

# The Kennedy Question

Lawrence F. O'Brien has been out of politics for about 18 months now, but politics is never out of the mind of the former Democratic National Chairman. He'll be back in the news in October, when Doubleday publishes his autobiography, "No Final Victories," the panorama of politics as he has seen it from the family saloon in Springfield, Mass., to the White House.

Meantime, O'Brien is back in circulation, nagging at Congress to pass significant campaign reform legislation before the impetus of Watergate has been lost, and prodding his party to assert more boldly its claim to a share of the televised debate on national issues.

O'Brien's life has been as an activist, and writing the story of the last four presidential campaigns and the Kennedy and Johnson administrations did not come easy.

The hardest thing to put on paper, the former Postmaster General said, were his feelings about the possible presidential candidacy of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), but after much wrestling, he decided "I just couldn't go by it."

O'Brien was, of course, a comrade-in-arms in both politics and government of John and Robert Kennedy, and his loyalty to that family is unquenchable. So it came as something of a shock to this reporter—as it will, I expect, to readers of the book—that O'Brien's verdict on the candidacy of the last Kennedy brother is that "I do not think he should run."

The reasons he gives are all personal—and they center on the fear, natural to one who was in both Dallas and Los Angeles, that the passions this family arouses could cause another tragedy.

As it happened, O'Brien was not the only one expressing that thought this week. At breakfast with reporters the same morning, Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (D-Mont.) had said of Kennedy, "I'd like to see him remain in the Senate and let someone other run. I just hope he doesn't run—for his own good."

Mansfield, like O'Brien, has a deep affection for the Kennedys that makes it painful for him to say anything critical about any of them. But when a reporter asked if Chappaquiddick and the question of public trust entered into his judgment on a Kennedy candidacy, the unflinchingly honest Mansfield said, quietly, "That, too, yes."

It is fair to presume that it colors O'Brien's opinion, also. He finished his manuscript, including his comment on Kennedy's candidacy, before taking off

on a European vacation in June. Almost the first thing he read when he returned was Robert Sherrill's article in the July 14 New York Times Magazine, called "Chappaquiddick Plus Five."

The article, he has told friends, "shook me—it had a helluva impact."

O'Brien was not alone in that reaction. Indeed, in the two weeks since the article appeared, it has probably come to rival the White House tapes in conversation in political circles.

It contained no startling revelations of what occurred in the 1969 accident in which Mary Jo Kopechne drowned, when a car driven by Kennedy went off the bridge at Chappaquiddick. Indeed, Sherrill, a Washington freelance writer, does not go as far as the author of a similar article in the August issue of *McCall's* in directly refuting Kennedy's statements about the time and circumstances of the accident.

What he does in his painstaking review of the evidence offered at the inquest and in Kennedy's brief past statements on the incident is to raise a series of pointed questions about Kennedy's and the officials' reluctance or inability to resolve what appear to be major anomalies and contradictions in the record.

Kennedy, who was vacationing in Ireland at the time, declined a request from Sherrill for an interview, and the full force and impact of the article—which has been reprinted in many other papers—caught him by surprise.

Nonetheless, requests by a number of journalists for a substantive response have gone unanswered, even though the senator is described by his associates as being "without any illusions about the fact" that those requests would be pressed with far more urgency if and when he declared his candidacy for President.

The reopening of the Chappaquiddick issue adds to the uncertainty, both in the Democratic Party and within the Kennedy circle, as to whether he will run in 1976.

Because the senator is the leading contender in the polls, potential rivals and others with less selfish motives regularly suggest that he ought to announce his intentions now—or at least very soon.

There is absolutely no reason to think Kennedy will respond to that pressure. On the contrary, his attitude is that he should not be penalized for his prominence and popularity by being forced to declare himself in or out of the 1976 presidential race two years before the nominating convention.

His intention is to wait until his own preferred time of decision—late 1975.

But the urgings of such unquestioned well-wishers as Mansfield and O'Brien—and the mixture of reasons that compel them to speak out—must be weighed against his own wishes.

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