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Some Democrats Think Kennedy Has Little to Gain

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 30— Senator Edward M. Kennedy's bid for a Senate leadership role involves a serious gamble with his prospects for capturing the Democratic Presidential nomination in 1972. A number of leading Democrats, some of them friendly to the Kennedy cause, thought today that the Massachusetts Senator had considerable to lose politically if he failed to unseat Senator Russell B. Long as majority whip and little to gain if he succeeded. As word of Senator Kennedy's surprise announcement spread through the capital, there were few who did not regard it as the formal opening of another Kennedy Presidential campaign, despite the unusually early timing.

Some Democrats believed Mr. Kennedy had been prompted to move openly for a share of party leadership four years before the election in an effort to cut off early some of his potential rivals, notably Senator Edmund S. Muskie of Maine.

Senator Muskie, the defeated Vice-Presidential candidate, considered taking the same political risk, counted noses among Senate Democrats and decided not to make the challenge. He said today he would support Senator Kennedy.

Thus, if Mr. Kennedy can depose Senator Long in Friday's balloting, he will have demonstrated a measure of courage that others lacked, a lesson that would presumably

not go unnoticed by party leaders around the country.

Kennedy associates reported that the Massachusetts Senator felt he needed to assert a personal role as a party spokesman, staking out a section of the leadership platform for himself in the only major area the Democratic party still controls, the Congress. Some of Mr. Kennedy's friends differed.

"Since when does a Kennedy need a title to attract political attention?" asked one Senator who planned to vote for him. "He'd have a lot more freedom to speak out on the issues if he didn't get stuck in this fairly unimportant job."

There was some difference of opinion among politicians as to whether Senator Kennedy's career would be seriously damaged if Senator Long turned back his challenge.

The prevailing view was that a political defeat, his first of any consequence, was unlikely to add luster to the emerging Kennedy record. There were some who thought that it was somewhat out of character for the Senator to demonstrate this sort of acquisitiveness.

"What is this going to do for Teddy's image?" one Democrat inquired. "His friends have been selling him around the country as more like Jack, but on his first real political move he acts like Bobby."

Some of the Democrats who urged Mr. Kennedy to take the step likened the situation to the 1956 Democratic National Convention in which John F. Kennedy gambled for the Vice-Presidential nomination and lost but was probably strengthened

as a 1960 Presidential candidate.

"That was a sort of gallant loss," one Democrat said. "Jack Kennedy made a creditable showing, far better than most thought he would, and losing didn't hurt him a bit in the long run. In fact, if he'd won and then been buried in the Eisenhower landslide, he would have been much worse off."

The position of whip, or assistant majority leader, has never conferred any particular national prominence on its past occupants or given them an audibly louder voice in the inner councils of the party. More often, it has been more a recognition for long service for a popular Senator willing to handle the workaday job or rounding up votes for party measures.

Thus, the challenge to Senator Long and to the inviolate traditions of Senate seniority provided the real political substance of the Kennedy move, rather than any profit the young Massachusetts Democrat appeared likely to realize from service in the relatively minor post he sought.

"It's really just a grandstand play," one unsympathetic Democrat observed.

Some of Senator Kennedy's backers have promised him their votes more as a matter of encouraging liberal activism among Democrats in the Congress than advancing his prospects for the Presidency.

They are convinced that moves like the anti-Long effort and the challenge to Speaker John W. McCormack in the House of Representatives are necessary to make the younger, more modern Democrats increasingly bolder, even if they lose some of the initial skirmishes.

In some instances, this feeling reflects a fear that Vice President Humphrey, in combination with some of the party allies of President Johnson, will continue to try to dominate the party, to the detriment of the kind of Democrats who worked in 1968 for the nomination of Senators Eugene J. McCarthy, George S. McGovern and Robert F. Kennedy.