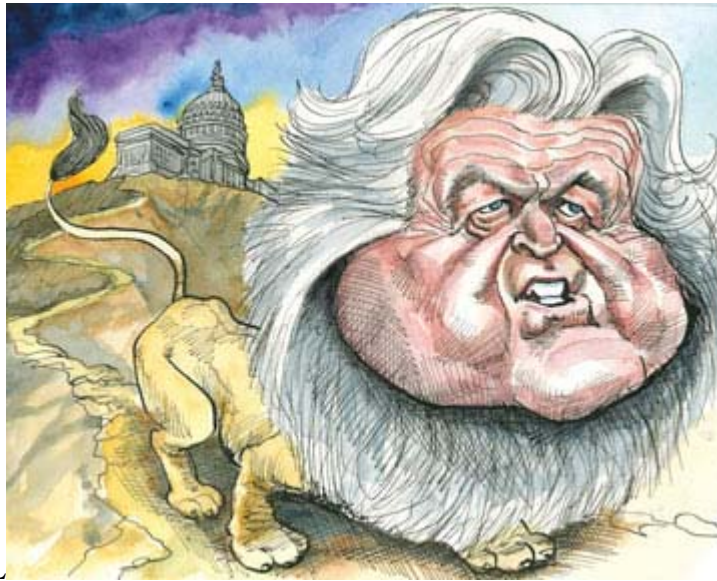


Illustration by KAL

HAD a young woman not drowned in his car, he might have been president. That, alas, is how many will remember Ted Kennedy. He ought rather to be remembered for his 47 years of manly toil in the Senate, where he was a staggeringly capable legislator. He arguably brought more lasting change to America than any other member of his celebrated family. Yet his story hinges around the tragedy of Chappaquiddick in July 1969.

He always denied that he was drunk that night, or that he was having an affair with Mary Jo Kopechne, the young campaign worker in his car. But if not, the episode is hard to understand. Driving away from a party, he swerved off the road and down a bumpy track before plunging his Oldsmobile into a pond. He escaped; his passenger was trapped under the water. Yet he did not call the police for help, relying instead on two discreet aides. Nor did he report the accident until it was discovered, nine hours later. His explanation for what he called his “irrational and indefensible and inexcusable and inexplicable” behaviour was that he was disorientated after the crash. Voters frowned.

Edward Moore Kennedy was born in 1932, the youngest son of what was to become America's most glittering political dynasty. His father, Joe, had built a colossal fortune, and wanted to turn his money into power. In 1960, his son Jack was elected president. Joe wanted Ted to inherit Jack's seat in the Senate, but Ted was only 28, and the constitution says senators have to be 30. So Jack persuaded the governor of Massachusetts to appoint his college room-mate to keep the seat warm for a couple of years. In 1962, Ted became the youngest senator.

The next year, Jack was assassinated. Ted was presiding over a Senate debate about libraries when someone rushed in and shouted: "Senator, your brother has been shot!" He turned pale, and rushed out. It was not the first time one of his brothers had died violently; Joe junior had died in the war. Nor was it to be the last. The third brother, Bobby, was murdered just when it looked as if he might win the Democratic presidential nomination in 1968. The Kennedy family ethos compelled young Ted to run for president, too. But, unsurprisingly, he had mixed feelings about it.

He sat out the races in 1972 (too soon after Chappaquiddick) and 1976 (his son was recovering from cancer). But he grew so disenchanted with Jimmy Carter that he bowed to a noisy "Draft Ted" movement and launched a primary challenge in 1980. It was a disaster. He could never explain why he should be president. Asked that question by Roger Mudd of CBS News, he froze and waffled. "It's imperative for this country to either move forward; that it can't stand still or otherwise it moves backward," he said. Though he electrified the party convention, Mr Carter trounced him in the primaries before being crushed by Ronald Reagan.

At his best, Mr Kennedy was a fine orator. Less than an hour after President Reagan nominated Robert Bork, a fierce conservative, to the Supreme Court, he was skewering him on the Senate floor. "Robert Bork's America is a land in which women would be forced into back-alley abortions, blacks would sit at segregated lunch counters, rogue police could break down citizens' doors in midnight raids, schoolchildren could not be taught about evolution...and the doors of the federal courts would be shut on the fingers of millions of citizens," he thundered. "There was not a line in that speech that was accurate," wailed Judge Bork afterwards. He was right. But it worked.

For most of his career, the indiscipline of his private life delighted Republican fund-raisers. He was thrown out of Harvard for cheating in an exam. He chased women as keenly as his brothers did but, unlike them, he lived to see the rules change. The gentlemanly press corps of the early 1960s kept quiet about Jack's escapades; modern scribblers know no such restraint. "He doesn't do interviews with lifestyle magazines because they tend to ask lifestyle questions," a flack told Michael Kelly of *GQ* magazine in 1990. The flack was right. Kelly's profile of the senator brimmed with booze,

blondes and boorish fumbles on restaurant floors. Mr Kennedy's not-so-private flaws made him a less effective politician. His speech attacking George Bush senior in 1988, for example, would have been deadlier delivered by someone else. "As the [Reagan] administration secretly plotted to sell arms to Iran," he asked, "Where was George?" Republican bumper-stickers replied: "Dry, Sober and Home with his Wife".

His last crusade

Yet even when he was carousing—and he sobered up in the 1990s—he was a hell of a senator. He was not a details man; he had a devoted staff for that. But he had passion and energy and a palpable desire to comfort the afflicted. From the moment he entered the Senate, he agitated for civil rights for blacks. His beefy fingerprints are on the Voting Rights Act, the Age Discrimination Act and the Freedom of Information Act. He pushed for an end to the war in Vietnam, for stricter safety rules at work and for sanctions against apartheid South Africa. He sometimes took bold stances while his party dithered: he opposed George Bush junior's Iraq war from the start. Yet he worked hand-in-glove with Mr Bush to make schools more accountable and to liberalise immigration law, though the latter task defeated them both.

His last quest was to make health insurance universal. He first attempted this in the 1970s. This year he threw all his weight behind Barack Obama's health plan, before cancer made him too ill to work. Last week, suspecting that the end was near, he urged a change in Massachusetts law to allow a temporary successor to be appointed by the Democratic governor. If this does not happen, the seat could be empty for months, depriving Democrats of their filibuster-proof majority in the Senate—and reminding Americans how big a man, in every sense, they have lost.