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After the 'New Politics': Kennedy's Olive Branch

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IN THE MOST unexpected personal turnabout of the expiring political year, Edward Kennedy is suddenly moving toward the ideological center. He is even tendering a partisan truce to President Nixon.

In a profoundly important speech in California, Senator Kennedy has said a brisk goodbye to the leftist and "elitist" McGovernites—of whom he was never all that fond, not withstanding a widely held stereo-type to the contrary. And he has offered friendly companionship to those moderates who have just regained control of the Democratic National Committee.

What does it all mean? In the view of a fairly representative number of the regular party pros, it means that Kennedy is positioning himself to claim the party's leadership in 1976—either to obtain the presidential nomination for himself or, at minimum, to have king-making power at the 1976 Democratic National Convention. He is seeking a full reconciliation with the regulars and is departing without tears from what was always an uncomfortable association with the McGovernites. Has Kennedy, then, read the election returns? Yes, of course, but the thing does go deeper than that. For all his faults, Edward Kennedy is not at home in the evangelistic and moralistic politics that have characterized the McGovern movement. (Nor could John Kennedy ever have been.)

THE SCENE of his farewell to the McGovernites was a California dinner honoring one of the leaders of the anti-McGovern forces, Eugene Wyman. Wyman never made any secret of his position. Nevertheless, Kennedy poured praise upon him—while the McGovern people were demanding punitive action against all those who disaffected—and even more praise upon none other than Richard Nixon.

The President was saluted for both his moves toward Red China and his wage-price freeze. Kennedy wound up with this extraordinary comment: "... There is more good will in Congress now toward Mr. Nixon than perhaps at any time in his career in public life."

Though the Democrats had continuing differences with the President, Kennedy went on, these were "no longer necessarily colored by the difficult partisan passions that so often obscured the issues before. Without abandoning any of the basic principles we have fought for, we in Congress, and I for one, will extend the olive branch to the administration in the coming Congress."

Such a 100 per cent-plus partisan Democrat as Averell Harriman seems to suppose that, with these kind words, Kennedy is simply "setting up" Mr. Nixon for a rough going over in a coming Kennedy-led investigation of Republican campaign practices. Maybe. But this columnist doubts it.

AS IN WAR, the non-combat officers in politics are often far more bellicose than the front-line fellows. There really isn't any law against the supposition that Kennedy simply means what he says. But if his new attitude toward Mr. Nixon may be said to be authentically amazing, his revealed attitude toward McGovern only looks amazing. The campaign created enshrined clichés about the McGovern-Kennedy relationship. For one, there was the widespread fiction that McGovern was simply desperate to have Kennedy on the ticket. The fact was that the vice presidential nomination was "offered" by McGovern only in full awareness

that Kennedy would not take it as he never in the world would have done.

Though a Kennedy in-law, Sargent Shriver, eventually went on the ticket, this in no way altered the fundamental reality that McGovern was carrying "the new politics" a great deal farther than was at all to the taste of the highly pragmatic Ted Kennedy. Though himself a "new" politician—to a point—Kennedy was never all that "new" and certainly not "new" enough to approve McGovern's alienation of the labor leaders and so powerful a Kennedy friend as the Boss of Chicago, Mayor Daley.

Put it all together and what it spells is that the McGovernite version of "the new politics" is being quietly interred with the climactic help of Edward Moore Kennedy.

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