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# ‘Catching the Wind’ Review: The Liberal Lion in Full

How to sum up Edward Kennedy’s long political life, tagged with both achievement and disgrace?



Sen. Edward Kennedy at the grave of his brother, President John F. Kennedy, in 1971. PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

By *Edward Kosner*  
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Edward Kennedy is one of those “not quite” figures in America’s past, men of real significance in their time—Henry Clay, William Jennings Bryan, Adlai Stevenson, Nelson Rockefeller—who never could capture the ultimate prize. History tends to reward most of them with a generous last hurrah if not a reprisal of “Hail to the Chief.”

Kennedy died of a brain tumor at 77 in 2009 after serving in the U.S. Senate longer than all but three other men. Over nearly 47 years he was a prodigious legislator who proposed no fewer than 2,500 bills and saw almost 700 of them enacted into law. Liberals hailed him as their Lion of the Senate. Yet today, his legacy must contend with those awkward or grotesque episodes that cast a shadow over his manifest accomplishments.

### CATCHING THE WIND

By Neal Gabler  
*Crown, 887 pages, \$40*

Mention Teddy Kennedy and people are likely to remember not only his eloquent 1968 eulogy for his murdered brother Robert but also his being expelled from Harvard for cheating on a Spanish exam; the Chappaquiddick disaster; his mumbly inability to tell Roger Mudd why he wanted to be president in that ineredicable 1979

TV interview; and his drunken carousing with his nephew William Kennedy Smith in Palm Beach, Fla., in 1991 before Mr. Smith was accused—though later acquitted—of raping a young woman.

Now Kennedy is the subject of a new biography by Neal Gabler, the adroit chronicler of Walter Winchell, [Walt Disney](#) and other 20th-century American icons. To call Mr. Gabler’s “Catching the Wind: Edward Kennedy and the Liberal Hour” monumental would be to insult the pyramids. Still, the book logs in at 736 pages plus back matter, and it’s only the first volume of a projected two-part work. (That’s quite a bit shorter than Robert Caro’s Lyndon Johnson pentalogy, but then Teddy was no LBJ.)

There are already more than a dozen Kennedy biographies, plus his posthumous memoir “True Compass” (2009) and many other books in which he figures prominently. Even so, Mr. Gabler promises that the Ted Kennedy who emerges from his book won’t be “an altogether familiar one.” To a degree this is true. The rich narrative is studded with tasty factoids—Ted and Robert Kennedy called each other “Robbie” and “Eddie”—and lively quotes, anecdotes and vignettes. The Kennedy of “Catching the Wind” may not be all that new, but there’s certainly a lot of him.

This can be a maddening book, especially if you have reservations about Ted Kennedy’s glory. In prodigious—often stupefying—detail, it follows Ted from his birth during the Depression to 1975, the year after Richard Nixon resigned and Kennedy, for the third time, backed away from running for president as anti-school busing mobs rampaged through Boston. All the liberal triumphs on Capitol Hill are here, the leadership on big issues from civil rights to health care to Vietnam—and all the failures, too, many self-inflicted.

Mr. Gabler can be hagiographic about Teddy Kennedy as the avatar of doomed late-stage liberalism in America, a tragic hero who mastered his destructive impulses to carry the flame. “He had lived long enough,” the author writes, “to fail, to sin, to stumble, to fall and fall out of favor. He had been publicly abased . . . and forced to ask for forgiveness. To his fiercest detractors, these missteps were unforgivable, though how much of their implacability was politics in the conservative gale and how much morality is impossible to say. But to those who loved him, these flaws were intrinsic to that love.”

He has a simple theory: Teddy was the helpless victim of family dysfunction—the youngest of nine children in a gilded household ruled by Joseph and Rose Kennedy. They are depicted as monstrous parents determined to raise an aesthetically perfect brood, some of whom would reach the pinnacle of American society and power as a rebuke to the WASP establishment that lorded it over the Irish-Catholic Kennedys and their kinsmen.

