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WHAT DROVE THE FATHER?  
WHAT CAPTURED THE SONS? POWER.  
CHARISMA. IMAGE. FAMILY. SEX.

# THE KENNEDY IMPRISONMENT

A MEDITATION ON POWER  
GARRY WILLS

AMERICA'S  
MOST  
FASCINATING  
FAMILY  
REVEALED  
AS NEVER  
BEFORE!





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**A Meditation  
on Power**

**GARRY WILLS**



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*To the Other Garry Willses*

*Garry S. (1884–1956)*

*Garry L. (1961– )*

*There lurks about the fancies of many men and women an imaginary conception of an ideal statesman, resembling the character of which Alcibiades has been the recognized type for centuries. There is a sort of intellectual luxury in the idea which fascinates the human mind. We like to fancy a young man in the first vigour of body and in the first vigour of mind, who is full of bounding enjoyment, who excels all rivals at masculine feats, who gains the love of women by a magic attraction, but who is also a powerful statesman, who regulates great events, who settles great measures, who guides a great nation. We seem to outstep the moenia mundi, the recognized limits of human nature, when we conceive a man in the pride of youth to have dominion of the pursuits of age, to rule both the light things of women and the grave things of men. Human imagination so much loves to surpass human power, that we shall never be able to extirpate the conception.*

—WALTER BAGEHOT, of Bolingbroke

# CONTENTS

<i>Prologue: Brothers</i>	I
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## PART ONE: SEX

1. The Father	13
2. The President	26
3. Sisters and Wives	38
4. The Prisoner of Sex	51

## PART TWO: FAMILY

5. Semi-Irish	61
6. Semi-English	73
7. Honorary Kennedys	86
8. Ghosts	102
9. The Prisoner of Family	114



### PART THREE: IMAGE

10.	Creating the Kennedys	131
11.	Style	144
12.	The Prisoner of Image	156

### PART FOUR: CHARISMA

13.	Counterinsurgency at Home	169
14.	Enjoy! Enjoy!	182
15.	Delegitimation	195
16.	Veralltäglichung	207
17.	The Prisoner of Charisma	216

### PART FIVE: POWER

18.	Bulldog! Bulldog!	227
19.	The Midas Touch	240
20.	"Learning"	250
21.	"Triumph"	264
22.	"Restraint"	274
23.	Charismatic Nation	285
24.	The Prisoner of Power	297

<i>Epilogue: Brotherhood</i>	308
<i>Index</i>	315



back, he remounts this spavined Rosinante and rides it to another doorway. He knows what is ahead—squeezing through small homes packed with people, feigning delight at nibbles on homemade cake, at a ritual slurp of freshly brewed coffee. At one home, after taking something for his dry throat, he assures the housewife: "That's good water."

This is an exercise the Kennedys perfected. Veterans of other campaigns, of other brothers, took it as one of the laws they had written: a Kennedy in the front room of anyone's house means the wife's vote is certain, and the wife will work on the husband. But the woman's vote is a different matter in 1980, and so is the Kennedy technique. Tonight's series of "coffees" is clearly marked on the schedule CLOSED TO THE PRESS. These homes are so jammed that Kennedy will not have room to shrug out of and into his coat—it gets left on the bus. But the pencil press nags at Tom Southwick, the press secretary increasingly insecure (he will soon resign), till he lets us in. The TV crews are just as happy to watch, on their equipment, replays from the Olympic hockey game—which gives Kennedy his opening remark of the evening, repeated from house to house: "I bring you *good* news" (shaking his left hand at "good" as if to get water out of his watch), "the American hockey team beat the Russian team, and *they* were a significant underdog too" (left forefinger points up in a long scooping motion on "they"). It is the epitome of false cheer. Instead of warming the crowd up, he disorients it. What has gone wrong?

These New England houses in a heavily Catholic state should be Kennedy territory. In one of them I study the kitchen calendar, from Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal Parish. Questions are so many "fat balls," served up for Kennedy to knock out of the park—health care, veterans' rights, shipyards. He barely bothers to swing. Phrases out of the past are lifted up, but no longer placed in an architectonic whole, in a Kennedy rhetoric of liberalism overarching local bread-and-butter issues. A woman asks. "What do you think is the future of the UN?" He gives the fending-off answer used to placate right-wing foes of the organization, though she is clearly its friend: the do-gooder agencies *do* do some good—WHO and UNICEF, UNESCO and the FAO. The woman, impatient, asks if the UN can grow toward a world government. "I'm interested in that," Kennedy says,

in his uninterested way. But we must also make the world "safe for diversity" (his brother's line from the American University speech, so out of context here as to seem a deliberate caricature). Before leaving the house, I ask the UN questioner if his answers satisfied her. She shrugs: "I guess he can't say more than that in this campaign." By now, she is admitting, Kennedy must bear his liberalism with a shamefaced doggedness, advertising its and his own doom. He actually *ducks* fat balls.

