

Between a bang and a whimper

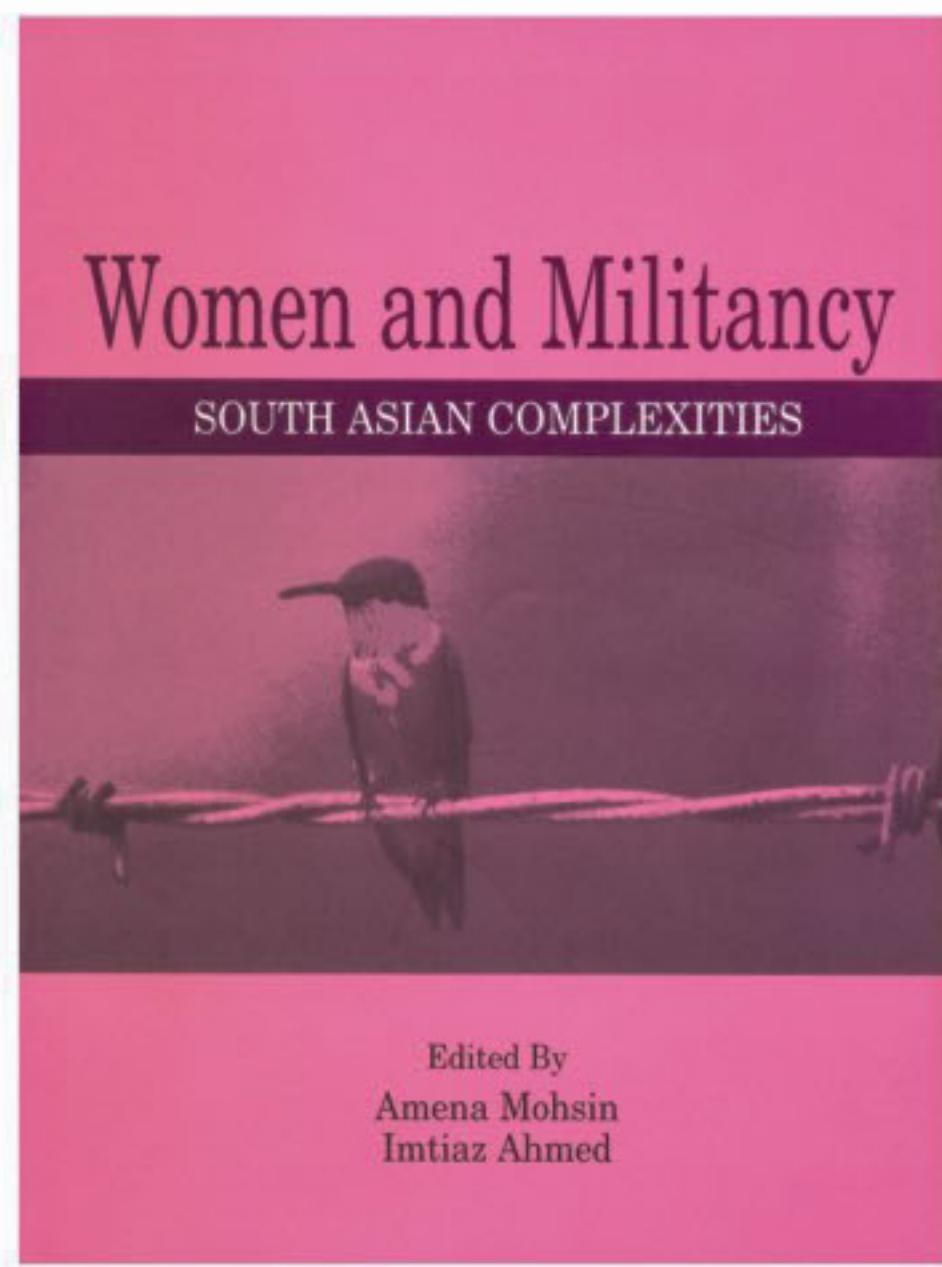
Shahid Alam does not find depth in a new work

At first glance, the rather imposing title *Women and Militancy: South Asian Complexities* might conjure up in the reader visions of profound insights into what apparently should be a very interesting topic, possibly unusual in the field of academia: a correlation between women and militancy (notwithstanding the celebrated cases of Leila Khaled, Djamilia Bouhired, Djamilia Boupacha et al.). And, when the subtitle is considered, the reader's interest might get aroused even more, especially if s/he is of this region or has more than a passing curiosity in it. In the event, his/her experience would likely fall below expectations, more so because South Asia is limited to Bangladesh and only stretched beyond its territorial boundaries to include the proximate Northeast Indian state of Meghalaya. Beyond the rather misleading subtitle, Amena Mohsin and Imtiaz Ahmed's edited volume, as is not unusual in books made up of a collection of writings, is constituted of essays of uneven quality. A few illuminate, others are rather humdrum, and disappoint in the context of the subject matters they deal with. In the end, in some cases, one would have to look really hard to find any complexity, and the expectancy that could well be aroused by a glance at the title *Women and Militancy* might turn out to be a damp squib.

