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Kennedy attack to backfire?

WASHINGTON — The influence of a private attack on Sen. Edward M. Kennedy by a deputy chairman of the Republican National Committee late last week has left some powerful Republican politicians chagrined and infuriated others.

Employing language seldom used even in the heat of an election campaign, deputy national chairman Lyn Nofziger lashed into Kennedy in a private memorandum distributed to Republican Congressmen as follows:

"The fact that a man with Sen. Kennedy's record of cheating, of lying, of cowardice and of ignoring the law could have the gall to level personal attacks against (President Nixon) never ceases to amaze me."

Nofziger's memorandum appeared on the desks of many Republican members of Congress under the official imprimatur of the National Committee. Significantly, however, Sen. Robert Dole of Kansas, chairman of the National Committee, and some top aides of President Nixon emphatically told us they not only had not approved the diatribe against Kennedy but did not know about it in advance.

More important, some party leaders in Congress and some political operatives close to Mr. Nixon privately denounced the Nofziger assault as all but certain to boomerang against the Republicans and build sympathy for the brother of the murdered John and Robert Kennedy. To these Republicans, moreover, Nofziger's brassnuckle attack signaled a consensus within the Republican party that Kennedy is a far stronger prospect today to be the Democratic Presidential nominee than at

any time since the Chappaquiddick tragedy.

Nofziger, who heads the National Committee's political propaganda and publications section, is a tough, clever

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

and irrepressible political operative who gave up newspaper reporting to handle Ronald Reagan's gubernatorial campaign in 1966. He joined Mr. Nixon's White House staff in 1969 and the National Committee in 1971.

An expert in the arts of black propaganda, Nofziger has titillated political Washington by using the National Committee's weekly publication "Monday" as a platform for flogging Democrats in an aggressive, irreverent and sometimes amusing way.

But Nofziger's crescendo of attacks on Kennedy recently reached a point where some Republicans started complaining that he was hitting below the belt. In his memorandum to Congressional Republicans, Nofziger refers to these protests and states: "Personally, I am at a loss to understand the objections in light of Sen. Kennedy's attacks on President Nixon." Proceeding to attack Kennedy as a cheater, a liar, a coward, and a law-breaker, Nofziger then quoted nine specific Kennedy attacks on Nixon policies ranging from the President's handling of campus unrest to his recent Supreme Court nominations.

"I think the public needs to be re-

mindful from time to time what kind of a man it is who makes such attacks," Nofziger's memo said. "That is what we try to do."

But unanimously, party politicians we talked to took major exception to Nofziger's strategy as "overkill," drastically "premature," and as bad politics that could well boomerang against the Republicans by building potent pro-Kennedy sympathy.

Asking not to be quoted by name, one party leader said the White House was "shocked" by the most recent California poll (by Mervin D. Field) showing Kennedy beating Mr. Nixon in his home state by 45 per cent to 42 per cent. That "shock," he said, immediately penetrated the National Committee and may have prompted Nofziger's attack.

Whether that is true or not, the Nofziger assault smacks of the simplistic, expedient politics that afflicted the Republicans in the 1970 campaign: a passion for immediate political gain at immeasurable future cost. If, as some politicians feel, President Nixon really perceives Kennedy, with his obvious political liabilities, as the easiest-to-defeat Democratic opponent next November, he should veto all official political attacks on his character and let the record speak for itself.

And if, as some other Republicans feel, Mr. Nixon now really fears Kennedy in 1972, political attack that smacks of character assassination to rank-and-file voters will make him more, not less, formidable, particularly with the record number of young voters. "A few more blasts at Kennedy like that" one Democratic politician told us, "will blast him right into the nomination."