

Watergate Hits Kennedy

WASHINGTON — Among the more interesting fallouts of the Watergate fiasco is speculation of what it means for the future of Massachusetts Senator Edward M. Kennedy. On one side are those who say that his prospects are brighter now because Watergate has canceled Chappaquiddick.

Others argue the reverse: Why, they say, would the Democrats nominate the only man whose own trespasses will neutralize the question of Republican political morality?

I AGREE WITH THE SECOND more cynical group. As the saying goes, two wrongs don't make a right. And two immoral episodes don't add up to political morality. If anything, I would think the harsh spotlight that Watergatism is shining on U.S. political standards also bodes ill for Teddy Kennedy.

After all, if the electorate is angered toward a demand for integrity and morality in government, then the Senator from Massachusetts is the Democrat whose presidential qualifications will be the most suspect.

Let us remember that Edward Kennedy was the Democratic Senator originally mentioned to head the Watergate investigating committee, and during October, 1972, his "Now I will, now I won't" attitude was very obvious — and so were the personal reasons for it. Ultimately, of course, the Democrats decided to ride with Sam Ervin of North Carolina, a man of very different reputation.

If morality is a big issue in 1976 or if the Democrats want to try to make it a big issue, the last man they will run for the White House is Edward Moore Kennedy.

After all, the Republican nominee in 1976, whoever he is, will not be a Watergate involver. Under those circumstances, the Democrats couldn't hope to get much mileage out of morality in government.

So I don't take EMK too seriously. Some may think that his July plans to share an Alabama platform with George Wallace are opportunism and (or) hypocrisy. I think that he's just playing that last fatal chip.

Perhaps Edward Kennedy should be compared to the English prince of the same name. No one cared too much about the personal behavior of the Prince of Wales, but the same conduct was deemed intolerable in a man who had to fulfill the responsibilities of King Edward VIII.

Nancy Gager Clinch's fascinating book, "The Kennedy Neurosis," sketches EMK's controversial morality — from cheating at Harvard to running traffic lights at law school in Virginia to the consummation at Chappaquiddick — with an electric intensity.

LAST MONTH at a University of Pennsylvania forum, I discussed Kennedy's prospects with Richard Scammon, the well-known political analyst and former Census Bureau Director under John F. Kennedy. We both agreed that Kennedy was vulnerable, on the morality issue.

Thus, it's difficult to see the Watergate mess advancing the career of the Massachusetts senator. More likely, the stricter moral climate that it will engender will hurt Kennedy's Presidential prospects. And if this is true, then it's some consolation for the GOP — one of the few Watergate has yielded.