

MAY BE LA. FAVORITE SON

M'Keithen Sees 'Wide-Open' Race

Gov. John J. McKeithen today predicted a wide-open convention for the Democratic presidential nomination and declared he is in the process of revising his position about his role in view of President Johnson's withdrawal from contention.

McKeithen, who had said previously he expected the Louisiana delegation to vote for Johnson at the convention, said today he might wind up as a favorite son candidate if it is in the best interest of Louisiana.

THE LOUISIANA chief executive had high praise for the President but said it may be that the nation is reverting to isolationism.

"I think this will have extremely far reaching results in shaping the future of this country," McKeithen said at a specially called news conference in Baton Rouge to give his response to Johnson's bombshell announcement.

He said that assuming a war de-escalation means withdrawal from Vietnam, "I think it could very well mean this country is going back to isolationism."

He said the country obviously

is not getting the help it should from the rest of the free world in Southeast Asia and was particularly critical of France and England.

"MY FEELING has been," he said, "that we have no choice but to stand in Vietnam."

He said he would like to have both Sen. Robert F. Kennedy and Sen. Eugene McCarthy, the only two major candidates for the Democratic nomination, "explain what their goals in de-escalation are."

The Louisiana governor, who will have the deciding voice and influence in casting the state's 36 votes at the convention in Chicago, said he does not have a choice for president now.

His personal choice, he said, would be Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, who has yet to announce. But he qualified that by saying he first wants to find out how all of the candidates stand on lawlessness

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in the streets, on Vietnam and where the country will stand fast against communism.

M'KEITHEN had announced earlier he did not plan to attend the national convention in August because he thought President Johnson would win despite any primary losses.

In view of the new political situation, he said, he is reviewing his plans and may attend the convention as leader of the state delegation. The delegation may be selected the latter part of this month or in early May.

McKeithen repeated earlier statements that he has not been contacted directly or indirectly about being the running mate of any of the announced candidates for president.

THE GOVERNOR said that he may not support the nominee of the party.

"I am the first one who said I shall put my country ahead of my party," he said. "It means I may very well not support the nominee."

Johnson's withdrawal, McKeithen said, could help Republican Richard Nixon in Louisiana, depending on what George Wallace does. He said he thinks Wallace is still front runner in Louisiana and did not rule out the possibility that the former Alabama governor might withdraw.

"I THINK THERE is probably going to be a pretty wide open thing there," he said of the national convention. "I suspect it will be."

McKeithen will meet this month both with Kennedy and Humphrey when the two officials visit Louisiana for separate functions. Kennedy is due this week and Humphrey next week.

Asked if he would discuss politics with Kennedy when they confer in Crowley Saturday, McKeithen said:

"If he desires I will. I don't know if he wants to discuss politics with me. It may be he doesn't feel a Southern governor will help him."

The governor also declared that he is still opposed to a party primary election to name presidential electors, which Leander H. Perez, Plaquemines Parish political leader, is planning. "I don't think we need any primaries," McKeithen said.

IN PRAISING Johnson, McKeithen said, "I think this is likely to make President Johnson a great man in history.

He said the President "has been terribly treated about Vietnam."

He said, "I was not surprised he did not run. I don't mean I had any inside information . . . but I had serious reservations."

McKeithen's press conference came on the heels of expressions from many top Louisiana politicians in his favor as a favorite son candidate.

Many said today they feel McKeithen, as a moderate Southern governor, is now a strong contender for the vice-presidential slot.

In other quarters, it is felt that the visit here this week by New York Sen. Robert F. Kennedy will be more meaningful now that the President has withdrawn.

Kennedy is scheduled to make a round of speeches here Friday. He will speak on urban problems at the Loyola University Field House at 4 p.m. at a meeting sponsored by the New Orleans Consortium. Friday night he is scheduled to speak at Louisiana State University in New Orleans and he will be guest of honor at a Roosevelt Hotel reception sponsored by the Young Democrats of Louisiana.

Later, he will be entertained at a private dinner by Crowley City Judge Edmund Reggie, who is actively promoting the idea of a Kennedy-McKeithen ticket.

A ROUND of activities is also scheduled for Kennedy at Crowley. McKeithen has said he will not come to New Orleans to meet Kennedy but that he will go to Crowley.

Rep. Edwin W. Edwards of Crowley said that if Kennedy, Sen. Eugene McCarthy or Vice-President Hubert H. Humphrey is nominated, any one of them would need to look to the South or the West for a running mate to balance the ticket.

"It's conceivable that John McKeithen would be the choice."

Mrs. Blanche Long, national Democratic committeewoman, agreed with many others, that the Democratic race is now "wide open." As for the possibility McKeithen might

run as a favorite son, she said, "I was hoping he would. But I just don't know whether he will."

