

James J. Kilpatrick

Sherrill book details Chappaquiddick cover-up

Somewhere in this broad land, to judge from the polls, a goodly number of voters have been waiting for Teddy. They can forget it. With publication of Robert Sherrill's *The Last Kennedy*, the senior senator from Massachusetts no longer remains in the ball game. He's been called out on fouls.

The book is a bombshell. It picks up on the piece Sherrill wrote in July 1974, for the *New York Times*, amplifies the conflicting evidence and comes to a crushing conclusion: Kennedy's cover-up of the Chappaquiddick tragedy makes Nixon's cover-up of the Watergate scandal look like a child's game of peek-a-boo.

Kennedy's manipulation of "everything and everyone," in Sherrill's view, "was undoubtedly the most brilliant cover-up ever achieved in a nation where investigative procedures are well developed and where the principles of equal justice prevail at least during some of those moments when people are watching."

A dozen other books, to be sure, long ago sought to expose the half-truths and whole lies of Chappaquiddick. Sherrill's stinging narrative carries a special quality all its own. He comes to this wretched affair as a certified liberal. He is Washington correspondent for *The Nation*. His profound disappointment in Edward Kennedy — his shame and scorn for the senator's conduct — can be sensed like hot tears, unshed, beneath the cool discipline of his prose. In quite another context, I myself

once knew the feeling.

It will be seven years this July since Mary Jo Kopechne died in the watery wreck of Kennedy's Oldsmobile sedan. Many persons will have forgotten the characters in this drama, the lines they spoke, the roles they played. Sherrill's gift is to bring it all back.

Everything that we know — really know — of Chappaquiddick can be summed up in a few sentences. On July 18, 1969, Kennedy went to a cookout party on Chappaquiddick Island at Edgartown, Mass. The guests included five men, all of them old Kennedy friends, and six young women, all of them veterans of Robert Kennedy's 1968 campaign. Some time that night, Kennedy's car went off a narrow bridge. Mary Jo Kopechne's body was retrieved the next morning.

On July 25, Kennedy pleaded guilty to a charge that he "did operate a certain motor vehicle upon a public way and did go away after knowingly causing injury . . . without stopping and making known his name, residence, and the number of his motor vehicle." Kennedy was sentenced to two months in the workhouse, suspended. His driver's license was suspended for one year.

Those are the bare bones of the story. After seven years, those bare bones are about all we have. Twelve critical hours are still blank. As Sherrill makes clear from an exhaustive examination of the record, it is impossible to this day to put together a clear, corroborated account of who attended the party, what they had to drink, when

Kennedy and Miss Kopechne departed, whether they left together, how and when Kennedy got across the channel to Edgartown, whether the young woman drowned or was asphyxiated. And so on.

This is because some of the evidence was destroyed, some of the police work was amazingly feeble and a long-delayed inquest was conducted with curious ineptitude. Mainly, the mysteries remain because everyone clammed up. They stonewalled it. "The word is Nixon's," remarks Sherrill, "but the practice is Kennedy's."

"I don't believe the public is generally aware of how very successful simple silence can be in a situation like this," Sherrill says.

In the case of Watergate, Nixon kept talking and his aides kept babbling, and relentless and unfriendly investigators could not be suppressed. In the case of Chappaquiddick, Kennedy made one cotton-candy statement, his friends locked their lips and the bloodhounds of justice curled up like puppies and slept. After a while, the frustrated press went away.

The Last Kennedy is a reminder that books can affect history. One thinks of Tom Paine, Edmund Burke, Emile Zola, Harriet Beecher Stowe — a list could be long extended of writers whose works, in and of themselves, shaped the course of events. Sherrill's damning version of *J'accuse*, coming in a spring when an untarnished Kennedy could have his party's nomination for the asking, will find its place on this significant shelf.