

PRESIDENT SCORES A MUSKIE REMARK

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Says Senator 'Libels' U.S. Public in Barring Negro as a Running Mate

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 16—

President Nixon today accused Senator Edmund S. Muskie of a "libel on the American people" for having stated that they would not approve a Negro nominee for Vice President in the 1972 election. [Question 15, Page 27.]

The President's remark, preceded by a reaffirmation of a pledge not to discuss 1972 politics in 1971, was his sharpest criticism of the Maine Democrat, who is considered the leading prospect for the Democratic Presidential nomination next year.

Mr. Muskie told a group of Negro leaders in Los Angeles at a private meeting last week that he shared their desires for full equality for black Americans but that it would defeat his prospects and their ambitions if he were to select a Negro as a running mate.

Such a ticket, Mr. Muskie had told the Los Angeles group

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and later stated in public, would not be "electable" because the American people were not yet prepared to accept it.

Asked at an unscheduled news conference what he thought of Mr. Muskie's statement, the President first said he would not talk politics this year. Then he said:

"With regard to the general proposition of prejudice in the United States as it affects politics, I am glad to reiterate my own position."

"I believe it is, frankly, a libel on the American people," he continued, "to suggest that they are too prejudiced to vote for an individual of a certain religion, race or national heritage." He cited as proof, the election of John F. Kennedy, a Roman Catholic, as President in 1960 and the popularity of Senator Edward W. Brooke, a Negro, in Massachusetts.

Mr. Nixon did not mention Senator Muskie by name, but it was clear that he was referring to the Maine Senator.

The President said that it was "very important for those of us in positions of leadership not to tell a large number of people in America, whoever they are, that because of the accident of their birth they don't have a chance to go to the top."

Senator Muskie's office said he would not have any comment in response to Mr. Nixon's remarks. When details of his remarks became public, the Senator emphasized that they represented a candid answer to a question posed during a discussion about mutual efforts on the part of the Negro leaders and himself to achieve full equality.

Mr. Muskie subsequently expressed the hope that, by raising the issue in public, it might become possible, after all, to give consideration to a black running mate next year.