

The Kennedy Problem

By William V. Shannon

WASHINGTON, Aug. 17—In going over the side, Richard Nixon may have taken Edward Kennedy down with him.

Senator Kennedy remains well in the lead as the prospective Democratic Presidential nominee in 1976. But Mr. Nixon's collapse makes the nomination worth considerably less to him than it would have been otherwise. After the public has rebelled against a cover-up at the Watergate, will it buy a cover-up at Chappaquiddick?

If Mr. Nixon had been less directly involved in Watergate, he could have survived in office until the end of his term. That would have been ideal from a Democratic party viewpoint. The next Presidential election would then have been fought between two nonincumbents, with the G.O.P. candidate carrying the burden of an unpopular, scandal-stained Administration.

As it is, President Ford comes on as Mr. Clean and will have the advantages of incumbency. The 1976 campaign may thus turn on normal economic and foreign policy issues.

The problem for the Democrats, however, is that if Senator Kennedy is their nominee, it will be hard to focus attention on those normal issues and on such mistakes as Mr. Ford may have made by then. Instead the Republicans will have no difficulty establishing as the prime question—do you believe Senator Kennedy's story of what happened that night at Chappaquiddick?

The drowning of Mary Jo Kopechne and Mr. Kennedy's failure to notify police promptly or to seek help from a nearby house would have become an issue whenever he ran for President. But if Mr. Nixon had clung to power through the next election, Mr. Kennedy and his managers might have been able to establish in the public mind the fiction that Chappaquiddick was an old story, that it had all been hashed over before, and that it was in rather bad taste for any Republican to bring up the subject. As the saying goes, why rake up the dead past?

Under those circumstances, the Chappaquiddick story would only have percolated below ground. But after the paroxysm of press exposé, public indignation, and Congressional investigation of Watergate, there is no chance that the Chappaquiddick story can be pushed underground. It has become legitimized as a topic of political controversy. The public will expect to get all the facts and will expect to make a judgment on those facts as it did on Mr. Nixon's case.

The facts have not been forthcoming yet. No autopsy was performed. The coroner's inquest was a feeble and inconclusive affair. Senator Kennedy's speech to the people of Massachusetts was in the inglorious tradition of Mr. Nixon's "Checkers" speech, a mixture of partial and self-serving information mingled with and overwhelmed by an emotional plea for sympathy. It cannot stand as Senator Kennedy's final word on the affair.

Robert Sherrill's article in The New York Times Magazine for July 14, 1974, entitled "Chappaquiddick Plus 5" was a major political event. Mr. Sherrill raised pertinent unanswered questions and pointed out serious discrepancies in the authorized Kennedy version of events. Unless Senator Kennedy can clearly respond to those questions and reconcile those discrepancies, they will dog his footsteps throughout the next Presidential race.

His reluctance to face the Chappaquiddick issue confronts his party with another problem. As long as he remains a potential candidate in 1976, his shadow keeps the sunlight from reaching any other putative Democratic nominee.

It is easy to understand why. Aside from his famous name and his family's legend, he is a superb candidate. He is an excellent speaker able to put serious issues in clear and dramatic terms, has physical presence, an easy charm, and goes at the grueling business of campaigning with verve and gusto. Contrary to what was said of him when he first ran for the Senate a dozen years ago, he would be a formidable candidate today even if his name were Edward Moore. But because his name is Kennedy he has a devoted constituency that would make him a hard man to beat in a Democratic primary in any Northern state.

That loyal constituency can nominate him but by itself cannot elect him. Can he persuade the independent voters as long as the full truth of Chappaquiddick remains unexplained? That is the question that haunts other politicians in his party, including many who are sympathetic to him.

The Democrats are not bereft of other talent. Aside from several well-known Senators, there are others deserving of serious consideration, such as Representatives Sidney Yates of Illinois and Morris Udall of Arizona, Mayor Kevin White of Boston and former Mayor John V. Lindsay of New York, and Governors Reubin Askew of Florida and John Gilligan of

Ohio. But those alternative candidates cannot capture sufficient attention to be discussed seriously. As of now, none of them has his visible political strength, but it is entirely possible that one of them could be elected in 1976 and that Senator Kennedy could not. Until he resolves the Chappaquiddick mystery to the satisfaction of fair-minded people or withdraws from the race, however, the Kennedy problem will loom darkly over the Democratic party's future.

I have seen at least five-seven columns like this, citing Sherrill's article.