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Glimmering in the Rusty Junk Pile

OBSERVER

By Russell Baker

This is Senator Edward M. Kennedy. He is not a candidate for President.

Can you believe it?
Of course not.

Senator Edward M. Kennedy is a member of the Democratic party, is he not? Is not every member of the Democratic party—man and woman, in office and out, at home and abroad—a candidate for President? Of course.

What is the definition of a Democrat now that the Democratic party has turned into a hangover? To be a Democrat is to be a candidate for President. Nothing more.

Senator Edward M. Kennedy defies the definition. So he says.

He is the only Democrat on earth who is not a candidate for President. So he says.

If true, this makes him a rarity as great as the giant American panda.

Is it any wonder that people come from miles around to stare at him and that Democrats can think of little else when they contemplate their coming trial against the earnest Ford?

Imagine the Democratic mind at work. What a mind it is! A junk pile of old memories gone to rust. It once had identifiable ideas which gave it personality, but that is a long time ago now. Now it stands for everything because, under the erosion of time, circumstance and spinal fatigue, it has come to stand for nothing. Well, not precisely nothing. The desire to win elections burns as

fiercely as ever. It is what distinguishes the Democratic mind from the Republican.

In the Democratic mind, the purpose of existence is victory. After it wins, it will try to think of something to stand for.

In the Republican mind, the purpose of existence is to prevent the victory of any Republican who stands for something any other Republican doesn't like.

In the Democratic mind, a hideous suspicion has recently begun to spread its tentacles through the rust.

It is the suspicion that it is no longer a party at all. What, if it is nothing more than a junk yard full of 1937 ideas and their 1964 retreats? It is a natural time for this suspicion to root. If the Democratic Presidential candidate may be a white racist, an aging hawk, an old labor buff, an agent of the oil cartel, a new isolationist, a prairie populist, a consumer activist, an urban liberal, a spokesman for Mayor Daley, an unreconstructed cold warrior, or someone whose only strength is telegenic teeth, it is not unreasonable to suspect that the party is no longer a party, but only a memory in search of a new suit.

Such organizations do not easily win victories, even against Republicans.

If you do not have a party, the next best thing is to have a Kennedy. This is not only because Kennedys do win victories, but also because Kennedys can create the illusion of a party even though none exists.

With Senator Edward M. Kennedy running for President, the Democrats

would again be able to persuade themselves that they were part of a party instead of a junk yard.

And so, naturally, Senator Edward M. Kennedy is not a candidate.

Why should he be?

By being the only living Democratic non-candidate in the world, by withholding himself like pork chops from a hungry man, he creates the salivary effect among the faithful which leads to nomination by stampede.

He does not want that, of course. He wishes only to withdraw like Achilles from the battle and, like the aging Adams, toil quietly for the good of the Republic.

And even if he did want the nomination—which he does not—would it not be fatal to become a candidate just now?

Would it not merely tarnish him to be confessed just another of the multitudes in search of a better job?

Would it not expose him to a terrible year of damaging attacks from competing Democrats and destroy his chances of beating the earnest Mr. Ford?

Would it not be wiser to wait for them all to perceive that the multitudinous candidacies around them threaten to expose the fact that there is no party left, and send delegations to his tent?

It most certainly would, if he wanted the nomination—which he does not, of course.

Can any amount of pleading that he is absolutely essential to the survival of the Democratic party persuade him to relent and take up the heavy burden for the nation?
Never. Never.

He is not a candidate.
He wants only to toil quietly now for the good of the Republic. Democrats may come and marvel. It will do them no good.
He is not a candidate.