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A Chilling Account and a Word of Warning

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Most Americans would probably be surprised to know that Sen. Edward Kennedy, Jesse Jackson, and former Vice President Al Gore all were once solidly anti-abortion. That seems almost incomprehensible now, but the record is clear — and the pattern is chilling.

By the time Jesse Jackson and Al Gore came onto the national stage, abortion rights represented a major plank in the Democratic Party platform. Jackson had actually written attacks on the abortion culture, pointing to the disproportionate number of aborted African-American babies as evidence of racism. Al Gore ran for both Congress and the U.S. Senate on a pro-life record. When both men launched campaigns for the presidency, they changed positions on the abortion issue.

As for Ted Kennedy; he was pro-life as late as 1971, after New York had already legalized abortion. As Anne Hendershott documents in her article, "[How Support for Abortion Became Kennedy Dogma](#)," in 1971 Sen. Kennedy wrote to one of his Massachusetts constituents with these words: "When history looks back to this era it should recognize this generation as one which cared about human beings enough to halt the practice of war, to provide a decent living for every family, and to fulfill its responsibility to its children from the very moment of conception."



From the very moment of conception. Writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, Hendershott then explains:

But that all changed in the early '70s, when Democratic politicians first figured out that the powerful abortion lobby could fill their campaign coffers (and attract new liberal voters). Politicians also began to realize that, despite the Catholic Church's teachings to the contrary, its bishops and priests had ended their public role of responding negatively to those who promoted a pro-choice agenda.

Anne Hendershott wrote her article in light of the possibility that yet another Kennedy may sit in the U.S. Senate. "Caroline Kennedy knows that any Kennedy desiring higher office in the Democratic Party must now carry the torch of abortion rights throughout any race," she explains. Hendershott documents the assurances that Caroline Kennedy has already paid to the abortion rights movement: "Ms. Kennedy was so concerned to assure pro-abortion leaders in New York, Britain's *Guardian* newspaper reported on Dec. 18, that on the same day Ms. Kennedy telephoned New York Gov. David Patterson to declare interest in the Senate seat, 'one of her first calls was to an abortion rights group, indicating she will be strongly pro-choice.'"

Indeed, Caroline Kennedy's unusual campaign for the appointive senate term from New York — the seat now held by Sen. Hillary Clinton — has prompted her to reveal that she supports same-sex marriage and virtually unrestricted abortion rights. She opposes parental notification laws and seems to advocate the entire body of pro-abortion orthodoxy.

The most important section of Anne Hendershott's article does not concern Caroline Kennedy, however. Instead, she documents a strategic meeting in the 1960s when the Kennedy family met with liberal Catholic theologians to formulate a mechanism for changing their position on abortion — and thus for taking the position directly opposed by their church.

Look carefully at Hendershott's narrative:

At a meeting at the Kennedy compound in Hyannisport, Mass., on a hot summer day in 1964, the Kennedy family and its advisers and allies were coached by leading theologians and Catholic college professors on how to accept and promote abortion with a "clear conscience."

The former Jesuit priest Albert Jonsen, emeritus professor of ethics at the University of Washington, recalls the meeting in his book "The Birth of Bioethics" (Oxford, 2003). He writes about how he joined with the Rev. Joseph Fuchs, a Catholic moral theologian; the Rev. Robert Drinan, then dean of Boston College Law School; and three academic theologians, the Revs. Giles Milhaven, Richard McCormick and Charles Curran, to enable the Kennedy family to redefine support for abortion.

Some of these names are well known, even to non-Catholics. Robert Drinan served in the U.S. Congress from 1971 to 1981, when Pope John Paul II ordered all ordained priests to refrain from electoral politics. Drinan was so pro-abortion that he opposed the partial-birth abortion ban until ordered by superiors to drop his opposition. Charles Curran, an ethicist and moral theologian, was later removed from the faculty of the Catholic University in America for his views in opposition to the church's teaching and authority. He currently teaches at Southern Methodist University.

Hendershott provides more details of the meeting at Hyannisport:

Mr. Jonsen writes that the Hyannisport colloquium was influenced by the position of another Jesuit, the Rev. John Courtney Murray, a position that "distinguished between the moral aspects of an issue and the feasibility of enacting legislation about that issue." It was the consensus at the Hyannisport conclave that Catholic politicians "might tolerate legislation that would permit abortion under certain circumstances if political efforts to repress this moral error led to greater perils to social peace and order."

Father Milhaven later recalled the Hyannisport meeting during a 1984 breakfast briefing of Catholics for a Free Choice: "The theologians worked for a day and a half among ourselves at a nearby hotel. In the evening we answered questions from the Kennedys and the Shrivvers. Though the theologians disagreed on many a point, they all concurred on certain basics . . . and that was that a Catholic politician could in good conscience vote in favor of abortion."

This is a chilling account of a meeting that, without any doubt, contributed to the deaths of countless unborn babies. At this meeting the Kennedy family was handed a theological rationale that served as political cover. It was a rationale that allowed this powerful family to put its influence in service of abortion rights, even as family members continued to claim identity as members of their church.

There are important lessons here, to be sure. One lesson must be this: There will be theologians who seem ever ready to find a way to subvert the teachings of their church, even as they seek to remain in its employ and trust. The second lesson is like unto the first: There will ever be politicians who are looking for political cover, and will gladly receive this cover from those willing to subvert their church's teaching. These lessons are by no means limited to the Roman Catholic Church.

We are all in Anne Hendershott's debt for her documentation of this sad spectacle. The warning represented by this historical account is troubling to see, but impossible to miss.

