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BY DAVID GREENBERG

Ted Kennedy's messy, monumental life

In his 47 years in the United States Senate—from the high promise of his brother Jack's presidency to the hard slog of Barack Obama's first months in the White House—Edward M. Kennedy accomplished as much as anyone who ever served in that body.

During that half-century, Kennedy's large extended family was at the center of a cascade of unimaginable tragedies, including his brothers' assassinations, his near-fatal plane crash, cancer diagnoses for two of his children, divorce, drug addiction, sex scandals and the premature deaths of several other relatives.

Perhaps most important, Ted Kennedy emerged after his brother Robert's death in 1968 as the chief torchbearer of American liberalism, even as it came under attack from an insurgent political right.

Kennedy's rich, dramatic, consequential life has been chronicled in several books. But two new, deeply researched accounts should establish themselves as the go-to sources for anyone interested in the Massachusetts senator's momentous career: Neal Gabler, the author of lauded lives of Walter Winchell and Walt Disney, among others, has written the 1,227-page "Against the Wind: Edward Kennedy and the Rise of Conservatism, 1976-2009," which follows his 928-page first volume, "Catching the Wind: Edward Kennedy and the Liberal Hour, 1932-1975." John A. Farrell, whose other biographies have tackled Tip O'Neill and Richard Nixon, weighs in at a relatively economical 738 pages in "Ted Kennedy: A Life." (Yes, even the title is shorter.)

Each biography has strengths and limitations. Gabler's taste for the epic mode makes for some beautifully rendered chapters, such as his patient illustration, through the accretion of nifty anecdotes, of how Kennedy came to master the Senate's byways. But his prose often turns verbose and bombastic. He pastes in simplistic political analyses from undiscerning historians and reprints swaths of perishable punditry from journalists of yore. The index contains 16 references to Elizabeth Drew, 13 to David Broder, eight to Garry Wills. (Gabler even quotes a dozen times from the Boston Globe reporting of John A. Farrell.) Perhaps striving to emulate LBJ biographer Robert Caro's inimitable style, Gabler repeats words, phrases and ideas excessively, as if continual reiteration will invest them with profundity and grandiosity.

Farrell writes briskly and clearly, and despite its girth his book never feels overlong or uninteresting. Sometimes, indeed, one craves more. Early in the book he drops the bombshell that as a boy Ted was molested at boarding school—but he never mentions the incident or its psychic consequences again. Without elaboration, he describes Ted's father as a "purveyor of forbidden liquor," but readers who know that David Nasaw debunked the myth of Joe Kennedy as a bootlegger in "The Patriarch" (2012) will want to know what exactly Farrell means.

What propels the reader through these biographies is not only these authors' writerly talents but the sheer drama of Ted Kennedy's saga. That tale didn't start auspiciously. Elected to the Senate in 1962 to fill Jack's old seat, Ted faced rampant suspicions—as had his brothers when they began their careers. He wasn't deserving, everyone said; he owed his position to the family name

and fortune. Yet also like his brothers, Ted dispelled those doubts through hard work and a serious commitment to mastering public policy. Within a few years he was flourishing as a capable, canny legislator and a rising star in his party.

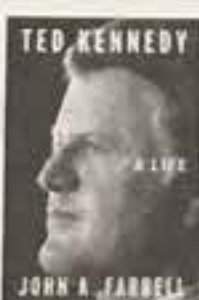
A trifecta of tragedies, however, nearly derailed everything. First came the assassinations of his two brothers. As burdensome as the grief were the world's new expectations. Ted was suddenly supposed to fulfill the legacies of two of the most visionary, eloquent liberal voices of his time. Weeks after Robert's murder in June 1968, Democrats were clamoring to nominate Ted, 36, for president. Wisely, he declined the draft. Whereas his brothers had seen the Senate as a stepping-stone, Ted intuited that the body's collegial, collaborative ways might in fact suit him better than the splendid isolation of the White House—though the temptation of a presidential run remained.

Then came Chappaquiddick. In July 1969, after a night of drinking, Kennedy drove his car off a narrow Martha's Vineyard bridge, drowning a woman in the passenger seat. He did not tell the police immediately, hoping to hide his inebriation. The deed was widely seen as an act of self-sabotage, a way to flee the new burdensome expectations—a "death wish," one family friend said. It hamstrung his White House ambitions thereafter.

Gabler and Farrell both link Kennedy's personal travails to liberalism's woes in these years. The strained claim is unpersuasive, even glib. The backlash against 1960s liberalism stemmed from forces deeper than one man's recklessness: the fizzling of postwar prosperity, deindustrialization, the humiliation of Vietnam, surging crime, fear of liberalizing values, resistance to outcome-based racial policies. Current punditry notwithstanding, working-class Whites began trending Republican long before the presidencies of Donald Trump or Ronald Reagan.

Both authors vividly depict this backlash through Kennedy's confrontation with angry protesters against court-ordered school busing. For all its storied liberalism, Boston had to reckon with vicious racial conflict after a liberal judge ordered South Boston Irish Catholic students bused to schools in Black neighborhoods and vice versa. In 1974, a largely Irish American mob jeered Kennedy, pelting him with rocks and garbage, when he came to one of their rallies—an ugly symbol of how Kennedy and the Democrats had lost the loyalty of a longtime core constituency.

Chastened, Kennedy retooled. Without forsaking his values, he began acknowledging when conservatives made legitimate critiques of Democratic policies and trying to devise fresh solutions. Kennedy, to be sure, never identified as a "neoliberal" (a much-misused term today that properly refers not to Reaganite free-marketters but to practical-minded welfare-state liberals seeking new policies for a changed economy).



