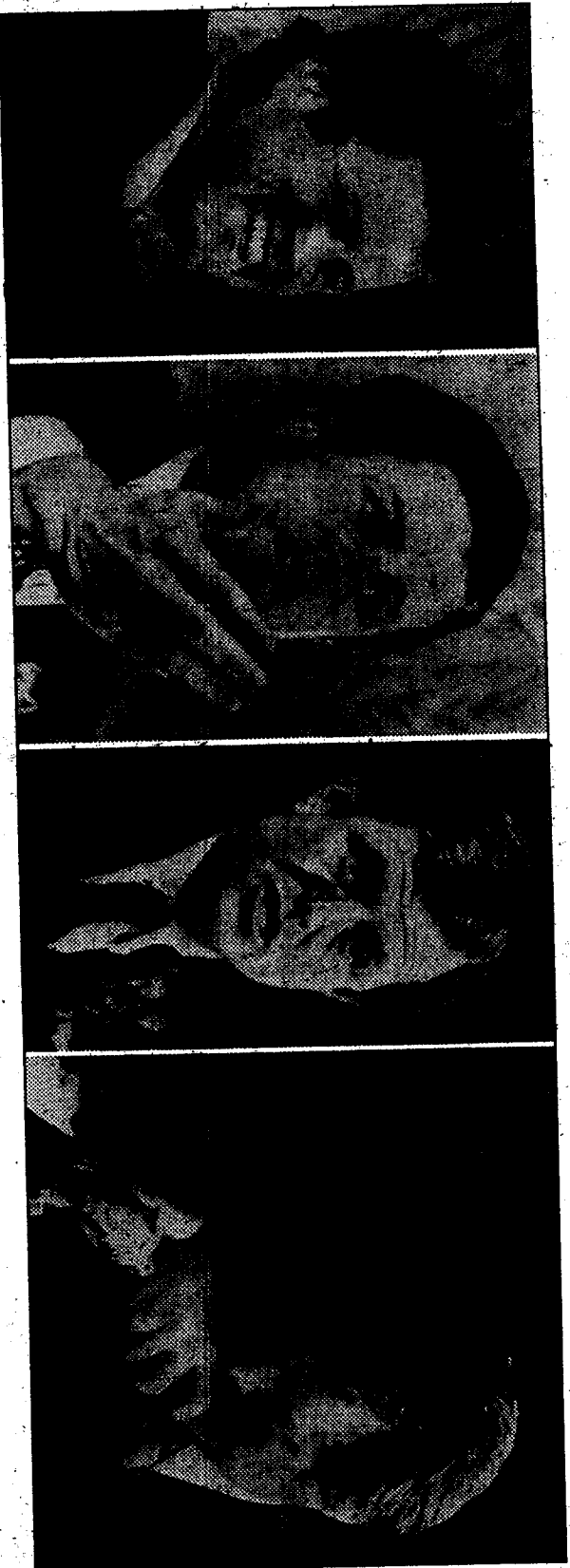


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Reckoning With Ted Kennedy This Election Year

By JAMES MacGREGOR BURNS

WILLIAMSTOWN, Mass.—Edward Kennedy is, I believe, scrupulously observing his promise not to run for the Presidency this year. He is not a clandestine candidate. But how long can he evade the issue, or can we? For the irony is that the more firmly he pursues his noncandidacy the more likely he is to end up in the grip of forces and events he cannot control—crises abroad, a deadlocked convention and the failure of a strong candidate to emerge on the Democratic left.

This is to assume that he would accept a draft. Would he? The longer he waits, the harder it would be to reject a genuine appeal from the party or its left wing. Convention procedures would make a draft awkward to decline. Kennedy could hardly allow the delegates to go through a turbulent, nationally viewed roll-call and then inform them that he was not available.

Potent psychological factors also would be operating. The voters who are wondering what is going on in Kennedy's mind forget that he is wondering what is going on in their minds. To Kennedy a genuine draft would mean that his post-Chappaquiddick period of probation was over, that the politicians considered him electable. It would be hard to respond to such a gesture with a refusal.

