

Kennedy Noncampaign: Some Read a No as Yes

By R. W. APPLE Jr.
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Nov. 17 — Three powerful Democrats, all identified with the Kennedy family in the past, talked by phone this week: John J. Gilligan, the Governor of Ohio, Senator John V. Tunney of California, and Robert Moretti, the Speaker of the California Assembly.

They agreed among themselves that an overt Presidential campaign by Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts was not going to materialize next year and that they should therefore make other plans. Yet Mr. Moretti still wants to hear it once more, straight from the Senator, so he will fly to Washington later this month to have dinner with Mr. Kennedy at his home.

Mr. Kennedy has been saying for months that he has no intention of running, that he would remove his name from primary ballots wherever possible, that his supporters should go to work for other candidates, that 1972 was simply not his year.

Hard to Accept

His hold on Democratic politicians' minds is so powerful, though, that most professionals around the country tell questioners as a matter of course that the party's 1972 Presidential nominee will almost certainly be Senator Edmund S. Muskie of Maine or Mr. Kennedy. (A few throw in the name of Hubert H. Humphrey). Even hard-bitten realists like Mr. Moretti find Mr. Kennedy's "no" very hard to accept fully.

Gradually, most of the professionals have accepted it, but they now believe that Mr. Kennedy has a good chance — "3 out of 10," said a Pennsylvania leader — to win the nomination without a campaign.

Other candidates will nibble Mr. Muskie to death, goes the scenario that one hears in the state capitals, with Senator Henry M. Jackson of Washington winning in one state, Mayor Lindsay of New York in another, Senator George McGovern of South Dakota in a third. So the convention will be deadlocked, Mr. Kennedy will dominate the polls and he will be tapped.

The polls provide the readiest and most concrete explanation for the power of Mr. Kennedy's noncampaign. Not only does he consistently finish first or second in the Harris and Gallup national surveys of Democrats, he also shows strongly in local polls — particularly those that measure sentiment in Negro, Mexico-American, Indian and poor white neighborhoods.

In a survey of a Chicano neighborhood in Los Angeles, for example, his "favorable" rating exceeded 90 per cent — far better than anyone else's, including Cesar Chavez, the militant farm-worker organizer.

The "Kennedy Mystique"

Such results obviously reflect the esteem in which Mr. Kennedy's two brothers were held, as well as his own advocacy of the underdog. The "Kennedy mystique" (although no one seems to call it that any more) remains a powerful factor in American politics.

Some people, for example, find it impossible to believe that Senator Kennedy is not secretly organizing a massive campaign that would be started in time for, say the California primary on June 6. In recent weeks, for example, the following rumors—all, so far as it was possible to check, unfounded—circulated in political quarters here and elsewhere:

¶Mrs. Robert F. Kennedy had called all the workers in past Kennedy campaigns to her house, Hickory Hill, for an organizational meeting.

¶Stephen E. Smith, Senator Kennedy's brother-in-law, had quietly passed the word to the Kennedy "shadow organization" that its members were to go to work for anyone but Mr. Muskie, because he must be stopped if the Senator was to have a chance.

¶Senator McGovern and Mr. Kennedy had met on Cape Cod, with Mr. McGovern agreeing to throw his support to Mr. Kennedy in the event of a deadlock.

Mr. Kennedy's strength, which seems to have increased steadily among the professionals and the public in the last four months, as the Chappaquiddick incident faded slightly, appears to be a sign of the weakness of the rest of the field as much as a sign of his own appeal.

"What am I going to do?" asked an Eastern Governor this month in a typical comment. "Nobody excites me. Nobody seems to have anything in his guts. It's all dull, dull, dull."

In that context, Mr. Kennedy seems exciting, exciting, exciting to many of his party's leaders. Several of them have commented recently on reports they heard of speeches that he and Mr. Muskie gave at the Latin Casino near Philadelphia within a few weeks of each other. Mr. Kennedy made the bigger hit.

The old Kennedy retainers are scattered — John J. Burns and Mrs. Ronnie M. Eldridge with Mayor Lindsay, whom some Kennedy loyalists consider essential to a stop-Muskie strategy; Frank Mankiewicz and others with Mr. McGovern; John F. English with Mr. Muskie, and so on. But enough remain available, and enough

others would return to the fold, to man a campaign.

In addition, Senator Kennedy retains the goodwill of important king-makers, notably Mayor Richard J. Daley of Chicago. Their influence might prove decisive in a deadlock.

There is not a great deal of evidence that Mr. Kennedy would promote himself as a compromise candidate at the Miami Beach convention. The assumption among the politicians is that he would be unable to resist a chance at the nomination under those circumstances, with so little risk to his reputation, but it is just an assumption.

The longer Mr. Muskie retains his front-runner position, the less likely a deadlock — and the less likely a Kennedy nomination — will be.