He's a Happening

Robert Kennedy's Road to Somewhere

by Andrew Kopkind

Robert Kennedy is on to something. He hovers over it like a pig in the *Perigord* sniffing a truffle. It is just below the surface; he can't quite see it; he doesn't know its size or shape or worth or even what it's called. He only knows it's there, and he is going to get it.

Where does he look? Among the grape-pickers on strike in central California, in Cloth Market Square in Cracow, on the Ole Miss campus, in a Senate hearing room. And always with the same single-minded, almost frightening intensity. Perhaps the young know what it is; Kennedy spends an inordinate amount of time at schools and colleges talking with them. Maybe the poor know; he studies the condition of the urban ghettoes. Is it in Latin America? He'll go and see. Is it in South Africa? Get him a visa.

Whatever the object of his quest, Kennedy is unlikely to find it. He is looking not for a thing, but for a happening – what is happening to politics, to people. "In the 1930's, just going to college was a struggle," he said last week, feet up on his cluttered desk, drinking hot tea late in the afternoon of a hot day. "Then the war in the 'forties, then the Korean war. So now there's time, and people have more of a realization of things. When you obtain knowledge it creates internal problems."

Everything Kennedy says about other people has an autobiographical ring. That may be the characteristic of a good novelist, but not frequently the mark of the customary politician. But then no one argues that he is an ordinary politician. He is an elusive phenomenon, even more than the other Kennedys. He is not a liberal or a conservative or a hawk or a dove or a machine politician or an independent. The favorite journalistic game these days is to examine his motives. Is he making a calculated, almost diabolical drive for the Presidency? Is he on some joy ride in politics, doing and saying the first thing that pops into his head?

Neither question elicits the answers that make sense in politics. Certainly he wants to be President, and he hardly can help weighing his actions on the scale of long-range goals. But the choices are wide open, and Kennedy is opting more and more for the high-risk, high-gain issue. Nothing in the book of common political practice demands that he approve of blood donations for the Viet Cong, that he champion the grape-strikers' cause, that he criticize the Justice Department's refusal to allow burial of a Communist in Arlington cemetery. He does not have to make diplomatic trouble by going to South Africa. He can talk about the "urban crisis" without suggesting that whole blocs of ghetto Negroes migrate to the suburbs. He could have addressed the rally in Mississippi without belittling Ross Barnett. He can involve himself in automobile safety without bludgeoning the president of General Motors at Senate hearings. Yet he has done all those things. He thinks some of them have done him political harm. He finds the pain delicious.

He can afford the luxury of the free rein because he has a precious commodity – time. Nothing much is likely to happen to him for five years, maybe more. He neither needs nor wants to harden the lines around his constituency. His speech recognizing the stake of the Viet Cong in any Vietnam settlement won him exaggerated enthusiasm from student radicals and "peaceniks," but he will not be their champion. He commands the hearts of the Irish Catholics from the 1960 campaign, but he is not their property; he may even offend some of them with talk of birth control and divorce law reform. A current theory has Kennedy grabbing the "liberals" in the Democratic Party from under the nose of Vice President Hubert Humphrey, like so many apples. But what will he do with them? No Kennedy carries the mantle of "liberalism" comfortably.

Kennedy is not yet capturing a bloc, or putting together a coalition, or hewing out a program. What is happening is less dramatic: around him are gathering people in government and outside who in the very loosest sense constitute a Kennedy Party. It does not caucus, and very few in it would be able to identify themselves as members. There are a few senators, several old New Frontiersmen scattered about Washington, and many more "exiles," in one sense or another

in law offices, universities or businesses around the country. There is no "party line," or at least nothing in manifesto form. But the Kennedy Party is, as one Democratic senator said, "the only alternative power source to that famous Consensus. If you're against Johnson, you've got to be for it" – or be a Republican.

As the informal party leader – as the only reason for its existence – Kennedy has peculiar credits and liabilities. His name makes slavish zombies out of otherwise rational humans. The movie-star aura that gave the White House something of the flavor of the MGM back lot during the early 'sixties has settled on him. More than that, he radiates power: for three years he was at the very heart of it (closer by far than any mere Vice President) and he is changed for the experience.

