

**Max Lerner**

## The Kennedy Mystique

ARE WE WITNESSING the collapse of the Kennedy mystique? I suspect we are, although we won't know for certain until next year, when Ted Kennedy's role in the congressional and state elections will be tested.

The strength of a political mystique is not just the halo but its payoff in action. Before the July 18 drowning episode there were few Democratic candidates who didn't hope that Teddy would bring his halo to their home districts in the 1970 campaign, and that some of the halo would rub off on them. Now it would be a brave candidate who would risk inviting him.

THE SUREST PATH to the presidential nomination, as Richard Nixon proved, is to build up debts in the off-years to be paid on the presidential convention years. That was going to be Teddy's path in 1970 and 1972, and even if he had deep inner doubts — as he seems to have had — the pressure of those who clung to him because of past favors or prospective power and excitement would have been too great to resist. Now that path has swung away into darkness and the unknown.

With the Kennedy mystique either gone or in limbo, a mystique vacuum has been created for the Democrats. This may, of course, in time, operate to swing opinion back to Teddy: the biggest political argument for him is that there is a vacuum without him. Yet by every precept of principle and common sense, the Democrats will have to turn first to others, less glamorous but closer to the somber mood of the voters, and test their mettle.

The three obvious names — Hubert Humphrey, George McGovern and Edmund Muskie — I put in an ascending order of their chances. Despite his 1968 defeat, I wouldn't exclude Humphrey, especially since his likely return as senator

from Minnesota next year (after Eugene McCarthy's unhappy withdrawal) will give him the public exposure he desperately needs if he is to be himself. McGovern's political flower is less wilted, and it will have a chance to bloom if McGovern succeeds at all in his almost impossible job of democratizing the Democratic Party.

There will doubtless be others, but for the present it is Ed Muskie who looks best. He has judgment, freshness, coolness. All of them are important qualities, especially when the old candidates are no longer fresh and when the most exciting of the young ones has shown a bewildering lack of judgment in a crisis.

It is a curious, wildly accidental way for leadership of a party to emerge. But the risks of political struggle are as perilous as its stakes and triumphs are heady. My only plea is to make less impossible demands on party leadership.

There are, for example, two theories of how to get to the top in a liberal party like the Democratic: one is to be a "gut fighter," show imagination and militancy in constant attack; the other is to make few enemies and not court the destructive battles. There are some who hold both theories simultaneously, although they cancel each other out. The poor politician is likely to be caught and crushed between them.

UNDERSTANDABLY, it is the Democratic left which will suffer most from the passing of the Kennedy mystique. Having lost both McCarthy and Robert Kennedy, they needed Teddy to keep the young insurgents from abandoning the two-party tradition and going off to form a new party grouping.

Their plight is a cruel one. But they, too, will have to learn, along with the other Democrats, that you don't solve the basic leadership problem by using a handy mystique as a crutch.