Going from the bright night back into the bus is like entering a rusty muffler. Sniffles blend with cigarette smoke, and with the question endlessly posed here: Why is he, how *can* he be, so bad? He has lost all sense of scale. In little rooms he is too loud, in large halls too mumbly. He seems to be talking to audiences somewhere else—mainly in the past. When a Kennedy cannot do a "coffee" right, things are truly upside down. This very week I saw Howard Baker make hostesses glow in their own homes, complimenting them, giving their coffee cake heartfelt munches. Kennedy cannot even *eat* right—one of the American politician's basic skills.

That is a special problem these days, since everywhere Kennedy goes he is cutting birthday cake. All his years in politics he has reminded people, come February, that he shares a birthday with George Washington. Now, even that reference gets out of hand. Speaking in Newmarket, he shouts: "George Washington was a southern Senator, and *he* was followed in the presidency by a man from Massachusetts." No politician is above making up a little history when it serves, inventing a Senate past for Washington; but Kennedy has done it to equate President Carter with George Washington—not the surest way of diminishing an opponent. Reporters long ago gave up counting Kennedy's malapropisms. Hide and seek is only fun if the quarry will at least pretend to hide. One cannot expose a clumsiness that is proclaimed. "Oliver Wendell Holmes, who was Chief Justice of the United States," Kennedy tells the students at West High School.

So dazed is he and stumbling, now, that some who do not witness the spectacle day by day think the press is picking on him. That was probably true, three months earlier; but since then regard for him has been increasing in the press bus,



along with pity. This campaign is out of synch with perception of it—a set of multiple time-lags. When he seemed to be gaining, he was losing; now, in loss, he is subtly growing. At one of the coffees, an angry voice shouts: “Did you anticipate that the press would turn on you as it has?” Kennedy smiles: “We’ve got a few in the room, so we better look out.” The slight laugh makes him provoke a bigger one: “Want me to point ‘em out, so you can go get ‘em?” Kennedy, once the darling of the press, is reduced to the ploys of George Wallace, the reporters’ bogeyman.

As Kennedy began his campaign in November, flying the huge chartered jet, trailing a presidential entourage, the press resented his arrogance, the assumption that to run was to win, that he would prevail by sheer drift, inheritance, and Carter’s default. *Then* his mistakes mattered, his apparent lack of purpose. Then critics were harsh, swift to say this man in the imperial panoply had, intellectually, no clothes on, that “there is no there there.” But now a there is beginning to appear, and the press is quick to throw clothes over his nakedness—all too late. The change began a month ago when President Carter beat Kennedy two-to-one in the Iowa caucus votes. Some on Kennedy’s own team were counseling withdrawal. They saw the defeats stretch out before him, all through a spring and summer; and so did he. He would, in time, lose twenty-four of the thirty-four primaries, twenty of twenty-five state caucuses. But instead of dropping out, he drew himself together and gave the speech that should have opened the race, the Georgetown speech—wage and price controls, gas rationing, an international commission to study Iran’s grievances in the hostage affair; strong stuff, defiant of campaign evasions, an abrupt end to hedging and a declaration of purpose worth all future effort. If he was going down anyway, better to go down for principle, for the embattled liberalism other Senators, running scared, would no longer champion.

Some people thought Kennedy was doing himself, not liberalism, the big favor, drawing it down with him to dignify his fall. Battered as the liberal program might be, it was not so clearly doomed as Kennedy’s race. But Kennedy, it turned out, could not be accused of opportunism; which takes, at the least, some clarity of purpose. His mind drifted away again from specifics of his Georgetown speech. Gas

rationing disappeared from his rhetoric. The economy was neglected for weeks at a time, though he had declared it the central issue. Scheduling and staff matters were neglected. After his severe effort at focus, Kennedy lapsed back into the daze that numbed others in his campaign. He would rouse himself to eloquence at one stop, and ramble at the next. His attention span seemed to stretch for minutes, not for days (or even hours).

