



Ending in Arlington

by Wlady Pleszczynski

I CAN'T REMEMBER WHERE, but years ago I read something that, politically speaking, captured the essential Ted Kennedy. He was doing some advance work before an appearance by his brother. One look at the auditorium or gym and he knew it was too big. He had the event moved to a much smaller room. It would be easier to fill, and the cameras would make the turnout seem like a standing room only throng. Artifice was the heart and soul of the Kennedy operation.

Teddy rather knew as much, which is what made him such a good political performer at Democratic conventions and other such occasions, a blowhard in the best rhetorical sense, dutifully pounding and har-rumphing away from the podium in the name of all the usual Democratic nonsense. Even with a delicious Boston accent it was a tough act to sustain over 47 often stale years, but he retained enough public charm and wit to pull it off, most notably to the benefit of presidential upstart Barack Obama in early 2008. And what luster he had lost was more than made up for that day by Caroline Kennedy's participation.

It's when his words actually mattered—or were supposed to matter—that he ran into serious problems. Even a diehard loyalist like Hendrik Hertzberg noted after Teddy's death the permanent damage caused by "considerable evidence" of the efforts Kennedy took to create "a false alibi" in the immediate wake of Chappaquiddick. The savaging of Robert Bork was worthy of father Joe's Hitlerian proclivities. A simple question from Roger Mudd proved deadlier than drink itself. Among the Kennedy faithful, for whom the dream has always endured, none of that of course mattered. Political sycophancy is as old as time, leaving its practitioners blissfully beyond the requirement of self-respect.

Some three years ago I was on a long Interstate drive, always an ideal time for a blast of NPR's "Fresh Air." Dave Davies was interviewing Ted about his new book, *America Back on Track*. The bowing and scraping I heard wasn't my muffler bumping the roadway. Late in the piece Davies inquired about

Ted's famous role as surrogate father to Robert's and John's children. Oh, they're just terrific kids, Ted replied, unable to say anything specific about them, noting only that some are doing wonderful work in environmentalism, making documentaries, or in "Save The Children, different types of activities." He mentioned how he and they had all recently read up on their John Brown and taken a bus trip to Harpers Ferry, highlighted by "the excellent presentations that are made by the Park Service down there..." So many years in the Senate, so many years on automatic government pilot.

And now he rests on hallowed government property, after a sendoff of sendoffs (even if most of those lining Washington's streets appeared to be tourists lucky to witness something unexpected), ending up near the spot where his brother is said to have said in 1963, "I could stay here forever." CBS and *Time* magazine revived that quote during their coverage of Teddy's death, though one had JFK saying it eight months before his assassination, the other just eleven days before Dallas. Not that it makes any difference, since we all know the words probably belong to Theodore Sorensen.

Oddly, Ted's alleged final words were never spoken by him, just put down on paper and in the first case fed to the press days before he died, his letter calling for speedy naming of a successor, and in the second case read at his burial by one of the family's favored clerics. Unfortunately, the cleric read aloud not only Kennedy's self-serving missive to Pope Benedict but also the Vatican's curt reply—a public blowoff that a hale Ted Kennedy would have anticipated and thus prevented. But he's gone, and when I went by his grave two days later there were but four or five visitors in front of it, a smattering of flowers still wrapped in grocery-store cellophane, and a single guard not quite sure what he should be doing. It was late in the day, and what tourists were left all seemed to gather around John Kennedy's grave, oblivious to the presence of a newcomer a few hundred feet away. ❁

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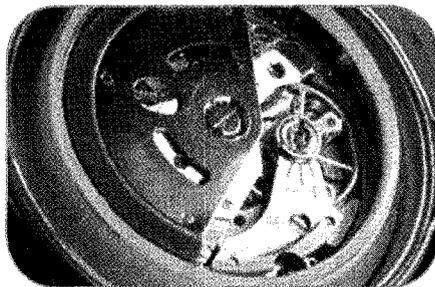
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