

'Big Ed'

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON

WASHINGTON, Feb. 25 — Big Ed Muskie discusses his Presidential prospects these days like a detached philosopher analyzing some unlikely historical character. He is remarkably objective, candid, and even self-critical, still visibly surprised to find himself leading the Democratic race, but obviously determined to make the most of his chances.

He is beginning to plan his campaign now, instead of merely accepting speaking engagements at random. He is dissatisfied with his speeches — thinks they've been too casual, sometimes "pretty awful." So he is looking for help in this field, recruiting a news staff, planning a trip to Africa in the spring and to India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam later in the year, if he can find time.

Sargent Shiver, who helped recruit President Kennedy's staff in late 1959, and Norman Cousins, editor of The Saturday Review, have volunteered their help. Several fund-raisers from the Kennedy camp have come over with Senator Edward Kennedy's approval, and while Senator Muskie wonders where the money will come from for the long primary election contests, he thinks he'll have enough to get through the present year.

So far he has not been asking for commitments from influential Democrats, but the response from the Democratic Governors who have been in Washington recently has been "surprisingly promising." In fact, most of the things that have been happening to him lately seem to surprise him.

Even after his unsuccessful campaign for the Vice-Presidency in 1968, he assumed the Democratic Presidential nomination of 1972 would go to Edward Kennedy, and that this would rule him out as a New Englander for a place on the ticket. It was not until the Kennedy accident at Chappaquiddick that he began to think he might have a chance.

This is rather typical of Muskie. Things always seem to be coming to him just when he thinks they are out of the question. Though Hubert Humphrey had talked to him about being the Vice-Presidential candidate in 1968, he didn't quite believe a man from so small a state as Maine would be chosen until it happened.

His strength then and now is that people seem to trust him on sight. Part of this may be because his character was formed before he even thought of making politics a career. Even after he had been Governor of his state for four years, he intended

to retire from politics, and it was not until he won a seat in the Senate in 1958, when he was 44, that he decided what he wanted to do with his life.

Even then, he says, he felt "uncertain" about how to exercise power in the Senate, and finally decided to settle in and work his way slowly through the committees.

It may be that this is why, at 57, he has acquired his present confidence. For he has somehow emerged, not by contriving a personality and scrambling for power, but merely by doing what came naturally and finding that somehow his colleagues came to him.

Things, of course, will change now. He can no longer prevail by working away rather obscurely. Now he will have to plan and choose and define on the scale of the nation and even the world. He is no longer merely "Big Ed," the pleasant, industrious, competent Senator from Maine but a man who may be President, and whose every act and speech will be tested against the awesome responsibility.

Already the pressures are on him from the other candidates or their supporters who are suggesting he is too cautious or too short-tempered—an odd combination—or too conservative or too liberal or too vague on the great issues of the future.

He doesn't complain about this. He accepts the fact that he will have to speak out, but he is going to pick his staff and pick his time and pick his issues very carefully. Only as these decisions unfold will it be possible to estimate his chances, but the guess here is that it would not be wise to underestimate him.

For Big Ed is not the sort of man you'd hand your hat to by mistake. He hasn't struggled up through the law and Democratic politics in a Republican state, and the Senate and the last Presidential campaign for nothing.

His experience is primarily on the home front—particularly in the fields of state and intergovernmental relations, environment, conservation and finance—and he will have to overcome the charge that he is not well-grounded in foreign and defense affairs.

But, withal, he is a calm and even commanding figure, with a superb voice, a philosophic turn of mind, and the look of integrity in his eye; and after the last few years, this might strike a lot of people as a pleasant change.