A short introductory chapter by the author leads to, successively, "Unheard Voices: War Experiences of Bihari Women in Bangladesh" by Shuchi Karim, "Militarisation and the Fate of Women's Body: A Case Study of Chittagong Hill Tracts" by Tania Haque, "Life and Living of Ahmadiya Muslim Jamaat in Bangladesh: An Unholy Alliance of Secular Politics and Religious Extremism" by Perween Hasan, *Mastanocracy, Insecurity and Gender in Dhaka Slum* by Fouzia Mannan, and "Militancy in Meghalaya: Politics Beyond Patriarchy?" by Imtiaz Ahmed and Amena Mohsin. The broad theme of the book is encapsulated in Cynthia Enloe's words, cited by Shuchi Karim: "Women, in almost every society have some experiences for militarisation or war in one form or the other, but their experiences are unlike those of men with whom they share ethnic, religious identities, political ideologies, economic class, historical familiarity, or geographic locations." Isn't that the truth, but the book under review, as a whole, comes up short in explaining and analyzing in depth this very crucial observation.

In the "Introduction" (Chapter 1), Mohsin and Ahmed try to explain militancy in this region, an explanation that people would likely have differences over in terms of its specific cause-and-effect focus: "...criminalisation of politics in South Asia has resulted in militant behaviour and militancy in the societal, cultural and religious spaces." To reiterate, South Asia is represented by Bangladesh and Meghalaya, just as the mission statement of the book eventually turns out to be a little too pretentious: "This book is an attempt to bring the complexities and multiplicities of violence inflicted against women and the different dimensions of militarisation." Certainly some of the writings appear to portray the isolated cases of women being subjected to militancy and its attendant consequences as statistical oddities that happen in every society without

being able to demonstrate them as part of a greater problem afflicting society in general. Tania Haque's paper is, in her words, "based on the case studies of sexual crimes committed by both state and non-state actors in the internal armed conflict situation in the CHT," but has not convincingly lived up to her claim that the "study shows that patriarchy, gender, class, ethnicity is (sic) inseparably tied together," or that it "argues that the modern state is essentially a gendered construct and its institutions are not gender neutral, which marginalise women. Masculine values and ideologies are embedded in our modern state, which silences the voices of minorities and women." This last sentence might reasonably appear to many as being a sweeping gener-



Women and Militancy
South Asian Complexities
Amena Mohsin and Imtiaz Ahmed, eds.
The University Press Limited

alization, just as some might seek explanations other than given by the author for the ethnic minorities' many tribulations: "The Constitution of Bangladesh adopted by the Bangladesh Parliament on 4 November 1972 legally consolidated the hegemony of Bengalis over the ethnic minorities," with the offender being Article 9, which stipulates that Bengali nationalism is based on Bengali culture and language.

In one of the standout pieces, Shuchi Karim goes philosophical in trying to find the answer to these questions that she poses for herself: "how do women from different backgrounds and ideology locate themselves within the framework of nationalist identity? How do women, especially those who either live in the margin or remain almost invisible recollect their memories of war which has had life-changing consequences over generations?" She set out on her journey with a view to knowing about women's experiences during the country's liberation war in general; specifically, for the purposes of the article, researching the Biharis. Her own experience in getting feedbacks from people (presumably educated) when she apprised them of what she was planning on undertaking is a multi-

faceted eye-opener: many questioned her patriotism, loyalty, and alliances, all wrapped up in the questions, "is there any place for Biharis in our society?" and, "can we ever forgive them for betrayal?" Karim's piece contains some engrossing material.

