

DEMOCRATS URGE KENNEDY TO SPEAK

In Anonymous Interviews,
They See Political Peril

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WASHINGTON, July 24—There is a widely held belief among Democratic leaders that unless Senator Edward M. Kennedy answers all questions about the fatal accident in which he was involved last weekend, he will raise ineradicable doubts about his qualifications for the Presidency.

The Senator was the driver of a car that plunged off a narrow bridge into a tidal pond on Chappaquiddick Island last Friday night. The crash occurred as he was returning to Martha's Vineyard from a cook-out party attended by five old male friends of the family and six young women who worked in his brother Robert's Presidential campaign last spring.

Mary Jo Kopechne, one of the women, was riding with him, and she drowned.

In interviews today, neither Democratic nor Republican politicians would be quoted by name when asked to comment on the possible impact of the accident—and particularly of the Senator's failure to report it for at least eight hours—on Mr. Kennedy's career.

Interviews Anonymous

However, they agreed to speak freely if their names were not used. Members of both parties agreed that Senator Kennedy's career had been hurt and that he and his advisers had handled the incident badly by their failure to disclose fully what had happened.

The Senator told the police that after the accident he was in a state of shock but nevertheless made repeated attempts to rescue Miss Kopechne.

Democratic leaders, who indicated they were concerned and embarrassed because Mr. Kennedy is not only assistant leader of the Senate but also a likely prospect for the Presidential nomination in 1972, believe the Senator could retrieve his position with the passage of time, providing he testified frankly next Monday at a hearing in Edgartown, Mass., before the Dukes County clerk.

The hearing, requested by the Senator, will concern whether or not a complaint should be issued against him for leaving the scene of the accident. He is not obliged to be present.

Senator 'Badly Hurt'

One influential Democratic Senator said today:

"I assume he is going to do something. He can't let this thing deteriorate. I can't help but think he's been badly hurt. He may be able to come back if he's got some answers."

The same Senator said that if he were in Mr. Kennedy's position, "I'd try to answer every question, whether it hurts or not. Then I'd come back here and do my job as whip. And then I'd try to be re-elected [in 1972] by as large a margin as possible. There's a form of cleansing in a political tribunal."

The Senator was critical of the behavior of Senator Kennedy since the accident and of the apparent advice that he was assumed to have acted on.

"There must be some disarray up there because those guys [his advisers] are smart. Because everybody knows they are smart, they therefore assume he is not saying anything because it will hurt him. Now it has reached the point where he's hurting himself more by not saying anything."

When a Republican politician with close connections to President Nixon was asked for his assessment, he responded at with a succinct legal epigram—*Res ipsa loquitur* [The matter speaks for itself.]

He went on to say that though Republicans leaders had not held any formal discussions on the political impact of the incident, the agreed view was that "it is going to hurt substantially because the Senator was a chief fund raiser and very active [in the leadership] on the hill."

"I think they're [the Democrats] hurt, and I think he's hurt. This underscores his immaturity, and that has been his problem all along," this Republican said.

Moreover, he added, he did not think the incident would be forgotten by the voters in 1972, although he felt that it would obviously not be as sharp in their consciousness as it is now.

He said this conclusion might change if possible disclosures to come made the Senator's situation worse than it is or if Mr. Kennedy produced "a satisfactory explanation" of his conduct.

When a reporter recalled that Senator Mike Mansfield, the majority leader, said last Sunday that the accident could have happened to anybody, the Republican politician answered: "Yeh, but it happened to somebody."

A Democratic Senator who is close to Mr. Kennedy said that he had made calls to his home state to assess the feeling aroused by the incident. Those who were friendly or commit-

ted to Mr. Kennedy, he said, tended to overlook, any unanswered questions about the accident and simply to look on it as "another tragedy" that had overtaken the Kennedy family.

But, he continued, those who had been political opponents of the Kennedys or were not disposed to like them "assumed the worst."

A New England Democratic leader said he could think of three reasons why Mr. Kennedy would not have said anything at the outset. He said the Senator may have felt that he should not make a statement before a hearing, that any statement would have increased the suffering of the Kopechne family and that he did not wish to discuss his personal tragedy at a time of national triumph over the lunar landing.

However, this Democrat went on, things have reached the point where "the longer the delay, the worse it looks."

"It all depends on what happens Monday," he said. "He

either comes out whole, or he comes out ruined. It depends on whether he makes a clean breast of the whole thing. People would like to believe him if he'd come up with a reasonable story."

This New Englander emphasized, however, that he was talking about the nomination 1972 and not his re-election to the Senate in 1970.

"He can do no wrong in Massachusetts," he said.