

Joseph Alsop

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Kennedy's 'Experiment'

Sen. Edward Kennedy's big decision has already filled acres of newsprint with commentary, analysis and explanation. All the same, nothing has been said about the really major experiment Sen. Kennedy means to make, now that he has cut himself free of all the complications of a possible presidential candidacy.

"I want to see what I can really do as a free senator," he told this reporter after reaching his decision. "When everyone thinks you may be going after the White House, you can't take a single step; you can't make any move at all, that isn't interpreted in terms of presidential politics. Getting away from that is what I mean by becoming a free senator.

"I've got a lot to do, too. There's my health bill, first of all, that I've been working on for so long. With no one at either end of Pennsylvania Avenue thinking that passing a Kennedy bill will help a Kennedy nomination, I have a lot better chance of getting something done that really needs to be done."

Put as simply as Sen. Kennedy puts this new experiment he wants to make, the novelty and significance of his aim may escape most people. In fact, however, if Sen. Kennedy succeeds in putting a Kennedy health bill on the statute books, he will have pulled off a feat without any real parallel in nearly three decades.

In order to grasp the novelty, you have to try to picture the U.S. Senate as it looked from the press gallery, when this reporter went to work there in 1936. The empty, sordid, posturing senatorial super-stars of the present would then have been laughed on the Senate floor, first by their colleagues and then by the members of the press gallery.

The super-stars of 1936 were of a different order. Perhaps the greatest was noble old George Norris of Nebraska, with his deceptive outward sweetness, his splendid silver thatch, and his toughness in any fight for a good cause. All but single-handed he had saved Muscle Shoals, despite repeated, White House-supported grabs by the private power companies during the booming Republican years.

Then along came a change of climate and President Franklin Roosevelt. There was Sen. Norris, the unique, unchallengeable authority, with his great bill for the Tennessee Valley Authority ready for instant action. His long, hard, obstinate fight—above all his years of work and study—were then rather promptly rewarded; and so the TVA became George Norris' enduring monument—a more enviable mon-

ument, in truth, than most past Presidents can claim!

Norris had other monuments as well, such as the Norris-Laguardia act. Quiet, decent Bob Wagner of New York had his great Wagner act, and some others, too. Bob LaFollette of Wisconsin had his civil liberties act; and fiery old Jim Cozzens of Michigan had the mighty banking act that is still the basis of all our legislation in this field.

Other names might also be cited, but enough has been said to suggest the point. In brief, what was then the left wing of the U.S. Senate had plenty of great legislators, in the true sense of men who perfected and pushed through great statutes of permanent significance.

Just why this splendid legislative fertility was then followed by verbose sterility, no one has yet explained satisfactorily. It is a hard fact, however,

that the only major postwar statutes bearing senators' personal stamps are Robert A. Taft's Taft-Harley Act and Lyndon B. Johnson's ever-memorable Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts.

But President Johnson was a man of the center, who loathed the Senate's professional liberals, and Sen. Taft, surely was an authentic man of the right. Meanwhile, the liberal Democratic senators of Sen. Kennedy's group have been busy for over a quarter of a century with a game resembling the ballet. They are always striking the most beautiful attitudes, in other words. But when all is said and done, there is nothing left but air.

To try to break this boring pattern is the essence of Sen. Kennedy's proposed experiment. Nothing could be more interesting, especially in view of all the gabble about "congressional" instead of "presidential" government. In reality, we cannot have congressional government today, any more than we had congressional government in President Roosevelt's time. It would be a disaster to attempt it.

But we certainly can have what Sen. Kennedy means to attempt—serious, practical, legislative initiatives, by liberal senators and representatives with the patience to do all the needed homework, plus the triumphant, toilsome obstinacy of a George Norris. To have that begin again would let fresh air into a Senate shifting with unjustified self-admiration.

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