

EVANS AND NOVAK

Teddy's Silence Dismays Friends



WASHINGTON — As the hours of silence from the Kennedy compound on Cape Cod stretched into days, the shuddering impact on Sen. Edward M. Kennedy and on the Democratic party itself of the weekend's tragic events were slowly and privately acknowledged by the party's leaders. On Monday, political supporters of Kennedy waited anxiously for some clarifying statement that would, once and for all, clear up what happened on Martha's Vineyard last Friday night.

When there was no clarification, either openly to the public or privately to political supporters, the hopeful waiting was transformed to melancholy foreboding.

"With every hour that passes," one pro-Kennedy congressman told us, "the situation becomes more ominous."

Indeed, at this writing, few of the veteran political hands who counseled the two elder Kennedys have been called into this crisis. In their absence and the lack of solid answers to the questions posed by the senator's sketchy statement of Saturday, rumors in the political community have run like wildfire. Thus, some pro-Kennedy politicians view the silence as a mistake of doleful consequences.

In this light, there is no doubt that Kennedy's political career — of seemingly limitless prospects Friday night — has been damaged. What is the subject of endless speculation here is how severely and how lastingly damaged.

At opposite poles are the

Kennedy enemies and the Kennedy loyalists. Anti-Kennedy congressmen of both parties, returning to the House after the weekend, were quick to sign his political death certificate — some chortling in the cloak rooms at this indignity for the Kennedy clan. But Kennedy loyalists we talked to around the country confidently predicted that the reversal would be only temporary.

In between, however, are relatively objective politicians who feel — in the absence of a comprehensive explanation still awaited by Kennedy's supporters — that the tragedy likely but not certainly will knock Kennedy out of the 1972 presidential picture.

One reason is the sudden freeing of anti-Kennedy sentiment, bottled up since the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy. This sentiment is now being fueled by talk that the lack of an autopsy for Miss Kopechne and the apparent lack of a thorough investigation of possible negligence by Kennedy point to favored treatment. Politically, this could be as damaging as the events themselves.

Moreover, the Harvard cheating incident, all but forgotten, has returned from the deep subconscious to active political conversation.

One Democratic congressman, considered pro-Kennedy, told us he thought of that long-ago Harvard affair when he read of the unexplained delay in reporting the accident and that he began to contemplate "the ultimate nature of a guy's character."

Ironically, the incident came at a time when Ted Kennedy, while scarcely trying, was domi-

nating the Democratic party with a completeness seldom seen in a party out of power. His acceptance by all aspects of the party (including organized labor, never a Kennedy citadel) far surpassed that of either of his brothers. Moreover, as the hard-working and effective Senate majority whip, he was the first of the Kennedys on his way to becoming a true Senate power.

Thus, while Kennedy expressed doubt to his colleagues about running against President Nixon, his growing pre-eminence in the Democratic party had gradually been erasing his option. That is, there was growing doubt that he could choose not to run.

Sen. Edmund Muskie of Maine would see the Democratic presidential possibility most enhanced by these events, but, in fact, 1972 becomes a dark unknown.

For now, Democratic politicians are worried about the adverse impact of the Kennedy crisis on all aspects of their party, affecting both the 1970 and 1972 elections and the Senate.

Kennedy's key role in the Senate, vital to Democratic strategy on both the anti-ballistic missile and the surtax, is likely to diminish sharply.

The interest at the White House, where ever since the inauguration political aides have been casting eyes backward at Ted Kennedy, is intense.

The private consensus there is that he is out of the picture for 1972. The extent of administration interest was revealed by a telephone call from a Justice Department official asking a newspaper correspondent close to Kennedy for additional details of Friday night's events.

Whether this glee of anti-Kennedy forces turns out to be premature depends, in the short run, on whether the present silence is broken by a full and satisfactory explanation of events. But in the long run, politicians agree, whether he can rise from this political catastrophe depends on Ted Kennedy himself — his inner resources and how he conducts himself in the months and years ahead.