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## Chappaquiddick (Movie Review)

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# Chappaquiddick (Movie Review)

## **Abstract**

"Chappaquiddick' probes basic issues about the moral behaviors of American politicians and why voters elect them, even when politicians behave badly."

Posting about the movie *Chappaquiddick* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/movie-review-chappaquiddick/>

## **Keywords**

In All Things, movie review, Chappaquiddick, John Curran

## **Disciplines**

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## **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

# Movie Review: Chappaquiddick

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 [inallthings.org/movie-review-chappaquiddick/](http://inallthings.org/movie-review-chappaquiddick/)

Josh Matthews

May 19, 2018



**Title:** [Chappaquiddick](#)

**Directed by:** John Curran

**Written by:** Taylor Allen and Andrew Logan

**Starring:** Jason Clarke, Ed Helms, Jim Gaffigan

**Music by:** Garth Stevenson

Democracy is a fickle beast. Sometimes, serial adulterers and bombastic liars can become or remain mayors, governors, Senators, and Presidents. Sometimes, these politicians can survive in-office scandals—but other times, scandals can destroy careers.

What could an American politician get away with and still be re-elected? How about, say, manslaughter?

“Chappaquiddick” probes basic issues about the moral behaviors of American politicians and why voters elect them, even when politicians behave badly. In somber tones, the movie depicts how Massachusetts Senator survived a 1969 scandal in which he was probably responsible for a woman’s death.

I say “probably” because the movie tiptoes around any solid judgment about what Kennedy did or did not do, and how aware he was of what he was did. If you were ever going to show a movie about the difficulty of detecting deceit and reading body language, “Chappaquiddick” would be your movie.

It is so very hard to read Kennedy, thanks to a remarkable performance by Jason Clarke. He plays a fast-rising Senator, the youngest Majority Whip in U.S. history, confident in public and blessed by his family’s reputation. But, Kennedy has lost two brothers in recent years (JFK and RFK) to assassinations, and his deep sorrow about their deaths hangs around him like a black cloud. As their baby brother, he also lives in the shadows of their legacies, and he is the only living son in a Kennedy household still dominated by a wheelchair-bound patriarch (i.e., Joseph Kennedy, unforgettably played here by Bruce Dern).

“Chappaquiddick” takes place during the remarkable weekend of July 18, 1969, during which Neil Armstrong and crew landed on the moon. On the 18<sup>th</sup>, Kennedy takes his friends to Chappaquiddick Island, Massachusetts. At their party, Kennedy talks to Mary Jo Kopechne (Kate Mara), a loyal campaigner for Bobby Kennedy. They both head out to the beach alone, they drink a bit and share their sorrow over Bobby’s 1968 death, and then they take a drive.

What happens next probably changes the course of U.S. political history.

Kennedy drives the car off a bridge. The car flips over, crashing top-down into the water. Somehow, Kennedy makes it out of the car, but Mary Jo does not. She dies.

Kennedy leaves the scene of the accident and walks back to the party. He looks somberly at his friend and cousin, the lawyer Joseph Gargan (Ed Helms). “What’s wrong?” Gargan asks. Kennedy’s appalling, tantalizing response echoes throughout the rest of the movie: “I’m not going to be President.”

You will note that Kennedy’s response is about his ambition and not about the dead woman he left in the car, not about Mary Jo Kopechne, which is a narcissistic subtext of which Gargan cannot let go of. Gargan and another friend, Paul Markham (Jim Gaffigan), row Kennedy in a boat to the nearest phone, where they implore him to report the incident.

Kennedy does not. Instead, he calls his father, whose advice is only one word: “alibi.” Kennedy waits out the night to think through what he should do.

Or is he really thinking? From the car wreck through the rest of the movie, as Kennedy tries to manage his story about the wreck and how the media portrays it, we cannot tell why exactly he is saying and doing what he says and does.

There are several options. He might be in his right mind, attempting to deceive and to cover up a crime. Or, he might be grief-stricken and in shock, thinking poorly and therefore making foolish judgments. Or, he could be delusional and delirious, since he probably suffered a concussion in the wreck.

Or maybe, he is some combination of the three: calculating, traumatized, concussed. Every viewer will have to decide what exactly happened and how much responsibility Kennedy bears. It is likely that there are a hundred ways to interpret his behavior.

In my view, “Chappaquiddick” is anti-Kennedy, but not too much. We know that Kennedy has some of his wits about him. He tries to take charge of the P.R. response to the wreck, which he does in part to vainly show off his alpha-male leadership and to declare that he, and not his father, is the patriarch of the Kennedys. He defies his father’s team of consultants by putting on a neck brace at Mary Jo’s funeral. Is his neck hurt? No, but the neck brace might gain him some sympathy with his constituents, or so he thinks.

Manipulative moves like this, of which there are several in “Chappaquiddick,” drew audible gasps of outrage from the audience at the movie theater I attended. They picked up on Kennedy’s vain attempts to soften his scandal. As the movie proceeded, I sensed that some of

the audience sided with Gargan's perspective. Gargan thinks that Kennedy should be honest about what happened. Later, against the advice of Joseph Kennedy's consultants, Gargan tells Ted to resign as senator. It is, he says, the right thing to do.

But, Kennedy appears to think, maybe the Chappaquiddick scandal is an opportunity. Maybe he can use the scandal to drum up sympathy for himself, as a kind of victim, in order to get re-elected.

This possibility seems downright despicable. However, one of "Chappaquiddick's" remarkable qualities is its ability to arouse deep sympathy for Kennedy as a human being, while also inciting outrage at some of his actions, which nevertheless may be blamable on his grief and trauma.

I find it extremely difficult to side with someone emotionally and yet simultaneously feel disgusted at them, but this is how "Chappaquiddick" made me feel about Kennedy, who suffered great personal loss, whose family situation was unenviable, who worried about being assassinated himself, and who seemed like a decent guy.

Maybe he was. He was beloved in the U.S. Senate and in Massachusetts, for which he served as its Senator 46 years. In spite of Mary Jo Kopechne, people re-elected him again and again.

Why? One clue is offered in what Jim Gargan does at the end of "Chappaquiddick," as Kennedy gives a nationally televised address. Gargan, the movie's voice of moral reason, who despises what Kennedy has done, nevertheless becomes a kind of Kennedy supporter, in a brilliant way that you must see for yourself.

Many American voters who will watch "Chappaquiddick" and stare aghast at what Kennedy does have nevertheless voted knowingly for a scoundrel or two. "Chappaquiddick" points some blame at Kennedy, but it also points back at us, a people who landed on the moon and yet who appoint ambitious liars and philanderers to help us get there.

This is one of the year's best movies.