



Edward M. Kennedy

Chappaquiddick Address to the People of Massachusetts

broadcast nationally from Joseph P. Kennedy's home on 25 July 1969



AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

My fellow citizens:

I have requested this opportunity to talk to the people of Massachusetts about the tragedy which happened last Friday evening. This morning I entered a plea of guilty to the charge of leaving the scene of an accident. Prior to my appearance in court it would have been [im]proper for me to comment on these matters. But tonight I am free to tell you what happened and to say what it means to me.

On the weekend of July 18th, I was on Martha's Vineyard Island participating with my nephew, Joe Kennedy -- as for thirty years my family has participated -- in the annual Edgartown Sailing Regatta. Only reasons of health prevented my wife from accompanying me.

On Chappaquiddick Island, off Martha's Vineyard, I attended, on Friday evening, July 18th, a cook-out I had encouraged and helped sponsor for a devoted group of Kennedy campaign secretaries. When I left the party, around 11:15pm, I was accompanied by one of these girls, Miss Mary Jo Kopechne. Mary Jo was one of the most devoted members of the staff of Senator Robert Kennedy. She worked for him for four years and was broken up over his death. For this reason, and because she was such a gentle, kind, and idealistic person, all of us tried to help her feel that she still had a home with the Kennedy family.



There is no truth, no truth whatever, to the widely circulated suspicions of immoral conduct that have been leveled at my behavior and hers regarding that evening. There has never been a private relationship between us of any kind. I know of nothing in Mary Jo's conduct on that or any other occasion -- and the same is true of the other girls at that party -- that would lend any substance to such ugly speculation about their character. Nor was I driving under the influence of liquor.

Little over one mile away, the car that I was driving on an unlit road went off a narrow bridge which had no guard rails and was built on a left angle to the road. The car overturned in a deep pond and immediately filled with water. I remember thinking as the cold water rushed in around my head that I was for certain drowning. Then water entered my lungs and I actual felt the sensation of drowning. But somehow I struggled to the surface alive.

I made immediate and repeated efforts to save Mary Jo by diving into the strong and murky current, but succeeded only in increasing my state of utter exhaustion and alarm. My conduct and conversations during the next several hours, to the extent that I can remember them, make no sense to me at all.

Although my doctors informed me that I suffered a cerebral concussion, as well as shock, I do not seek to escape responsibility for my actions by placing the blame either on the physical and emotional trauma brought on by the accident, or on anyone else.

I regard as indefensible the fact that I did not report the accident to the police immediately.

Instead of looking directly for a telephone after lying exhausted in the grass for an undetermined time, I walked back to the cottage where the party was being held and requested the help of two friends, my cousin, Joseph Gargan and Phil Markham, and directed them to return immediately to the scene with me -- this was sometime after midnight -- in order to undertake a new effort to dive down and locate Miss Kopechne. Their strenuous efforts, undertaken at some risk to their own lives, also proved futile.

All kinds of scrambled thoughts -- all of them confused, some of them irrational, many of them which I cannot recall, and some of which I would not have seriously entertained under normal circumstances -- went through my mind during this period.

They were reflected in the various inexplicable, inconsistent, and inconclusive things I said and did, including such questions as whether the girl might still be alive somewhere out of that immediate area, whether some awful curse did actually hang over all the Kennedys,



whether there was some justifiable reason for me to doubt what had happened and to delay my report, whether somehow the awful weight of this incredible incident might in some way pass from my shoulders. I was overcome, I'm frank to say, by a jumble of emotions: grief, fear, doubt, exhaustion, panic, confusion, and shock.

Instructing Gargan and Markham not to alarm Mary Jo's friends that night, I had them take me to the ferry crossing. The ferry having shut down for the night, I suddenly jumped into the water and impulsively swam across, nearly drowning once again in the effort, and returned to my hotel about 2:00am -- and collapsed in my room. I remember going out at one point and saying something to the room clerk.

In the morning, with my mind somewhat more lucid, I made an effort to call a family legal advisor, Burke Marshall, from a public telephone on the Chappaquiddick side of the ferry and then belatedly reported the accident to the Martha[']s Vineyard police.

Today, as I mentioned, I felt morally obligated to plead guilty to the charge of leaving the scene of an accident. No words on my part can possibly express the terrible pain and suffering I feel over this tragic incident. This last week has been an agonizing one for me and for the members of my family. And the grief we feel over the loss of a wonderful friend will remain with us the rest of our lives.

These events, the publicity, innuendo, and whispers which have surrounded them and my admission of guilt this morning raises the question in my mind of whether my standing among the people of my State has been so impaired that I should resign my seat in the United States Senate. If at any time the citizens of Massachusetts should lack confidence in their Senator's character, or his ability -- with or without justification -- he could not in my opinion adequately perform his duties and should not continue in office.

The people of this State, the State which sent John Quincy Adams, and Daniel Webster, and Charles Sumner, and Henry Cabot Lodge, and John Kennedy to the United States Senate are entitled to representation in that body by men who inspire their utmost confidence.

For this reason, I would understand full well why some might think it right for me to resign. For me, this will be a difficult decision to make.

It has been seven years since my first election to the Senate. You and I share many memories -- some of them have been glorious, some have been very sad. The opportunity to work with you and serve Massachusetts has made my life worthwhile.



And so I ask you tonight, the people of Massachusetts, to think this through with me. In facing this decision, I seek your advice and opinion. In making it, I seek your prayers -- for this is a decision that I will have finally to make on my own.

It has been written:

A man does what he must -- in spite of personal consequences, in spite of obstacles, and dangers, and pressures -- and that is the basis of all human morality.¹

...whatever may be the sacrifices he faces, if he follows his conscience -- the loss of his friends, his fortune, his contentment, even the esteem of his fellow man -- each man must decide for himself the course he will follow. The stories of the past courage cannot supply courage itself. For this, each man must look into his own soul.²

I pray that I can have the courage to make the right decision. Whatever is decided, whatever the future holds for me, I hope that I shall have -- be able to put this most recent tragedy behind me and make some further contribution to our state and mankind -- whether it be in public or private life.

Thank you and good night.

¹ Winston Churchill, source uncertain and pending confirmation; quotation also ascribed to John F. Kennedy (see below)

² John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage*