

Un-Making of a President

# The Important Questions Ted Left Unanswered

*Third in series of articles on Senator Ted Kennedy whose car plunged off a bridge at Chappaquiddick Island in Massachusetts last summer, killing a passenger, Mary Jo Kopechne. The author, a magazine and newspaper writer and biographer, writes about the effect of the tragedy on Kennedy's political career.*

By Liz Smith

Why wasn't everybody satisfied with the television statement given by Senator Ted Kennedy six days after his car accident in Massachusetts — an accident which took the life of Mary Jo Kopechne, an RFK campaign worker?

The patchy explanation was that Teddy himself almost drowned, escaped he knew not how from the submerged car, dived repeatedly into the strong current to try to save Mary Jo, then walked back to the party cottage to ask his cousin, Joe Gargan, and his friend, Paul Markham, to help him.

Teddy said both these men dived to rescue Mary Jo, but failing, took the Senator to the ferry slip. It was after the hour of regular service though special boats could be requested by a simple phone call.

(These calls go through the Edgartown police switchboard.)

Teddy claimed he plunged suddenly into the water and swam across to Martha's Vineyard. (While suffering exhaustion and a concussion, wearing his heavy backbrace and clothes?) There, he said he collapsed in his Edgartown motel room, appearing around 2 a.m. to ask the time of the owner.

Markham and Gargan allegedly returned to the party cottage and spent the night on the floor without mentioning the accident to anyone.

The next morning — ten hours later — Kennedy re-

—Turn to Page 8, Col. 1

ported the accident to the Edgartown police, after first making a ferry trip across to Chappaquiddick with Gargan and Markham. They returned swiftly around and went back to Edgartown, after a ferryman asked if they'd heard of the accident.

"What is Truth?"—Pontius Pilate.

Kennedy's curiously elliptical TV clean breast of it was meant to still questions and dampen criticism. But it didn't. Why?

Possibly because its very truth-is-stranger-than-fiction air posed more questions than it answered; possibly because it smacked of tremendous hubris.

Many felt it an arrogant insult to their intelligence. Right or wrong, true or false, as a statement to clear something, Teddy's TV tale became a classic understatement, on a par with "Someone has blundered," to describe the Charge of the Light Brigade.

The anti-Kennedy "National Review" said:

"The human mind refuses to accept a sequence of events as, finally, unintelligible: which is what, in effect, Senator Kennedy asked his TV audience to do.

"The continuing refusal of those who were at the cottage to say anything at all about the evening's events serves to generate further skepticism. If Teddy's explanation is true, what motive would exist for the silence? If the guests could confirm his story, and fill in its gaps, why should they refuse to do so?"

Pro-Kennedy columnists Frank Mankiewicz and Tom Braden remarked on "the Shakespearean sense of a puzzlement of the will, of judgment suspended and flawed at a crucial moment." After this analysis, they bluntly dubbed it, "the end of the Kennedy era."

### Magazine Comment

A Louis Harris poll discovered that 44 per cent to 36 per cent, a plurality, thought Kennedy had failed "to tell the real truth" and a 51 per cent to 31 per cent majority agreed "there still has been no adequate explanation . . ."

A letter writer to "Time" magazine remarked:

"Assume that your

friend and cousin, having had a tragic accident comes to your door . . . He is completely exhausted, in shock, and has water in his lungs and a slight concussion. Do you call a doctor? Don't be ridiculous . . . take your friend to the nearest ferry and, when the ferry is shut down for the night, just calmly stand there and watch him swim across the channel, preferably fully clothed. Now he'll be able to recuperate all by himself in a nice comfortable motel room. Brothers Grimm, move over. You have been topped."

Another person wrote "Newsweek:"

"If this account is true, we can only hope that the Senator gets some new advisors; if it is not true, he should get a new speechwriter."

(Both Markham and Gargan and the gaggle of Kennedy advisors and speechwriters have come in for such unrelenting criticism ever since that some of them, notably Ted Sorensen, have edged perceptibly out of the EMK camp. The behavior of Markham and Gargan, two adult attorneys, caused Bobby biographer and fan Jack Newfield to say that Teddy would have done better by simply going for advice to the nearest Legal Aid.)

### Discrepancies

The pro-Kennedy "New York Post" editorialized:

"There were too many discrepancies between his first statement and subsequent disclosures, including some contained in his speech last night to risk minimal cross-examination in a courtroom, or even direct questioning by the press."

"When a man gives various unconvincing explanations of an act, one

must suspect that the real reason for the act lies in the unconscious."

Bullitt and Freud.

Or, in the Super Ego as someone joked. Was the verdict of a well-known Washington writer and longtime Kennedy observer correct?

"He is a spoiled, last child, a mama's boy. Good at all the small things, but feeling even in maturity that he can buy himself out of any pinch."

People simple weren't satisfied with the explanation the Senator gave. To make matters worse for Teddy, the accident happened on the same weekend the world was literally glued to the tube for the moon shot. This exposed thousands of additional viewers to super news coverage, pointing up the contrasts between the high courage of the astronauts and the Senator's suspect behavior.

(News coverage was so intense and news interest so high in this period that papers were in short supply all over the U.S. and newsdealers pirated bundles from each other in an all-out war.)

"Would Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Mike Collins have left that drowned girl at the bottom of a pond and gone looking for a lawyer?" asked enraged letter writer John Toland, in a missive that turned up in several publications.