What won grudging respect was his will to go on, the lack of complaint as old allies fell away; the absolute refusal to criticize his critics, to indulge even fleeting bitterness. There was only one thing Kennedy could prove now, that he was not a spoiled kid—the thing on which everything else had depended, back when no one realized that. He campaigned like a dethroned king doing penance. It was painful to watch, even for reporters who had gloated at earlier setbacks.

Ghoulish journalists have for a long time called assignment to Kennedy “the death watch.” If there is another Dallas, the networks want to be there. But this is another kind of death watch—not standing by on the chance of assassination, but witnessing the certain dissipation of a vast complex of hopes, the end of the entire Kennedy time in our national life. Rose Kennedy, on the eve of her ninetieth birthday, tells New Hampshire’s old folks to vote for her ninth child, and the emotion she calls up is nostalgic regret, not campaign enthusiasm. The emotionally wounded wife and three traumatized children are produced by the candidate like scars, not ornaments. “Come up, Patrick,” Kennedy gestures at a morning rally, and the twelve-year-old, so clearly resentful, stands just off the platform edge and refuses. Joan Kennedy, rising to speak, breathless and inducing breathlessness in all who watch, moves as carefully as a wire walker on the first trip over Niagara. Will she fall?

How did it all come apart so fast? Only last summer, Kennedy led Carter two-to-one in the polls. The President was seeking him out for debate, giving up the incumbent’s advantage, fearful of the even greater advantage of being a Kennedy. But that, too, had been a lagging perception, one out of synch with events. Edward Kennedy had inherited various simulacra of power, not its reality; he both was and was not “a Kennedy” as his brothers had defined that



political entity. And both being and not being like them hurt. His life has become, over the years, a broken chain of tangled memories, full of gaps and overlaps. He lives out of sequence with himself, the youngest child and oldest son alive; the kid brother who must father all his brothers' kids. Nearing fifty, he lives cramped inside the diminutive "Teddy."

At age twenty-nine, Edward Kennedy was Assistant District Attorney for the County of Suffolk, preparing his first Senate race. At the same age, his oldest brother had died in war.

At age forty-three, Edward Kennedy had been a Senator from Massachusetts for thirteen years—the senior Senator for eleven years. He was considered by many (including Jimmy Carter, out of office in Georgia), the strongest contender for the Democratic nomination coming up a year later. At age forty-three his elder brother Robert had been killed while campaigning.

At forty-six, Edward Kennedy ignited the Democratic "mini-convention" in Memphis and seemed to all observers his party's favorite. At the same age, his brother the President was shot in Dallas.

Of his four dead siblings, two died in their twenties, two in their forties. He had become his father's father when he reached the age of thirty: the financier who drove his brothers toward office had a crippling stroke just before Edward won a Senate seat. Later, it was Edward who had to pierce his father's shell of incomprehension with news that the President was dead. It was Edward who buried the father one year after Robert was shot. It was Edward who stood by in smock and face mask to assist at the cesarean birth of Robert's last child after Robert's death, blood from the incision spraying his mask. Day by day, he mixes death and life.

Both press and public were astounded at the way Kennedy bore up under defeat after defeat, Tuesday after Tuesday, in the 1980 campaign. But he has long been initiated into loss. When he was twelve, his brother and his brother-in-law were killed in war. When he was sixteen his sister died in a plane crash. When he was thirty-one, his brother was shot. When he was thirty-two, his aide, and the pilot of a chartered plane, died in the crash that broke Edward

Kennedy's back. When he was thirty-six another brother was shot. After that last blow, maudlin in the woozy early hours in Alaska, he kept repeating to reporters, "They're going to shoot my ass off the way they shot Bobby's." He rarely showed fear, however; seemed, indeed, too jaunty to some—with the effort that heaves several lives' weight into the air again. After Robert was killed, he told his aide Dun Gifford: "I can't let go. We have a job to do. If I let go, Ethel will let go, and my mother will let go, and all my sisters."

Because of Kennedy's determination, there is a wounded youthfulness about him that deceives. He will be the kid brother till he dies. Because they died too young, he will be young in a grotesque way when he is old. The proper sequences have been irrevocably mixed. He is allowed neither youth nor age, neither death nor fully living. John, campaigning, had Robert and Edward to work for him. Robert had Edward to advise and be his surrogate. Edward has no one but ghosts at his side, and they count more against than for him, eclipse him with bright images from the past. Where they were praised too fulsomely, he is bound to be judged too harshly. He inherits the illusions of his brothers' followers with the accumulated venoms of their foes; and both tend to disinherit him.

