

MARY McGRORY



Kennedy Building Inquest Case

WASHINGTON — The Nixon administration has written off Teddy Kennedy as a contender in 1972.

They note that the inquest at Edgartown, Mass., which was put off by his motion, continues to rage in private forums. They note the prevalence of bitter jests about bridges.

The senator agrees with them that he is out of it for next time. When he announced he would run for the Senate again — having solicited a referendum on resignation in his television "confession" of July 25 — he said he expected to serve a full term.

He has received the worst press of any senator in this century since the tragedy on Chappaquiddick Island. His motives, his courage and his conduct before, during and after the accident have been subject to ferocious review.

The delay in the inquest has revived the charges that now, as in the moment of crisis on the island, his first thought is of his own political preservation. They have been added to the delay in reporting the accident and the delay in explaining it to the police.

His friends say that, despite appearances, he is anxious to appear at an inquest to proclaim he has nothing to hide and to put the matter behind him so he can begin his campaign.

Justice Paul Reardon of the Massachusetts Supreme, Judicial

Court, who ruled in favor of Kennedy, has forbidden all discussion of the case by officials, which is of some relief to the senator.

His lawyers are preparing his case in a manner that reminds people of the infinite resources of the Kennedys, their unchanging access to the best and the most in time of trouble.

A team of expert physicists from the Arthur D. Little Co. has been experimenting with a car overturned in water at the scene. They can be expected to try to refute the contention of a local scuba-diver that Mary Jo Kopechne could have been saved if help had been immediately summoned. They have told the senator that she had six minutes, at best.

Medical experts will be ready to testify that the senator's state of shock would explain his actions during the night of July 18.

Since the tragedy, he has received 160,000 letters, and in a compulsive display of dispatch, his staff has answered them all. They were aided by 80 volunteers who worked around the clock. The critics, who numbered about 40,000 got courteous form letters.

Characteristically, Teddy appeared at his Boston headquarters to thank the volunteers a week ago Friday.

The senator, looking alternately distraught and determined, goes about his duties in the Senate, that citadel of suffering where men judge issues but not each other (at least publicly).

He still gets an enormous

number of speaking invitations, from Massachusetts and other states. He speaks from time to time on the floor — about Biafra, about military expenditures. He has had nothing to say about the war, which would bring him in direct confrontation with the President, whose judgments he is not in a position presently to question.

But nobody else in his party has come forward to preempt the issues he had adopted with increasing boldness since last spring.

Sen. Eugene McCarthy continues to observe a year-long silence. Sen. Edmund S. Muskie of Maine engaged a task force the week after the tragedy, but has said nothing about anything that matters. Former Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey has sought the quiet waters of Lake Waverly.

And in Massachusetts, no one has dared to attack the senator publicly or declare against him for the Senate.

The public expresses scant sympathy for Teddy himself, but they are sorry for Rose or Joan or the dead brothers.

The voters of Massachusetts have invested a generation of love and tears in the Kennedys and feel about them as the British feel about the royal family — they are a luxury which has become an essential. Teddy represents the last hope of restoration of Jack Kennedy.

Transportation Secretary John A. Volpe, a former governor, was reported eyeing the race. But he has told his friends he is happy where he is. Rep. Silvio O. Conte, a popular progressive from the West, has been approached, but has told friends he is happy where he is. Rep. Bradford Morse has been approached because he is known to be bored with House service. He would give the contest with voodoo an air of substance.

But while Kennedy is vulnerable beyond the dreams of his enemies, they still do not dare do battle with the legend he personifies.

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