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Symposium

Expert Opinion
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The Senator and the Symbol

Conservatives resisted what Kennedy stood for, and should resist what he now stands for.

An NRO Symposium

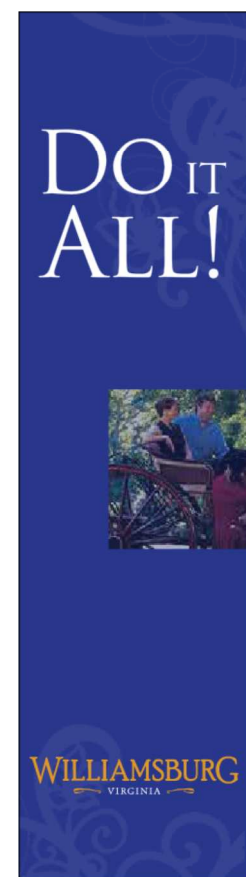
We've been told that he was the "Lion of the Senate" and the conscience of American liberalism. And now we're told that we should surrender on nationalizing health care, which Democrats propose to do in tribute to him. But what is Sen. Edward M. Kennedy's actual political legacy? Several longtime Kennedy-watchers weigh in.

KEN BLACKWELL

We should pass Obamacare as a tribute to the Senate's liberal lion, they tell us. And Ted Kennedy was the most liberal of the lions. He challenged President Carter from the far-left wing of a left-liberal party. He demanded taxpayer funding of abortion. He opposed low-income parents' choosing safe and effective schools for their kids. He fought welfare reform — a reform that affirmed dignity, marriage, and work. He degraded the process of judicial confirmation, mauling Robert Bork and every constitutionalist nominee since. He fought to end true marriage — and marriage, not welfare, is the greatest boon to the poor. If we do pass Obamacare, it will achieve Ted Kennedy's cherished goal of a government of the liberals, by the liberals, and for the liberals. If it's lions versus Christians, I'll stand with the Christians.

— *Ken Blackwell, a former Ohio secretary of state, is a senior fellow at the American Civil Rights Union.*

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PATRICK BASHAM

The most important lesson to be learned from Ted Kennedy's career — his true political legacy — is that, in partisan politics, ideas matter. What matter over the long haul are a consistently held set of beliefs and the ability to articulate those beliefs in an accessible, attractive manner. Short-term victories may be achieved by superiority in the mechanics of campaigning, political organization, and voter mobilization. But long-term shifts in the national political culture require the repetition of a plausible narrative that resonates with a critical mass of voters. Ted Kennedy's liberal narrative never changed between his first Senate campaign in 1962 through his endorsement of Barack Obama for president 45 years later. Kennedy's effectiveness as a

spokesman for statist cures to the nation's economic and social ills rested upon his credibility as a passionate apostle of Big Government. Opponents could pierce Kennedy's intellectual armor but not his ideological commitment. Today's spokesmen for a smaller federal government can learn little of value from Kennedy's policy prescriptions. But they can learn a great deal from Kennedy's skilled marketing of his beliefs, especially his unwillingness to water down his ideology to suit fluctuations in the nation's political temperature.

— *Patrick Basham directs the Democracy Institute and is an adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute.*

JOHN J. MILLER

Ted Kennedy possessed of one of the best brand names in American liberalism. At first, he benefited from the brand: He was elected to the Senate because of his last name. Later, he extended the brand through his own capabilities and commitments. He also tarnished the brand through his indiscretions. (Do any parents want their boys to grow up to be just like Teddy?) Liberals will inflate his accomplishments, which were by no means insignificant. Conservatives will have to admit, however grudgingly, that he was an effective promoter of the causes he believed in. The question of whether they were the right causes or the wrong causes will remain a bitter dispute.

— *John J. Miller is NR's national political correspondent. His personal website is [Hey Miller](#).*

MONA CHAREN

As I said in [my column](#), the praise of Kennedy's "bipartisanship" and seeking "common ground" is a lot of hooey. He was a scorched-earth partisan who was not above defamation and distortion when he thought it would advance his causes. Sure, he was charming, and I'm sure he was a delightful colleague, a fine father and uncle, and so forth. (And one wishes nothing but comfort to his mourners.) But the politics he practiced partook more of the bludgeon than the gavel. Not satisfied with opposing President Bush's decision to go to war in Iraq, he trafficked in utterly baseless rumors, such as the suggestion that "the president and his senior aides began the march to war in Iraq in the earliest days of the administration, long before the terrorists struck this nation on 9/11."

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