

No One's Waiting For Kennedy

For the last seven years—almost, in fact, since the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy—an immobilized, transfixed Democratic Party has been “waiting for Teddy.” But, finally, it isn't waiting any longer. And for Democrats, that's the most important political development of the year.

In all fairness to Edward M. Kennedy, the able and popular senior senator from Massachusetts, he has consistently and conscientiously tried to convince fellow Democrats that he was not a candidate for his party's presidential nomination. Yet, for years they wouldn't take him at his word.

Now, at last, most of the influential leaders have, and it is changing the whole political scene; for, with Teddy definitely out of the race, it is becoming possible for others to get some attention. Year after year, the young Massachusetts senator not only ran first in the polls of Democratic voters, but he literally dwarfed all others.

It has been a discouraging phenomenon for rival aspirants. Four years ago, Sen. George McGovern almost dropped out of the race for the Democratic nomination because, even after prolonged campaigning, he could not get a rating higher than 5 per cent in the polls, while Teddy continued to be the popular choice with a rating 8 to 10 times McGovern's.

It had the same depressing effect on Sen. Walter Mondale, the highly regarded senior senator from Minnesota, who last winter did retire from the 1976 race. Many thought he would be an ideal candidate, but after some months of exploring his prospects around the country, he discovered it was difficult to arouse much popular enthusiasm as long as Teddy remained a possibility.

Kennedy, of course, has become aware of this, which explains why he has repeatedly disavowed any intentions of running next year. Some of his disclaimers have been almost Shermansque. Beyond that, he has taken certain steps, such as significant staff changes, to emphasize the irrevocability of his stand.

No single development appears to account for the growing inclination to accept Kennedy's decision. True, the 1976 presidential primaries are only a few months away, but even after several primaries were held in 1972, a large bloc of Democrats still clung stubbornly to Kennedy in the belief that he ultimately would respond to popular demand.

The latest Gallup Poll shows that the senator is still first with the Democratic rank and file, although by a sharply

reduced margin since the last previous survey in July. The real change is more clearly defined by a new national poll of the top leaders of the Democratic Party.

The 340 members of the Democratic National Committee, plus half of the party's state chairmen, were asked by U.S. News and World Report who they thought would win the Democratic presidential nomination in 1976. Sen. Hubert Humphrey was an easy first with 49 per cent, Sen. Henry Jackson was second with 14 per cent and Kennedy was third with only 8 per cent.

When the same leaders were asked who they favored for the nomination, Humphrey was again first (22 per cent), with Kennedy down to 12 per cent. Nobody, incidentally, favored Gov. George Wallace for the nomination, nor did any of the respondents think he had a chance of being selected.

As can be seen, the chief beneficiary of the Kennedy self-eclipse is Sen. Humphrey, who almost defeated Richard Nixon in 1968. The Minnesotan has been climbing steadily in the polls ever since the voters began to take Kennedy at his word. All indications are that this trend will continue.

With more and more party leaders taking it for granted that Humphrey will be the 1976 standard bearer, interest naturally increases in the contest for the second place on the ticket, especially as to whether the party will continue its usual practice of balancing a liberal Northerner with a Southern or border state running-mate.

When the U.S. News survey asked the party leaders if the Democrats need a Southerner on the ticket “to help hold the South,” 59 per cent said no, and 41 per cent said less. Nevertheless, when they were asked who they thought would get the vice-presidential nomination, two Southerners led all the others by far.

Former Georgia Gov. Jimmy Carter was first (41 per cent) and Sen. Lloyd Bentsen of Texas was second (20 per cent). Sen. Birch Bayh of Indiana was third (9 per cent). Finally, when asked who they wanted for vice president, the leaders chose Carter (28 per cent), with Bentsen second (10 per cent) and Bayh third (7 per cent).

So, more and more, it looks as if the Democrats are hankering for the kind of North-South ticket they used to arrange in the winning days of Roosevelt-Garner and Kennedy-Johnson.