

The Kennedy Dynasty Week Five Reading *The Transformation of Ted Kennedy* Mick Chantler, Instructor mickchantler@gmail.com

Ted's ill-advised 1980 Presidential bid revealed many of the Kennedy family's flaws. He challenged a sitting Democratic President, splitting the party and opening the floodgates for Reagan's landslide victory in November. In so doing, he violated the sound advice he had given Bobby twelve years earlier when he beseeched his older brother not to challenge LBJ, and to wait until 1972 or even '76, when he would be in a much better position. But like Bobby, Ted couldn't wait to bring about a Restoration of Camelot, and he calculated that he could easily brush aside Jimmy Carter as well as any Republican challenger. He was wrong on both counts: Carter beat him in a bitter and divisive primary campaign, and it seems unlikely that Ted could have beaten Reagan in the fall. The timing was right for the former Governor of California to launch the conservative ascendancy that would dominate politics for years to come.

When Jimmy Carter first learned that Kennedy was mounting a challenge for the Democratic nomination, he vowed "I'll whip his ass." There were sound reasons for Carter's confidence. Ted had stumbled—badly—when asked by TV newsman Roger Mudd why he wanted to be President. Inexplicably, Ted seemed flummoxed by the question, even though it should have been obvious that he would face such a query. He fumbled for an answer for several embarrassing minutes, mumbling that it was his sense of history that induced him to run. No one was convinced; it appeared that he was running out of a sense of entitlement, or because of personal animosity between him and Carter. Furthermore, Carter doubted that Ted could bring the same Kennedy charisma to the campaign that had worked so well for his brothers. He

was right—Ted did not have the magic Jack and Bobby could weave—but still nostalgia for the glorious days of yore could mobilize enough support to badly damage Carter’s re-election prospects. Which is exactly what happened. Carter won the nomination, but Ted, and his bitter supporters, refused to rally around the President in the fall campaign against Reagan. When combined with the public’s disenchantment with Carter’s handling of the Iranian hostage crisis, the outcome in November was inevitable. Reagan swamped Carter, and went on to spend eight years in the White House attempting to dismantle the New Deal.

The breach between Carter and Ted Kennedy dates back to the early 70s. Their mutual hostility wasn’t really about policies—both men were liberals who wanted to use the powers of the federal government to ameliorate the miseries of poor and marginalized Americans. Both were keen advocates of Civil Rights, and both wanted an overhaul of the nation’s health care system. But the devil is in the details, and the two never could come to a common strategy of how to tackle the nation’s myriad problems.

The simple fact was the two men didn’t like each other. Ted regarded Carter as a Southern interloper who really didn’t belong in the White House. Team Kennedy regarded Carter and his advisors from Georgia as too conservative, too tied to traditional thinking about budget deficits. Worse still, the Born-Again Christian refused to serve liquor at White House meetings with Senators—a grave offense of protocol in Ted’s eyes. Conversely, Carter thought Ted was a spoiled patrician who felt that the highest office in the land was his almost by divine right. Carter became convinced—and I’m not sure he was wrong—that Ted’s

philosophy was rule-or-ruin. “Deep down, I suspect Ted would rather see Reagan elected than me,” Carter opined.

If Jimmy Carter was right in this assessment, Ted got his wish. And the Democrats would wander in the wilderness for twelve years.