

MARIANNE MEANS

Book Stops Talk Of Bobby for '68

WASHINGTON—Sen. Robert Kennedy's tumble in popularity as a result of the Manchester book controversy should hush the persistent speculation that Kennedy will somehow, someday, be on the Democratic ticket in 1968.

The idea that Kennedy would have the impatience and political strength to make an open and successful bid for the 1968 presidential nomination, or that President Johnson would dump Vice President Humphrey in order to substitute Kennedy, was never realistic. Kennedy himself has said repeatedly he is not running for any office in 1968.



MEANS

Nonetheless, both possibilities have been suggested often in print by responsible writers. The thought has been kept alive by Kennedy supporters, indulging in wishful thinking; Johnson-Humphrey adherents, confessing exaggerated fears; and a few local Democratic officials, annoyed for one reason or another at President Johnson.

★ ★ ★

SUCH SPECULATION has always been keyed to the public opinion polls, and based upon the premise that President Johnson would forever be low and Kennedy forever high in popularity ratings. Kennedy's sudden decline, however, discredits that premise and demonstrates once again that popularity is ephemeral indeed. For more than a year Kennedy has beaten President Johnson handily in every poll, yet today Lou Harris shows him trailing the President by 12 points.

It may be, of course, that Kennedy will climb back up again in public esteem as easily as he slid downward. For that matter, so may President Johnson.

The significance of the Kennedy decline in practical political terms is that it reveals Kennedy is no less vulnerable to the vagaries of public opinion than any other national political figure. The aura of political invincibility which was his chief appeal to Democratic professionals has been shattered. The inherited name of Kennedy no longer gives him a

safe conduct pass.

What has happened, as this columnist pointed out last week, is that the public has begun to disassociate the living politician Robert Kennedy from the legend of the late President Kennedy. In fact, the public may even be approaching the point of view held by one savvy New York Democrat who was close to the late President: "There are two kinds of Kennedys—Jack and all the others."

★ ★ ★

IN THE PAST FEW WEEKS Kennedy's associates have sensed the damage to his image and have tried realistically to adjust to the new facts of life. For instance, former Kennedy White House aide Kenneth O'Donnell, who has made uncomplimentary remarks about President Johnson in public, slipped secretly into the capital recently to try to improve his relations with some unofficial Johnson advisers and with high administration figures, including Vice President Humphrey. O'Donnell's move is interpreted here as a sign that Kennedy's forces have resigned themselves to a policy of quiet waiting until after 1968.

The fluctuations of the polls do not detract from the fact that Kennedy remains the most obvious prospect for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1972, when Lyndon Johnson cannot succeed himself. The only Democrat on the horizon in a position to challenge him is Humphrey—and Humphrey lacks Kennedy's independence, money, glamour and youth.