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A Move Toward Healthy Politics

A few years ago a Massachusetts congressman died. At the graveside ceremonies a military rifle squad fired the traditional volleys of salutes. Among the dignitaries at the graveside was the senior senator from Massachusetts. As the rifle squad fired each volley, the senator started, perceptibly.

The echoes of gunshots in Dallas in 1963, and in Los Angeles five years later, still reverberate in his mind and in the mind of the nation. Edward Kennedy and his family have spent too much time at gravesides.

Obviously a number of considerations, political and personal, led Kennedy to opt out of the 1976 presidential campaign. But certainly it was only realistic for him to weigh, as he surely did, the fact — and it almost certainly is a fact — that somewhere in this continental nation there is an Oswald, a Sirhan, a Bremer pensively polishing a gun — a demented, marginal man bent on winning a momentary significance by spilling famous blood.

This does not mean that (as Prof. Arthur Schlesinger said after Robert Kennedy was shot in 1968) "we are indeed a frightening people" or that we have "some dark intolerable tension in our history and our institutions" or that America "has made murder a major instrument of American politics." Leaving the professor's rhetoric aside (where it belongs), the actuarial facts are interesting.

Since 1789 there have been six at-

tacks (four lethal) on Presidents, one attack on a President-elect (Franklin Roosevelt), one attack on an ex-President trying a comeback (Theodore Roosevelt), two attacks on presidential candidates (Robert Kennedy and George Wallace). But since 1789 there have been nearly twice as many—at least 16—attacks on British sovereigns and prime ministers (five on Queen Victoria) and more than 15 attacks on French chiefs of state (which attacks caused more than 300 casualties among unfortunate bystanders).

But, unquestionably, the Kennedy name is a lightning rod that attracts the static emotional electricity of sick people. There are some sick people among the 211 million Americans, and it takes only one: Our successful assassins act alone.

Even without the omnipresent fear of violence, a Kennedy campaign would have been under the lowering cloud of Chappaquiddick. That would have meant more of the unhealthy politics we have been enduring in the Vietnam and Watergate eras.

Healthy politics is rooted in the past in the sense that it concerns enduring values and goals. Unhealthy politics is dominated by the past in the sense that it is poisoned by suspicions and recriminations about a few divisive events. A Kennedy campaign would have meant two sour years dominated by the question: "What did he do and when did he do it that July night in 1969?"

The laws and logistics of presidential campaigning are now such that, had Kennedy wanted to run, he would have had to start early next year. And then an enormous amount of ink would have been spilled, broadcast time consumed, and adrenaline pumped in a two-year effort to develop a more adequate public record than now exists concerning Chappaquiddick. If Kennedy had run, this preoccupation with Chappaquiddick would have been necessary. But it would have been an intolerable distraction from the enveloping dangers that threaten the nation.

Perhaps not since 1812 has the nation been as vulnerable to its principal armed enemy as it is today. Certainly not since 1929 has the nation been as vulnerable to economic calamity as it is today. And not since 1858-1860, the last two years of the worst President, James Buchanan, has the nation been as poorly governed as it has been during the last two years. A Kennedy campaign would have meant two more years of distraction, of looking backward, looking for evidence of a man's weakness, not looking for sources of national strength.

Looking back, it seems that a dispiriting American era began 11 years ago on the street in front of the Texas Book Depository. Edward Kennedy, by doing the right thing at the right time, has done all that he could do to spare the nation still more wasteful years.