

Chappaquiddick examines 1969 tragedy and political cover-up

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Directed by John Curran; written by Taylor Allen and Andrew Logan

This is a good film, not a great one, but given the cultural and political context in which it has been produced, *Chappaquiddick* is a considerable achievement. The film was written and cast well before Donald Trump was viewed as a serious presidential prospect. It premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival late last summer, but only went into general distribution in the United States in early April.

The subject matter, as the title suggests, is the death of Mary Jo Kopechne, who was taking part in a reunion for former campaign aides of Robert F. Kennedy on the weekend of July 18-20, 1969, on Chappaquiddick, an islet adjacent to the larger island of Martha's Vineyard, off the southern coast of Massachusetts.

Kopechne, 28, was riding late at night in a car driven by Senator Edward Kennedy which went off an open wooden bridge and plunged into the water. Kennedy escaped, under circumstances that have never been made clear, but Kopechne drowned. Kennedy later pleaded guilty to leaving the scene of an accident, and was sentenced to two months in jail (suspended) and a year's probation.

The film deals with the accident in its first 20 minutes, and devotes its main attention to the efforts by Kennedy and his family and entourage to manage the political uproar that ensued. *Chappaquiddick* limits its focus to a single week—from the Friday of Kopechne's tragic death to the following Friday, when Kennedy made his guilty plea, then gave a televised address to the nation in an effort to salvage his political career.

Given that the events in question are intrinsically political, it does little credit to director John Curran (*The Painted Veil*, *Stone*) and producer Mark Ciampi that they declared their intention to avoid making a "political film." And indeed, this is somewhat misleading: the entire substance—and value—of *Chappaquiddick* is that it takes an unsparing look at the behind-the-scenes mechanics of the capitalist political system in America.

The film's central character, Edward Kennedy, was the only survivor in 1969 among four sons of Joseph P. Kennedy, a wealthy financial operator (he would have been a billionaire in today's money), and a fascist sympathizer in the 1930s, who was by all accounts the driving force of the family's rise in American politics.

Kennedy's oldest son Joe was killed in World War II; second son John was elected to the House of Representatives in 1946, to the US Senate in 1952, and as president in 1960, dying to an assassin's (or assassins') bullets in 1963; third son Robert was a junior witch-hunter during the McCarthy era, then his brother's attorney-general, a US senator from New York after John's murder, and then himself assassinated in 1968 at the height of his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Against this backdrop, youngest son Edward (Ted) Kennedy was considered the laggard, a playboy in his young adulthood, elected to the US Senate in 1962 (at the age of 30) to fill out the remainder of his brother John's term, reelected in 1964. But by the summer of 1969, a year after his brother Robert's assassination, he had been chosen Senate

Majority Whip, the number two position in the Democratic leadership, and he was widely expected to run for president in 1972 against the incumbent Republican, Richard Nixon.

Chappaquiddick begins with a scene in which this political expectation forms the backdrop. Edward Kennedy (Jason Clarke) has brought to the island the "boiler room girls," so-called because they played a key backstage role in his brother's presidential campaign, in an effort to persuade them to join his own political operation. He presses Kopechne (Kate Mara), now managing a mayoral campaign in New Jersey, to join his staff. She is hesitant to return to Washington, still traumatized by the murder of Robert Kennedy.

The two leave a party, with Kennedy driving and importuning Kopechne to go with him "to the beach." Later he would claim he was driving her to catch the last ferry to return to her hotel room in Edgartown, on Martha's Vineyard. Obviously intoxicated, he drives too rapidly down an unlit dirt road and plunges off a bridge into the water. He is next seen pulling himself up on the shore, then walking several miles to the house where the party is ongoing.

Kennedy returns to the scene of the crash with two aides, Joe Gargan (Ed Helms), his cousin, and Paul Markham (Jim Gaffigan), a former US attorney, and they make a few half-hearted attempts to dive down and open the car door behind which Kopechne lies trapped. Gargan and Markham then row Kennedy across to Edgartown in a small boat, returning him to his own hotel room, while urging him to call the police and report the accident.

The senator makes several calls to Joseph Kennedy (Bruce Dern), but none to the police. In his first call, he tells his father, "I'm not going to be president." In a second call, his stroke-afflicted father croaks out only a single word, "alibi." Edward Kennedy initially follows this advice, claiming that Mary Jo was at the wheel of the car. He tries out this lie on Gargan and Markham, to their apparent disgust, before thinking better of it when he finally goes to the Edgartown police station in the morning to report the accident.

This sequence establishes the pattern for the rest of the film. While Kennedy is occasionally visited by flashbacks of Kopechne's imagined drowning—in images that convey considerable pathos, even horror to the viewing audience—he and his aides are preoccupied with minimizing the damage to his political career. They treat the Kopechne family, the police, the legal system and the press as so many pawns to be manipulated on their chessboard.

One scene, in particular, is worth the price of admission. After making his statement to the police—written for him by Markham to minimize his own culpability—Kennedy is flown back to the mainland and goes to the family compound in Hyannisport. There he unexpectedly confronts a room full of political operatives and advisers summoned by his father, a war council of sorts.

These aides discuss how the police, the courts and the press can be most effectively handled to avoid irreparable damage to Kennedy's political

prospects. The scene gives a glimpse of the ruthlessness and cynicism of the US ruling elite. The most vocal in this group, and the most willing to confront Kennedy with the potential problems caused by his own conduct, is Robert McNamara, the former secretary of defense and Vietnam war criminal, effectively portrayed by Clancy Brown.

