

Muskie Speaks Up

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, Sept. 29—Senator Ed Muskie is generally rated the front-runner for the Democratic Presidential nomination, but after this ritual concession the criticism usually begins. He does not have enough appeal to the left, or to the right (depending on the critic); his campaign is too bland; the Senator himself is too much a "centrist."

Maybe so, but a pair of recent events tend to unsettle the notion of a wishy-washy Muskie trying to win the nomination by saying nothing. The first of these was the candidate's remarkable statement to a group of blacks in Los Angeles that he believed he would be defeated in 1972 if he chose a black for a Vice-Presidential running mate.

This might prove to be the biggest political blooper since George Romney's brainwashing, although there are said to be those who regard it as the shrewdest political move since John Kennedy's telegram to Mrs. Martin Luther King in 1960.

Events may well vindicate one of those judgments, but for the moment the overtly political consequences of this statement are less interesting than the fact that a Presidential candidate made it. Even the objective truth of Mr. Muskie's remark is a little aside from the point; there is no doubt that he believed it to be true. So, in fact, does virtually every other practicing politician in America today.

So the first thing is that Mr. Muskie gets a high mark for candor, which is always good but particularly so at a time when two successive Presidents have been so widely suspected of dissembling that President Nixon has even called public attention to his difficulty in convincing people that he is telling the truth.

In fact, the President's pious complaint that Mr. Muskie had "libeled" the American people simply underlined the point. A man whose political strategy is to win the white South and the white suburbs by cutting into the George Wallace vote is standing knee-deep in credibility gap when he defends the political effectiveness of a black on a national ticket.

Mr. Muskie's statement represented more than candor, however. It was an obvious effort to face hard facts, not to take refuge in comforting sophistry. In a society choked with scapegoats, straw men, scare theories and euphe-

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mism, a simple willingness to face up to conditions is notable in itself—a fact which speaks volumes about the political climate of the Nixon-Agnew years.

Moreover, a politician who has been around as long as Mr. Muskie could not have been under much illusion about the political risks of making such a statement. If making it turns out to be an asset in the long run—which is by no means clear—it still will be true that it was a gamble to have done so.

These aspects of the statement on blacks were to some extent duplicated in Mr. Muskie's later speech to the Governors Conference the night after the bloody recapture of the Attica prison. Putting aside a prepared text on revenue sharing, the Senator told the Governors that "at this moment there is only one thing to say. . . . The Attica tragedy is more stark proof that something is terribly wrong in America."

That is not a line generally recommended to Presidential candidates, nor was Mr. Muskie's advice to his audience to "ponder how and why we have reached the point where men would rather die than live another day in America." And while all politicians are fond of making statements like the pledge that followed ("The only decent course now is a single, clarifying decision—at long last, a genuine commitment of our vast resources to the human needs of people"), still the context in which the Senator was speaking gave it a certain ring of determination.

This speech also represented an apparent effort to face up to unpleasant but important facts and to speak frankly about them, even though incurring some political risk. It also arose obviously from strong emotions; and if the ability to feel something passionately is the opposite coin of the fabled Muskie temper, hurrah for that.

These remarks may not have made Ed Muskie much more or less a front-runner than he already was, nor do they necessarily show him to be the best man or the best candidate the Democrats have. But at least it ought to be noted that there was nothing bland, wishy-washy or centrist about the Muskie who made those statements; maybe the image is only in the eye of the beholder.