

Mary McGrory

Hanoi, McCarthy Put Pressure on RFK; His Dilemma Has Become Excruciating

WASHINGTON — Robert Kennedy still faces the prospect of becoming, at 42, either an ex-candidate or an ex-hero.

If he decides after all to take on Lyndon Johnson, he will in his own view split the party and lose the election, thus imperiling not only his own future but that of his younger brother Edward.

If, on the other hand, he persists in his belief in the inevitability of Lyndon Johnson in 1968, he risks losing those followers he prizes most, the intellectuals and the young.

His dilemma, which he knew would be bad, has suddenly turned excruciating in the light of the recent exchanges between this government and Hanoi over what Sen. Kennedy has labeled "a clear and unequivocal invitation to negotiate" from North Vietnam's foreign minister.

The fact that such statements about the peace offensive, which has been rejected by the State Department, have been coupled with pledges of support for Mr. Johnson has repelled his most ardent admirers, and they have not hesitated to tell him so.

Making matters worse, Sen. Eugene McCarthy, who is defying President Johnson, baited Sen. Kennedy on his home grounds.

In a speech in New York, Sen. McCarthy pointed a finger at those who are "waiting for a latter-day salvation, like four years from now," and received tumultuous applause.

The stormer of rapids and mountains, the bold invader of hostile states and continents, has been cast in the role of Hamlet, not daring to do what he most wants to do. It is a distasteful and damaging manifestation.

Knowing the period would be difficult at best, Sen. Kennedy sought the relative obscurity of a ski resort, poverty hearings and home chores. But as the crisis over the peace offer and its rejection mounts, he can find no place to hide.

No political figure has put the moral issue of the war more compellingly than Sen. Kennedy. On a television program last November, he passionately questioned the justice of despoiling a land and its people in the name of "self-defense."



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Sen. Kennedy has protested that his support of the President is conditional, but he knows it comes out as a loyalty pledge, and that his objections make him sound like a defensive hairsplitter.

The situation has drastically foreshortened his timetable. It is no longer a question of how he can maintain himself for the next four years, but what his posture can be for the next four months, as Sen. McCarthy takes the issue of the war to the country. A designation of the McCarthy candidacy as "healthy" will hardly serve him as the administration continues to study the use of the word "will" in the initiative from Hanoi.

The strain has begun to tell. Last Monday in New York, Sen. Kennedy confided to a college audience, as he explained why he did not declare for Sen. McCarthy: "I have a feeling also that I am not accomplishing a great deal."

For the most popular politician in the country, it was an extraordinary confession of futility.

Some of his desperate adherents grasped at the curious remark as a last straw of hope, seeing it as evidence that Sen. Kennedy has at least begun to argue with himself in public over the logic and morality of his position.

(The Washington Star Syndicate)