Edward Kennedy must be reckoned with in 1972. This is not to brush aside such problems as the possibility of assassination. As an old friend of Kennedy's at Harvard wrote me: "My fear is not so much for his sake. After all, these are the risks of combat. What I dread is what such an eventuality would do to the country: the guilt and the shame it would infect all of us with. Looking at such a searing self-portrait, our pride and our confidence would shrivel." Others contend that Kennedy is in more danger now, with his highly visible, preannounced speaking tours and easy accessibility to crowds, than he would be as nominee for President with elaborate Secret Service protection; that in four or eight years he would be no less vulnerable; and that it would be demeaning to the nation, and un-Kennedy-like for a Kennedy, to grant

Many of the political personages he associates with were members of the older brothers' political circles. The structure of political institutions and processes within which he works is essentially the same as that within which his brothers operated for a total of twelve years; his very workspace—his office in the old Senate Office Building—reminds one, with its over-

worked staff and switchboard, furious pace, enormous productivity, and tone of genial bustle—of the Senate offices of his brothers. His way of thinking about issues and facing them—breaking them down into their components, asking for outside help especially from academics, issuing meaty policy statements, analyzing all options from moving speedily and dramatically to not acting at all—is reminiscent of the work habits of John and Robert.

Still, the Kennedy tradition has its limits as a guide to action today. For there are actually two traditions, one of John Kennedy and one of Robert. Which aspect Edward Kennedy responds to will tell much about his brand of political leadership in the nineteen-seventies.

For all his activism and boldness, especially in times of crisis, John Kennedy followed an essentially conventional political strategy—the strategy of coalition, compromise, and consensus. In part this was forced on him by the narrowness of his electoral margin in 1960 and the tenacity of the anti-New Frontier senators and representatives entrenched in the veto centers on Capitol Hill. But in larger part it was John Kennedy's temperament not to exhaust his political capital on moral issues, not to raise hell unless he would win by doing so, above all not to confront and challenge obstructive institutions when he could bypass or compromise with them. There was a dualism in President Kennedy: He was a policy liberal but an institutional conservative.

Robert Kennedy took a different course. Shocked by the assassination, ejected from the White House inner circle, exposed as a Senator to the harrowing urban problems of his adopted state of New York, he moved strongly to the left.

By 1968 he was riding the radical, reformist and anti-Vietnam tides sweeping the country. He was displaying not only a passionate emotional and political commitment to moral issues, but with his bravado and iconoclasm he was prepared to assault institutions he saw as anachronistic and antidemocratic. "For there is another kind of violence," he said after Martin

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semantics the veto power over who should be allowed to run for President.

Grievous though it is, this problem must not divert us from the real question we should confront now rather than put off until convention time—the qualifications of Edward Kennedy for Presidential leadership.

The key to Kennedy's political personality lies in what is variously called the Kennedy tradition or heritage or legacy. He was almost literally steeped in a family ferment that brought two brief but intoxicating moments in American history—John Kennedy's Presidency and Robert Kennedy's quest for the Presidential nomination. He is part of that heritage not only in the same sense that Franklin Roosevelt was shaped by the Woodrow Wilson years, or that Richard Nixon was influenced by the example of Dwight Eisenhower. Far more, his political thinking is dominated by a whole generation of observing his brothers' way of dealing with problems and opportunities.

Luther King's murder, "slower but just as deadly, destructive as the shot or the bomb in the night. This is the violence of institutions, indifference and inaction and slow decay."

It was the Robert Kennedy of 1964-68 who had the more profound impact on Edward Kennedy. They were serving side by side in the Senate, each representing an Eastern urban state; they were outside the various Democratic party establishments: Together they embodied the Kennedy legacy of concerned activism. There was a significant shift in Edward Kennedy from the unassuming young 30-year-old who had come to the Senate in 1963 prepared to be deferential both to the Senate oligarchs and to the ways and mystique of the upper chamber, to the Edward Kennedy of 1968 who was striking out on his own, helping his brother in the struggle against the conservative wing of the party, and taking advanced positions on domestic and foreign policy.

After Robert's death Edward Kennedy moved more consistently than ever toward the liberal-left of the Democratic party. He took strong positions on the old Kennedy policy base of bread and butter issues.

Less predictably he showed a knack for becoming identified with issues before they gained national attention. Over three years ago, for example, he called for a new China policy that would include ending American opposition to Communist China's admis-

sion to the United Nations; withdrawal of the American military presence from Taiwan; United States willingness to re-establish consular offices in China; unilateral removal of restrictions on travel and nonstrategic trade; discussion with Peking of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries; the reconvening of the Warsaw talks. He became closely identified with the plight of refugees, whom he saw in their anguished settings in Africa and Asia. He took a leading Senate role in lowering the voting age to eighteen and on easier registration.