Equally effective, in this reviewer's opinion, is Dern as Joseph Kennedy. With gestures, stares, and only six actual words of dialogue—"Alibi" twice, and "You'll never be great," addressing Edward with contempt—he conveys both the powerful personality and the true nastiness of the father of the Kennedy clan.

The actors portraying the four main characters, Clarke as Kennedy, Mara as Kopechne, and the comedians Helms and Gaffigan as Joe Gargan and Paul Markham, give life to their more complex roles as well. Clarke's Kennedy is the picture of ruling class entitlement, quickly overcoming any (minor) scruples in the name of preserving his political career. Mara manages to express intelligence and a strong personality in her brief screen time.

In this reviewer's opinion, the main limitation of *Chappaquiddick* is that it doesn't really convey the actual concrete historical context. The script seeks to date the events, in a somewhat mechanical fashion, with frequent references to the Moon landing the same weekend, and references to the assassination of Robert Kennedy the previous year.

But the events otherwise unfold without any real sense of the political conditions in which they transpired. You have no idea that Richard Nixon is president—in a film focused on the man preparing to challenge him for reelection!—and the word "Vietnam" does not appear in the script, as far as I could tell.

The early scenes of the party on Chappaquiddick thus ring false. How could a group of Kennedy aides and campaign workers assemble for a reunion in July 1969—at the very point when US troop strength in Vietnam reached its peak, at 550,000 soldiers—without any mention of Nixon or the war in their conversations. As one who lived through that period, I doubt that any social gathering of that day could have been so non-political, let alone a reunion of those who worked on the campaign of an avowedly "antiwar" presidential candidate.

Mary Jo Kopechne was apparently quite knowledgeable about the war in Vietnam, had read widely on it and helped in the drafting of Robert Kennedy's speeches on the subject. She had also moved to the South at the height of the civil rights struggles, teaching school for a year in Montgomery, Alabama (1962-63). Mara conveys a bit of this, particularly in delivering the line that the RFK campaign "felt like public service, not politics." But there is nothing more after that brief hint.

To this reviewer, it is perfectly plausible that the young women who attended the Chappaquiddick cookout were idealistic and intelligent veterans of the Robert Kennedy campaign, not "party girls" or Kennedy "groupies" as depicted in some quarters.

The fact that none of the other women on Chappaquiddick that weekend, all friends of Kopechne, lent themselves in any way to subsequent gossip and conspiracy-mongering speaks well of them. Also, notably, not one of them has been swept up in the current #MeToo campaign, and sought to add reminiscences of alleged misconduct by Edward Kennedy (or his aides) to the mountain of decades-old trash being peddled by the *New York Times* and other corporate media outlets today.

As for the fate of Edward Kennedy, there is no need to alter the conclusions drawn by the *World Socialist Web Site* on the occasion of his death, nearly nine years ago. We said at the time that Chappaquiddick scarred his political career, but, "More important, however, were vast changes in American politics and the Democratic Party that gathered strength in the 1970s."

By the time Kennedy felt able to make a bid for the Democratic presidential nomination, challenging the incumbent Jimmy Carter in 1980, the political establishment had shifted well to the right, and he was

defeated. As the WWSW noted, "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."

Chappaquiddick has received a generally favorable critical response, but there has been one prominent attack on the film that deserves comment and a rebuttal. In an op-ed column in the *New York Times*, published two days after the largely favorable review of the work by the newspaper's long-time critic A.O. Scott, liberal journalist Neal Gabler (*An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, 1988) denounces the film for allegedly distorting the tragedy. Gabler goes so far as to brand the film as "fake history," in an effort to link his criticism with the campaign against "fake news" being waged in the American media.

The *Times*' decision to publish such a column is itself remarkable, given that the newspaper has been spearheading the #MeToo campaign, over largely unproven allegations of sexual misconduct, witch-hunting politicians, artists and entertainers, and lumping together indiscriminately everything from unwanted requests for a date to sexual assault.

Chappaquiddick involves the death of a young woman at the hands of a powerful man who escaped the legal consequences—no one has died in any of the myriad #MeToo episodes—but the *Times* has no problem handing over its op-ed pages for an impassioned defense of the senator as victim of falsification and character assassination.

Gabler only identifies one actual "distortion," the depiction of Joseph Kennedy as still able to speak a few words, although since his 1961 stroke, according to Gabler, he was so debilitated that "he could only babble incoherently." He objects to the film portraying the Kennedy patriarch "like a Mafia don," but that is both arguably true and well within the purview of artistic license.

Gabler's main objection to the film, insofar as it is possible to cull something from the largely disjointed series of imprecations, is that an artist should not take liberties with the story of Edward Kennedy because not enough years have transpired so that he has "passed into the public domain," and because "the Kennedy family ... remain politically active, and divisive."

Actually, it is remarkable that so many years have passed since Chappaquiddick *without* any serious treatment of the affair on film. That suggests the continuing power of Democratic Party liberals in Hollywood, who would oppose any effort to tarnish the image of the most important "brand" in post-World War II Democratic politics.

Gabler does not cite any significant falsification in the film, nor can he, since it adheres cautiously to the public record—indeed, *Chappaquiddick* manages to remain ambiguous about how long Kopechne could have survived under water, and whether she could have been saved if Kennedy had called the police and a diving crew as soon as possible.

What the *Times* columnist really objects to is the film's depiction of the cynical political spin-doctoring by Kennedy and his aides to salvage (more or less successfully) his political career. This is not helpful to today's Democratic Party, which chose Kennedy's nephew Joseph Kennedy III to give its rebuttal to Trump's state of the union speech in January.



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