

Henry J. Taylor

Meaningless Poll Response

MILLIONS MUST find it inexplicable — and totally shocking — that the public's estimate of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy's personal fitness to be president of the United States declined so little in the Gallup and Harris polls after he revealed his reactions and performance in the Chappaquiddick event.

Poll replies show little more concern for thoughtful conclusions than for Miss America's mother or the tortoises of Aldabra in the Indian Ocean. It is appalling that polls exert a powerful tyranny in general opinion.

THE PUBLIC'S ANSWERS are the product of practically everything you can think of — except thinking. When I was in Berlin recently the respected Wickert Research Institute ran a nationwide poll asking what group the people considered the most powerful today in West Germany. West Germany's population is 60 million. Only about 20,000 Jews have chosen to remain since Hitler's horrible diabolic purges, making the Jewish percentage of the population practically zero.

Yet the poll showed that eight out of 10 West Germans believe that "the Jews are the most powerful group in West Germany." This is apparently a leftover from the Hitlerian propaganda, and such "thinking" in the replies is, of course, totally without a trace of any thinking whatever.

Able Elmer Roper, who is a philosopher as well as a famous pollster, long ago

found and demonstrated that feelings, not thoughts, dominate poll replies.

Stated Roper: "The one thing the responses are usually not — and I repeat not — inspired by is thoughtful evaluation."

The highest approval of presidential action and performance ever given in the Gallup poll's entire history (87 percent) went to a president during his first week in the White House before he had time to do anything at all. This was President Truman at the moment he took over from FDR.

During President Kennedy's last seven months in office his Gallup poll rating slid steadily downhill. His popularity reached the lowest level of his career at the very moment of the Dallas horror — a decline that dated over the full span from the Bay of Pigs. But the ghastly assassination instantly reversed the low estimate of his fitness as president. Overnight, the public response to Mr. Kennedy's presidency zoomed.

AS FOR PRESIDENT JOHNSON, his down-sliding rating had a brief turnup immediately after his Glassboro meeting (June 25, 1967) with Soviet Premier Aleksei N. Kosygin — another purely emotional response. Mr. Johnson himself admitted that the meeting was "only exploratory."

But Mr. Johnson's only marked turn-up came when he announced (March 31, 1968) his abandonment of the presidency. His rating as president zoomed on his promise to quit, just as President Truman's rating zoomed before he had a chance to do anything.