### Devastating

The question was devastating and possibly accounted for President Nixon's not inviting Kennedy, the only ranking member of Congress so ignored, to the Los Angeles dinner for the astronauts. While one man was about to place the first footsteps on the moon's surface, making a noble remark about mankind, another had been rounding off the most promising political career in America, saying in Warner Brothers jargon, "Get me Markham!"

Eric Sevareid summed it up in a TV editorial as the weekend drew to a close. "Camelot," he intoned, "is on the moon."

In Hyannisport, the 79 year old Rose Kennedy, a woman who has drawn world admiration for her remarkable grace under pressure, was quick to defend her baby boy:

"Teddy has been so magnificent under a tremendous strain which people don't know about. He has been overly conscientious about his father and about me and about Ethel—in addition to his own obligations. He has been so faithful in caring about us all. It has really been unfair—the burden."

Then with that characteristic Kennedy turning toward ambition as sunflowers turn toward the sun, she went on: "I'm sure Ted can rise about all this."

This was the public Rose, who faltered only slightly in the aftermath of her son's tarnishing ordeal, by failing to attend her usual 7 a.m. Mass at St. Francis Xavier Church. But that in itself was indicative, for Rose Kennedy's private reaction was said to be one of devastation from disappointment and grief.

### Lacked Greatness

The indomitable lady has possibly been hit harder by Teddy's Chappaquiddick episode than by any of the more fatal tragedies which have beset her life. She may resemble some Grecian aspect of motherhood, a solid pillar of a Caryatide, protesting the death of her man and supporting the edifice of the Kennedy legend, but such heroic thoughts sustain by their own greatness. The incident at Chappaquiddick lacked any shred of heroism or greatness.

Onassis to Winston Churchill: "Sir Winston, would you rather be a great man honored in your country or have

raised an estimable family of children?"

Sir Winston to Onassis: "Hmmm, difficult question — difficult."

Mrs. Hugh Auchincloss (Jackie Bouvier Kennedy Onassis's mother) may refer to Ted Kennedy privately as a "cute boy" but she admires Rose Kennedy very much. She has been telling intimates that she believes this one event has crushed Rose.

"There is no doubt in my mind it's a much greater blow. It's so ignominious, you see. The others had a nobility, a grandeur."

They say Rose Kennedy keeps near her a framed copy of the Irish folk poem, "The Mother." It begins:

"I do not grudge them Lord, I do not grudge — My two strong sons that I have seen go out — To break their strength and die, they and a few, — In bloody protest for a glorious thing."

Actually, Rose Kennedy has given three brave sons as hostages to fortune, but there is no room in this poem for the behavior on Chappaquiddick, of her fourth and last. This, they

say, galls her intolerably, though she gave out the usual remark that "God does not send us a heavier cross than we can bear."

### Sympathy Letter

Then she sent the Kopecnes a registered letter of sympathy which they found "wonderful" and she went back to holding her head high. The attendant publicity enraged one Gloria Wohl, who demanded to know why the press was concerned with Rose Kennedy's grief, asking, "what loss had Rose Kennedy suffered in the death of Mary Jo Kopecne?"

The loss was a legend besmirched. Why, it was all so petty, useless, almost absurd. Like the famous Order of the Hare, created by Edward III, who assumed that a commotion in the ranks signified the beginning of a great battle when actually it turned out merely to be a hare running between the two armies. The Chappaquiddick business was like a rabbit, a very scared rabbit at that.

"Life's" Barry Farrell, disposed to be kind, ended up noting that the men who

had created the leaping phrases of the New Frontier and handled the Cuban Missile Crisis, had come together once again to serve a Kennedy. (Robert McNamara, Steve Smith, Ted Sorensen, Richard Goodwin, Burke Marshall, Kenneth O'Donnell, David Banks, Milton Gwirtzman.)

It was some array of talent, "But this crisis had no grandeur; all they had to account for was the classic rich kid's stunt — running away from an accident that dad can fix with the judge. And to do so they were willing to try fixing it with the people, using sympathy to buy acquittal."

### Priceless Memories

Rose Kennedy, surrounded by the priceless memories of her high-achieving children, may still have been as proud of her "jewels" as the mother of the Gracis. But it must have come stabbing back, the self-doubt she once expressed about wondering if others were too tired when the last little one comes along to give the attention needed, to make the extra effort, to tell the bedtime stories again, and set the examples. She had even advised Ted and Joan not to have a large family and had expressed disapproval of Bobby and Ethel's enormous brood. If her nine may have been too



"I'M SURE TED CAN RISE ABOVE THIS"  
Rose Kennedy and Ted at Hyannis Port

many, then their 11 was ridiculous.

She was the mother of two dead war heroes, one a martyred President, and of another dead dedicated idealist and she was also the mother of the man who had his companions spirit-off Martha's Vineyard before they could be questioned by press or police —

a man who hustled to the sanctuary of the Kennedy Compound with the biggest advisory help he could find — a man who, after he finished wearing what the "National Review" called his "prop" orthopedic collar at Mary Jo Kopecne's funeral and shedding real tears by her grave, was almost immediately back in

Hyannisport, poring over large photos taken from an airplane on assignment. These blow-ups showed all the details of Martha's Vineyard and Chappaquiddick islands.

There was no question Teddy Kennedy was shaken, demoralized, haunted by the dead girl's fate. But why, if innocent, was he so worried about his own fate?

And wasn't one of his biggest personal problems in the aftermath of the accident facing up to his father, the man who had helped make him what he is today?

**TOMORROW:** The playboy Kennedy.