Robert Kennedy's past, and to a certain extent his manner, will always haunt him. In the early 'fifties he was a committed McCarthyite. Then he became so engrossed in the prosecution of Jimmy Hoffa that he lost sight of some refinements discernible to other Americans who care deeply about individual rights. Neither the politics nor the personality that Robert Kennedy expressed in those years fits the expectations of those who are now his fondest followers. So they get rid of what doubts linger by postulating a theory of "flux." Kennedy's life, an old associate suggests, is discontinuous. Other men may develop in an orderly, serial way; Kennedy's career is seen in episodes side by side. There was the Senate investigating episode, the Justice Department episode, and now the senatorial episode. Like Picasso's various periods, they do follow logically one from the other.

In his current incarnation, Kennedy is cast in the role of a "presidential" Democrat from New York State – the first since Franklin Roosevelt. He comes to Washington with a lot of political linen laid out for him. It is taken for granted that he will be an aggressively "liberal" senator; New York does that to its elected officials. Besides, his colleague in the Senate is a Republican, Jacob Javits, who is constantly pushing Kennedy to more aggressive positions. Kennedy has to be strong on civil rights, dedicated to urban development, for Israel and against Arabs, for reapportionment, welfare, education, housing – and so on down the line.

But as a very junior senator, Kennedy can be experimental. He can test out ideas without the sense of responsibility that he had as part of a national administration, or that older senators sometimes feel as middling-to-elder statesman. He can be a "good Democrat" and support the Great Society programs to the hilt. That would be enough to ensure his reelection, and with everything else working for him, enough to keep him alive as a presidential candidate.

But the wilder tacks he takes – the sudden, spontaneous, half-understood acts of calculated risk – define the Kennedy Party. It puts Robert Kennedy apart from the politics of his own youth, and even some distance from the New Frontier. Someone calls it "post-Stevenson politics," which does not provide much of a definition. It is what comes after rationalized public welfare, full employment, desegregation and the sensible conduct of a Cold War. It deals with an age of systems-analysis, ghetto warfare, labor and corporate centralization, and post-postwar diplomacy.

Kennedy is not a conceptualizer; at least, he does not talk much about broad concepts. But he seems to have an intuitive sense of the changes going on in the country, and he responds to them. Just before he flew to the grape-pickers' strike he asked an assistant, "Why am I going there?" There were places where farm workers got lower wages, or had worse living conditions, or more oppression. But that strike is perhaps the definitive labor war of the decade – and Kennedy felt it before he understood it. The point was that the workers in the grape fields do not want just better wages or conditions, but *recognition*, as a source of power, as a community, as people capable of making their own decisions. To get it, they have to fight some elements of big labor as well as the big growers. It did not, as it turned out, take Kennedy long to grasp it all. He tore into the growers in two days of hearings, and won the confidence of the strikers.

He knows that "conscience" is becoming a major element in political behavior. He likes to quote an inscription which he says was found on an Egyptian pyramid: "No one was angry enough to speak out." Last week he said, "There's a sharp difference between this generation and the last. Young people today have that motivation – idealism and dissatisfaction." He has an affinity for protest, if not a taste for protesters. He likes people who are making "that effort" – "whatever their particular politics happen to be." Kennedy denounces "easy solutions" in many speeches, but more than that he seems to dislike solutions in general. Still, there are distant goals. "I'd be discouraged if I thought it was all just an exercise," he says. But certainty? He quotes Learned Hand approvingly in praise of "the spirit which is not too sure it is right."

The Outsider

Kennedy's position in the Senate reflects these intuitions. Many of his colleagues get the idea that he doesn't think much of Congress at all. "He's a visitor, a boarder," a senatorial aide said. Unlike his brother, Teddy, who is working his way into the Senate "establishment," Robert Kennedy remains almost totally outside. He does not defer to older senators; he sometimes insults them. During one session of the car-safety

hearings in February, Kennedy exploded at Republican Sen. Carl Curtis for not letting Ralph Nader, a leading critic of the automobile industry, give his full testimony.

