

# James Kilpatrick

## The Other Coverup

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."

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**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."

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. 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.

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**"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. 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.