Once brother drew on brother for fresh strength; now brother drains brother, all the dead inhibiting the one that has lived on. Edward has managed to outlast three brothers without ever catching up to one of them. Just as he seems to overtake them, their glory either recedes from him, or fades in the public's eyes. It was pretty evanescent stuff to begin with, the glory; but one can hardly look to him for that perception. To show ingratitude toward the ghosts would just make them harder to shake off. Meanwhile, he inherits all their children, while his own partly slip away from him, victims of his own victimhood, and of his wife's.

There has been too much dying for the Kennedys, which makes the whole nation, not just traveling reporters, mount a kind of death watch over Edward Kennedy. An editor of *Harper's* took offense at the family gift for disaster: "Given the intensity of his family's will to death . . . ,” he wrote in 1980. Will to death, indeed. Were Lee Harvey Oswald, and Sirhan Sirhan, Kennedy wish-fulfillments? This almost de-



mented charge shows how deep the Kennedy fascination has entered into the national psyche, and how odd the manifestations of it can become. He only partly died with each brother, and some resent that. What right has he to live?

*Guthrum the good is fallen,  
Are you too good to fall?*

If Kennedys have a will to death, then Edward's life proclaims his lack of willpower. His very courage to go on, his lack of self-pity, are used against him.

James MacGregor Burns called Edward Kennedy "late-born," a description echoed constantly in other people's writings. But, even more important, Kennedy was early stranded, deprived of his own sources of strength and support, forced into the arena by a father and brothers who are not around to help him with the fight. Burton Hersh quotes a friend of the Senator: "When Ted wants to consult with someone he trusts completely he gets in a room alone, and locks the door, and talks to himself." He communes with ghosts. Years ago, one of John Kennedy's mistresses told her son: "The old man would push Joe, Joe would push Jack, Jack would push Bobby, Bobby would push Teddy, and Teddy would fall on his ass." It need not have worked that way, if one or more of the first four men had lived longer. But they did not. Having pushed the younger brother for a while, they could not hold him up or steady him under trial, as each had been steadied, earlier, by the others.

At the end of a campaign day in New Hampshire, I had dinner with reporter Jim Dickenson of the *Washington Star*, and his wife, Molly. How does Kennedy go on, we wondered. Jim said: "If this is the American dream, you can have it. Wealth, looks, family, office, power—he has what his daddy wanted for him, and look where it's got him. Who on earth would want to be Kennedy now?" The center for so long of prying envy, he had become an object of pity for those who watched him up close, what there was to watch. Constantly on display, Kennedy is forever hidden, known only to a few—and those few sometimes wonder if they know him. Does he know himself? Has he a self to know,

apart from the vanished older icons of Kennedy self-possession?

We went back to the Wayfarer Inn in Manchester, and met California Governor Jerry Brown wandering with a lone aide down the hall.

"Where you been?" Brown asked me.

"Following Kennedy."

"How's he doing?"

"It seems bleak."

"Yes?" There was no show of glee at this report about a rival candidate. "Well . . . it's hard, I guess, to handle decline." He said it meditatively, knowing his own campaign was gliding down, and knowing that we knew. Jim later remarked, "We just heard Jerry Brown's concession speech."

Molly, a Brown admirer, said, "Yes, but it was more than that. You could tell what was happening to Kennedy affected him." This was more than an unsuccessful campaign. I had thought to pursue the matter with Brown, but just then Theodore White bustled up to lecture Brown on the Roman Empire.

It was more than a campaign ending. Kennedy was being forced, every day, to demonstrate that he was not as good as his brothers. His every effort at recommending himself worked to condemn him. He could not make the counterclaim, that his *brothers* were not as good as his brothers, that Camelot had been a fabric of political unreality. In this campaign, Kennedy was like the last climber in a human chain going up a mountainside, tied to the prowess of the four men above him. But then, in rapid succession, all four men fell, and the very strength that had been drawing him upward now hung a dead weight below him. Each time he stirred to go higher, he just slipped back. The "Kennedy legacy" had become a very literal burden, made his life a constant labor with death. 7



