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# Politics

## A year in, Rep. Kennedy charts his own course

Content to wait his turn, form alliances in House

By Noah Bierman | GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 18, 2014



JESSICA RINALDI FOR THE GLOBE

**Representative Joseph P. Kennedy III has taken a distinctly more deliberate path in his first term than his father did.**

WASHINGTON — For 90 minutes, the 33-year-old rookie representative with the shock of red hair bided his time as an endless stream of senior lawmakers asked lengthy questions about the crisis in South Sudan. Representative Joseph P. Kennedy III stroked his chin as he waited his turn.

Kennedy finally got time for two questions, but the long wait made him late for his next appointment.

“The joys of being a freshman in the minority,” he said with an air of self-deprecation, a shrug, and a sigh as he headed out — promptly underscoring his newbie status by making a wrong turn into a parking garage before finally locating the correct corridor.

As Kennedy marks a year since his arrival on Capitol Hill, he is in many regards still finding his way. Legions of Kennedy loyalists hope that he will revive the family tradition and rise quickly through the ranks. But to follow Kennedy on recent travels between Washington and Boston is to see a man playing the long game, still figuring out his mission.

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The newest Kennedy in public life mocks his own lack of experience; casts himself as just another freshman Democrat, lower profile than most; and defers to colleagues from both parties. He is building a reputation for delving into unglamorous subjects; his favorite topic: STEM, an acronym favored by education policy wonks, which stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.

But don't mistake any of that for lack of ambition.

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**Joseph P. Kennedy III marks one year in Congress**

“While his name brings a special kind of cache, the thing about it is he doesn’t take that for granted and he doesn’t try to exploit it,” said Paul G. Kirk, the former chairman of the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation who replaced Edward M. Kennedy in the Senate on an interim basis.

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*‘It’s really important ... to do the fundamentals of this job really, really well.’ - Representative Joseph P. Kennedy III*

“I think he also understands that freshman year is a listening and learning year and identifying the issues which you feel most strongly about,” he said.

JoeKIII, as he is often called, is walking amidst the sweep of Kennedy family history, which includes a great-uncle and grandfather who were assassinated and another great-uncle who served decades in the Senate. He has most directly followed his father, former representative Joseph P. Kennedy II, who at this one-year point in his political career had lashed out at the slow pace of the House.

He is experiencing some of the same frustrations as his father about the glacial pace of change but emphasizes — through his actions and words — that he will go more slowly and more quietly.

Just being a member of Congress is enough for now; no need to complicate matters. “I’m not good at the deep, introspective, on-the-couch analysis answers,” he said.

Using his first term as a quiet apprenticeship is a luxury that more vulnerable politicians might not have. After the Democratic field was largely cleared for him in the 2012 primary for Fourth Congressional District based in Brookline, Kennedy took more than 60 percent of the vote in his general election. He has yet to draw an opponent for the November 2014 election.

“It’s really important for me to do the fundamentals of this job really, really well,” Kennedy said. “And to let people know that I think the core responsibilities of a member of Congress aren’t seeking the national headlines or being the spokesperson on this issue or that issue when you just get there.”

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The lobby of Kennedy's Washington office is filled with banners for all the hometown sports teams, a Boston Strong poster, and free sample bags of Craisins. His dog Banjo, a border collie mix, is often wandering without a leash.

One has to get past the waiting room to see reminders of his family's imprint on the nation. There are photos from his grandfather Robert Kennedy's presidential run and the quote from his grandfather reminding him "you live on the most privileged nation on earth."

Like his great uncle, Senator Edward Kennedy, he is trying his hardest to make some Republican friends. So unlike his fellow Massachusetts Democrats, who take pleasure in roasting the Tea Party, he holds his tongue.

"Their point of view resonated enough with the people they represent that they got elected," he said. "And it's, I think, extremely important for me to at the very least try to understand what that point of view is. It doesn't mean we're going to agree on everything. But you might find something."

It's a starkly different strategy from his father, Joseph P. Kennedy II, who was elected in 1986 when Democrats controlled the House and thus faced far less gridlock than today, but he nonetheless grew impatient with the imperative to "kowtow to some ladder rungs" to win power. The older Kennedy, who served a dozen years, declined an interview request.

