

# Kennedy Frees the Democrats

By Tom Wicker

Edward Kennedy has done the wise and courageous thing in closing the door, about as conclusively as it was possible to do, on the possibility that he might run for President in 1976. Skeptics will question whether the family reasons he stated were really controlling with him; but the net effect of his announcement nevertheless comes down to two points of overriding importance.

One is that other Democrats who may aspire to the 1976 nomination—Senators Henry Jackson, Walter Mondale and Lloyd Bentsen, Governors Reubin Askew, Dan Walker and John Gilligan, potential Governors Hugh Carey and Edmund Brown Jr.—can now move out of Senator Kennedy's shadow and compete among themselves rather than against his dominance of their party.

The other and more important consequence of Mr. Kennedy's "Sherman" statement is that, whoever the Democrats nominate, he or she will be able to campaign against the record of the Nixon-Ford Administration without the distracting necessity to defend against the inevitable charges Mr. Kennedy would have faced as a result of the Chappaquiddick incident of 1969.

In one stroke—and in refreshing contrast to Richard Nixon's desperate efforts to cling to power and office—Mr. Kennedy made it possible for his party to nominate a relatively new face who will be free to carry the battle to Gerald Ford—the presumed Republican nominee—and to focus the

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campaign on the records of the incumbent President and his predecessor. If Mr. Kennedy had persisted in running, and had been the Democratic nominee, it is safe to say that the focus of the 1976 campaign, would have been, instead, on the Chappaquiddick incident.

Mr. Kennedy chose to point to family considerations—which are real and compelling—and to dismiss the importance of Chappaquiddick in his decision. Nevertheless, he made that decision last summer, in the weeks not only of Richard Nixon's unraveling cover-up but also following the appearance of an article by Robert Sherrill in *The New York Times Magazine* which raised the many unanswered questions about Chappaquiddick in the most devastating fashion.

After deciding to take himself out of the race—as persons close to Mr. Kennedy tell the story—he decided to defer an announcement of that decision until after the 1974 elections, on grounds that he would be more effective campaigning for other Democrats this fall if he appeared to be a potential President.

On recent political trips, however, Mr. Kennedy was taken aback to find that important and traditional Kennedy backers were supporting other candidates—for instance, in California, Walter Shorenstein was backing Henry Jackson. In that state, too, the Democratic nominee for Governor, Edmund Brown Jr., declined to have Mr. Kennedy campaign for him. In Indiana, Mr. Kennedy encountered insistent Chappaquiddick picketers.

These unpleasant developments apparently caused Mr. Kennedy to reverse himself; he came to think that he might be a more effective Democratic campaigner if he was not viewed as a prospective President. And although he may have been candid in saying, in his announcement, that he still believed he could win the Presidency, he nevertheless may also have recognized what a bitter and difficult campaign his presence in the race would have insured.

A meeting on Cape Cod last weekend with some of his closest advisers failed to shake Mr. Kennedy's decision to take himself out of the race. Nor was it unknown to him that, following the Sherill article, *The Boston Globe*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* were conducting major investigations of the Chappaquiddick affair—and these could only be forerunners of other inquiries.

Mr. Kennedy may therefore have been disingenuous in casting entirely in family terms his decision not to seek the Presidency. Certainly, he overstated the case considerably when he asserted that he had answered all questions about Chappaquiddick and had nothing really to fear on that issue, had he decided to run. The hard truth is, as can be attested by almost any reporter who travels the country, that there is a huge reservoir of doubt and resentment about what Mr. Kennedy called "the tragedy" at Chappaquiddick, particularly among those who had given their allegiance to Spiro Agnew or Richard Nixon or both, and those who had seen both Mr. Agnew and Mr. Nixon brought low for "cover-ups" rather like those of which they suspected Edward Kennedy.

Mr. Kennedy did nothing to clear up such doubts; if anything, his decision not to run probably confirms many Americans in their suspicions about his behavior at Chappaquiddick. His announcement did clear up one of the major questions about 1976 politics, and so far in advance as to transform the outlook for that campaign. Now the question is not whether the voters will accept Edward Kennedy but whether the Democrats can find a candidate to unite their party and make the case against the Nixon Administration and its hand-picked successor.