

Inside Report

Lyndon vs. Bobby

By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

Post 3/9/67

PRIVATE EVIDENCE of the havoc left by the latest clash between Lyndon B. Johnson and Robert F. Kennedy was found aboard the Caroline, the famed Kennedy family plane, some where between New York City and Washington last Sunday night.

The political cargo aboard the plane were U.S. Senators returning from Sen. Robert Kennedy's \$500-a-plate Democratic fund-raiser in Manhattan. Neither of the Kennedy brothers was aboard.

One cluster of five Senators sitting together, four of whom are up for re-election in 1968, bitterly but frankly contemplated President Johnson's impact on their own fates. Although each feels confident of running ahead of the President, each glumly forecast his own defeat next year—because of Mr. Johnson.

The gloomy Senators aboard the Caroline all are associated with the Kennedy wing of the Democratic Party. As such, they support Kennedy against the President in the debate over the Vietnam war. Nevertheless, they know that the deepening Johnson-Kennedy feud darkens the gloom suffusing the whole Party.

NOR ARE SPIRITS any brighter at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue. Even the more moderate advisers at the White House now fear the rising feud may lead Kennedy to attempt to wrest the nomination from Mr. Johnson next year, to the ruin of both men. Though this prospect is highly unlikely, the mere fact it is being bruited about the White House is significant.

In sum, the Johnson-Kennedy feud begins to look like a bottomless morass into which Democrats of all stripes are sinking. The two



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contestants now seem unable to control, much less stop, the dispute so damaging to their Party.

The point of no return was the now famous Feb. 6 White House confrontation between the Senator and the President after Kennedy returned from his fling at personal diplomacy in Europe. In addition to Mr. Johnson's threats of political retribution, he also flatly informed Kennedy that was the last time he would be seeing the Senator from New York. That is, even the cobra-like relations of today were to end.

From that point, it was inevitable Kennedy would make public his proposal to suspend bombing of North Vietnam. In keeping with his principle that defense appropriations bills should not be used as a vehicle for peace bloc amendments, Kennedy spoke only after the Vietnam money bill had passed.

But the mere fact he publicly proposed his Vietnam plan in the headline-making March 2 speech was by itself a sign of further deterioration in Johnson-Kennedy relations.

AT ONE TIME Kennedy hesitated to make a substantive public proposal about Vietnam because any idea coming from him would automatically preclude Mr. Johnson from accepting it. According to close associates in the Senate, when he did

unveil his Vietnam plan he did so in the full knowledge that this probably would push the President in the opposite direction. Indeed, even some Administration officials say sadly that the mere fact Kennedy was proposing it might inhibit the President.

And yet Kennedy's speech hardly contained any revolutionary ideas. Even dove-like officials at the State Department see nothing new in it. The fact that Hanoi insists on a permanent cessation of bombing prior to negotiations makes Kennedy's bid for another temporary cessation something of a non sequitur.

However, Administration officials not caught up in the LBJ-RFK feud view Kennedy's speech as far less provocative than his poorly advised proposal a year ago for a coalition government in South Vietnam.

The truth is that Kennedy sought carefully to keep the rhetoric of his March 2 speech as mild as possible. Despite his caution; when the President learned that Kennedy was going to deliver a major Vietnam speech, he instinctively reacted with a whirlwind of activity to counteract it.

The predictable effect was just the opposite: Mr. Johnson simply dramatized Kennedy's speech himself.

Perhaps the best assessment of escalation along the LBJ-RFK front was an off-hand comment the other day to an old political friend by Vice President Hubert Humphrey. When Lyndon and Bobby get together, said Humphrey, good sense flies out the window and they become two animals tearing at each other's throats.

This appraisal explains the melancholy now spreading over Kennedy-men and Johnson-men alike in the Democratic Party today.

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