But Kennedy has yet to take a position on the pressing issue that will face any liberal Democrat arriving in the White House with a long list of policy commitments that could not be effective through the present legisla-

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tive and administrative machinery of the national Government. He shares the dilemma of any Presidential candidate who "means it": The more he urges thoroughgoing economic and social reform the more he must be prepared to overcome the "tyranny of institutions" that has been obstructing major reform in this country for over forty years. The most that can be said for Kennedy is that no other Presidential possibility has addressed this question either.

How would Kennedy employ Presidential power if he won it? I doubt that he would exhibit the political ingenuity and versatility, the cerebral acuteness, the wizardry in symbolic gesture, the extraordinary ability to communicate, and the sheer intellectual range and power of the John Kennedy Administration. His strength would lie less in political feinting and parrying than in directly appealing for electoral support behind his efforts to mobilize influence across the whole political and governmental front. He would advance more direct confrontation of archaic institutions and outdated programs than by adroit manipulation or management.

This estimate must be in part conjectural because all the superficial publicity about Kennedy simply has not equipped us to make the kind of hard appraisals on it that we can of the candidates who are going through endless days under the acute pressure and spotlight of campaigning. But the voter must be asking questions not only about Kennedy and the candidates but about themselves—what kind of leadership does the nation need? Most of the voters may want four more years of Nixon's type of Presidency or most of them may want the kind of moderate liberalism, with slow, step by step advances, that a centrist Democrat might offer.

But if they wish a more radical, a more thoroughgoing change, they must dispassionately analyze Kennedy's capacity to mobilize a majority of the people for a climactic political breakthrough—a reaffirmation of national values and the transformation of political institutions to realize these values. But this is not the kind of question that is being asked by the press or by the leaders of opinion today.

Ultimately political leadership turns on more than political skill or even political principle. It turns also on questions of character and temperament, and it is on this score that many Americans—not least of all, perhaps, Kennedy himself—are most uneasy in their assessment of him. In this context, Chappaquiddick is the issue that will not die. Nothing has been learned about the aftermath of the accident to challenge Kennedy's characterization of his behavior as indefensible. The crucial question is whether the

incident revealed a pattern of behavior on his part. Even before Chappaquiddick he was exhibiting a moodiness and disorientation that worried his friends. In part this was doubtless a response to his brothers' deaths, especially Robert. Chappaquiddick was followed by another period of unsteadiness and of anguished self-doubt. At least one student of personality and politics feels that Kennedy has demonstrated an emotional escapism and volatility that betrays the absence of a central core of integrity.

In the long run, though, the cardinal importance of Chappaquiddick may not be Kennedy's reaction to the tragedy but his reaction to his reaction. Some persons close to Kennedy feel that he was forced to come to grips with himself, to identify himself—and that this self-confrontation brought

out iron in his soul. I think his main instinct, after some weeks of groping, was to find therapy in his work by throwing himself back into his Senate and political role and, above all, to reconnect himself with the Kennedy tradition of bold and innovative leadership. It is from this self-identification that strong policy positions have been forged.

Kennedy, in short, is essentially a public man, responsive to the forces around him, including the continuing vitality of the Kennedy heritage. How he behaves if elected President would depend finally on the extent to which the nation wants to turn to the uncompleted agenda and unfulfilled promise of John and especially Robert Kennedy. This brings us back to the political urgencies facing us today. It is not enough to ask Kennedy to make a declaration of availability or unavailability. Nor can we wait on events. To leave a vital aspect of our responsibility for selecting Presidential candidates to fate, or to chance, or to backroom machinations, is to make ourselves inert objects of history rather than, to some degree, the shaper of our political destiny.

This means:

(1) The press should subject Kennedy to as full and sharp a scrutiny as the announced candidates are receiving in the crucibles of the primaries. This would mean less speculation over will he or won't he? And more analysis of what Kennedy is saying, what political leaders or groups he is maintaining links with, how well he is standing up under the pressures on him.

(2) Local political leaders should factor him into their political arrangements. In some states, for example, party chairmen are inviting supporters of the candidates to speak for them at party conclaves; a Kennedy spokesman should be included. Delegates to the national convention, and candidates for a delegate, should feel free to declare for Kennedy, provided they make clear that such action is unauthorized by him.

(3) Voters in the Presidential primaries have a right, if they so wish, to vote for Kennedy or write in his name, and their votes should be counted and reported.

The reason for all this is to confront the Kennedy phenomenon rather than evade it. "There is no safety in hiding," Edward M. Kennedy said after Robert's death, "not for me nor any of us here today." Four years later that is a sober reminder to Edward Kennedy, and to all of us.

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