Perween Hasan chronicles the evolution of the Ahmadiya Muslim Jamaat sect, and their life and lifestyle in Bangladesh, but, while mentioning individual cases where they have been subjected to violence and repression down the years, has not quite been able to dig deep and wide on the topic of what she cogently determines to be, "an unholy alliance of secular politics and religious extremism." She does mention this critical phenomenon that has (in my view, very negatively) affected the functioning of liberal pluralist democracy in Bangladesh: "...the extreme religious right...has become important in the political power game. All three parties which have been in power (Awami League, Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jatiyo Party) have wooed them in order to hold on to power." As the author relates, the phenomenon of the whole nexus between the secular and the religious parties resulting in virulent persecution of the Ahmadiyas reached a peak during the BNP-led alliance government of 2001-06. Hasan then draws attention to both a general observation on Bangladeshi society and a poignant situation of a particular section of an oppressed community: "Living in a patriarchal society such as Bangladesh, Ahmadiya women are doubly marginalised, internally as well as externally."

Fouzia Mannan draws attention to a problem not widely-known, possibly not reported as prominently as could be in the media, and certainly not a big phenomenon --- that of the existence of female mastans in the Dhaka slums. She also brings out a recurring aspect of Bangladeshi society while taking up the issue of female mastans and the lives of women in the slums: "...women in the urban slums...are not getting justice, mainly because the society is patriarchal and masculine in nature and mastanocracy has a strong relationship with both." And, "Female mastans are product of the patriarchal system and most of them are associated with the power structure through kinship (husband, brother or father).... Put differently, women's involvement in mastanocracy is hardly a sign of women's empowerment. Rather it is a sign of being a victim of the patriarchal system."

In "Militancy in Meghalaya", Ahmed and Mohsin conclude that, "Khasi women have to face and fight militancy both within and without." *Women and Militancy: South Asian Complexities* allows the reader glimpses into the militancy phenomenon as it relates to women in Bangladesh, emphasizing the fact that women fall victims in almost circumstances to various forms of militancy in this patriarchal society, even when, as mastans, they might appear to be in the driver's seat. Beyond that, however, it does not offer the kind of deep analysis that could have made it a more meaningful read.

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Travelling back to a war

Y.M. Bammi appreciates a historical work

The book is an excellent personal account of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh by Dr Nuran Nabi. It offers a remarkable first-hand view of the freedom struggle from the author's personal experiences as a freedom fighter. The book distinguishes itself from other works by providing a vast canvas ranging from the author's early childhood days to his participation in the freedom struggle.

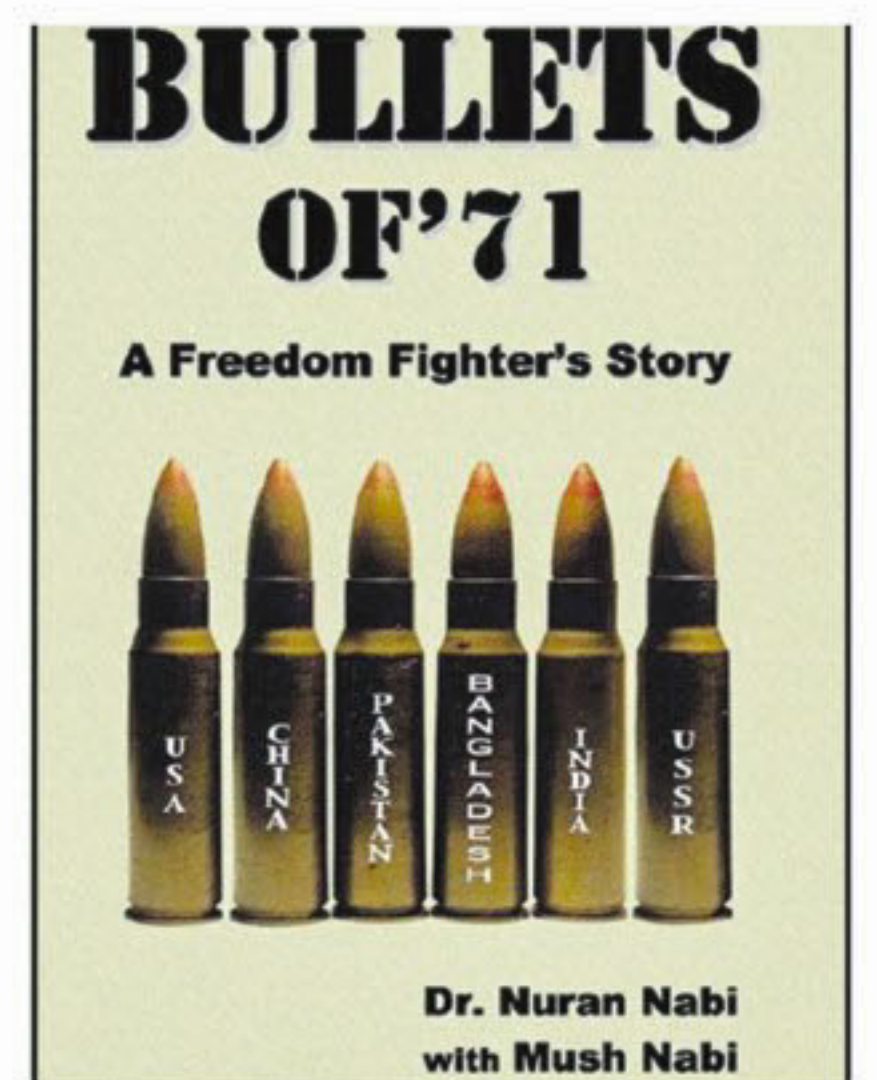
The book is divided into two parts; Born in Bengal and Bullets of '71. Part I covers the experiences of young Nabi through his Dacca University days. Part II details his experiences participating in the freedom struggle and emerging victorious over the Pakistan armed forces. In Born in Bengal, Nabi describes his early years and the events that lead a young village lad to become a politically-aware student at Dacca University. He recounts his happy childhood indulging in boat trips and catching fish in village ponds. He anguishes over leaving his mother for boarding school and later his grief at her passing. He describes his college days, sports activities, and close relationships with teachers. He talks vividly about the wave of discontentment flowing against the domination and ill-treatment by West Pakistan.

