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TELEVISION REVIEW

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A focus on Kennedy as fighter for reform

By Don Aucoin, Globe Staff | March 24, 2010

When we first see the familiar hulking form of Senator Edward M. Kennedy in “The Senators’ Bargain,” he is making his way down a Capitol hallway toward yet another committee meeting, his gait stiff and painful from the broken back he suffered four decades earlier in a plane crash.

When we last see the Massachusetts senator, in the aftermath of a devastating 2007 defeat for an immigration reform bill on which he had labored for years, he wastes no time on sour grapes. Instead, he looks toward the future and frames immigration as a moral imperative. “It’s an issue about our humanity, it’s an issue about our decency, it’s an issue about our faith,” he proclaims, adding that it is also about “our shared history as immigrants and as Americans.”

“We will endure this loss, and begin anew,” Kennedy says. Pointing out that Congress was created to tackle contentious issues like immigration reform, he notes, “Today, we didn’t. But tomorrow, we will.”

Those bookend images capture what made Kennedy special: a willingness to immerse himself day after day in the unglamorous nuts-and-bolts work of legislation, combined with a gift for stirring rhetoric that reminded us what all that hard work was *for*.

There is an added poignancy to “The Senators’ Bargain,” which airs tonight on HBO2 and Friday on HBO Latino, given that health care reform — which Kennedy famously described as “the cause of my life” — cleared a major hurdle by winning passage in the House last weekend, seven months after the liberal lion died at age 77.

If health care was the cause of his life, immigration reform may have run a close second. It was on immigration that Kennedy first made his mark as a senator, leading the fight for passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. The law did away with the “national origins” test that had long favored immigrants from Europe and paved the way for a multiethnic America.

Filmed from 2001 to 2007, “The Senators’ Bargain” (the title refers to the “Grand Bargain” Kennedy and senators from both parties forged on immigration reform) chronicles the behind-the-scenes lobbying efforts — and the compromises — made by immigration advocates as they tried to carve a path to citizenship for an estimated 12 million illegal immigrants.

“The Senators’ Bargain” vividly illustrates what a skilled inside player Kennedy was, and why some proponents believed health care legislation would have encountered fewer obstacles if he had been around to work his coalition-building magic. “There’s our leader! There’s our leader!” Kennedy cries jovially as Republican Senator John McCain, a crucial ally on immigration reform, walks into a meeting in 2004. “Stand tall!”

Then again, this fine documentary also shows the limits of those skills, as the Grand Bargain fell apart amid an increasingly polarized political environment. It led to a lot of finger-pointing, even among ostensible allies. In one emotionally charged scene, “The Senators’ Bargain” shows Senator Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) sourly upbraiding immigration advocates. “I have to say I’m very disappointed in all of you,” Menendez grumbles at the people we have seen working around the clock on behalf of reform.

Kennedy is a different story. When immigration reform finally expires via a cloture vote, he invites the advocates into his office, and, while clearly exhausted and disappointed, does his best to buoy their spirits with smiles, jokes, and allusions to the 1967 “Impossible Dream” Red Sox.

“This place is a very chemical place,” he says, demonstrating the intuitive understanding of the Senate that made him an unrivaled force in that institution for half a century. “There’s a rhythm to this place. There’s an ebb and flow in terms of when things are possible, and then suddenly, the sort of stars come in line when things are right, and you get some results.”

And then, demonstrating the live-to-fight-another-day spirit that remained with that happy warrior to the very end, Kennedy adds a final few words: “We’ll be back at it again.”

Don Aucoin, a member of the Globe staff, is a coauthor of “Last Lion: The Fall and Rise of Ted Kennedy.” ■

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