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'Camelot's End' Review: Unpopularity Contest Helped into office by voters' disgust with Watergate, Jimmy Carter soon alienated supporters. By 1979, Democrats preferred Ted Kennedy by

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a 52%-23% margin.

Jan. 25, 2019 9:49 am ET

By Edward Kosner

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pretty dismal. He did make human rights a signature element in American foreign policy. Still, he is chiefly remembered for that lugubrious "malaise" speech and the catastrophic failure of his mission to rescue the American hostages in Tehran. Many Democrats still revere Edward M. Kennedy for his long career as a liberal champion

However worthy Jimmy Carter's postpresidency, his single term in the White House was

in the Senate. But he never escaped the stain of Chappaquiddick in July 1969, when he drove his car off a bridge on Martha's Vineyard and left a young woman inside to drown. Questioned about it by Roger Mudd on TV a decade later, Kennedy could hardly muster a coherent sentence. Nor, indelibly, could he tell Mr. Mudd why he wanted to be president. Yet these two deeply wounded politicians were the polestars of America's oldest political party as it approached the 1980 election. In "Camelot's End," Jon Ward retells the story



PHOTO: CARTER ARCHIVES/ZUMA PRESS **CAMELOT'S END**

By Jon Ward

Twelve, 390 pages, \$28

could be president.

Carter in August 1980.

Democratic nomination against the genial conservative star Ronald Reagan, who promised to "make America great again." He purées his narrative mostly from the accounts of others and does a professional job of it. But he quotes so profligately from the authors of the 82 books and eight magazine articles in his source list that it's hard to find any of his own prose worth citing. Inescapably, the book takes the reader back to one of the more dispiriting periods of modern

of the Carter-Kennedy face-off for the

interest rates and high unemployment, gasshortage riots, and the Iranian hostage crisis, among other miseries. The author deconstructs Mr. Carter's political career, showing how the ambitious peanut farmer feigned sympathy for Georgia's term-

American politics—Mr. Carter's post-Watergate

presidency of combined high inflation, high

limited segregationist Gov. Lester Maddox to win the statehouse in Atlanta in 1970, then governed for four years as a "New South" racial moderate. He had actually been nursing plans to run for the White House from the moment he won the governorship. Once his term ended, he traveled the country to get himself better known. He showed up unbidden at Newsweek when I was the editor in the mid-'70s, and my colleagues and I were left scratching our heads about why this provincial pol imagined he

Teddy Kennedy thought Chappaquiddick had ended his dynastic hopes. He had easily won re-election to the Senate in 1970 but had been stripped of his leadership post. His carousing and philandering were no secret. Indeed, if the Kennedy brothers were the Corleones, cool, calculating Jack would be Michael, hotheaded Bobby would be Sonny, and Teddy—up until then—would be the unfortunate Fredo. But the Kennedy name still had resonance with

Democrats who yearned in 1980 for a revival of JFK's gauzy Camelot.

Carter in 1976. Once in the Oval Office, the 39th president's steely rectitude, conservative bent, compulsion to control (even the White House tennis-court schedule) and barely concealed mean streak alienated him even from his own party, which controlled both houses of Congress. By the spring of 1979, a poll showed Democrats favoring Sen. Kennedy for the 1980 nomination by 52% to 23% over the dour incumbent. Even so, the president bragged, "I'm going to whip his ass." After retreating to Camp David, he came down from the mountain in mid-July to address

the nation's glum mood from the White House. Mr. Carter never actually uttered the word

Hobbled by his pardon of Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford had lost the White House to Jimmy

"malaise"—old Washington hand Clark Clifford had mentioned it to reporters earlier—and the speech was a big hit at first. But, as the author relates, the president quickly fired five cabinet secretaries—leaving the country with the impression that his administration was imploding. Then the Islamic radicals who had ousted the shah of Iran overran the U.S. embassy in Tehran, seizing 52 American hostages and essentially dooming any prospect for a second Carter term. The Carter-Kennedy battle for the 1980 nomination lasted for more than six ugly months. Kennedy was on the defensive after the Mudd interview and was badly out-organized by the Carter campaign. The president beat him so soundly in the early going that many

delegate lead, but Kennedy amped his liberal fervor and won big states like New York and California. On the eve of the Democratic convention, Kennedy's only shot was an "open convention" in which the delegates won in primaries were free to vote for the challenger. "Win With Ted or Lose With Carter" buttons sprouted on the floor. The ploy failed. When Mr. Carter went over the top, Kennedy came on stage with him but humiliated the president by sidling away every time the nominee tried to hoist his hand for the obligatory "unity" picture. Reagan went on to crush Mr. Carter in November, winning all but six states and the District of Columbia for a total of 489 out of 538

expected Kennedy to drop out. Within a few months, Mr. Carter had built a commanding



popular vote.

electoral votes. It's Mr. Ward's dubious argument, reflected in his subtitle, that the Carter-Kennedy war "broke" the Democratic Party. Hardly. Just eight years earlier, Nixon had won every state but Massachusetts (and D.C.) for 520 electoral votes in his landslide win over George McGovern. If the Democratic Party had ever been broken, it was in the Kennedy-Johnson years, when civil-rights legislation turned the Democrats' once-solid South GOP red. Yet gifted campaigners like Bill Clinton and Barack Obama created victorious new Democratic coalitions in 1992, 1996, 2008 and 2012. Even losing candidates like Al Gore in 2000 and Hillary Clinton in 2016 won the The truth is that Jimmy Carter was an accidental president swept narrowly into office by

the country's revulsion at the Watergate mess. Whatever his virtues as a legislator, Teddy Kennedy lacked the character and self-control to carry the family back to the White House.

Camelot had ended long before his car—and his presidential dreams—hurtled off Dike Bridge with Mary Jo Kopechne that summer night in 1969. -Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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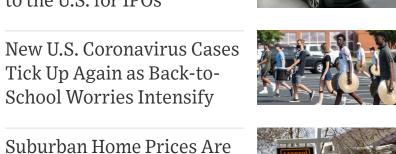
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