Nabi includes a brief account of the history of the region, which takes the reader through the independence of India and the political events in Pakistan leading to the elections of 1970. He provides bone chilling accounts of the political conspiracy hatched by Yahya and Bhutto to deny Sheikh Mujibur Rahman his legitimate democratic right to head the government of Pakistan, the crackdown by the Pakistan Army, and the atrocities committed on the innocent people of East Bengal. The reader experiences the patriotic fervor and is roused by the emotional description of the Dacca rallies of Mujibur Rahman. Part I ends with Nabi and many of his friends being inspired to join the freedom struggle for the liberation of East Pakistan and creation of their own country, Bangladesh.

Bullets of '71 is the main area of focus, in which Nabi narrates his experiences as a Tangail Mukti Bahini freedom fighter under the leadership of Tiger Kader Siddiqui. He talks about the rigorous training and the detailed planning and coordination activities for conducting raids. He describes his harrowing experiences trying to evade the Pakistan army under the cover of darkness through the forests and rivers in the region. He details the role played by Mukti Bahini in assisting the Indian Army in joint operations, including the airborne operations. All through the narration the strong spirit of Bangladesh, her fight and struggles, and her sacrifices stand out clearly.

In a chapter dedicated to the Bangladesh Genocide 1971, Nabi covers

the gruesome atrocities committed by the Pakistan Army on their Muslim brothers and sisters as well as Hindu minority people of East Pakistan. His narration is heartbreaking and authentic and he quotes reliable western sources, including Senator Ted Kennedy, on the plight of the innocent Bangladeshis. He notes the humanitarian assistance given by India and the world, and the international reactions to the crisis, both positive and negative.



Bullets of '71: A Freedom Fighter's Story
Nuran Nabi
Author House

Part II ends with the reader experiencing the joyful events leading to the fall of Dacca, the surrender of the Pakistan army, and the jubilation on the Bangladesh victory on December 16, 1971. Here, Nabi describes his joy at meeting with his leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman where he and his fellow fighters were lauded for their role in the freedom movement. Thereafter, Nabi returns to Dacca University to resume his studies.

The book is a must read for the present generation of Bangladesh as it narrates the events leading to the Liberation War and Independence of their country. It is of immense value for other readers as it describes the role played by other countries in the crucial period of the liberation of Bangladesh and covers various actions taken by the Tangail Mukti Bahini against a much stronger and well equipped Pakistan Army.

The book is a tribute to the people of Bangladesh, all the freedom fighters, and especially to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, whose leadership inspired the Bengali population.

Lt Gen (Retd) Y M Bammi saw action in Bangladesh's War of Liberation and was in Dhaka with his General Officer Commanding, Maj. Gen Nagra, on 16 December 1971 to accept the surrender of the Pakistan army.

No wisdom, but nuggets anyway ...

