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Incredible Kennedy Story

THE KEY PROBLEM in the sad case of Sen. Edward Kennedy (which was not a "Kennedy tragedy" — it is Mary Jo Kopechne who is dead) is to distinguish between private and public behavior.

Let us begin an answer to Kennedy's request for advice by stipulating that he was, as he claimed, innocent of any improper acts and cold sober. And that the accident could have happened to anyone.

SO MUCH for the private aspects of the case that can be left in the loving care of those who relish rooting around for possible scandal. What concerns me is Kennedy's public behavior — his actions not merely as a citizen, but as a high public official who has been pushed for the Presidency.

To make an analogy, what would we think of the captain of an ocean liner who, on hearing the fire bell, started rushing around the ship with a bucket of water? All would, I'm sure, concede that he was a fine, sincere dedicated man — but a captain?

A little local background on Martha's Vineyard might be in order. It has some of the loveliest beaches in the United States, but the waters are plenty dangerous. The islanders are not Iowa farmers; they live with the sea, fear it as only those who know it can, and have elaborate preparations for handling emergencies. Neither does Kennedy hail from Kansas. He has spent most of his summers in and on the water in Nantucket Sound, precisely the area involved. Once the car was in the water and he was unable to rescue Miss Kopechne, the public question must be: Why didn't he blow the whistle?

If he had gone to the first house, he

could have reached the police. In 15 minutes the Coast Guard chopper would have been hovering over the scene lighting it up and the scuba divers of the Edgartown Fire Department would soon have been at work. This might not have made any difference — Miss Kopechne may have drowned immediately — but people trapped in cars have stayed alive for hours with air-bubbles.

Instead Kennedy apparently went back, got two friends, and returned to dive some more (in the dark?). Then accompanied by his friends, he went over to the channel between Edgartown Harbor and Katama Bay (probably a good 600 feet wide), impulsively leaped into the water (in the dark) and swam across. As best we can gather, the friends said "good-bye" and went home to bed.

By this time Kennedy had (1) been in a serious automobile accident and suffered from concussion; (2) dove desperately to try to save Miss Kopechne; (3) walked over a mile to get his friends; (4) returned to try again. Nevertheless his friends permitted him to make a potentially disastrous swim to Edgartown.

AS I SAID at the outset, Edward M. Kennedy's behavior as a man is not my concern here. I do not consider myself morally equipped to engage in the care of souls. However, as a citizen of Massachusetts who twice voted for Kennedy I feel qualified to pass judgment on his actions as a public figure. I regret to say that his behavior on Martha's Vineyard falls well below what I consider the minimum standards we can expect from high public officials, and I feel his resignation would be appropriate.