

SF EXAMINER

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The Hopefuls: Ted Kennedy

WASHINGTON — Senator Edward Kennedy played tennis with an old friend two days after his surprise defeat for reelection as Senate majority whip.

"What now?" asked the tennis partner casually, over a glass of ice water between sets. Kennedy replied that he wasn't sure what he would do. For the moment, he was disposed to proceed as though nothing had happened to change his political status. He meant to go through with a heavy nation-wide speaking schedule already arranged for the next few months, designed to help maintain his position as a power center in the Democratic Party.

KENNEDY was not inclined to listen to those counselors who were now saying he had to become an active presidential candidate to recoup his lost prestige. But he was not inclined to bow his head and retreat from the public eye either (as if a Kennedy ever could).

The friend left Kennedy's home in McLean with the impression that although Kennedy felt badly about being defeated, he was also rather relieved. This man is increasingly convinced that Kennedy lacks the drive and ambition of his two late brothers and is too ambivalent about the White House to do the things necessary to capture it.

A number of Kennedy's associates agree with the tennis-player and accept Kennedy's words at face value when he says he is not a presidential candidate. Indeed, Kennedy has been reinforcing those words by releasing any of his former

allies who ask his permission to work for other presidential candidates.

Nonetheless, every one of Kennedy's six major potential 1972 Democratic rivals believes firmly that Kennedy is a candidate and merely playing it coy. They have good reason to be skeptical. Kennedy sent not one but three "thank you" letters, including one mailed from Amsterdam during a visit in the Netherlands, to financial contributors to his Senate campaign. Kennedy keeps talking about controversial issues in such a manner as to keep his name in the news.

The best route to the presidency for Kennedy, most Democratic pros agree, is to pretend he doesn't want it but do all the right things to be in position for a last-minute surge at the convention.

The long-range effect upon Kennedy's presidential prospects of his defeat for the whip post is difficult to calculate. He remained high on the public opinion polls despite Chappaquiddick, a tragedy which would have ruined any other national politician.

But an essential part of the Kennedy myth is that Kennedys can't be defeated. The rejection by his Senate peers is undoubtedly a grave psychological blow.

THE SENATE DEFEAT, in its irony, also seemed to indicate a new down cycle of the Kennedy fortunes. Ten years ago the Kennedy juggernaut swept over Sen. Robert Byrd and his presidential candidate, Hubert Humphrey. When he outmaneuvered Kennedy for whip, Byrd evened the score.