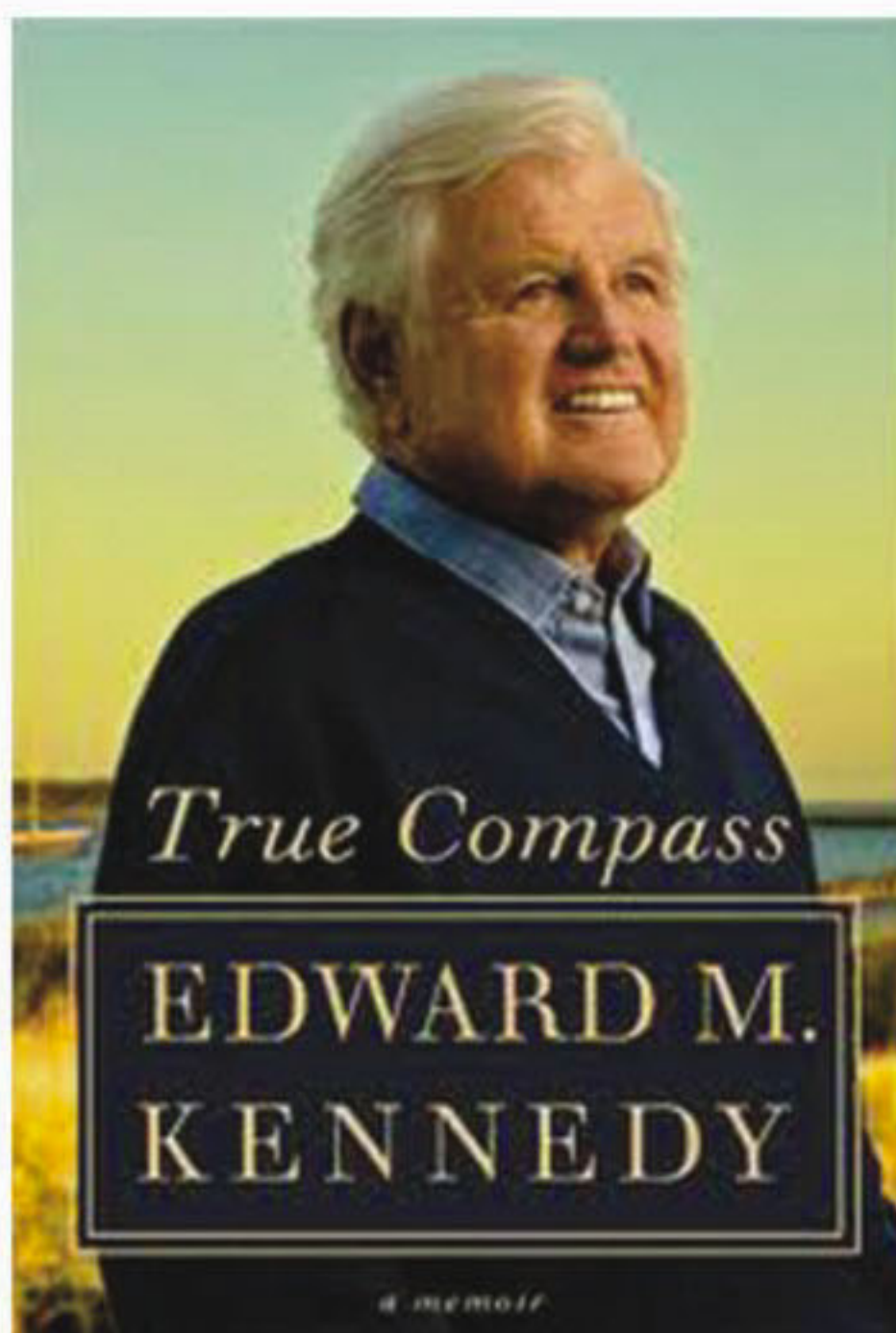
Syed Badrul Ahsan recalls a president who never was

Edward Kennedy's death more than a year ago was cause for the celebration, in a manner of speaking, of a dynasty that yet exercises a hold on the public imagination. It does not really matter that the dynasty, as it used to be, does not happen to be there any more. That the mystique of the Kennedys has become frayed over the years is no more in question. But, again, there is that certain reawakening of sensibilities, of memories, every time the Kennedys are mentioned. That explains the grandeur of Edward Kennedy's funeral. The fact that he was the only Kennedy brother to survive to ripe old age (he was seventy seven when he passed on) did little to stop the flow of a revival of popular interest in the clan. The Obamas and the Clintons and the Bushes and the Carters made sure, through their presence at Kennedy's memorial services in Boston, that the clan was remembered.

