

Lingering Tragedy

By James Reston

EDGARTOWN, Mass.—Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts said that he pulled out of the 1976 Presidential election campaign because of his responsibilities to his family—and this is widely accepted as true—but obviously there were political considerations as well.

For the last few weeks, investigative reporters from Time magazine, The Boston Globe and other publications have been here on Martha's Vineyard island reviewing every detail of the Kennedy Chappaquiddick tragedy.

Here, perhaps more than anywhere else, the death of Mary Jo Kopechne in a car driven over the dike bridge by Senator Kennedy, has remained a live and bitter controversy. On this island—aside from everything else—leaving a body in the water is unforgivable. Some members of the grand jury that examined the case have expressed dissatisfaction with the unanswered and sometimes contradictory testimony in the still secret record.

The foreman of the grand jury, Leslie Leland, a druggist in Vineyard Haven, has been particularly outspoken and critical about the way the case was handled, and he has recently been talking to Mike Wallace of CBS about discussing his doubts on Wallace's "Sixty Minutes" television program.

It is not to be assumed from this that Mr. Leland or any of the other grand jurors are claiming to have any startling new evidence in the case, but merely that some of them feel the inquiry was not as complete as it should have been, and certainly not as meticulous as the political and legal proceedings that led to the resignation of President Nixon.

Accordingly, as Senator Kennedy remained ahead in the preference polls for the 1976 Democratic Presidential nomination, there was considerable pressure on newspapers and the networks to demonstrate that they were going to review Chappaquiddick as carefully as they had investigated Watergate.

This may have had something to do with the timing of the Senator's withdrawal, if not with the actual decision itself. For the longer he remained in the race, the clearer it became that the tragedy of Chappaquiddick was going to be replayed in the headlines and on the television screens, not just next year, but in the next few weeks—and go on through the 1976 campaign.

Maybe this was not a factor in the Senator's decision—who knows what is in the minds of Messrs. Kennedy,

Nixon, Rockefeller these days?—but the bumper sticker "Nobody Drowned at Watergate" was an ominous symbol of the vicious things to come. Mr. Kennedy seems to believe that he could have survived it, won the nomination, lost ten points on Chappaquiddick and picked up twenty on Watergate; but even if he had won, he would have divided his family, his party, and the country. And after a decade of war, scandal, and moral and political disarray, Kennedy's decision to withdraw must have seemed to many an act of liberation for himself, his family, his party, and the nation.

In a way, when Nixon finally walked the plank, he took Kennedy over the side with him. Americans of all political persuasions are tired, sad, and ashamed of the frustrations and moral squalor of the age, and worried about the effects of all this on their children. To choose between Watergate and Chappaquiddick in a savage personal campaign during the 200th anniversary of the Declaration in '76 seemed too much, even to many of the most enthusiastic supporters of President Kennedy and his brother Robert.

Senator Kennedy was by far their most attractive personality. In the last few years, he has become a more eloquent and impressive speaker in a big hall than any of his brothers or any of his competitors in either party. He has done his homework on the coming issues and won the respect of the Senate more than his brother Jack. In short, he had everything but the main thing: He could not unite the country, or his party, or even his family in a political or moral crusade against the Republicans.

There is an element of irony in this that is hard to escape or define. But for the sudden accident here on the Chappaquiddick bridge five years ago, as for the startling shots that killed his two brothers, he would undoubtedly have moved into the White House in the election of 1976. And the irony is that, by that accident, he was both startled into maturity and responsibility, and in the same instant, destroyed as a Presidential candidate for the foreseeable future.

Actually, he is probably a more stable and dependable Presidential character now than ever in his life,—he has learned by failing and suffering—but there is some flaw or accident in the Kennedy clan that defies their ambitions, and in the end, he had to go. The surprising thing is that he recognized it. Old Joe, the Founding Father, probably would not have agreed. The guess here, on some knowledge of the Old Man, is that he would have wanted the last son to tough it out. But the Senator took the other road, and, both personally and politically, he was undoubtedly right.