AGAINST THE WIND
Edward Kennedy and the Rise of Conservatism, 1976-2009
By Neal Gabler
Crown
1,227 pp. \$45

TED KENNEDY A LIFE
By John A. Farrell
Penguin Press
738 pp. \$40

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) as a new senator in 1963. Kennedy and his wife, Victoria, at the 1992 Democratic convention. Kennedy's car is pulled from the water on Chappaquiddick Island, Mass., on July 19, 1969.

While still carrying the liberal banner, he championed causes like airline deregulation and criminal sentencing reform, deviating from the old orthodoxies to regain the support of economically downscale voters.

By now a seasoned master of the Senate, he crafted and passed a bevy of laws. Some of them rankled ideological purists, but they brought hardheaded liberals and conservatives together in fruitful alliances. "The ACLU thinks that it defines liberalism in this country," Kennedy said when accused of selling out. "I define liberalism in this country."

Kennedy's status as liberalism's standard-bearer led him to run against his own party's president, Jimmy Carter, for the 1980 nomination. Both Farrell and Gabler recount the dramatic primary battle with verve. Part Southern populist, part technocrat, Carter was the first Democratic president since Grover Cleveland who wasn't in the liberal tradition; a surprise victor in 1976, he remained distrusted by important Democratic blocs. His reluctance to tackle health-care reform drove Kennedy to take him on. But Carter deftly locked up support from power brokers around the country, while Kennedy, despite soaring rhetoric and a few exhilarating upsets, ran a dreadful campaign.

Ironically, while the feckless Carter lost the presidency to Reagan, Kennedy returned to the Senate revitalized. Even though Republicans now ran the chamber, he continued to notch victories, artfully shaping legislation, such as a renewal of the Voting Rights Act, to gain bipartisan support. He knew when to refuse compromise, too. His early, strident opposition played a crucial role in blocking right-wing judge Robert Bork's ascent to the Supreme Court, ultimately leading Reagan to appoint the milder Anthony Kennedy. Gabler comprehensively reviews Ted Kennedy's Senate accomplishments, in minute detail, but Farrell attends to many of them, too; both make clear how lengthy and substantive the record was.

But the old instincts for self-sabotage reared up again. Kennedy had always drunk and eaten too much. He was unfaithful to his wife, Joan, whom he divorced in 1982. Though he could be a loving and fun-loving father and uncle, he had troubled relationships with his three children, especially Patrick (who was elected to Congress himself in 1994). By the early 1990s, though Ted was at the top of his political game, he was floundering personally. He would get drunk in public, grope women in restaurants or otherwise carry on like a teenage fraternity brother, not a 60-year-old Senate lion. The press wrote about it.

His double life crashed down in 1991 when, over Easter weekend at Palm Beach, Fla., he joined younger relatives carousing, and one of them, nephew Willie Smith, was accused (and later acquitted) of rape. Ted not only behaved crassly but misled the police to dodge question-

ing. It was Chappaquiddick redux. For the first time since 1962, the elder statesman's reelection to the Senate was in peril, as he braced to battle the popular, slick businessman Mitt Romney.

Defying predictions, Kennedy repelled Romney's challenge. An unexpectedly dominant debate performance showed that he still possessed the fire voters admired, while his TV ads showcased the luckless workers devastated by Romney's hardhearted business practices. More fundamentally, Kennedy had turned his life around, thanks largely to his new wife, Victoria Reggie, 22 years his junior. Her love and good sense calmed him, and his devotion to her helped him stop his womanizing, moderate his boozing, and find stability and peace.

Kennedy's comeback was also aided by Bill Clinton, whose rocky but successful two-term presidency rejuvenated liberalism as a governing philosophy. Before Clinton, Democrats had lost five of six presidential races, mostly in landslides; after Clinton, they lost the popular vote only once, barely. Both Farrell and Gabler—as is too common today—badly misread Clinton as a cynical "centrist" triangulator. They salt their treatment of him with gratuitous digs. But their evidence belies their rhetoric.

In truth, Clinton's strategy for renewing trust in activist government amid a conservative climate was, as Kennedy's top aide Carey Parker aptly explained, "to come up with incremental steps to reach" traditional liberal ends, "which was basically what we saw as Clinton's Third Way." Pragmatists at heart, the 40-something Arkansas and the 60-something Bostonian both saw that by demonstrating government's efficacy and their party's concern for "working families" (a poll-tested phrase they both liked), they might reverse the decades-long loss of faith in liberal rule.

Clinton and Kennedy collaborated often, on raising the minimum wage and on safeguarding Medicare and Medicaid. Kennedy also continued to corral Republican senators such as Nancy Kassebaum of Kansas and Orrin Hatch of Utah to co-sponsor major health-care bills that Clinton would sign. Both men grasped the adom that Americans, while "rhetorically conservative," are "operationally liberal"—that even as we rail against Washington, we want government to deliver the goods. Even under George W. Bush, Kennedy persisted in compromising, notably on education reform and on expanding Medicare to cover prescription drugs. Yet these deals didn't dilute his authority as liberalism's voice. When Bush in 2002 wanted to invade Iraq, Kennedy marshaled the Democratic opposition, albeit in vain.

Today, hunkered in our ideological trenches, we may find it hard to square Kennedy's record of legislative compromise with his unflinching rhetorical defenses of liberal values. But liberal politicians from Franklin Roosevelt to John Kennedy to Joe Biden have always known, if intuitively, that pragmatism is a core component of liberalism—that in a diverse nation, progress is of necessity eked out through the fits and starts of the democratic process. So long as there is a will to join the struggle, Kennedy insisted, the dream shall never die.

David Greenberg is a professor of history and of journalism and media studies at Rutgers University. The author of several books, he is currently writing a biography of Rep. John Lewis.