

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

## Sen. Kennedy's Early Start for The White House



Weeks before his shrewd and blatantly political visit to Gov. George Wallace in Alabama, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy's closest political operatives were quietly spreading the word: Kennedy is off and running for President in 1976.

Just as quietly, that word is reactivating the old Kennedy apparatus, dormant since the tragically aborted 1968 campaign of Robert F. Kennedy. Although Kennedy himself confides he may delay a final decision until early 1975, his trusted lieutenants tell the faithful that no doubt remains. Nor have they been discouraged by Kennedy.

No signal by any other politician could carry such profound implications. As the Kennedy machine regenerates, friends and foes in the Democratic Party are coming to feel Kennedy's nomination can be prevented only by wholly unexpected events. For some Democrats, this promises a renewed Democratic coalition. But others are bathed in gloom, believing the stain of Chappaquiddick would doom Kennedy in the general election.

The hub of the embryonic campaign is Paul Kirk, 36-year-old political aide on Kennedy's Senate staff. For months, Kirk has been collecting names of supporters in key states. Vet-

eran state Kennedy leaders ask mayors and other local worthies to be sure and "call Kirk" when they visit Washington.

Kirk merely leads the vanguard, preceding the old faithful who will mobilize in 1975. Pierre Salinger, now an editor in Paris, tells friends Kennedy definitely will run and he will be back home to help out within 18 months. David Burke, Kennedy's former aide and confidante now in private business, informs associates he can scarcely wait to join the campaign. Brother-in-law Stephen Smith is expected to play a major role, perhaps, campaign manager.

But the clearest clue comes from the senator himself. Whereas he has successfully banned any slight presidential campaign activity the last three years, such inhibitions are now gone. On a recent one-day visit to Portland, Ore., for a non-political speech, Kennedy not only met with the local Democratic committee but tried to assemble a secret meeting of old Oregon Kennedyites (but failed for lack of time).

Moreover, Kennedy is wooing moderate-to-conservative elements of the party who abhorred Sen. George McGovern and distrust the Kennedys. Realizing he can never co-opt Wallace, Kennedy, in his trip south, was signal-

ing to moderates that he is moving toward the center.

In that sense, Kennedy's preparation for Alabama was more important than the visit itself — particularly his telephone call to Gov. Wendell Ford of Kentucky asking what to say in Alabama. A rising new figure in the party's moderate wing, Ford was implacable against McGovern and a stalwart backer of Robert S. Strauss as Democratic national chairman. Nobody ever has called Ford a Kennedyite. But he was flattered that Kennedy asked his advice and even more pleased that he followed it.

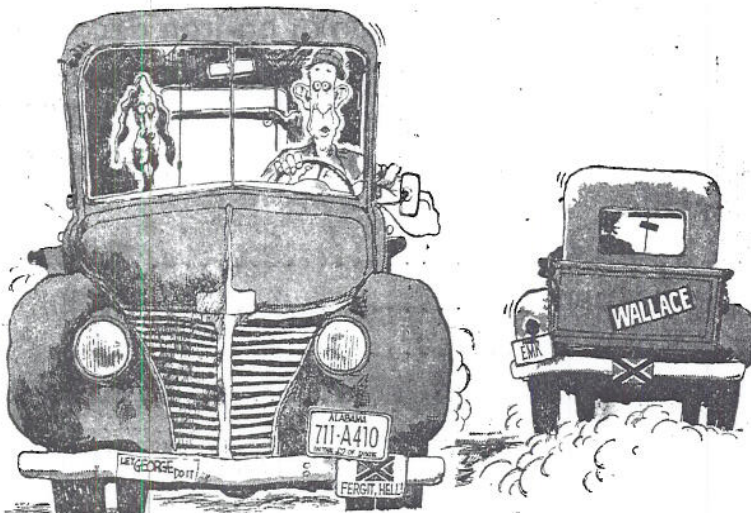
Kennedy's desire for approbation from the left seems to be dimming. He is not displeased that his Alabama trip was panned by liberal James Wechsler of the New York Post and conservative William Buckley of the National Review, feeling that puts him in the middle. One high-level Kennedyite privately told the senator that the New York Times condemnation of the trip was a political plus; Kennedy did not disagree.

He feels that the 1976 nomination is well worth having, partly because the issues that have divided the Democratic Party — war and race — are subsiding. The war issue is obviously gone. Kennedy may be overly optimistic about race, but he is too much of a politician to follow McGovern's suicidal course in cramming busing and welfare down the white workingman's throat.

Unlike many Democratic politicians, Kennedy does not believe the Watergate scandal expands his Chappaquiddick problem. Nor does he share the fear of some Kennedyites that a campaign for President unacceptably threatens a third Kennedy assassination. His one spoken caveat seems apprehension that another presidential campaign will again disrupt the large Kennedy family, especially his orphaned nieces and nephews just settling into a relatively private existence.

Kennedy thinks he is keeping his options open. But as the old machine gets cranked up, as he plies the candidate's trade and builds expectation among his supporters, the shadow of inevitability sets in on Democrats — for better or for ill — of another Kennedy run for the White House.

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