

Dilemma for the Senator's Friends

Underground Kennedy

Washington

Three powerful Democrats, all identified with the Kennedy family in the past, conferred by telephone this week: John J. Gilligan, the Governor of Ohio, Senator John V. Tunney of California, and Robert Moretti, the Speaker of the California Assembly.

They agreed among themselves that an overt presidential campaign by Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts was not going to materialize next year, and that they should therefore make other plans. Yet Moretti still wants to hear it once more, straight from the Senator, so he will fly to Washington later this month to have dinner with Kennedy at his home.

Kennedy has been saying for months that he has no intention of running, that he would remove his name from

primary ballots wherever possible, that his supporters should go to work for other candidates, that 1972 was simply not his year.

His hold on Democratic politicians' minds is so powerful, however, that most professionals around the country tell questioners as a matter of course that the party's 1972 presidential nominee will almost certainly be Senator Edmund S. Muskie of Maine or Kennedy. (A few throw in the name of Hubert H. Humphrey). Even hard-bitten realists like Moretti find Kennedy's "no" very hard to accept fully.

Gradually, most of the professionals have accepted it; but they now believe that Kennedy has a good chance — "three out of ten," says a Pennsylvania leader — to win the nomination without a campaign.

Other candidates will nibble Muskie to death, goes the

scenario that one hears in every state capital, with Senator Henry M. Jackson of Washington winning in one state, Mayor John V. Lindsay of New York in another, Senator George McGovern of South Dakota in a third. The convention will be deadlocked, Kennedy will dominate the polls, and he will be tapped.

The polls, of course provide the readiest and most concrete explanation for the power of Kennedy's non-campaign. Not only does he consistently finish first or second in the Harris and Gallup national surveys of Democrats; he also shows strongly in local polls — particularly those that measure sentiment in Negro, Latin-American, Indian and poor white neighborhoods.

Such results obviously reflect the esteem in which Kennedy's two brothers were held, as well as his own ad-

vocacy of the underdog. The "Kennedy mystique" (although no one seems to call it that any more) remains a powerful factor in American politics.

Some people, for example, find it impossible to believe that Kennedy is not secretly organizing a massive campaign that would be launched in time for, say, the California primary on June 16.

In recent weeks, for example, the following rumors — all, so far as it was possible to check, unfounded — circulated in political quarters here and elsewhere:

• Mrs. Robert F. Kennedy had called all the workers in past Kennedy campaigns to her house, Hickory Hill, for an organizational meeting.

• Stephen E. Smith, Kennedy's brother-in-law, had quietly passed the word to the Kennedy "shadow organization" that its members were to go to work for any-

one but Muskie, because he must be stopped if the senator was to have a chance.

• McGovern and Kennedy had met on Cape Cod, with McGovern agreeing to throw his support to Kennedy in the event of a deadlock.

Kennedy's strength, which appears to have increased steadily among the professionals and the public in the last four months, as the incident at Chappaquiddick island faded slightly, appears to be a sign of the weakness of the rest of the field as much as sign of his own appeal.

"What am I going to do?" asked an Eastern governor earlier this month in a typical comment. "Nobody excites me. Nobody seems to have a y'fthin' in his guts. It's all dull, dull, dull."

In that context, Kennedy seems exciting of many of his party's leaders.

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