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'The Road to Statesmanship'

P. G. Wodehouse describing Market Blandings on its best day (and his) couldn't have done justice to California the weekend before last when Ted Kennedy toured the state. The sun smiled, the sea sparkled, and a gentle breeze urged all mankind to surf and fairway. Nobody in his right mind would have gone to a political meeting.

But Kennedy drew hundreds to daytime rallies for would-be congressmen in San Jose, Monterey and Concord. He had thousands stomping at a Los Angeles Palladium fund-raiser for the Democratic candidates in dull races for senator and governor.

At private meetings in Los Angeles and San Francisco he put a pretty good touch on the financial heavy-hitters—even though economic conditions have reduced them to batting fungoes. As Warren Christopher, a leading lawyer with ties to all Democratic factions, said: "If Kennedy gets an A for campaigning, nobody else even gets A-minus."

So Kennedy had reason to believe that he could have won the 1976 Democratic presidential nomination, and had a good shot at the White House. He withdrew from the race, as he said yesterday in Boston, largely for "personal reasons."

The first and foremost of these was the condition of his son, Edward, Jr. The boy had lost a leg because of bone cancer, and the prognosis is uncertain. He asked his father on a couple of occasions not to run for President in 1976. The senator dotes on him and stays with him in the hospital when he goes back every three weeks for treatment. Of itself, that appeal was probably decisive.

A second important reason is the senator's wife. None of the women married to the Kennedy brothers has had an easy time. Joan Kennedy, the senator's wife, has found the challenge particularly difficult.

She has recently been in clinics in Connecticut and California. Though the senator saw her on the California trip, the encounter was not reassuring. It seems doubtful the marriage could stand the strain of a presidential campaign.



Finally, there is Chappaquiddick. If the senator was ever under an illusion that the issue would go away, his recent travels dispelled that notion. There were oblique references to the incident on signs at Kennedy rallies, and newsmen kept asking about it all the time. Chris Lydon of The New York Times and I flew with him from San Jose to Monterey on the California trip, and at least half the questions we asked had to do with Chappaquiddick.

He said—and I think believed—that he could respond to the questions raised, notably in the recent New York Times magazine article by Robert Sherrill. He insisted that in thinking about whether to run, Chappaquiddick would be "a factor, but not a major factor."

He said that the family was a major factor, and I believe him. But a difficult family situation would have been aggravated by the Chappaquiddick

issue. As he said, more recently: "It's one thing when you're the target. It's another thing when you make other people the target."

Senator Kennedy's decision, in these conditions, is right and wise. He has squared his own interest with the interest of his party and his country in a way that is noble, even heroic.

For himself, Senator Kennedy has opened the road to statesmanship. He is probably out of the presidential running for a long time. He believes that a Democrat will be elected this year, and for a second term in 1980.

So nobody can now fairly accuse him of taking positions or backing candidates for reasons of ambition. The stands he takes on the issues dear to him—on detente with the Soviet Union, on health and housing and equal rights—will be tested on their merits. He himself will finally be judged for his own heart and brain—and not as the brother of his brothers. In a deep sense, he has now come into his own.

The Democratic Party is similarly served. It has been fighting over the Kennedys since 1960. Now that old battle is ended, and the party can address itself in a fresh way to men and issues.

The road has been cleared for all the candidates already in the field for 1976, and for many others. Since none appears pre-eminent, and since new rules for delegate selection and campaign financing work against a sweep of the primaries, the probability is that nobody will lock up the nomination before the convention. The decision will have to be by give and take—a victory, in a deep way, for the democratic process.

As to the country, Senator Kennedy has behaved in a way that unsays the awful example set by President Nixon and his men. He has taught by deed the lesson that provides the answer to our present political and economic troubles—the lesson of not being greedy, the lesson of self-restraint. He has subordinated self to the larger purpose—an austere act which, in an era of mass democracy, expresses true greatness.