Public service, not the presidency

Apr. 30, 2009
GLENN C. ALTSCHULER, THE JERUSALEM POST

Last Lion: The Fall and Rise of Ted Kennedy
By the Team at The Boston Globe.
Edited by Peter S. Canellos
Simon & Schuster
464 pp., $28.

In the spring of 1951, Edward Kennedy, a freshman at Harvard, was in danger of flunking Spanish and losing his eligibility to play football. So he asked a teammate to take the final examination for him. When a teaching assistant recognized that Bill Frate was not Edward Kennedy, both boys were kicked out of school for two years. "Don't do this cheating thing," Joe Kennedy told his son, "you're not clever enough."

The youngest of nine children, Teddy Kennedy lived in the shadow of his older brothers, Joe Jr., Jack and Bobby. By 1968, however, they were dead - and Ted became responsible for picking up their fallen standard. He has done so, according to seven reporters for The Boston Globe, by becoming the most powerful legislator in the US Senate, keeping alive the flickering flame of political liberalism.

In Last Lion, these journalists trace the evolution of "the chubby kid in short pants," spoiled and insecure, into the patriarch of the Kennedy clan and an effective advocate for less affluent Americans. Along the way, they acknowledge, Kennedy struggled, often unsuccessfully, with his demons - drinking, partying, philandering and, an assumption (in evidence in 1969 at Chappaquiddick, when he failed to report an automobile accident that resulted in the death of Mary Jo Kopechne) that "he could do anything and have others clean up."

At bottom, however, Last Lion is a story of sin and redemption. Drawing disproportionately on the testimony of Kennedy's friends, the
authors lionize the senator from Massachusetts, who was diagnosed with brain cancer in 2008. Through adversity, they claim, Kennedy accepted - and embraced - "that if his life were to be marked by a heroic quality, it was not to be the lit-by-lightning kind his martyred brothers had." Public service, not the presidency, would be enough for him. And enough would be as good as a feast.

Kennedy's success with "pocketbook issues," health, education, workplace safety and employment, the authors demonstrate, giving short shrift to his foreign policy positions, stems from his mastery of legislative processes, an ability to work with Republicans and a willingness to compromise. He visited newly minted senators in their offices, and reached out to colleagues at times of personal crisis, flying to Utah to attend the funeral of the father of Republican senator Orrin Hatch, and hopping the train to Wilmington, Delaware, when Joseph Biden suffered an aneurysm.

Kennedy was especially generous in sharing credit. On his draft bill for a Patient's Bill of Rights, he wanted John McCain's name to come first, followed by John Edwards'.

Among 20th-century senators, the authors assert, a bit hyperbolically, only Lyndon Johnson can compare with Ted Kennedy "as a driver of legislation." On health care alone, he has been the architect of legislation providing access to doctors and hospitals for low-income women and their children; insurance for unemployed workers; limitations on the ability of insurance companies to use preexisting conditions to deny coverage to patients; dramatic increases in funding for research on cancer (and rare diseases) at the National Institutes of Health; and assistance for mentally disabled people.

The authors also suggest, a bit simplistically, that Kennedy invariably chooses principle over politics. During his reelection campaign in 1994, they write, the senator's campaign manager advised him not to reject outright the proposal of his opponent, Mitt Romney, to deny assistance to welfare mothers who continued to bear children. He'd rather lose his seat, Kennedy proclaimed, than endorse legislation that would harm underprivileged families.

Kennedy's position was, indeed, principled. But it was also good politics. For decades, his safe seat allowed him to adhere to principle. And even when challenged by an attractive well-funded Republican candidate, he knew that he was such a "known quantity" that by turning to the Right he risked losing support among his liberal constituents, in Massachusetts and the country at large, without any real prospect of attracting anyone who had not voted for him in the past.

With Kennedy promising a universal health care bill as his last hurrah, Last Lion should be regarded as a work-in-progress. Nonetheless, the authors do make a compelling case for their man as the paradigmatic practitioner of post-New Deal liberalism in the United States.

At the Democratic National Convention in 1980, Kennedy made a speech that will surely serve as his epitaph. Defeated for the presidential nomination by Jimmy Carter, his request to address the delegates in prime time was denied. So he staged a coup of sorts, stretching the 15 minutes allotted to him to debate platform committee reports devoted to the economy into a 40-minute peroration on his political philosophy. "The commitment I seek," he declared, "is not to outworn ideas, but to old values that will never wear out." Almost 30 years before he blessed Barack Obama as the heir to his family's legacy, Kennedy pledged that "the work goes on, the cause
endures, the hope still lives and the dream shall never die."

The writer is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.