

MES, WEDNESDAY, MAY 21, 1969

Edward Kennedy's Challenge to President Nixon

By JAMES RESTON

The old pugnacious Kennedy spirit is beginning to be heard again in the Senate. Less than a year since the death of his brother Robert (June 6), Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts is emerging as the most outspoken political critic of the Nixon Administration.

This new assertiveness has been coming on gradually ever since he sought and won the Democratic whip's job in the party leadership, but now he is clearly cracking the whip. He is no longer the quiet Kennedy, deferring to the conservative elders of the Senate, and grieving over the past. He is now the head of the clan and aiming to be head of the party.

Early and Bold

All this was expected, but not quite so soon and not quite so direct and bold. He did not even wait for the end of the Apollo 10 moon probe to ask that, "once the lunar landing and exploration are complete," the Administration divert a "substantial portion" of the space budget to the "pressing problems" of poverty, hunger, pollution, and housing down here below.

The next day, while most of his colleagues were celebrating the victory of our armed forces

in a bloody ten-day battle for Hamburger Hill above the Aushau Valley in Vietnam, he condemned the whole operation as "both senseless and irresponsible" and asked why we were making such human sacrifices when President Nixon had already announced that he was not seeking a military victory.

The same day he took on the American oil industry—no modest antagonist—and demanded to know why oil imports couldn't be relaxed a bit, since oil import controls had cost American consumers between \$4 billion and \$7 billion a year.

The Kennedy Battleground

This is a fairly strenuous week's work, but it isn't until you go back through the files of his speeches since President Nixon's inauguration that you realize that his challenge to the Administration has been building up week by week.

It has not been a personal challenge to the President—though the political confrontation between the two is obvious. He has been courteous. He is less strident than his brother Robert and less elegant than his brother John, but he has clearly taken up a prominent position on the left of the Administration.

Primarily, he is challenging President Nixon's emphasis on

foreign affairs and the defense budget, and arguing that the major threat to the security of the nation lies at home. The point is clear in an analysis of his speeches since President Nixon took the oath of office.

He has not only called for cutting the defense and space budgets, but insisted on reducing the level of violence in Vietnam, concentrated on the human aspects of the war—casualties and refugees—opposed the antiballistic missile system, insisted on a more generous policy toward China and even the abolition of the American bases on Taiwan, and attacked the "brazenly practiced" corruption of the Saigon Government.

On the home front, he has not only defied the oil lobby, but attacked racial discrimination in employment, demanded wage and price restraint, insisted on tax reform before the Administration took up the same cry, and even denounced the "demagoguery" of the Republican leader, Everett McKinley Dirksen.

This is about as far as man can go in the first four months of a new Administration. He has picked his targets, and it is interesting that, in the process, he has also condemned the young militants who have resorted to violence

in the universities; but mainly he seems to have established a political base to the left of the Administration—more in favor of the home front than the foreign front, more for taking risks for peace, more for social reconstruction at home than anything else.

The Party Strategy

Where he is moving, why he is moving now, and whether his decisions are wise are all subject to argument, but one thing is clear. Edward Kennedy has changed. The paralysis of last year is over. He is moving. He has taken up a position, and in the process, he is dominating the Democratic opposition.

No doubt events will decide whether he was wise to move so fast and so boldly. President Nixon is also moving under more difficult restraints toward a peace in Vietnam which will let him re-allocate his budget toward home front problems; and if he makes peace, he will blunt Senator Kennedy's arguments.

But meanwhile, the Senator from Massachusetts is establishing himself as the leading figure in the opposition party. His principal Democratic opponent four months ago was Senator Edward Muskie of Maine, but in the last few weeks, Kennedy has clearly dominated the Democratic scene.