



Senator Edward Kennedy: In Memoriam

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I met Senator Kennedy but twice. The second and shorter of the two occasions was in the 1980s when he and Senator Alan Simpson of Wyoming co-hosted a gala benefit for the Lab School, a leading Washington educational institution for differently able children with learning disabilities, among whom were those who had been diagnosed as autistic, dyslexic, brain-damaged, and/or neurologically-impaired.

The first meeting was the more memorable of the two. In the early 1970s, Senator Kennedy invited me to his home in McLean, Virginia, where he asked me to brief him on his forthcoming visit to Saudi Arabia. Joining us that evening were the senator's foreign policy adviser, Dr. Robert Hunter, who would later serve on President Carter's National Security Council and as American Ambassador to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Paris; Dr. Phillip Stoddard, then Director of the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research for the Near East; and Edward Sheehan, a journalist who had traveled with Henry Kissinger on his shuttle diplomacy visits to the Middle East following the Arab oil embargo against the United States and other countries that were deemed to have been overly supportive of Israel in the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war.

We met at the senator's home at six o'clock on the deck outside his residence overlooking the southern banks of the Potomac River. Once inside his capacious home what was immediately apparent, indeed omnipresent, was a panorama of mementoes depicting one person's – his – life and family. On end tables here, interspersed among bookshelves there, and now and again tucked into a nook and cranny off to the side were literally dozens of framed pictures of the senator, his parents, his renowned siblings, and other members of his extended family. The pictures depicted him and those of his immediate kin and others who obviously meant a great deal to him, playing touch football, sailing off Martha's Vineyard, sitting for a group photo at a family reunion, hoisting one of his children, nieces, and nephews, accommodating a photographer's capturing his delivering a speech on an issue he deeply cared about, his meeting with this or that national and foreign leader, his presenting an award, his being on the receiving end of a citation reflecting his lifetime adult commitment to public service. Amidst the plethora of framed mementoes reflecting his and his family's life and accomplishments, the discussion turned serious.

Over dinner and afterwards until midnight, Senator Kennedy proved to be the most

relentless congressional inquisitor I have ever encountered. He must have asked me as many as forty questions. Not once did he indicate that he wanted or needed to take a break. Nor did he ask if I wanted one. Not once did he ask a question for which my answer might have been a simple “yes” or “no.” Each leading query was intended to ensure that his forthcoming visit to the kingdom would be the most successful one imaginable. Indeed, he was interested in practically every aspect of Saudi Arabia — its history, culture, society, economy, development priorities, its leaders, governance, political dynamics, foreign policies, and issues with the United States. Never before or since has a Member of Congress asked me as many legitimate and focused questions about Muslims and the Arab world, a particular Arab country’s people, and their relations with the United States and vice versa.

As the evening progressed, regardless of whatever Senator Kennedy’s political attitudes and positions towards Arabs and Muslims were before, he was for the entirety of that six-hour session as serious and intensively focused as any Member of Congress I have known. Specifically, he wanted to know realities as opposed to myths, truths as opposed to misleading information about what made America’s relationship with Saudi Arabia not only important but special and worthy of strengthening and expanding, of defending and protecting.

Throughout the time we spent together, there was only one discordant note. Edward Sheehan, who was silent during much of the evening, challenged the senator on the issue of Palestinian refugees. Sheehan had done his homework. He pointed out that he had always been impressed that the senator had been one of Congress’ most outspoken members in support of the right of refugees of armed conflict to return to their homeland and be compensated for the tragedy that had befallen them largely through no fault of their own. Although Sheehan took care to commend the senator for all that he had done in support of the rights of refugees all over the world, he pressed him to account for what he alleged was his having failed until then to use his seat in Congress to adequately address the legitimate grievances of the Palestinian refugees stemming from the establishment of Israel in 1948.

The senator took umbrage at the insinuation. He lambasted Sheehan for implying that he had been less than sensitive to the plight of the Palestinian refugees. The give and take then and there between the two men became heated but in the end was inconclusive. One need not speculate on the implications of the fact, introduced much later, that the late senator’s widow is of Arab ancestry, a fact unknown to most Americans. Many, however, would claim that this, together with the degree to which the senator over time came to speak more openly and forcefully in favor of strengthening Arab-U.S. ties and introducing compassion and justice into the relationship, cannot be dismissed as entirely coincidental or insignificant.

I left Senator Kennedy’s home around midnight intellectually exhausted. Until then, I had not met a single American elected leader in my country’s national legislative or executive branch quite like him. By his attentiveness, focus, advance preparation, and intellectual curiosity, he came across as unabashedly keen to extract from me

and the other guests present every possible bit of information and insight we might have to offer as to how he might better understand and relate to an important Arab nation that was rapidly emerging as a country of globally vital importance to the United States and its allies.

Early the next morning, I received a telephone call from the senator's foreign policy advisor, Dr. Hunter. He was calling to convey the senator's appreciation for everything that had transpired the night before and to ask a question: "The senator wants to know whether you would be willing to do the same thing for his sister, Jean, as she will accompany him, and he wants her to benefit the same as he did."

About Dr. John Duke Anthony

In addition to heading the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, Dr. John Duke Anthony has been a consultant to the U.S. Departments of Defense and State for three and a half decades. He is a former Chairman of the Department of State's Near East and North Africa Program in the Department's Center for Area and Countries, the principle U.S. government program tasked with preparing American diplomatic, defense, and related personnel for service in the Arab and Islamic countries of the Middle East and North Africa. He was also the founding chairman of the Department's Advanced Arabian Peninsula Studies Program. The author of three books, more than 150 articles, and several monographs, Dr. Anthony is also an Adjunct Associate Professor at the Department of Defense's Institute for Security Assistance Management and the Georgetown University Graduate School of Foreign Service's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, where he teaches one of the few American university semester long courses on "Politics of the Arabian Peninsula." He co-taught the course with HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal Al Sa'ud, Chairman of the King Faisal Center for Islamic Studies and Research, former Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United Kingdom and the United States, and Director General of Saudi Arabia's General Intelligence Directorate, the kingdom's lead foreign intelligence agency.