

Sen. Kennedy: The Burden of Chappaquiddick

When Sen. Edward M. Kennedy was asked over CBS's "Face the Nation" last Sunday about his conduct just after the 1969 Chappaquiddick tragedy, his careful response precisely followed a long-devised strategy which deeply alarms many Democratic politicians, including some longtime Kennedy partisans.

Though it scarcely seems conceivable, the program produced the first substantive Chappaquiddick question ever asked Kennedy on national television during the nearly five years since the accident. Kennedy responded, as he and his aides decided long ago, by referring the questioner, Martin F. Nolan of the Boston Globe, to the Senator's 1969 explanations of Chappaquiddick and the now public transcript of the coroner's inquest. What's more, Kennedy intends to answer all future questions the same way.

To many Democrats (pro-Kennedy and anti-Kennedy alike) outside the senator's inner circle, this smacks of President Nixon's handling of Watergate, despite the vast dissimilarities, and risks similar consequences. Kennedy must, they say, explain Chappaquiddick and again apologize for it. At stake is a deeper issue: deep-seated unease by many Democrats about the increasingly probable Kennedy candidacy for president in 1976.

At the heart of both the dispute over Kennedy's political tactics and this unease is the fact that Kennedy never has been subjected to probing cross-examination about what happened at and after Chappaquiddick. The issue was not raised by Republicans during Kennedy's 1970 Senate re-election campaign. Interviewers of Kennedy during his rare television appearances have dodged the uncomfortable subject.

Hence, Kennedy and his closest advisers have concluded that Chappaquiddick is a burning issue only with Kennedy-haters who would oppose him anyway. They believe it has become a dead issue that can safely be handled by referring questions to the written record.

One savvy Democratic operative, an important adviser to both JFK and RFK, has disagreed strenuously. He recently urged Kennedy to respond to any questions about the accident with a detailed and precise explanation, thereby drawing a vivid contrast with Mr. Nixon's self-destructive obfuscation on Watergate. Kennedy listened to the advice, nodded, but expressed neither agreement nor disagreement.

In fact, his disagreement seemed clear on Sunday after Nolan asked why he took seven days "spent with political advisers and lawyers and speechwriters" to make a televised re-

sponse to the tragedy. Kennedy simply chose not to answer the question by saying, less than accurately: "I've responded on the questions of Chappaquiddick." He added that "there's a full response" plus the transcript of the inquest; that "I've accepted the responsibility"; that it's up to the people to judge him.

Kennedy received no more substantive questions Sunday on Chappaquiddick. His lieutenants concede that as a full-fledged presidential candidate, he might well be barraged by 15 minutes or more of tough questioning over television. Such an examination could for the first time probe apparent contradictions in Kennedy's own conduct.

But there is no inclination now for Kennedy to respond any differently in the future than he did on Sunday. A published report that Kennedy will commission a new book to reveal untold facts about Chappaquiddick is wholly inaccurate. He plans to say nothing more.

What makes this so questionable is widespread feeling among Democratic politicians that, contrary to the feeling of Kennedy's inner circle, voters who normally would be Kennedy Democrats are leaning against him on ethical grounds. In particular, big city party campaigns now fear Catholic middle-class voters might defect from the third Kennedy. It is no secret that

Mayor Richard J. Daley of Chicago and Philadelphia County leader Peter Camiel clearly prefer Sen. Henry M. Jackson.

This mood is typified by the fact that both Jackson and Sen. Walter Mondale campaigned in the recent special congressional election in Pennsylvania while Kennedy did not. Kennedy was not pressed to come into the district, and his eleventh-hour offer of a taped endorsement for television was politely declined.

Adding to the internal tension inside the party is widespread agreement with Jackson's politically inept admission that the 1976 nomination is Kennedy's for the asking. The Daleys and Camiels may harbor some misgivings but are not about to openly oppose Kennedy. Thus, at this early stage, they wonder whether he can be elected.

Overall, Kennedy's first major nationally televised performance since 1970 received high praise from Democratic politicians: his physical appearance excellent, his answers crisp and understated. But Nolan's question almost surely is the forerunner of continued probing if he runs for president. In that case, Democrats believe Kennedy must come up with something better than his nonresponse of Sunday.