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Kennedy Must Decline His Party's Summons

WASHINGTON — It is, of course, too early to suggest what alternative to Richard Nixon will be available in 1972, or perhaps too early to suggest whether the country will want one. Moods are transient, and if the country's mood continues to be a curious combination of the phlegmatic and the cantankerous it will not really matter very much whom the Democrats anoint.

Still, there is always the chance that the country's mood will change, that it will seek a leader. Moreover, whether or not the mood changes, there will always be those who think it has changed, or would change if the right man spoke out. Thus it is possible to envision the scenario at the Democratic National Convention of 1972, meeting in the certainty of the renomination of Richard Nixon.

The imaginary scenario is not peaceful. The candidacies of Hubert Humphrey and Edmund Muskie—the front-runners—have stalled, in part, let us say, because each seeks to draw from the same pool of delegates, in part because neither is acceptable to the sizable minority to whom they represent a past with which to break.

A Southern bloc led, let us say, by John Connelly of Texas threatens a walk-out against the possible choice of Sen. George McGovern of South Dakota. A list of dark horses, including, let us say, newly elected Sen. Adlai Stevenson of Illinois and Sen. Joseph Tydings of Maryland, has failed to arouse enthusiasm.

Newspaper columnists are comparing the convention to that of 1860, when the Democrats went three ways to defeat.

It is at this point that delegates and party leaders begin placing telephone calls. The message is easily imaginable. "You can unite this party," the calls say, "and if you don't unite it the party is dead."

Here the scenario must end. Imagination cannot encompass the myriad feelings which the man on the other end of the telephone will conjure, and indeed may well be conjuring now. For the confrontation suggested by the telephone call in the scenario has surely crossed Edward Kennedy's mind.

That he would say yes to the telephone call is unimaginable today for two reasons.

First, because whatever happened at Chappaquiddick will still be cloaked—if not in mystery, then in gossip. Could Kennedy win if he did run in 1972? By 1976, on the other hand, Chappaquiddick will no longer be a matter for speculation. For better or worse, so far as Kennedy is concerned, it will be history.

Second, 1972 provokes the vengeful psychotic. Twice weekly, at least, Kennedy associates talk to police about those threats on his life—they come by dozens in the morning mail—which they consider most worthy of being looked into. Will this shadow which follows him disappear by 1976? Perhaps not but, just maybe, perhaps so.

That is why the answer from the other end of the telephone in the scenario envisioned above must be negative. And that is why the Democratic Party is in such a desperate search for a leader, while at the very same time it has one standing by.

Edward Kennedy performs his Senate business with new-found passion for both details and anonymity. Who led the fight against Clement Haynsworth and Harrold Carswell? Birch Bayh—out in front—but Edward Kennedy behind the scenes. Who—with rare parliamentary skills and informed argument—shepherded through Senate and House the 18-year-old Voting Rights Act, over the hostility of the South and the White House? Sen. Mike Mansfield—out in front—but Edward Kennedy behind the scenes.

And yet with all the details and all the work there is something less than satisfying about anonymous leadership, even when it leads to anonymous victories. Particularly when you know there is no finish line in sight and that, two years from now, the answer must be no.