

HR, JW, JP, LF, EW, RB

5/28/72

Editor
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Dear Sir,

For Richard J. Walton to ask (5/28/72), "Is Edward Moore Kennedy fit to be president...?" is tantamount to saying that in my lifetime none were.

Examples: Wilson and the League of Nations (and the end-term incompetence); Harding (caught as Senator in a New York City whorehouse, he pleaded Senatorial immunity, successfully); Coolidge (seed of depression); Hoover (depression, with "two chickens in every pot"); FDR (Pearl Harbor); Truman (Korea ~~plus~~ plus); Eisenhower (Dulles and Vietnam; Sherman Adams and Goldfine); JFK (Bay of Pigs); Nixon (you name it).

And to blame him for the public-relations aspect of Chappaquidick is to confuse lawyer and client (Esquire, 2/72, of the "legendary" Burke Marshall", who brain-trusted: "It was a bad thing, I suppose...").

As a "notice historian" Walton should know that almost anyone is "fit to be president", and almost nobody isn't, from the record.

Sincerely,

Harold Weisberg

Is Ted Kennedy fit to be president?

The Education of Edward Kennedy

A Family Biography.

By Burton Hersh.

Morrow. Illustrated. 510 pp. \$10.95

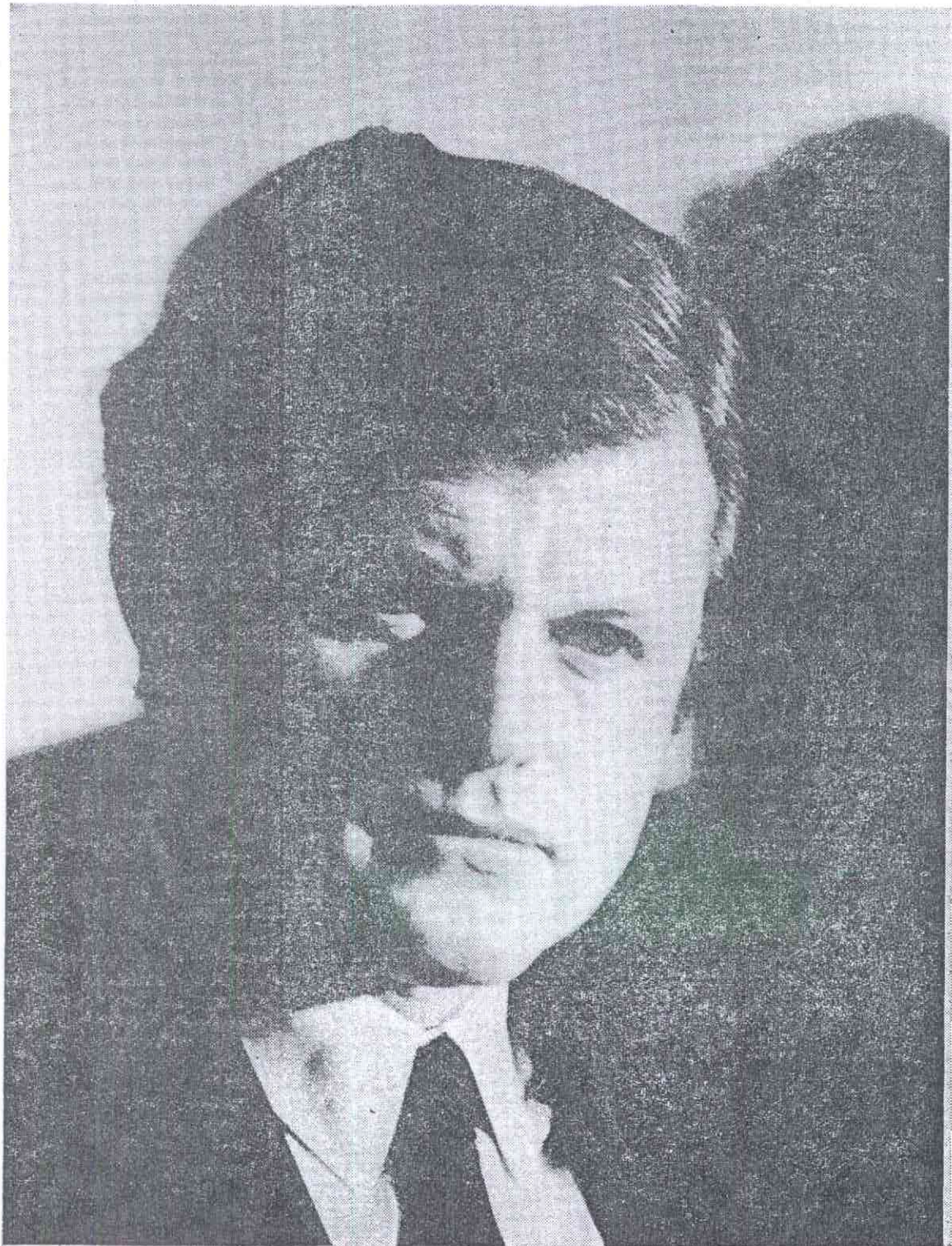
Reviewed by RICHARD J. WALTON

The question is simple: Is Edward Moore Kennedy fit to be president of the United States? That has been the question since Chappaquiddick and even if the passage of three years has muted it, current events revive it. The possibility grows that the Democrats will in July be unable to choose among the pathetically ambitious Old Guard favorite Hubert Humphrey, the steadily stronger but maverick George McGovern, or even, in the event of a deadlock, decent Edmund Muskie, who has already learned that so many political bosses are either powerless or faithless or, often, both. If none of these men can make it, who is there but Teddy?

