

Ted Kennedy and the 27 Soldiers

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By Okey Ndibe

A few days ago, a friend of mine in Lagos recounted his online conversation with a Nigerian legislator visiting the US. The Nigerian lawmaker wrote admiringly about the crowds of Americans, rich and poor, who streamed into the John F. Kennedy presidential library and museum in Boston, Massachusetts to pay their last respects to Senator Ted Kennedy. Then he expressed a wish for the day to come when a Nigerian legislator's death would inspire a similar expression of public adulation.

My friend essayed a sharp response. Gushing admiration for a deceased politician, he wrote back, does not come about through the carting away of "Ghana-must-go" bags of cash.

Perhaps my friend was in a testy mood, but his words rang true.

Senator Kennedy spent 47 years as a US senator. He won nine senatorial elections in a row, and these were real elections, not the sham that passes for Maurice Iwu's idea of an election. But more than pulling off a string of electoral triumphs, Kennedy's real achievement lay in the superb quality of his lawmaking. He sponsored, or co-sponsored, laws that made the lives of immigrants, workers,

the elderly, and so-called racial minorities better.

It is an acknowledgement of his legislative vision, and in particular his drive to utilize his political leverage to improve the lot of numerous constituencies, that millions of Americans, including many political foes, felt drawn to the streets to commence celebration of his legacy. Thousands lined the streets of Boston to hail the memory of a gentle bear of a man. One man recalled a ten-page handwritten letter Kennedy had sent to his wife in reply to hers. Another man remembered how his mother, Kennedy's constituent, received a surprise at her 80th birthday: Kennedy showed up!

To be true, Kennedy was far – very far, indeed – from being perfect. At one point in his life, he had a reputation both for womanizing and for drinking a pint or two too many. Yet, his constituents were willing to forgive, or overlook, his peccadilloes; they saw a man who was much greater than the sum of his personal flaws. At any rate, his job description was not to be a candidate for sainthood. They perceived in Kennedy a man willing to battle his personal demons – and determined to put in a hard day's

work on behalf of those who sent him to Congress.

Kennedy's long-time dream was to husband health care reform, guaranteeing every American and resident, regardless of income, access to sound medical care. It is strangely fitting and ironic that he died in the midst of a raging debate over how best to fix his country's too-expensive health care sector. His death may or may not lend impetus to the cause of universal health care, but nobody can deny that he gave the mission his all - and then some.

Place Kennedy side by side with Nigerian lawmakers - any Nigerian lawmaker - and we immediately shamble from the sublime to the absurd.

Kennedy loved to be addressed as Ted, or Teddy. No such simplicity for Nigerian lawmakers. Members of Nigeria's House of Representatives have a silly ritual of addressing each other as "Honorable," even as honor is frequently conspicuously absent from their conduct and lacking in their persons. But the grander gesture of inflation is to be found among Nigeria's senators. Each member, even those who don't know how to spell "bill," is dubbed "Distinguished Senator."

Yet, this is a body that is distinguished - along with the House of Representatives - by gargantuan greed and mediocrity, compounded by a steely indifference to the palpable, pressing needs of the citizens they purport to represent.

Take the manifest injustice meted out to 27 soldiers, three of them women, who served as part of Nigeria's contingent to UN peacekeeping operations in Liberia. The Nigerian legislature has chosen to remain blind to the continued incarceration of these hapless soldiers whose crime was to raise their voices and expose a scandal: how some unscrupulous officers divert monies meant to pay these peacekeepers.

The 27 were originally herded to jail to serve life sentences, even as the officers who committed the real crime of sitting on their allowances were given nothing harsher than a (quick) sharp eye.

On August 28, the army announced that the life sentences were reduced to seven years each. In offering this inadequate dispensation, Chris Olukolade, Director Army Public Relations, reportedly described mutiny "as a very serious offence in the military." He argued that "soldiers cannot exercise the same rights or approach to protests like civilians," since this would adversely affect national "security, orderliness and survival".

Ted Kennedy would have stood up and championed the cause of the 27 soldiers. Clenched fists pounding the podium, that extraordinary legislator would have reminded the army hierarchy that the graver threat to security, orderliness and survival comes from officers who eye their subordinates' allowances.

Nigeria's Senate and House of Representatives may shut their ears all they want, but the wailing of the 27 and their families will haunt their chambers

until justice - in the form of a reversal of the odious judgment - is done to the soldiers.

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About Okey Ndibe



Okey Ndibe is a Nigerian novelist, poet, and political commentator. He is the author of the critically praised novel, *Arrows of Rain*. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988 to be the founding editor of the *African Commentary*, an award-winning and widely acclaimed magazine published by the novelist Chinua Achebe. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. He is finishing work on a novel titled *foreign gods, incorporated*.

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