

A Cap Over The Wall

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, July 4—Senator Edward Kennedy went to Decatur, Ala.—a city named after the man who said “our country, right or wrong”—to salute Gov. George C. Wallace, to begin to put the Democratic party back together, and to toss his cap over the wall of race.

Evoking the “spirit of America” on the Fourth of July, Senator Kennedy did not shrink from using the Kennedy tragedies to scale that wall: “George Wallace almost lost his life—he sits before you in a wheel chair today—because of his belief in that spirit. Two of my brothers have been killed because they shared that belief.”

In one deft passage, he played upon his audience's resentment of Northern hypocrisy on racial matters, said nothing that would offend civil rights activists, and reprised his theme of a Kennedy-Wallace kinship of tragic violence:

“... Let no one think I come to lecture you on that racial injustice which has proven to be as deeply embedded and resistant in the cities of the North as in the counties of the South. . . . We are no more entitled to oppress a man for his color than to shoot a man for his beliefs.”

Time and again, Senator Kennedy showed the left wing of his party the way to appeal to the right, as he denounced “the depredations of unjust taxes and high interest” and embraced the rhetoric of states' rights: “States and communities and individuals must reclaim that power which has been absorbed by bureaucracies. . . .” The man in San Clemente himself would have applauded.

In the long run, these moves to heal party wounds will prove more important than the immediate news lead of his speech—an uninspired and unavoidable justice-must-be-done shot at the President about Watergate. Ironically, his strictures were cast in vintage Nixon style—a series of “some will say,” setting up and knocking down strawmen. “Some will assert that these lawless transgressions are of concern only to politicians.” (Some will wonder who has asserted that.)

Senator Kennedy's Decatur speech, however, is not to be nitpicked—his

appearance there itself was a major political turning point. Not only did it mark the beginning of a serious effort to reconstruct the old Democratic coalition but it happily meant the ending—at least for a long time—of the steady injection of vitriol into the body politic. We may have passed the peak of the politics of us-against-them.

For sixteen years the political operatives known as “Kennedy men” and “Nixon men” have been sisters under their skins. Like the colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady, their styles were different but their unwavering determination to win was strikingly similar. The Nixon men admired the way the Kennedy men stuck by their friends and punished their enemies.

The Kennedy men (the label given them was “Irish Mafia,” as unfair an ethnic slur as “the Germans”) taught the Nixon men in the 1960 campaign the value of personal loyalty and the uses of tight organizational discipline. The Nixon men learned that ruthlessness could go under the guise of a sense of purpose, and in return, have recently taught the remaining Kennedy men the danger of ineptness or excess in all of the foregoing.

That lesson of Watergate, conventional wisdom holds, harms a Kennedy candidacy. The voters are likely to choose their next leader more on the basis of character than charisma, we are told; some little lady in tennis shoes is bound to haunt Kennedy rallies with a “Nobody died at Watergate” placard; the gleeful condemnation of illegal security operations could be vitiated by the revelation of similar exploits in the Kennedy Administration.

But conventional wisdom, like Nixon's “those who” and Kennedy's “some will say” is wrong. The lesson of Watergate will ultimately benefit the third Senator Kennedy in a far more fundamental way: He may grasp, as very few of the closest aides of his brothers or of Richard Nixon ever grasped, the notion that a credo that says, “if you're not for us, you're against us” is incredibly stupid. To understand that, as Senator Kennedy shows signs of doing, is to begin to figure out how to acquire and wield power in a democracy.

George Corley Wallace is not “with” Kennedy, but today he and his followers—North and South—are that much less against Kennedy. Does this mean that principle is being trimmed by both segregationists and integrationists—that the causes of social justice or states' rights are being compromised on the altar of party politics?

Of course it does, and the country is better off. To demand ideological purity is to add to the sum of hatred in the nation; the fuzzy, confusing,

opportunistic, backscratching politics of the big tent set the stage for the deals, accommodations and compromises which may infuriate true believers but satisfy most of the people.

Governor Wallace has been the Marshal Tito of the Democrats, and no party can say now where he or his support is going in 1976. Just as it took a Nixon to end the cold war, it took a Kennedy to open up the competition for the Wallace voter—and our political system is healthier for it.