

Comments on the Kennedy Accident

Compassion Asked

To the Editor:

Your July 27 editorial "Still a Tragedy and a Mystery" was ungenerous. The point at issue is Senator Kennedy's behavior following the accident. I believe he described his state of mind and movements as accurately as his recollection would permit. The point that seems to be missed by many is that the Senator was apparently nearly drowned himself. It is quite possible that the degree of asphyxia that he experienced resulted in a significant reduction of oxygen to the brain.

Rescued drowning victims are often irrational, terrified and withdrawn. Behavioral aberrations can last hours after such an accident. Why so little compassion for this thoroughly decent human, whose public life has been above reproach? What is even more cruel is that some suggest that Miss Kopechne might have been saved by a rescue team from Edgartown. An overturned car has no air pockets. The average duration of life after inhalation of seawater is about four minutes. This tragedy has been compounded by the type of editorial reaction in *The Times*.

JAMES C. MELBY, M.D.

Boston Univ. Medical Center
Boston, July 29, 1969

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Actions in Crisis

To the Editor:

It would appear from the reactions of disbelief to Senator Kennedy's July 25 statement that many Americans are so emotionally strong and stable that they find it inconceivable that an intelligent, rational man could, when placed under great stress, fear, and a narrow escape from death, react in an irrational

It might be interesting for these critics and cynics to think back on their own thoughts and actions during moments of extreme crisis in their lives. Better yet, let them keep these same feelings in mind when they are next confronted by tragedy or possible death.

WILLIAM C. BARTLETT JR.

Centerville, Mass., July 26, 1969

Lack of Judgment

To the Editor:

not been given all the facts by Senator Kennedy and his lawyers regarding the accident on Chappaquiddick Island.

Kennedy's lack of judgment in a moment of crisis would lead me to believe that he is not competent for political office, and that he should resign at once or be forced to resign. Otherwise I fear that our political structure will deteriorate completely.

CAROLINE ROLLINS

Montague Center, Mass.
July 27, 1969

Unanswered Questions

To the Editor:

As a summer resident of Chappaquiddick Island who finds it necessary to use the Dyke Bridge, I and numerous neighbors are deeply concerned.

Senator Edward Kennedy's explanation on TV concerning his accident here contains discrepancies and hiatuses which must be answered. The life of a young woman entrusted to his care was lost. The responsible driver aspires to high office in our Government. Among the unanswered questions are these:

If his real concern was the life of his passenger, trapped in his car under water, how could he walk over one mile past several houses without once seeking help?

Why did he and two friends return later to the scene and "dive repeatedly to the car" in pitch darkness, in a strong current, without making an effort to obtain lights, equipment, or help?

Even if the Senator himself

"cannot account for my actions for the next several hours," how does this exonerate these friends who by now were well aware of the seriousness of the accident? Why did not one of them insist that the authorities be notified?

I cannot accept his explanation that he made "a wrong turn." But, supposing that he did, his headlights would have revealed water and the bridge in adequate time for him to stop the car. To drive off the bridge implied that judgment and reaction time were impaired, prior to the accident.

These questions and more raise such serious doubts that I for one cannot accept the highly polished, indeed politically masterful TV statement of July 25 without retorting, "Just whom do you think you're kidding?"

EDWARD B. SELF, M.D.

Edgartown, Mass., July 26, 1969
The writer is Assoc. Professor of Clinical Surgery, College of Physicians and Surgeons.

Obligation of Lawyers

To the Editor:

I cannot agree with Philip Sisk's statement [news story July 29] that Paul Markham and Joseph F. Gargan would have breached lawyer's "ethics," to have made known the facts of the Martha's Vineyard accident without Senator Kennedy's consent. What is the president of the Massachusetts Bar Association trying to tell us—that lawyers have a sort of "honor among thieves" code?

These three men were primarily friends. If we believe all three returned to the bridge and made efforts to find the missing girl, two of them at that point were still acting as friends. However, they were also attorneys, and sworn officers of the courts. Did they fulfill all their obligations as such, and advise the Senator, or did they enter into a conspiracy to suppress facts, or did they just "silently" go off to bed?

Chief Arena says that a citizen has a "moral" obligation to report an accident. However, lawyers, as court officials, have a much greater obligation. I think it is imperative that this whole incident, and the actions of all three lawyers be investigated by an appropriate committee of the bar association and a complete report made public.

THOMAS H. DOYLE
Fair Lawn, N. J., July 28, 1969

A Human Weakness

To the Editor:

In your July 27 editorial concerning Senator Edward Kennedy's tragic accident on Chappaquiddick Island you demand from the Senator explanations of conduct that no human being could possibly give.