"What I don't understand is why you don't let Mr. Nader read his statement to find out if in fact – " Kennedy growled at Curtis.

"I have no objection to his reading his statement," Curtis replied.

"Then maybe we would understand his position," Kennedy went on. "I don't know how you can reach a conclusion about his position. First you admit you haven't read his book; and, secondly, you haven't heard his testimony. Why don't you listen to his testimony and then criticize?"

"I have no objection to hearing his testimony," Curtis reiterated meekly, "but when he loses me with – "

"With big words?" Kennedy smiled.

That's not very nice for a junior senator. But Kennedy asks few favors from senators; it was he who finally had his brother, Teddy, withdraw the nomination of Francis X. Morrissey from the confirmation fight over a judgeship last fall in the Senate.

Congress is too slow, too ineffectual, too deliberative for Robert Kennedy. It is not where the action is. Like John Kennedy, he feels it is somewhat of an anachronism, that the affairs of a vast and complex society can-

Unter den Lyndon

not be dealt with by such a windy, old-fashioned collection of egotists.

To delve into the effect of the assassination on Robert Kennedy is to indulge too much in pocketbook Freud. Many of those close to him think it did not drastically change his way of life, but reinforced certain tendencies – his fatalism about politics, his alienation from establishments, his sense of the importance of individual acts of conscience. It was obvious to everyone who saw him that it intensified the brooding, the pained introspection that for a while became a public manner. Slowly, that is changing. His friends say that he can now make almost casual remarks about President Kennedy – even little jokes, with a touch of the macabre.

The political effects of the assassination on Robert Kennedy's life are as difficult to sort out as the psychological effects. It quickly made him a leading contender for the Presidency, but at the same time put new obstacles in his way. He certainly wants the office, but he is not going to go about it in the same way John Kennedy did. "One of the questions we ask," an aide says, "is what the political consequences of a speech will be. But it is very rarely the first question." "You have to remember," another adviser warns, "that no presidential campaign can be planned more than two years in advance. There are too many variables before that."

In the normal course of things, Kennedy can do nothing about the Presidency until 1972, and it may turn out to be later than that. The "scenarios" which some people have constructed involving a move in 1968 seem to have little foundation in foreseeable realities. In the meantime, the Kennedy Party at best can become a focus for disaffection in varying degrees with the Johnson Administration.

Kennedy himself is less than enthralled with the Johnson Administration; it is clearly not his style. But neither is he about to begin guerrilla warfare against it. Relations with his successor at the Justice Department, Attorney General Katzenbach, are under some strain. Kennedy is justly proud of his own record at Justice; he sometimes feels that Katzenbach responds too quickly to White House pressure, and has little taste for innovation. Kennedy disliked Katzenbach's stand against the burial of Robert Thompson, a Communist, at Arlington. He disagreed with Katzenbach's arguments against providing legal aid to poor defendants at the very beginning of criminal cases – in the police station. The Administration repays such opposition with small unkindnesses: Kennedy was conspicuously excluded from a recent White House meeting with senators interested in judicial matters.

It is doubtful whether Kennedy will ever express publicly anything less than support for Johnson. It is not merely good politics and good taste; Kennedy

knows Johnson's problems and the difficulties of the Presidency. But others are becoming more alienated. The war has cut deeply into the natural affection the New Frontier had for the Great Society. And the Kennedy Party could be an anti-war government-in-exile.

It already is a home for many of the New Frontier officials who were ripped untimely from their jobs. There is a kind of "shadow cabinet" which Kennedy uses both for ideas and to a lesser extent for political activity. Burke Marshall, the former head of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division and now general counsel at IBM, has the civil rights portfolio. Roswell Gilpatric, former Undersecretary of Defense, is a key source on strategy. Richard Goodwin, a former White House speechwriter, does work on foreign policy (he helped write the speech on Vietnam and the Viet Cong), and so does Arthur Schlesinger Jr. Kennedy has close ties with Robert McNamara and Orville Freeman, and he gets help from Theodore Sorensen on speeches (both Sorensen and Schlesinger are useful as gag-writers, among other things, but Schlesinger is considered the better of the two). Schlesinger actually writes few speeches that are delivered as written.

