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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 a 52%-23% margin.

By Edward Kosner

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



Sen. Ted Kennedy and President Jimmy Carter in August 1980. PHOTO: CARTER ARCHIVES/ZUMA PRESS

CAMELOT'S END

By Jon Ward

Twelve, 390 pages, \$28

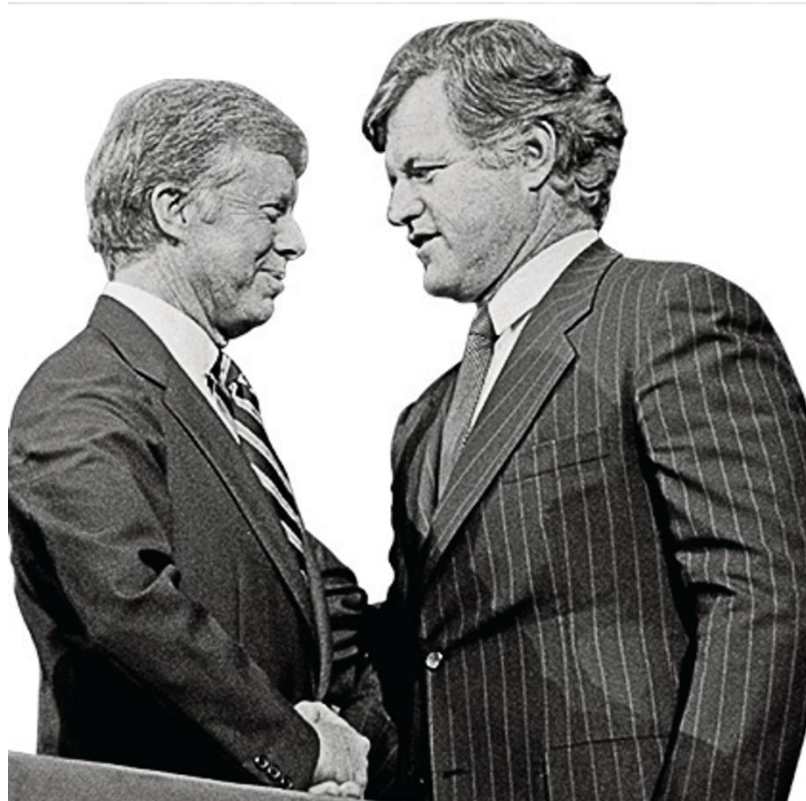
won the governorship. Once his term ended, he traveled the country to get himself better known. He showed up unbidden at Newsweek when I was the editor in the mid-'70s, and my colleagues and I were left scratching our heads about why this provincial pol imagined he could be president.

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.

Hobbled by his pardon of Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford had lost the White House to Jimmy 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 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 "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 expected Kennedy to drop out. Within a few months, Mr. Carter had built a commanding 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 play 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.



Sen. Ted Kennedy with Jimmy Carter at the Democratic National Convention in 1980. PHOTO: BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES

2012. Even losing candidates like Al Gore in 2000 and Hillary Clinton in 2016 won the popular vote.

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 Koepchne 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.

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 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

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