Ted Kennedy and the decay of American liberalism

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The death of Massachusetts Senator Edward (Ted) Kennedy on Tuesday marks the end of the Kennedy family's role as a major force in American politics. Ted Kennedy, who succumbed to brain cancer at age 77, served 47 years in the Senate. He was the last significant political representative of a family that loomed large in American political consciousness for more than half a century.

Ted Kennedy died some 46 years after the horrific events in Dallas that ended the administration and the life of his brother, John F. Kennedy, and 41 years after the assassination of his remaining brother, Robert F. Kennedy. (Joe Jr., the eldest brother, was a navy pilot in World War II. He was killed when his plane exploded in August of 1944).

The political careers of the Kennedys span the entire post-war period. Their personal tragedies are intimately bound up with the maelstrom of American politics and the explosive character of class relations in the United States. The assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy not only devastated the Kennedy family, they brought to a close a whole stage of American liberalism.

John F. Kennedy represented, in all of its contradictions, the Democratic Party as it emerged from Roosevelt's New Deal. He was elected to the US House of Representatives from Massachusetts' 11th congressional district in 1946 and to the US Senate in 1952. He entered Congress only one year after Roosevelt's death and the end of World War II. His father, Joseph Kennedy, a millionaire businessman, had served in the Roosevelt administration.

When Kennedy began his political career, American liberalism was already deeply compromised by its association with American imperialism and its embrace of anti-communism. Its decline was covered over for a period by the immense resources of American capitalism, which enabled the Democratic Party to make certain concessions to the working class. These, in turn, were bound up with its alliance with the right-wing labor bureaucracy.

The United States emerged from World War II as the dominant world imperialist power. American liberalism adopted the technique of combining idealist rhetoric with collaboration in criminal interventions by the US State Department, the CIA and the military directed against the international working class.

Even as it presented itself as the global champion of democracy and freedom, the Democratic Party depended for its electoral success on its control of the "Solid South," which was based on its defense of racial apartheid in much of the US.

These contradictions would play a major role in the mounting crisis that beset the Kennedy administration and its successor, that of Lyndon B. Johnson, whose Great Society program of social reform collapsed under the weight of the disastrous war in Vietnam and economic problems linked to the unraveling of the post-war economic boom.

John Kennedy's political career spanned the halcyon days of US global dominance and the beginning of the breakdown of that dominance. Kennedy was elected president in 1960 as a Cold War liberal. In the White House, he attempted to marry a program of moderate domestic reform with a more aggressive projection of American power internationally. His administration was quickly caught up in the contradictions of American capitalism both at home and abroad.

Initially indifferent to civil rights, Kennedy became embroiled in the political reverberations arising from the mass mobilization of African-Americans in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and early 1960s. He was assassinated in November of 1963.

The Kennedy administration ended as events in

Vietnam were driving it toward a military escalation and full-scale war, a policy that was undertaken by the Johnson administration.

The presidential bid of Kennedy's younger brother Robert as a belated opponent of the Vietnam War also ended in gunshots in June of 1968. In a turn of events pregnant with historical irony, Robert's death paved the way for Richard Nixon, who had been denied the presidency by John Kennedy in 1960, to win the White House eight years later.

The coming to power of Nixon was a turning point for American liberalism. It marked the end of the period when the Democratic Party represented a force for even limited social reform.

Edward Kennedy, the youngest brother, won election to the US Senate in 1962. His political career was permanently scarred by his personal recklessness, which exploded in the tawdry episode in Chappaquiddick in July, 1969, which involved the death of a Kennedy campaign aide. More important, however, were vast changes in American politics and the Democratic Party that gathered strength in the 1970s.

Following the debacle of the McGovern campaign in 1972, the Democratic Party moved sharply to the right. Underlying this development were profound changes in the global economic position of American capitalism, signaled by the breakup of the post-war Bretton Woods monetary system and the ending of dollar-gold convertibility in August of 1971.

In 1976, the Democratic Party turned for its presidential candidate to Jimmy Carter, a conservative southern governor. The uneasy relationship between Carter and Kennedy broke down later in the 1970s, leading to Kennedy's bid to unseat Carter and win the Democratic presidential nomination in 1980. By then, Kennedy himself had shifted in a conservative direction, as epitomized by his vocal support for deregulation of the airline and trucking industries.

The Democratic Party, underscoring its turn to the right, rejected Kennedy. His oft-quoted "the dream shall never die" speech at the 1980 Democratic National Convention was, in fact, the last hurrah of American liberalism. By then the program of American liberalism had long since become hollow. Lacking any political substance, it increasingly assumed a demagogic character.

Following the half-hearted presidential campaign of former vice president and Minnesota senator Walter Mondale in 1984, the Democrats turned in 1988 to a little known conservative governor, Michael Dukakis, and a conservative southern governor, Bill Clinton, in 1992.

After 1980, there was little substance left in Kennedy's professed devotion to social reform, despite his becoming the perpetual target of right-wing Republican attacks, which demonized him as an unrepentant liberal. From then on, Kennedy became what could be called a political minimalist—eschewing any serious attempt to enact major social reforms.

The American political establishment as a whole had shifted far to the right, as embodied in the free market nostrums of Reagan. These provided the political justification for a relentless assault on the living standards and social position of the working class, which continued under the Clinton and Bush administrations and continues today under Obama.

In death, Kennedy is being eulogized as the "Lion of the Senate" —a master legislator and advocate for the common man. While the personal tragedies of the Kennedys evoke in the public a certain sympathy for Ted Kennedy, the fact remains that his name is not associated with a single serious social reform. He spent his final decade sponsoring bipartisan measures of a right-wing character, such as George W. Bush's "No Child Left Behind Act"—an attack on public education—and a punitive bill targeting undocumented immigrants that failed to win passage in Congress.

Kennedy supported Obama in the 2008 election, in part out of animus toward Bill Clinton, whom he privately despised. The dark irony of his life is underscored by the fact that his signature political cause, which he promoted for nearly 50 years—universal health care—has been turned by Obama into a cover for a ruthless drive to gut health care for millions of working Americans. A bill to slash health care costs for big business and the government was being debated in Congress as Kennedy lay dying.