At a different level, Kennedy is developing a cadre of "idea men" as distinct from personal advisers. Some of them are New Frontier holdovers, former members of "Kennedy's guerrillas," a middle-echelon network of government officials with a special loyalty to the attorney general in those days. Some of them are still in federal agencies: Leonard Duhl, a psychiatrist and social planner now at Housing and Urban Development. Richard Boone, formerly head of Community Action at the Poverty Program, is another ex-guerrilla. Now he is director of the Citizens Crusade Against Poverty, a Walter Reuther-sponsored private antipoverty action group. A few journalists are close to Kennedy; most prominent is Joseph Kraft, the columnist. Since his rather abrupt entry into New York, Kennedy has developed another level of advisers around his state: he talks with Dr. Eugene McCarthy of Columbia University on health problems, and through him Kennedy has made contact with the "pro-Medicare" doctors (many of them teachers) in New York. He admires James Allen, the state Commissioner of Education, and solicits his ideas on school problems. Through Alan Campbell, of the Maxwell School of Public Administration at Syracuse, he has plugged into a vigorous group of upstate intellectuals.

Kennedy is playing New York politics cool. He manages to stay detached from the identifiable factions, and yet encourages and often supports them all as the need arises and conditions allow. He is more than courteous to the Reform Democrats in New York; they almost feel wanted by him. Last month, he spent a day at a conference on problems of underdeveloped nations, sponsored by Rep. William Fitts Ryan, the reform Democrat *par excellence*. He calls on reform leaders; recently he invited one to his hotel room and greeted the astounded visitor in his undershorts. The truth is that everyone needs him more than he needs them.

Kennedy has a small organization of his own in New York, presided over by Stephen Smith, in the tradition of Kennedy brothers-in-law. John Burns, the state party chairman, was a Kennedy choice. But there is not yet anything like a Kennedy machine in the state. "He could hand-pick the candidates for any office," a New Yorker said, "but he's staying aloof."

Who Are the New Boys?

The point is that Kennedy does not have to rule New York with a heavy hand. It is his own turf, and no one is in sight to challenge him. Elsewhere around the country, he has not begun to make new contacts. He is naturally close to old friends from 1960; after all, he cultivated them, and they will maintain a certain allegiance to him. In one way, that could prove to be something of a liability. Kennedy may personally be attuned to new political forces – the challengers of the big-city machines, for instance – but if he has only the old boys, his activities will be tightly circumscribed. His advisers say, however, that there is time enough to form new alliances, and it is in fact the part of wisdom to wait out the inevitable conflicts before moving in.

In the meantime, the Kennedy Party will concentrate on ideas rather than men, on creating a political mood rather than building a political organization. Already the mood is beginning to take shape. It began with the speeches Kennedy made last year on nuclear proliferation. He suggested that the US join with the Soviet Union, and China, if possible, to oppose the spread of atomic weapons. There were cries of "appeasement," but Kennedy's point was made: if ideology prohibits diplomacy, change the ideology. He continually pressed the Johnson Administration on a Vietnam settlement. He criticized the President for regarding the war as "purely a military problem." It was one of the factors which forced the Administration to devote at least some energies to "social reform." Then he spoke out against bombing North Vietnam. Finally, in his famous statement on the Viet Cong, he asked the President to recognize that a settlement in Vietnam could not come without participation, at some level, of the rebel forces.

The storm which the speech – and the subsequent "clarifications" which followed it – caused, has not yet subsided. Kennedy is said to think that he made many mistakes during those first days – not for what he said, but because he was unprepared to deal with the reaction. The problem was in his analysis of the nature of

political tempers all around. One of his advisers likens the affair to the meeting Kennedy had, after the Birmingham civil rights conflict in 1963, with James Baldwin and a collection of well-known Negro public figures in New York. Kennedy's instincts in arranging the meeting were good, and again ahead of the game (it is hard to imagine anyone in the White House or the Cabinet today even thinking of such a notion). But he did not comprehend what was going on in the Negro world (very few whites did in those days) and when Baldwin said later, "he doesn't understand us," he was right.

