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WASHINGTON AP - Sen. Edward M. Kennedy celebrated his 77th birthday today, farther along the presidential path than either of his two slain brothers were at the same age.

After a family party Friday night in New York, hosted by his sister, Mrs. Stephen Smith, aides said Kennedy planned to spend the day quietly at his McLean, Va., home.

When John F. Kennedy was 27, he had been in the Senate less than two years and was having severe problems with his back, injured in World War II. He was still two years away from emergence into national political prominence in his unsuccessful 1956 bid for the Democratic vice presidential nomination.

Robert F. Kennedy, at 27, was attorney general, the trusted confidante of his brother in a presidential administration that at the time seemed likely to extend another six years.

But Ted Kennedy, a senator from Massachusetts at 31, has been thrust into the leadership of his family by tragedy and into a leadership role in his party by its 1968 defeat and his own successful 11th hour race for Senate Democratic whip.

As his party's No. 2 man in the Senate, Kennedy is expanding his efforts in a number of legislative fields. And public opinion polls show him the overwhelming favorite of Democrats to rebuild their party after its defeat in last year's election.

Kennedy appears so strong at the moment, in fact, that he apparently has forced two other leading Democrats to talk openly of their desire to seek the 1972 presidential nomination, something unheard of for serious contenders.

Neither former Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey nor Maine Sen. Edmund Muskie is, of course, saying definitely this far in advance that he will run. But Muskie has largely forsaken the Senate to stump the country building local party support. And he openly admits that he is doing it with an eye to '72 and hopes to duplicate Richard Nixon's strategy of building up a big bank account of grass roots IOUs.

With this kind of muscle, Kennedy is playing it cautiously although he occasionally acknowledges speculation about his future with a quip.

He grants few on-the-record interviews. He also is trying hard to stay neutral in a hot fight for his party's Massachusetts gubernatorial nomination. It's a ticklish situation since Kennedy himself is up for re-election in 1970 and would certainly enhance his own presidential prospects if he could exceed his million-plus plurality of 1964.

Since he won the fight for whip seven weeks ago, Kennedy has curtailed many outside activities to stick close to the Senate floor. When the Senate recessed for 10 days recently, he toured his state and took a vacation.

Kennedy's announcement this week that he is commissioning his own study of the controversial Sentinel missile system put him squarely on collision course with the Nixon administration on what may be its biggest fight with Congress this year.

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At the same time, he is playing a greater role in Senate activity on domestic issues and in its day-to-day operations. Kennedy was one of the leaders of the successful fight this week for full funding of the investigation of hunger.

As expected, Kennedy has taken over many of the routine floor duties from Majority LEADER Mike Mansfield. Thus, with most senators including Mansfield away Friday when the Senate heard George Washington's Farewell address, Kennedy ran the brief session.

This role has developed some conflict with Sen. Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va., No. 2 man in the Senate Democratic hierarchy, who performed many of these routine functions last year when Russell B. Long of Louisiana was the whip.

Byrd still spends a great deal of time on the floor, but he spends it in a back row seat as if waiting for Kennedy to leave so he can take over. Kennedy rarely leaves.

With the year's legislative battles still ahead, Kennedy has assigned his administrative assistant in the whip's office, Wayne Owens, to study the mechanical operations of the House whip's office to see how Kennedy can best function.

Senate sources say that, on the whole, Long did little as whip, so anything Kennedy does will be a plus for the Democratic effort.

Kennedy's total involvement in the Senate processes is something of a first for his family and bears out Mansfield's statement that he is the only Kennedy who is "a real Senate man."

John Kennedy served eight years in the Senate but, except as chairman of the labor subcommittee, played little part in its operation. Likewise, Robert Kennedy used the Senate mainly as a national forum during his 3 1/2 years there.

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