

After Four More Years

By Anthony Lewis

After the Democratic convention in Miami last July one politician, and only one, asked party officials for an analysis of how the new rules just adopted would affect the choice of delegates and the convention in 1976. That was Edward Kennedy.

The intentions of Senator Kennedy are necessarily a prime subject of speculation for Democrats after the disaster of 1972. For he appears, at least at this early moment, the figure most likely to bring back the traditional party supporters who deserted this time without provoking a counter-desertion on the left.

Watching Kennedy in this campaign provided ample evidence of his appeal. He campaigned for McGovern all over the country. In Los Angeles one day, when he appeared twice with McGovern, he was twice introduced as "not the next President but the President after the next President." McGovern dealt with this by saying something about the next eight years and adding, "Teddy says I can only have four."

Kennedy was at two rallies and two fund-raising parties that day in Los Angeles. But by far his most interesting appearance was with Cesar Chavez at a meeting of the farm workers union. There was a sense of emotional rapport with the largely Chicano group, the migrant workers whom Robert Kennedy knew so well.

That occasion demonstrated one great strength in Edward Kennedy as a potential nominee: his ability to evoke a feeling of understanding, of connection, in the groups needed for a Democratic victory. George McGovern, apart from his other troubles, never really seemed at home with audiences of blacks or ethnics. He was a man from the plains, a stranger to urban people, and he seemed most at home with a corn-fed crowd in Iowa.

In policy terms Kennedy's position is not really different from McGovern's. He has been a vigorous critic of the Vietnam war for years; his judiciary subcommittee has done the best studies of civilian damage in Indochina and has tackled the politically delicate subject of amnesty. In matters of economics, health and civil liberties Kennedy has spoken courageously and effectively for the liberal viewpoint.

But of course his views do not arouse the same doubts and fears as they did in McGovern's case. For the average voter it must simply be hard to see a Kennedy as a dangerous radical. As for the professionals, the Dick Daleys and John Baileys, they see Kennedy as one of them.

ABROAD AT HOME

The Presidents who have led this country into periods of sharp change have not usually done so as a matter of ideology; Americans are not ideological. They have rather been men who combined glamour with reassuring roots in the system—Roosevelt, for example. Voters take a different view in choosing Presidents than in other elections, as 1972 showed. They tend to want as President someone who is in good part a trustee figure.

It is at that point that the pluses of an Edward Kennedy candidacy may trail off. Chappaquiddick will be seven years old in 1976, but it will not be entirely forgotten. The Republican candidate is not likely to let it rest, especially if he is Spiro Agnew. It takes no great imagination to foresee an ugly campaign.

More broadly, there will remain doubts about the judgment and maturity of someone who would be only 44 at the next election. Some admirers of John and Robert Kennedy who were skeptical about their younger brother feel that he has significantly deepened as a Senator, but he would still have to convince others of his essential seriousness.

The strongest argument against Senator Kennedy is a candidate for President has to be stated, unpleasant as it is: fear for his physical safety. The possibility of another assassination attempt would never be forgotten by his family or friends; indeed it would be there in the minds of the public, whether consciously or not.

The risk would certainly weigh heavily with Kennedy in deciding whether to go for the nomination—not in the sense of personal fear, which is not involved, but in terms of the burden on his own and his brothers' families. Concern on that score was decisive in keeping him off the national ticket this year.

It would be foolish to suggest this early that the Democrats have no one else who could put their party back together in 1976. Senator Walter Mondale, to name one, has a first-class record and has just proved in Minnesota that he too can make liberal views politically appealing.

But if Edward Kennedy wants that nomination, it is hard to see anyone stopping him. There is no reason for him to have come anywhere near a decision yet. My guess, and it is only that, is that the mysterious Kennedy sense of obligation and ambition will combine with the feeling of what remains to be fulfilled from his brothers' lives to make him say yes.