Kennedy was named for Eddie Moore, a longtime family factotum (and sometime procurer for Joe). In many ways the least gifted of the Kennedys’ four sons, Eddie grew up gut-sure of his inadequacy compared to Joe Jr., John and Robert. The philandering patriarch preached family first but was away most of the time and still dictated his children’s lives. “I don’t want any sourpusses around here,” he’d thunder. Rose, acting oblivious to his infidelities, compulsively flitted from Cape Cod to Palm Beach to Europe, plopping her youngest into one school after another. The boy found his place in the family hierarchy as the chubby charmer forever in trouble.

The Kennedys nurtured Teddy in their way. Despite his academic deficits, they got him into prep school at Milton Academy and sent him on grand tours of Europe en route to Harvard, where he majored in football until he was expelled in his sophomore year. As penance, he joined the Army—the first of his many lunges at redemption. Joe made sure that Teddy wasn’t put in harm’s way but assigned to a ceremonial unit in Versailles with weekends in Paris. Harvard readmitted him, and when he didn’t make the cut at Harvard Law School, a spot was found at the University of Virginia. There, as Mr. Gabler tells it, Kennedy defied the perpetual low expectations for his performance by winning the moot-court competition.

With a law degree but no prospects, Ted was installed as a junior prosecutor in Boston, but his real job was working for his brother, John the senator, during his campaigns for the 1960 Democratic presidential nomination and then against Richard Nixon. The next step was inevitable—running with no record in 1962 for JFK’s vacated seat in Massachusetts. This was the infamous primary race against Eddie McCormack, whose uncle was Speaker of the House. At their first debate, McCormack looked over at Kennedy and sneered, truthfully enough: “If [your] name was Edward Moore, your candidacy would be a joke.” Ted won anyway—with stealth help from his brother in the Oval Office.

The meat of this first volume is Kennedy’s first 13 years in the Senate and his flirtation with running for president in 1968, ’72, and ’76. The author divides Kennedy’s early Senate career into four phases: his rookie season; his return after the 1964 small-plane crash that almost killed him; his re-emergence after the 1968 assassination of Robert Kennedy that, in Mr. Gabler’s telling, permanently traumatized him; and his initially diminished role after Chappaquiddick a year later.

At first, Teddy played the humble freshman, holding his tongue at Jack’s old desk in the back row of the chamber and assiduously sucking up to the aging Senate bulls who ruled the club, many of them arch-segregationists like James Eastland of Mississippi. Eager and deferential, he charmed them as he had his parents and older siblings as a child. He turned serious after the six-month convalescence from his plane-crash injuries. Determined to bolster his civil-rights credentials, Kennedy fought a doomed effort for an anti-poll tax amendment to the 1965 Voting Rights Act against the strategic designs of now-President Lyndon Johnson and other backers of the legislation. Later, honoring a commitment to his grief-stricken father, Teddy called in every available chit to elevate a glaringly unqualified Boston hack named Francis X. Morrissey to the federal bench. “He was fighting,” Mr. Gabler rationalizes, “for all those who had suffered the same indignities, including himself.” Both of these losing fights actually bolstered Kennedy’s standing in the Senate, he claims.

Almost catatonic after RFK’s murder, he didn’t return to the Senate for months, then ran for party whip, an unglamorous post that he energized into a leadership role fit for a bull. Chappaquiddick stripped him of any moral authority and clout he’d accumulated, but he persevered to re-emerge as a leader of the end-the-war drive and the effort to force Nixon from office over Watergate. Indeed, Mr. Gabler makes the case that Nixon so feared a Kennedy run in 1972 that dirty tricks against Ted were integral to his Watergate designs.

One sure test of any Ted Kennedy biography is its treatment of the episode one midnight in July 1969, when the senator drove his car off a narrow wooden bridge near midnight on tiny Chappaquiddick Island, off Martha’s Vineyard. Kennedy escaped with his life but failed to rescue his companion, 28-year-old Mary Jo Kopechne, a former Bobby Kennedy staffer. Mr. Gabler devotes a hyperdetailed 54-page chapter to what he calls the “tragic accident” and its aftermath, and it’s exemplary of his approach to his subject.