"There is no explanation," you write, "of the Senator's apparent failure to notice for more than half a mile before the accident that he was on the wrong road." You find it difficult to understand why he did not seek help from the neighborhood, or how he was able, in his state of shock, to walk back to the house and his friends, or how they could allow him "to swim alone and fully clothed across a tidal channel in the dead of night, etc., etc., etc."

Is this not unfair? Can you expect any human being to explain sufficiently even to himself every irrational and impulsive action during a moment of supreme tragedy? Senator Kennedy has acknowledged in his television address that his conduct and conversation during the hours following the accident "make no sense to me at all," that his mind was besieged by "all kinds of scrambled thoughts," and that he was overcome by "a jumble of emotions, grief, fear, doubt, exhaustion, panic, confusion, and shock."

You ask Senator Kennedy for explanations where no explanations can possibly exist, except for the very human fact that as men we tend to act inconsistently. Tragedy has a way of placing a magnifying glass to human behavior.

In demanding further explanations from Senator Kennedy, you fail, despite your stated sympathy for him, to take into consideration a weakness that is basic to human nature.

RICHARD STAMELMAN

Middletown, Conn.

July 27, 1969

'Harsh' Criticism

To the Editor:

Your criticism of Senator Edward M. Kennedy in your July 27 editorial seems to me unduly harsh. You are unfairly demanding rational, detailed answers to an irrational tragedy. Hemingway once defined courage as "grace under pressure." Ted Kennedy, my wife and I believe, showed great courage in his public statement to the voters of Massachusetts on July 26.

WOODY KLEIN
Westport, Conn., July 27, 1969

Autopsy Backed

To the Editor:

In the untimely death of Mary Jo Kopechne, associated with so much discussion and speculation of national concern, it seems most unfortunate that no autopsy was performed. More than that, it is incredible that this important procedure was neglected—and, even more, that it is not legally compulsory in all such cases.

The local medical examiner should have afforded the Kopechne family, the Senator, the medical profession and the general public the advantages of knowing the confirmed cause of death. Any guess or assumption in such instances is not enough. Even in the most elaborately conducted diagnoses, arrived at in leading hospitals and calling upon sophisticated diagnostic procedures, the causes of death accepted before a demise have been refuted again and again after findings of autopsy examinations.

Here, where possible doubt certainly existed, the desirability of an autopsy seems overwhelming. Miss Kopechne may well have died at once of a fractured skull or a broken neck—and a knowledge of that fact would automatically erase the gnawing speculation that she might have lived (and suffered) for several hours in a bubble of air trapped within the car. Or, instead of drowning, she might have died quickly of a ruptured spleen, other internal hemorrhage, or similar in-

juries often characteristic of traumatic accidents.

Yet, in the absence of a fact-finding autopsy, sensational-minded and neurotic persons have been expounding possibilities that are detrimental to the Senator and cruel to the dead girl's family. All these could have been readily dissipated if the simple, common-sense and easily available procedure of the autopsy had been followed.

The time has come to stop temporizing about autopsy examinations and their obvious value. It is urgent for the medical profession, the press, and a concerned public to join in a broad educational effort that will illuminate the enormous advantages of the autopsy.

JOHN PRUTTING, M.D.
President, Foundation for
the Advancement of
Medical Knowledge
New York, July 28, 1969

Unsafe Bridge

To the Editor:

Your July 20 coverage of the accident involving Senator Kennedy, which appeared in the Sunday issue of July 20, was comprehensive and informative. Until this paper arrived at our home in Alpine, Calif., we had only the usual biased and incomplete account offered in the local San Diego newspaper. We are grateful to The Times.

As a result of your description of the actual conditions of the road Senator Kennedy traveled and the bridge he tried to cross, I realized that a travesty of justice was being committed.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the township are solely responsible for the death of Mary Jo Kopechne and the injury suffered by Senator Kennedy. The shock he experienced, after he realized what had happened, was comparable to a nonfatal bullet wound. But the actual effect on the man himself was inconceivably worse and more painful than any bullet wound could have been. Anyone who was ever involved in an accident in which he even thought he was responsible for the death or injury of a friend could describe the feeling.

But the Senator was not responsible. He was driving along a road and crossing a bridge that was not designated as unsafe. Police Chief Dominick J. Arena himself, over a nationwide television newscast, reported the road and the bridge as being dangerous.

It is imperative, if only for the sake of justice, that the actual responsibility for this unfortunate accident be placed where it belongs — with the state and the township in which the accident occurred.

BOB WANGLER
Alpine, Calif., July 20, 1969

Weak Case

To the Editor:

Let our voices join those who are dissatisfied with the quality and depth of Senator Kennedy's "confession." His contempt for the moral and intellectual fiber of the American people is painfully apparent in the weakness of the case and the strength of its proposal.

JOHN and IRENE CALLAGHAN
New York, July 26, 1969