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Bobby, Bombing, And the New Left

By Marquis Childs

CANNON to the right of him, cannon to the left of him, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy is steering a carefully calculated course through the perilous shoals of the controversy over the Vietnam war. Calling for stopping the bombing in North Vietnam is a point of departure readily identifiable.

It is beyond this point that navigation becomes tricky and difficult. For the Senator the attack from the left, meant to discredit him as the peerless leader of the brave, new world of youth, is something new. He has long become accustomed to the familiar bombardment from professional rightists.

The issue of *Ramparts* that blew the role of the CIA with various left-of-center groups, such as the National Student Association and the American Newspaper Guild, led off with a savage attack on Kennedy. Written by *Ramparts'* managing editor, Robert Scheer, the article dismissed Vice President Hubert Humphrey "as a bad joke to most young people."

BUT, said Scheer, "Bobby is believable and for that reason much more serious." From the viewpoint of the New Left, dangerous could be substituted for serious. The obvious objective is to destroy any middle ground between the demand for withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam and the cry of the hawks for the end of all restraint and total bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong.

The *Ramparts* article charges that Kennedy's involvement with the Vietnam war goes back to the earliest days of the Kennedy Administration, beginning in 1961 when "he did as much as any man to get us deeply involved there." Bobby Kennedy's vision of foreign affairs, Scheer writes, is "standard cold war mythology."

Back of the attack is an interesting venture in the politics of the emerging left. In the California primary last year Scheer ran against Rep. Jeffery Cohelan who represents the Berkeley district. On Vietnam, Cohelan said he was more dove than hawk and distinctly unhappy about the bombing. Scheer made a deeply emotional appeal for ending the war with American withdrawal.

Kennedy endorsed Cohelan. In spite of this, the Cohelan people say, a Scheer

emissary made a futile trip to Washington in the hope of getting at least a pat on the head from Kennedy for the Scheer candidacy. Cohelan won the primary by just under 55 per cent of the vote and was re-elected in November.

Another *Ramparts* figure, Edward M. Keating, publisher and principal angel, also ran unsuccessfully as an antiwar candidate. The political drive and the financing of the magazine seem to have been inextricably tied together. There were allegations at the time that the publicity agency handling the *Ramparts* account put out much of the flood of campaign literature for Scheer, Keating and one other *Ramparts* candidate in California. Having lost perhaps as much as \$1,500,000 in its sensational career, Keating has nevertheless been able to attract lesser angels.

The *Ramparts* political drive is presently concentrating on the Berkeley city elections. The goal is to make Berkeley a model city of peace which will come as a surprise to television viewers across the Nation who have seen repeated demonstrations and sit-downs in and around the university campus.

THE MIDDLE ground under the two-party system is the traditional source of political strength. The effective compromises making it a workable system have been achieved here. Today there are ominous signs that the bitter, prolonged, dirty war in Vietnam is eroding this middle ground.

The New Left, typified by *Ramparts* although the magazine's management disclaims any connection with that designation, hopes to gain from this erosion. It is anti-establishment—down with practically everything. But judging by American attitudes, as shown by national sampling, this is a frail hope. The latest Gallup Poll had 67 per cent supporting the bombing in North Vietnam and only 24 per cent opposed.

As a symptom the *Ramparts* splinter in California is currently significant. As the war goes on, however, it is more likely to appear as just a splinter. Say that there are more than a half million Americans in arms in and around Vietnam by the end of this year. Then a larger question looms.

It is whether any middle ground survives sufficiently to give not only Bobby Kennedy a place to stand but the President himself. Between the hard-nosed, bomb-everything right wing and a Republican campaign pointed as it was in 1952 toward peace the standing room will be all but obliterated.