Why did Kennedy turn off the main paved road to the ferry and bounce down a dirt road that led over Dike Bridge to the beach? He admitted having had a couple of drinks at the reunion party with Mary Jo and other young women, but insisted that he’d simply made a wrong turn and didn’t see the bridge in the headlights until it was too late. I was vacationing on the Vineyard later that summer and retraced his path. The road to the ferry was not only paved, it banked at the turn. When, as Kennedy had, I veered right, my car thunked as the tires slid off the canted main road. The dirt road was so corrugated that even traveling under 20 mph, as Teddy said he had, my car bucked and jolted. No driver could fail to recognize that he’d blundered onto the wrong path to the ferry.

Mr. Gabler gives the full account of Kennedy’s sketchy behavior after the crash, the mournful speech to the nation cobbled up for him by Ted Sorensen and others, and the various investigations of the young woman’s death. He claims there was “nothing whatsoever to undermine Ted Kennedy’s credibility” though the judge at the inquest ruled that Kennedy hadn’t told the whole story. And he blames the press for calling Chappaquiddick “an example of Ted Kennedy’s irresponsibility”—which is precisely what it was—and not “another Kennedy tragedy.”

Deep in the book, Mr. Gabler gets around to Kennedy’s other reckless behavior—his bouts of heavy drinking and especially his philandering, another family legacy. His wife Joan’s alcoholism has been traced by many to her husband’s indiscreet cheating. She picked up the phone once and heard him talking to an old and continuing love, a blond jewelry designer in Palm Beach. He was rumored to have had affairs with countless others, so it was said, including Candice Bergen, Margaret Trudeau (the wild-child wife of the Canadian prime minister) and a “stunning” New York socialite.

That Ted Kennedy acted as a moral force in politics is central to the author’s argument that his career embodied the arc of liberalism in America—from the legacy of the New Deal through his brother Jack’s New Frontier, LBJ’s Great Society, brother Bobby’s civil-rights and antiwar crusades, and Ted’s own fight for Medicare for All. In this reading, Nixon led the reaction that culminated in the Reagan Revolution—and, by implication, the Age of Trump. But, as “Catching the Wind” documents more fully than ever, Edward Moore Kennedy, whatever his virtues, was always a fragile vessel for those dreams.

—*Mr. Kosner was the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.*

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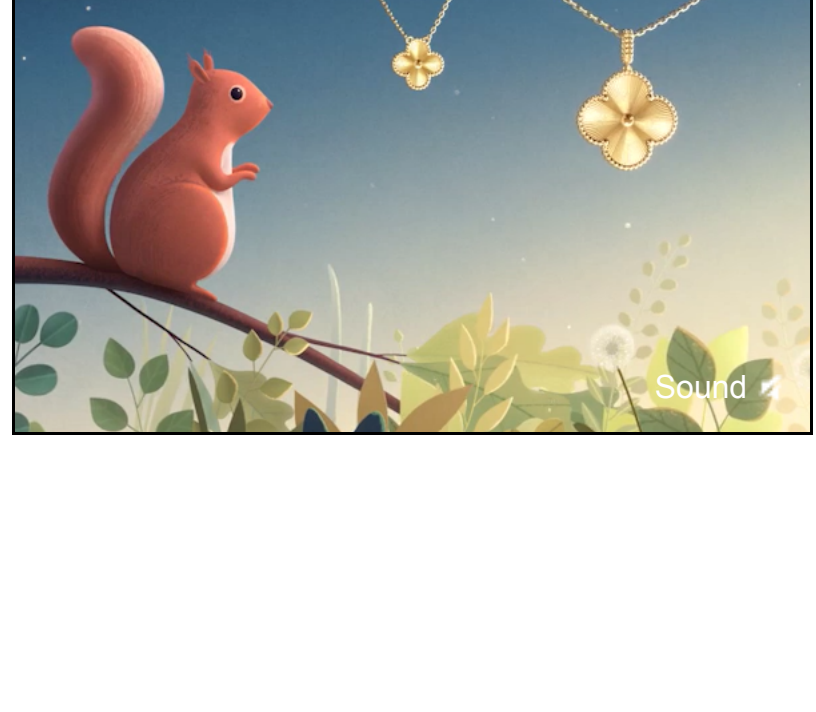


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