Should he get the nomination the response would be predictable. There is no way of knowing what Mr. Nixon himself might do, but inevitably, given the nature of politics, some of Kennedy's opponents would whisper nasty little innuendoes, sniggering little stories that would be difficult to confront because their purveyors would peddle them furtively. Yet to say that this would happen hardly constitutes an adequate defense. There was a Chappaquiddick and I shared then, and still share, the conviction that Edward Kennedy came out of it a demonstrably lesser man, perhaps even a dishonorable one.

This is not an easy thing for me to write, for I have come to believe in the last couple of years that Teddy Kennedy is one of the very best senators, one of the very best figures in public life. I'm not now talking about politics, for Kennedy is an awesomely gifted politician who might well be able to overcome the political difficulties. Nor am I talking about private morality, for I hold what may be an unpopular view: that it is close to impossible for an outsider to make moral judgments about another's personal life. I'm speaking about public morality. (Continued on page 3)

Richard J. Walton is the author of Cold War and Counter-revolution: The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy.



KENNEDY

(Continued from page 1) the way that Kennedy and his advisers decided that the first priority was to protect his political future. Beyond that, if Kennedy acted so badly, in panic, is he to be trusted with the terrible powers of the presidency?

Since I had not been able to answer my own questions satisfactorily, I turned eagerly to Burton Hersh's fascinating, even extraordinary book. He, of course, recognizes that Chappaquiddick is the central question and he attempts to answer it by reconstructing Kennedy's life from the beginning. The book is aptly subtitled: *A Family Biography*. This is entirely proper and it is, as I say, fascinating stuff. Kennedy's grandparents, his father and mother, his brothers and sisters, particularly the father and brothers, did so much to shape the youngest son. Hersh writes of this unique American family with a novelist's perceptions and prose. Some will find his language rich and stimulating. I found it often overwrought, obscuring rather than revealing, more appropriate for *Esquire* than the serious biography it most certainly is.

I have other reservations. As a novice historian, I wonder about some of those exact quotations and those exact accounts of elusive events. I sometimes wish Hersh were as concerned with substance as with technique, in, for instance, Teddy's decision to run for the Senate as soon as he reached the statutory age, as if it were his right as a Kennedy. Also there is a sort of awe of the Kennedys that troubles me. This is not to say that Hersh is a puff artist. Far from it, for he often reports things—Teddy's heavy, even wild drinking for a time after Bobby's death—that the Kennedy clan must desperately wish had not been printed. Yet he sees something about the Kennedys that permits him to speak blandly about Kennedy men, Kennedy people, as if the Kennedy brothers have had a unique

right to a sort of feudal loyalty to them and their ambitions. This loyalty is an extraordinary phenomenon and should have been examined. Maybe there's something wrong with me, but I find it terribly depressing that able men and women can submerge themselves not in a cause but for another person whose ambitions are transparent. And the fact that these talented people do it willingly, even eagerly, makes it sadder still to me. For Kennedy to accept it is understandable (it would be hard for any mortal not to) but why Hersh does perplexes me. I wish he had turned his novelistic gift to attempting to explain how

"Kennedy and his advisers decided that the first priority was to protect his political future."

this feudal lord-retainer relationship is possible in a 20th-century democracy.

I could list other reservations, but that would throw this piece out of balance, for the fact is that Hersh's prodigious research has provided us with an enormous amount of specific, hard information about Edward Kennedy as a boy and young man, about him as a political aide to his oldest brother, about his service to Bobby, and about him as a senator. In short, Hersh tells us more about Teddy Kennedy as a tormented, pressure-ridden, fun-loving, infallible, important human being than we are likely to learn elsewhere. Many readers, sniffing for scandal, will gobble it up as the inside story of the super-star head of a family

of super-celebrities. On that level it is almost certain to be a success. But Hersh had much more than that in mind, and he succeeded. For anyone with a serious interest in the last of the Kennedy brothers, friend, foe, or just curious, this is essential reading.

But to get back to Chappaquiddick. Does Hersh allay those persistent doubts? He tries in what might be termed an Olympian drama, a Greek tragedy with terrible elemental forces pressing down on this stricken young man, heir to a double legend, whose fate, one cannot help fear, is to complete the mystic set of three. Hersh quotes with approval Arthur Schlesinger, who said, "I think that with Chappaquiddick the iron went into Edward Kennedy's soul." One wants to agree, but then one remembers that Schlesinger wrote of John Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs that "It was a horribly expensive lesson, but it was well-learned." Then came Vietnam.

Yet I have the feeling that Schlesinger and Hersh are right. Perhaps Chappaquiddick was fate's final test, one that would destroy him or prove him. I want to believe that the ordeal of finding himself unworthy has implanted in Edward Kennedy the implacable resolve never again to be unworthy.

Upon a man who has been through such an experience it requires more confidence than I have to pronounce judgment. Yet the time may soon be at hand when we all have to make a functional, if not moral judgment: whether or not to vote for Edward Kennedy if he is ever nominated for the presidency. I will not be able to make even that judgment until it is time to pull the curtain closed behind me. But whatever my judgment, it is valid only for me. For those yet to make up their minds, this book will help them, as it has me. □