

IN THE NATION

Kennedy
Carries
On

By Tom Wicker

CHICAGO — Taking questions from a meeting of the militant National Association of Neighborhoods here the other day, Senator Edward Kennedy was challenged by a woman member for his sponsorship of the recodification of Federal criminal law. Among its other inequities, she pointed out, the bill would make it a crime to picket and demonstrate near a courthouse.

Mr. Kennedy acknowledged the charge but strongly defended the provision. Not too long ago, he reminded his questioner, it was not uncommon for mobs in some parts of the country to surround a courthouse and intimidate a jury, so they'd "string up people." The new bill, he said, would remove juries from "the 'holler' of the mob."

The response was rather like the Kennedy campaign — valiant but politically outdated. Mr. Kennedy stood up to his accuser and earned some applause for that. But he did not seem to realize that urban activists today are not much concerned about what white mobs in the South used to do; they are far more interested in how that picketing provision might apply to their own demonstrations in the nation's decaying cities.

All too often, in fact, Mr. Kennedy's seems to be a campaign of the Sixties, and his rhetoric about compassion and minorities and activism seems more reminiscent of his brother Robert, dead these 12 years, than a reflection of the political realities of the Eighties.

The senseless murder of Allard Lowenstein tended to make the same point. Al Lowenstein, as Edward Kennedy said of him, was "a one-man civil rights movement," a man of total commitment to the values that briefly seemed ascendant in the Sixties; and he was as stalwart for Edward as he had been for Robert Kennedy, as tireless and selfless in the cause of human rights and humanity this year as when those things seemed to matter.

But this is 1980, not 1968; and Mr. Kennedy's strident, sometimes stir-

ring calls for Humphrey-Hawkins full employment ("When we say full, we mean full"), improved health care, "social justice" and "economic democracy" not only disturb some voters but sound like echoes from an honorable but largely forgotten past.

And when he told the blacks, Hispanics and low-income whites of the Neighborhood Association that "your agenda in the neighborhoods is the agenda for all Americans," the spotty applause showed that even they knew better. Not just Camelot, but the ethos in which Bob Kennedy came to his apotheosis is long gone in America.

Edward Kennedy's candidacy is not finished. He could come out of the Illinois primary with perhaps 60 dele-

gates, most provided him by the aging Chicago Democratic machine. He could win in New York March 25, since Representative John Anderson will not be on hand to draw off independents and anti-Carter Democrats.

Many Jewish voters, moreover, seem truly angered at President Carter's inept handling of the recent U.N. vote. Secretary of Commerce Philip Klutznick and Carter campaign manager Robert Strauss found that out here last week when their defense of the President was hotly denounced at a meeting at the College of Judaica of a group of Jewish civic leaders once led by Mr. Klutznick himself.

But the negative personal reaction of the public to Edward Kennedy seems impossible to combat. Even at 9 A.M. on a live television program here last week, a woman interviewer relentlessly and typically quizzed/him about his personal life and what she called "the Joan factor" — the thesis that Mrs. Kennedy developed a drinking problem because of her husband's peccadilloes. That same morning, outside a Neighborhood Revitalization Project at 1521 North Walton Street, an elderly white man of undetermined ethnic origin told me he rejected Jimmy Carter ("Not a stand-up guy") but could never vote for Mr. Kennedy because of "that girl at Chappaquiddick."

Together with the Senator's dogged tone of Sixties liberalism, that kind of personal hostility makes it doubtful that Mr. Kennedy would profit much even from a sudden collapse of Mr. Carter's poll standing. Some reporters and politicians even theorize that Mr. Kennedy is making the President look stronger than he is, by conveniently providing Mr. Carter with a new primary victory every week.

Through all this disappointment and travail, however, it is important that Mr. Kennedy keeps plugging away at the President's economic ignorance and inflexibility; he is the only candidate in either party to offer a real alternative. There is something gallant, moreover, in the way he has accepted his devastating political decline and continued his campaign — lonely now, and perhaps hopeless — so that his simple persistence in it speaks to a strength of character that the public overlooks.

Besides, Mr. Kennedy's basic themes — generosity to the weak, justice for the disadvantaged — may be out of fashion but they are not dead, anymore than the great spirit of Al Lowenstein is dead. And as long as Edward Kennedy has the courage to force an indifferent public to hear these themes, his campaign will have the kind of honor mere victory could never bring it.