

Max Lerner

Kennedy's Test in Crisis

NYBORG, Denmark — The Danish papers take a healthy attitude toward the Teddy Kennedy affair. They are not particularly troubled by the question of whether there were—as he denies—or were not any questions of drunkenness or immoral relations involved. I am inclined to agree.

The Senate and House are not assemblies of gods but of men. Each man to his own pleasures and his own poisons. This is an area of privacy, and even a senator has the right to his private life, provided he does not carry it on too blatantly in public.

THE QUESTION then is not one of immorality in the breaking of the conventional codes of the society. Yet there is a real moral question involved, on a deeper level. It is the question of the kind of decisions Sen. Kennedy made and the kind of character structure he displayed under the stress and shock of the accident. It is in the end the deepest and simplest question of all: What kind of behavior do you show to a helpless human being, trapped in a car under water?

This isn't just the question of leaving the scene of an accident. It is the question of not crying immediately for help, not rousing the neighborhood, not routing out the village and state police and anyone else who could fish out the car.

The senator spoke, in his moving TV appearance, of the awful curse that hangs over the Kennedy family. No one could doubt it earlier, and no one can doubt it now. But it cannot explain away the problem of the senator's actions and inactions at that fateful moment. The case of his three older brothers and their deaths was truly tragic. In none of the three instances, however, was there any personal action or flaw that led to the death.

But in Sen. Edward Kennedy's case it is hard to talk of an awful curse of which

he was the innocent victim. Rather, it is an instance of a tragic flaw—call it a kind of hubris before the event and a panicky or stunned immobility when it happened—which evoked his current sense of guilt and his feeling of being pursued by a tribal nemesis.

This flaw should not rule out a continued senatorial career. Edward Kennedy has shown, on most occasions, an industrious, liberal, clear-headed skill and tactical shrewdness which have made him a good senator—perhaps (as Mike Mansfield has suggested) better than either of his two predecessor brothers in their Senate seats.

If I lived in Massachusetts I should vote for him to continue, just as I suspect that in Connecticut the voters are likely to return Thomas Dodd, with all his flaws, to his Senate seat and in Harlem they are likely to return Adam Clayton Powell to the House. Richard Nixon was twice forgiven and twice reborn: after his 1952 Checkers speech and after his 1962 hapless California press conference.

The Abe Fortas case was different, not because the flaw was deeper but simply because the Supreme Court posts are inherently posts that require a greater moral distance between those who hold them and the rest of us. The presidential post, on another level, is also different and more exacting. It requires steadiness of nerve and strength of decision in a crisis, and depth of compassion to go with that nerve and strength to keep them from becoming ruthless.

THAT IS HOW, I suspect, Sen. Kennedy will be judged in his presidential aspirations in 1972. Whatever explanations he offers between now and then will never quite allay our sense that at a crisis moment in his life, when another human life was at stake, he was either thrown into confusion or stunned into insensitivity and inaction.