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Kennedy: A Watergate Analogy

A nationally prominent Democratic congressman was stunned last winter when his own financial backers threatened to boycott his fund-raising dinner because Sen. Edward M. Kennedy was to be its star attraction.

The threat threw the congressman into consternation. He had secretly and personally arranged for Kennedy to fly to the Midwest at considerable trouble to appear at the fund raising dinner.

Caught in an insoluble dilemma, the congressman was taken off the hook by the tragic illness of the senator's son, Teddy Jr. When doctors decided to amputate the boy's leg, the senator himself cancelled the congressman's fundraiser.

Such reaction among Democratic politicians to Kennedy's coverup handling of the 1969 Chappaquiddick affair started rising with the unveiling of Richard Nixon's Watergate cover-up disgrace. At first, the reaction was subterranean, such as the revolt by the congressman's resentful money men. What made it go public was the stunning impact of Robert Sherrill's Chappaquiddick fifth anniversary article July 18 in the New York Times magazine.

But Sherrill's article was a product

of Watergate. No matter how vastly different in scope and significance, the inescapable analogy between Watergate coverup and Chappaquiddick coverup subjected Democratic politicians to ever-harsher questions: If the country forced Nixon's resignation, how could it turn to Kennedy as the cure for political immorality?

Thus, the political signals were clear by the end of August. Although not knowing how to stop Kennedy for the 1976 nomination, few Democratic politicians wanted him nominated.

But why did Ted Kennedy publicly choose not to run so early? For one reason, Sherrill's devastating article unleashed a horde of investigative reporters—including one investigation by the prestigious Boston Globe in the senator's hometown. Mike Wallace's "60 Minutes" on CBS was tentatively planning a hard-hitting Chappaquiddick show. One national magazine scheduled a probe of unanswered Chappaquiddick questions. In short, the worst was yet to come.

The capstone of the senator's timing, however, concerned demands of his own family, particularly the courageous battle against cancer by his 12-year-old son and the psychological strain on his wife. Combined with rising demands within his own party to

declare himself, the luxury of keeping the presidential option open-ended was foreclosed.

The absence of Democratic regret Monday over Kennedy's decision reveals the erosion of his political base—including his once ardent support in organized labor. High AFL-CIO brass always said labor would back Kennedy as the party nominee, but they desperately hoped he would not run.

That hope was never fully expressed in public, partly because of rank-and-file support. "Teddy wows our boys," a top labor political strategist told us just before Kennedy's statement Monday. At the legislative conference of the paper workers' union here last week, Kennedy got a wildly enthusiastic reception from delegates, far more so than either Sen. Henry M. Jackson or Sen. Hubert Humphrey.

The AFL-CIO leadership was far more restrained. This went partly to Kennedy's antiwar leadership in the Vietnam years, partly to his identification with the disastrous presidential campaign of Sen. George McGovern. But by far the larger part of it was Chappaquiddick.

Thus, labor officials were stunned at what happened when Kennedy came to Chicago May 11 as the main speaker at

a testimonial dinner for Joseph Keenan, longtime labor political operative. Kennedy's speech sparked a spontaneous, standing ovation even before he finished. But at one table, all 12 diners stayed in their seats, their hands in their laps.

"They were all middle-aged women," a key labor operative told us. "How many middle-aged women do you think this country has who hate the sight of Teddy Kennedy?"

The deadly reinforcement of this anti-Chappaquiddick emotion resulting from the Watergate analogy has been brutally clear in the 1974 campaign. Rep. Wayne Owens of Utah, a former Kennedy Senate aide now trailing in his campaign for the Senate, has kept his old patron, Kennedy, out of the state this fall. Kennedy's name does not appear in his literature. Two years ago, in contrast, Kennedy twice campaigned in Utah for Owens in his successful race for the House.

Kennedy's decision not to run shows that he was wrong that summer of 1969 when he guessed that Chappaquiddick, even if all questions were not answered, would fade away. That Richard Nixon's Watergate defeated that calculated risk is one of the great ironies of history.