"I made the speech because I thought there was something that was worth saying," Kennedy said last week. "We hadn't really discussed with any completeness or thoroughness the heart of what our policy should be. I made some mistakes in handling it. I think it was unpopular politically. But I would do it all over again if I had to."

What Kennedy only sensed about the Vietnam speech was that he was establishing a position of opposition, not presenting a program for enactment. When the inevitable political counterattack came from the Administration, Kennedy saw how vulnerable he was. All the big guns were against him. He retreated to avoid destruction. The principal effect of the act – to legitimize criticism and make alternative policies in Vietnam thinkable – was somewhat diluted.

Breaking Up the Ghetto

Kennedy has worked hard on education and civil rights legislation, but his principal domestic enthusiasms so far were contained in three speeches delivered in New York in late January. He called them "A Program for the Urban Crisis"; they included major proposals for housing, education and employment for the poor, in particular, Negroes. But the most intriguing part of the speeches was the analysis of the problem of the poor. Kennedy went further than any major political figure has done so far in seeing what underlies the "breakup of the Negro family" (as the President referred to it in his Howard University speech last June) and the "lack of motivation" (as the poverty program officials call it) of Negroes.

"The deeper part," Kennedy said, ". . . is in the gulf which separates the Negro from the white power structure that governs him, and in the failure of the Establishment to afford him full participation in shaping the governmental services he receives. For 300 years the Negro has been a nation apart, a people governed by a repression that has been softened to the point when it is now only a massive indifference. The Watts riots were as much a revolt against official indifference, an explosion of frustration at the inability to communicate and participate, as they were an uprising about inferior jobs and education and housing."

No one in the Administration yet is talking out loud about eliminating the ghetto, but Kennedy said, "Wiping out the ghetto is essential to the future of the Negro and of the city itself. It is essential because the ghetto is not a neighborhood. Rather it is a vast undifferentiated mass. . . . If we can break down the massive housing segregation of the ghetto, we can break down the other forms of segregation which it has caused. The ghetto, for example, makes it practically impossible to achieve meaningful racial balance in the schools. . . . The existence of smaller Negro and integrated neighborhoods throughout the metropolitan area would, on the other hand, permit the achievement of improved racial balance."

If Kennedy understands the powerlessness of ghetto-dwellers, he knows more about America than any of his Senate colleagues. It is still problematic whether he can translate such feelings into political action. He probably will not be a major framer of legislation. As John Kennedy did, he will use the Senate as a sounding board, dropping in and out as the occasions arise (he has spent more time outside than in Washington this year). Kennedy has his friends inside the Senate (his brother, Senators Tydings, Jackson, McGovern, Bayh and a few others, such as Church and Clark, with whom he often works), but it is the loosest of all factions. Kennedy is too much of a loner to start a Senate club. He has admirers on the House side, but no cohesive following there, either (Humphrey, on the other hand, had his own House club).

In the next few years, Kennedy's biggest problem will be to convince people of the significance of his new "episode." "Long ago," one Washington politician mused recently, "Robert Kennedy discovered that no one was going to like him, in the sense that people liked Roosevelt, or Stevenson, or Jack Kennedy. So he decided to make people follow him because of the power of his ideas, or the rightness of his positions." Even so, Kennedy still has to project his own intuitions over long distances to the voting public. Communication – which most politicians find so easy – is his biggest "hang-up."

At times it seems he can talk winningly only to young people. "Given a choice, he'll pick up an appearance at a school rather than at a civic club," an aide says. He begins to glow with a young audience, but he rarely gets past cool charm with adults. More cynical politicians suppose that he is carefully cultivating the new generation in hopes that he will win their votes in a half-dozen years. There may be some of that; at a Washington high school he told a student who asked when he would run for President, "when you're old enough to vote for me."