

Post-mortems for Ted Kennedy: Burying the remains of American liberalism

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A common theme runs through most of the official testimonials and press commentaries on Senator Edward (Ted) Kennedy, who died last Tuesday at the age of 77. While acknowledging that the senator's death closes a chapter in American politics, the eulogies focus on the most insignificant period of his long career.

Ted Kennedy, so runs the story line, really came into his own when he abandoned his presidential aspirations, recognized that there would never be another Kennedy administration, and found a way to work within the limits of a right-wing political environment hostile to New Deal-New Frontier-Great Society-style reformism.

The one-time presidential aspirant settled into a more comfortable and accommodating role as the Senate's toothless liberal "lion." Three cheers for "Uncle Teddy!"

Conservative columnist David Brooks of the *New York Times* described Kennedy as "The Great Gradualist." *Times* writer Sam Tanenhaus, in a retrospective entitled "In Kennedy, the Last Roar of the New Deal Liberal," criticized Kennedy's "intemperate denunciation of Judge Robert H. Bork in 1987," and condemned his attempt to unseat incumbent Democratic President Jimmy Carter in the 1980 presidential primaries as his "gravest miscalculation."

Similarly, the *Los Angeles Times* in an editorial on Sunday bemoaned Kennedy's "ill-considered campaign for the 1980 Democratic presidential nomination" and his "hyperbolic warning that confirming Robert H. Bork for the Supreme Court

would usher in the return of segregated lunch counters and back-alley abortions."

In fact, both episodes were among the more principled moments in Kennedy's career. Bork was a chief co-conspirator in Nixon's effort to remain in office during the Watergate scandal. When Attorney General Elliot Richardson and his deputy, William French Smith, resigned rather than execute Nixon's order to fire Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox in the infamous 1973 "Saturday Night Massacre," Bork accepted the post of acting attorney general and did the dirty deed.

As a judge on the US Court of Appeals, he issued rulings attacking core civil liberties laid down in the Bill of Rights, and following the defeat of his nomination by Reagan to the Supreme Court, he publicly denounced the Declaration of Independence for the egalitarian sentiments it espoused and inspired. This is the man whose honor Kennedy supposedly impugned.

As for Kennedy's bid to unseat Carter, the elevation of this conservative Southern governor as the Democrats' 1976 presidential candidate was a milestone in the shift to the right of that party and American politics as a whole in the aftermath of Watergate and the defeat in Vietnam. Carter's election was followed by a Democratic defeat in the 1978 congressional elections, which saw a further exit of prominent liberal Democratic legislators.

Kennedy's presidential bid was broadly opposed by the media and he was rejected by his party. He took his defeat in 1980 as the sign of an irreversible

abandonment of liberal reform policies by the Democratic Party and reconciled himself to the changed political landscape. He spent the rest of his political career seeking to enact minor administrative reforms and serving as a deal-maker in the Senate, while accepting his self-demeaning role as the spokesman of a politically bankrupt American liberalism.

Nearly a half-century has passed since John F. Kennedy announced his candidacy for the presidency on January 2, 1960. Within the framework of American history, that event came at roughly the mid-point between the election of Woodrow Wilson in 1912 and the election of Barack Obama in 2008.

In announcing his candidacy, Kennedy declared that he would, if elected, provide answers to the following crucial issues: “[H]ow to rebuild the stature of American science and education; how to prevent the collapse of our farm economy and the decay of our cities; how to achieve, without further inflation or unemployment, expanded economic growth benefiting all Americans; and how to give direction to our traditional moral purpose, awakening every American to the dangers and opportunities that confront us.”

When he delivered this speech, Kennedy viewed himself as a politically moderate representative of a liberal capitalist “progressive” tradition that had been inaugurated by Woodrow Wilson. We now know that the Kennedy administration, which ended with the assassination in Dallas, marked the beginning of the protracted death agony of that tradition. Imperialist commitments, economic decay and social polarization overwhelmed the liberal agenda. The modest goals proclaimed by Kennedy in the announcement of his candidacy were never achieved, and, in fact, were repudiated long ago by the Democratic Party.

Thus, when Barack Obama delivered his eulogy at Ted Kennedy’s funeral, he never used the word “liberal.”

During the past week, the media has repeatedly broadcast an excerpt from one of Senator Kennedy’s best known speeches—his concession to Jimmy Carter at

the 1980 Democratic Party Convention. Accepting his rejection by the convention, Kennedy declared, with evident sincerity, “the work goes on, the cause endures, the hope still lives, and the dream shall never die.”

As a matter of fact, as far as the Democratic Party and American liberalism were concerned, the work was over, the cause of social reform was abandoned, the hope was dead, and the dream, whatever it was, continued only as an illusion.

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