Kennedy's cousin, former Rhode Island congressman Patrick J. Kennedy, said some of Joe Kennedy II's colleagues felt threatened by his aggressive style and became determined to "put him in his place." The son's low-key approach is no accident, he said.

"His father's advice to me, and I'm sure it was to his son, was 'Don't do it the way I did it,'" Patrick Kennedy said. "In his own self-deprecating way, his father realized that he wasn't built for that place."

The son has so far avoided his father's brash television persona and the breakneck national fund-raising schedule that had colleagues worried he would burn out.

“Look, I think it's a — my dad is a high-energy guy. He's got an executive mentality,” Kennedy said, pausing as he measured his words. “There's no surprise that this place isn't moving as fast as any of us would like.”

It was his father, Kennedy said, who warned him before he decided to run for office that “this can be hard. It's a long slog.”

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Early on a recent Sunday morning, the day's slog began as Kennedy took a turbulent flight from Washington, D.C., to Logan to appear at a breakfast event in Newton. He gulped a few sips of coffee and bear-hugged Mayor Setti Warren of Newton before taking his seat at the annual meeting of the Jewish Community Housing for the Elderly.

Kennedy has held office hours at least once in each of the 36 municipalities in his district, which stretches from wealthy areas in and around Brookline and Newton to struggling communities of Taunton and Fall River.

Kennedy's wife, Lauren Birchfield, whom he married just after he was elected in 2012, spends much of her time in the couple's Capitol Hill apartment, while Kennedy travels frequently to their home in Brookline, near Coolidge Corner.

When it was time for his keynote address that Sunday morning in Newton, Kennedy won nods from the mostly older crowd when he recalled that his grandmother, Ethel Kennedy, advised him, first and foremost, to “visit the seniors.”

Then he moved on to talk about policy and the value of government, concluding with quotes from Bruce Springsteen and the Bible.

The next speaker made clear the expectations for the freshman congressman:

“Political figures bring us hope, and that’s what I think Robert Kennedy gave us more than anything else in the whole world,” said Barry Shrage, president of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies, the state’s largest Jewish charity. “And the first time I met Congressman Kennedy, I said, ‘You have me forever. In return for that, all I ask is that you take the dreams of your grandfather and your great uncle and you bring them to fruition. Give us back our hope.’ ”

When Kennedy is asked by a reporter if he feels there is too much talk about his family’s legacy, he insisted that the weight of those expectations means he has to avoid shortcuts, work hard, and use the advantages for the good.

His aunt and godmother, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, said there’s good reason to not complain about the pressure: It’s “so self-indulgent.”

Townsend, a former lieutenant governor of Maryland, said she has spent enough time in the inner city with kids who have much tougher family experiences — no mother or father at all.

“Oh it must be tough to be a Kennedy,” she said acidly.

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As Kennedy returned to Congress the following week, there was cause for muted celebration. Kennedy finally passed a bill, a modest measure authorizing a privately financed monument to the Peace Corps, which was founded by President John F. Kennedy and in which Joe Kennedy III served for two years.

It’s one of several gestures Kennedy has made to his family legacy. He also fasted 24 hours as part of a December immigration protest, participating in a ceremony that recalled his grandfather’s support for migrant activist Cesar Chavez’s 1968 fast.

When Representative Kennedy traveled to Israel in August, he read 1948 dispatches filed by his grandfather Robert Kennedy for the Boston Post “to see it through his eyes . . . a young man whose views of the world were obviously still taking shape.”

Kennedy made few public appearances at November events commemorating the 50th anniversary of JFK's death. He seems to recognize that his family legacy is polarizing, especially outside of northeastern liberal enclaves. So before he reveals who any of his new Republican friends are, he checks with them, to make sure going public with a Kennedy won't harm them in their districts.

Representative Markwayne Mullin, an Oklahoma Republican, said Kennedy earned his respect on an elevator ride. Kennedy was wearing a sling on his right shoulder after surgery. Mullin, 36, said he surprised Kennedy with a firm slap, directly on the tender spot.

Kennedy, writhing in pain, just laughed.

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