STATE REP. ERNEST N. "Dutch" Morial said he would "suggest" and "endorse" the idea. "I think it would be a great thing for the state. I think he should give it serious consideration." Morial said such a move "would at least hold the delegation together through the first ballot at the convention" and give the state some bargaining power. He feels that McKeithen would be acceptable as a running mate to either Humphrey or Kennedy.

Mayor Victor H. Schiro, who earlier had announced his support of the President, expressed surprise and disappointment at the President's decision but declined to make any further endorsement prior to the August convention.

"I don't know who the candidate will be . . . I'll just sit and wait."

House Whip Hale Boggs said he thinks McKeithen as a favorite son in contention for the vice-presidency is "highly probable."

J. MARSHALL BROWN, Louisiana Democratic national committeeman, said today he felt the President's withdrawal will put Humphrey in the running for the nomination. In other quarters there was agreement that Humphrey, although he has been behind the scenes much as vice-president, certainly cannot now be discounted.

"It seems natural to me that the vice-president would seek the presidency," Brown said. "If he wants the job, he certainly would be a contender."

"This announcement could open up a lot of other things," Brown said. "The thought that the President was a candidate for the nomination had the effect of holding some others back."

Louisiana Republicans feel Johnson's withdrawal will assure a GOP victory in the state this fall. Conservative Democrats held to their position that Alabama's George Wallace will come out on top, with no Southerner in the race.

CAMILLE GRAVEL of Alexandria, former Democratic National Committeeman, who has attended the last three conventions as a delegate, said, "I think it will definitely cause the Louisiana delegation to want to support McKeithen as a favorite son and then see what develops at the convention.

"It's wide open as far as the delegation goes," he said.

Gravel said he feels McKeithen, Sen. Long and Rep. Boggs are now in the national picture. "They're going to have an awful lot to say about who the nominee will be," he said.

Close political supporters of McKeithen who are pushing him to get into the national spotlight note that he is a close friend of Vice-President Humphrey.

M'KEITHEN AND Humphrey were especially close during the tense days of racial violence in Bogalusa. On a recent trip to Washington, Gov. McKeithen made a point of visiting the vice-president.

Humphrey, who is a graduate of Louisiana State University, will speak in Baton Rouge April 11 at a state AFL-CIO convention.

Reggie still is promoting the idea of a Kennedy-McKeithen ticket. He said last night he is wiring the Louisiana congressional delegation to ask their aid.

"I feel more than ever now that all of us in Louisiana should do everything we can to see the realization of a Kennedy-McKeithen ticket," he said.

KENNEDY SATURDAY night denied persistent rumors that he had actually offered the spot to McKeithen, as did the governor.

Earlier, McKeithen had said it would be nearly impossible to form a Kennedy-McKeithen ticket for various reasons, including their differing views on the Vietnam war.

Last week, he said he didn't plan to attend the national convention and that he felt the Louisiana delegation would support the President.

As for his own political future, he said that if he were approached by a national candidate, he would reassess his position. He stressed, however, that first there would have to be a meeting of the minds on policy.

WITH THE PRESIDENT withdrawing, Humphrey cannot be discounted as a can-

didate, McKeithen supporters feel, and a Humphrey-McKeithen ticket might be more feasible.

Gravel said he believes the governor will now reassess his decision not to attend the convention.

While some Louisiana Democrats were stunned by Johnson's announcement, others viewed it as a sort of political April Fool's joke — just strategy.

"I think Johnson is playing it cool," said Arthur Watson of Natchitoches, state party chairman. "I think he is going to be the subject of a draft. I don't think he is going to take himself out of it altogether."

"Kennedy is the No. 1 candidate right now and also the No. 1 target," Gravel said. "It's a wide-open situation."

Republican state party chairman Charles deGravelles called on Democratic office holders in the state to quit a "disintegrating" party and join the GOP.

"Disintegration of the Democratic Party as an effective political instrument in America has now been dramatically underscored by President Johnson's announcement that he will not seek reelection," deGravelles said. "Never in the history of American politics has there been such a dramatic public concession to failure to serve the public interest," he said.

BUT HE ADDED THAT it is to Johnson's great credit that he "rose above partisanship" and "recognized that manner in which the nation was being torn primarily by spokesmen for his own party."

He said, "I call on Democrat officeholders who believe in victory in Vietnam and end to riots in the street and suppression of crime to move into the ranks of the Republican Party today and help provide the kind of dedicated professional leadership the nation sorely needs."

Dave Dixon, a member of the Louisiana Stadium and Exposition District, the commission in charge of the proposed New Orleans domed stadium, said the President's action is "one of the best things in the world for the stadium project."

He said it means the "Vietnam war will end, probably in 1968, and there will be a great rush by American cities toward projects of the future. It will be a great psychological opportunity for New Orleans to be in the forefront."

Dixon said the proposed stadium has "already produced million dollars worth of publicity for New Orleans."