

A Guilty Plea and Suspended Sentence --He May Quit Senate

New York Times

Hyannis Port, Mass.

Edward M. Kennedy described last night as "indefensible" his actions following a fatal automobile accident last week and said he is thinking of resigning his Senate seat.

He invited his constituents in Massachusetts "to think this through with me" and help him arrive at the right decision.

Kennedy's account of the accident, in which a young Washington secretary, Mary Jo Kopechne, was drowned, was presented in a national television address ten hours after he pleaded guilty in a Martha's Vineyard court to a charge of leaving the scene of an accident.

His plea resulted in a suspended sentence of two months in jail, the minimum sentence provided in the law.

The presiding judge said of Kennedy: "He has already been and will continue to be punished far beyond any sentence this court can impose."

Kennedy, who last week was considered the Democratic party's likeliest candidate for the presidency in 1972, addressed himself early in his television statement to what he called "ugly speculation" linking him romantically with Miss Kopechne.

"There has never been a private relationship between us of any kind," he declared. He denied also that he was intoxicated at the time of the accident.

When the car he was driving plunged off the wooden bridge on Chappaquiddick Island, the Senator said, water entered his lungs and he "actually felt the sensation of drowning."

Later, he went on, he returned to the bridge with two companions, Joseph F. Gargan and Paul Markham, and they attempted to dive for Miss Kopechne's body.

His account of a return to the scene after midnight could help to resolve a discrepancy over the time of the

accident between Kennedy's original statement and the testimony of a witness who thought he saw a car with three persons in it turn down the dirt road at about 12:40 a.m.

"My conduct and conversations during the next several hours," he said, "make no sense to me at all."

He added: "I regard as indefensible the fact that I did not report the accident to the police immediately."

Speaking slowly, the Senator recounted some of the irrational thoughts that he said raced through his mind after

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the accident. He said he wondered whether "some awful curse" really did hang over the Kennedys, or whether Miss Kopechne might still be alive.

He was, he said, "overcome by a jumble of emotions."

Kennedy said he returned to his hotel in Edgartown by swimming the narrow channel that separates Martha's Vineyard from Chappaquiddick Island — a distance of about 150 yards. Earlier, it was assumed that he had made the crossing in a private boat.

ADVICE

The 37-year-old Senator said the accident, the speculation about it and his plea of guilty yesterday morning could shake the confidence of the people of Massachusetts in his ability to serve them. He said they are entitled to a Senator "who inspires their utmost confidence" and that he could understand why some people might feel he should resign.

Then, in a gesture that inevitably will be compared to that of Richard Nixon's so-called Checkers speech in the 1952 presidential campaign,

he asked the people to send him their advice.

Mr. Nixon's speech ended with a plea that the voters assure the Republican Party of their confidence in him.

Yesterday, in heavy fog and rain, Kennedy left Hyannis Port for Martha's Vineyard and his appearance in court at about 7:30.

It was 8:35 when the Senator, in a dark blue suit but coatless and hatless in the rain, walked up the courthouse steps with his wife, Joan, beside him.

PLEA

Kennedy strode stiffly into the peach-colored courtroom. He was preceded by his local lawyer, Richard J. McCarron.

The state's senior Senator stood at rigid attention as District Court Judge James A. Boyle settled himself behind his heavy oak bench.

The clerk, Thomas A. Teller, asked the senator to make his plea on the charge of leaving the scene of an accident involving personal injury.

Kennedy rose, voicelessly uttered the word guilty, then swallowed and said it again so the whole courtroom could hear it.

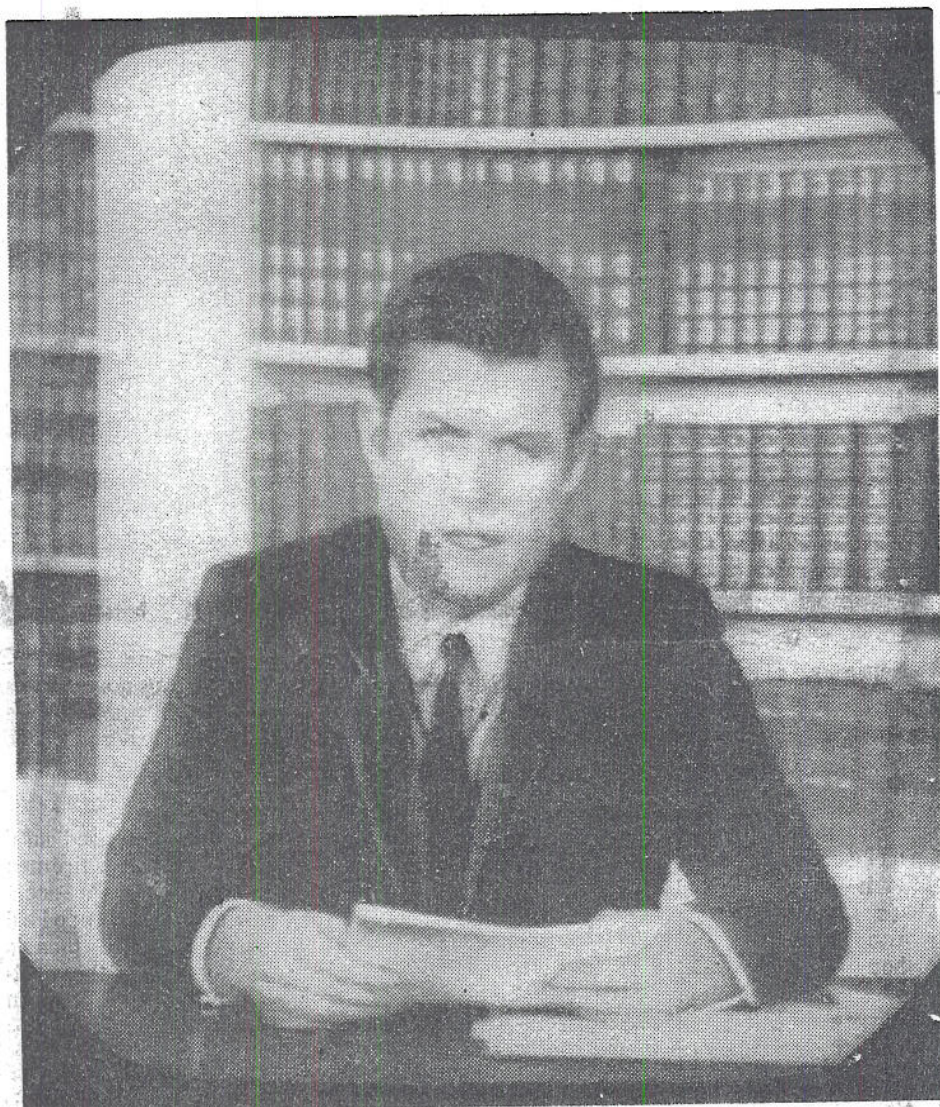


LPI Telephoto

Senator Kennedy and his wife, Joan, left the court together



Ted Kennedy's Own Story --TV Talk on Fatal Crash



UPI Telephoto

SENATOR KENNEDY SPEAKING ON NATIONWIDE TELEVISION
Rumors of 'immoral' conduct were vigorously denied