And now, in posthumous form, we have Kennedy's memoirs before us. *True Compass* ought to have come to us when Kennedy was alive; but, as he makes clear early on in the telling of the story, it was fast, oncoming cancer that came in the way. Or perhaps it was a sense in the veteran senator that death needed to be overtaken, in however slight a degree, by his narration of the tale of his life. Make no mistake about it: Kennedy's memoirs are no more profound than the way he had conducted his life right from his youth to his old age. For those ready to be peppered with wisdom by men whose political careers have

spanned nearly half a century (Kennedy served in the United States Senate from 1962 till the end of his life), *True Compass* comes as a bit of a disappointment. But is that surprising? The Kennedys have never been known for their wisdom or acute intelligence. Glamour and wealth have been part of their lives. Yet Edward Kennedy was different from his brothers in that his legislative accomplishments were feats that neither President John Kennedy nor Senator Robert Kennedy, both of whom were driven by thoughts of occupying the White House, could match. Even so, these memoirs will likely leave the reader wondering: where are the philosophical insights one spots in long-serving politicians?

There are none. But there are other nuggets, those that give you a compact as well as complex picture of the evolution of a politician in our times. Ted Kennedy, as he was known, came to occupy his senate seat in 1962, the same that his brother John had held till he was elected to the presidency, when he was only thirty. His rival was the nephew of House Speaker John McCormack. In the course of the campaign, the young McCormack taunted Kennedy about his pedigree: 'If your name had been Edward Moore instead of Edward Moore Kennedy, your candidacy would be a joke.' The joke would eventually, and tragically, turn out to be a long ride into legislative experience. JFK's assassination would leave the clan shattered. Robert



True Compass
Edward M. Kennedy
Twelve
Hatchette Book Group
New York

Kennedy was rendered psychologically immobile, as Ted states here. As for himself, he was presiding over the Senate on 22 November 1963 (part of tradition allowing

junior senators to be in that position at times) when the news of the assassination was brought to him. Five years later, it was RFK's murder in Los Angeles, moments after he had won the California primary against Eugene McCarthy, that sent Edward Kennedy spinning into a new circle of shock. Suddenly, the baby of the family (Ted was the youngest of Joseph and Rose Kennedy's children) found himself in the position of family guardian. Two widows, Jackie and Ethel, with their children, claimed his attention. More tragedy was to come. Ted's son was to be diagnosed for cancer. His wife Joan, shattered by the two assassinations, was to succumb to drinking problems. The senator himself was nearly to lose his life in a plane crash.

No, do not go looking for gems of wisdom in *True Compass*. Focus, rather, on the moments Kennedy considers significant in life, those he thinks readers should know about. He is clear about his feelings where RFK's 1968 run for the presidency is concerned: he believed in 1968 that 1972 would have been a better time. Once Robert was dead, his camp followers approached Ted to take up the banner. Edward Kennedy wisely declined. But by early 1969, seeking a specific role for himself, he challenged the long-serving Senator Russell Long for the position of Democratic whip in the Senate. To everyone's surprise, he won. It would turn out to be a pyrrhic victory, seeing that he would lose it two years later --- a direct

consequence of Chappaquidick.

Which of course brings up the death of Mary Jo Kopechne soon after Kennedy beat Long. With him at the wheel and Kopechne beside him, Kennedy drove his car into the river, clambered out of it, went home. Meanwhile, Kopechne died in the water. The senator goes to great lengths to give vent to his sorrow about the tragedy and makes no effort, absolutely none, to explain away Kopechne's death. It is obvious that Kennedy has been deeply scarred by the tragedy and yet there appear to be gaps in his narration of it. That it was a criminal act on his part to walk away from the scene of the disaster is a truth he does not acknowledge. It leaves the reader feeling pretty uncomfortable. The tragedy was to ruin Kennedy's chances for the White House. He aged, missed 1972 and then 1976. But then came 1980, when he challenged embattled President Jimmy Carter for the Democratic nomination. It ended in disaster, for both men. Kennedy did not win the nomination, but he wounded Carter enough for the president to be trounced by Ronald Reagan in November of the year.

Wisdom may not be the fundamentals of *True Compass*. But it is a work which you cannot easily put away. You come away missing its author and his ebullience, despite the very deep flaws that marked his personal and political career.

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