

A BRIDGE TOO MUCH?
(Originally published December 1979)

After the official announcement of Senator Kennedy's presidential candidacy, an unkind reader of the Atlanta Constitution wrote to editor Hal Gulliver, quoting his [Gulliver's] column of December 17, 1978: "Let me also explain to you why Sen. Kennedy is without any question not going to run for president in 1980." And from the same column: "So mark it down, a small prediction. Sen. Kennedy will announce that he is not running for president after all but rather intends to support the Democratic president in the White House both for renomination and reelection."

Well, predicting the moves of politicians and political alliances is a harmless but tricky business, as the gullible Gulliver probably now realizes. Others have been wrong about Teddy before. We had even saved a 1975 column of Carl Rowan, who confidently foretold that Kennedy would change his mind and become the nominee and next president in the year that Carter took it all.

In anticipation of the inevitable, we have been filling a Ted Kennedy file with clippings that date back long before his channel swim at Edgartown. Our purpose, as a long-time non-admirer of all Kennedys, was purely malicious. We've waited patiently for the day Teddy would announce his candidacy, intending to write a devastating article about the hero of Chappaquiddick Bridge.

Unfortunately, now that the senator has declared himself, we find we have nothing to say. All of his escapades, his character faults and his sorry political record have been exposed and rehashed. Everything that needs to be said has already been said—and in much clearer prose than we could ever manage. One would naturally expect that conservative and Republican-leaning writers like Buckley, Hart, Safire, Tyrrell and Kilpatrick would jump on Teddy with both feet, and they have. But it's also encouraging to see that he has been getting a bit of kicking from the liberal media as well.

The mere fact that we even consider looking to Teddy for leadership makes one English commentator ask, "Why should the American people, who expelled the monarchial-aristocratic principle 200 years ago, now seek to engineer a dynastic restoration?" If it is a royal family with court jesters we hanker for, columnist Joan Beck has the right solution—change the constitution, proclaim Teddy king, let him build a castle and put him in charge of ribbon-cutting and ceremonial duties.

Until 1962, when his brothers and the Kennedy clan pushed him into running for the Senate, Teddy ignored politics and concentrated on sophomoric pleasures. His campaign against veteran Massachusetts politician McCormack was amateurish and painful. But about 12 million of Kennedy money, some corrupt machine politics and a

sympathy vote got him elected. After the death of his brothers, his early years in the Senate were undistinguished and somnolent. But even so, at least until 1969, it was generally accepted that as inheritor of the Kennedy mantle, should he ever choose to run, the Democratic nomination and the presidency would be his for the asking. Then came the tragic episode at Chappaquiddick and, even worse, the contrived and farcical televised speech that made a public jackass of him. Since then he has worked a bit harder at his Senate job, but always with an eye to publicity and always in pursuit of the same liberal causes and legislation, which have now become increasingly unpopular. As a politician he is a man out of step with the times.

So, ten years after the fateful bridge accident, Teddy is gambling on his name alone, hoping that all is forgotten and forgiven, and challenging the incumbent president of his own party for the nomination. The Kennedy name may no longer be enough. In the words of James Kilpatrick, "So long as Mr. Kennedy were only a possible, or probable, or unannounced candidate, he enjoyed a certain immunity from searching inquiry. The tantalizing question was, would he, or won't he? Now the honeymoon is over." Consequently, we are happy to see him in the race.

The eventual outcome will reveal much about the intelligence of American voters. If he is nominated and then elected, it could mean "that the American people have gone soft in the head or plain decadent."** If he is defeated, either by Carter in the primary or by the Republican nominee in the final election, it will mean that his collapse at Chappaquiddick was too much to overcome. The old wooden bridge will have served a noble purpose. It will have destroyed, once and for all we hope, the phony fable of Camelot and the myth of the Kennedy name.

*** American Spectator, Peregrine Worsthorne letter "A Letter From Europe / An Englishman Looks at Teddy." Vol. 12 • November 1979 • No. 11*

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