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The Arrogant Touch Of Bobby Kennedy

WASHINGTON—Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy evidently believes that he and only he can retain for a Democratic Administration the "striving for excellence" which was attracted to government by his late brother, and that President Lyndon B. Johnson therefore should choose him now for Vice President.

In remarkable interviews with friendly reporters Robert Kennedy made plain his view that the political assets of the late John F. Kennedy are held, not in the name of John F. Kennedy's successor or the Democratic Party, but belong to brother Robert.

The terms in which he couched his claim are not flattering to the President.



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The Passing Torch

The Newsweek story, for example, begins with Robert Kennedy speaking:

"I'd like to harness all the energy and effort and imagination that was attracted to government by President Kennedy. I don't want any of that to die. It's important that the striving for excellence continue, that there be an end to mediocrity. The torch really has passed to a new generation. People are still looking for all that idealism. It permeated young people all over the globe. And I became sort of a symbol not just as an individual."

Such words fall harshly upon the ears of Lyndon Johnson, who came to Washington at the peak of New Deal idealism and has spared neither effort nor imagination to hold the Kennedy Administration together and is successfully promoting its policies.

Robert Kennedy also claimed that "most of the major political leaders in the North, all of them really," want him on the ticket. He did not think he would lose many votes in the South, either.

It is normal for a President to assume that he has first claim on the allegiance of party leaders of all regions. It is probably still true that they will yield him his usual prerogative of choosing his own Vice President.

A Drawn Knife

Nevertheless, the Attorney General's sudden move, coming well before the Democratic national convention as it does, puts the President on notice that a very sticky situation might arise at Atlantic City. There can be no question that Robert Kennedy can put together a task force to help him which could make it hard for the President to turn a Kennedy drive aside.

In effect, Kennedy is leaning against Johnson with a knife in his hand.

To many here it seems that the Attorney General has served an ultimatum on the President. How Johnson handles it will be a political classic.

Mutual Concern

Both he and Kennedy are pouring soothing syrup on their past differences, which is in their mutual interest. Johnson does not want to appear to deal in personalities or grudges. Kennedy knows he must as a practical matter subdue his past scorn of Johnson.

It was Johnson's idea to make the first convention day a Kennedy memorial and he hoped with it to drain away personal emotions. He is on notice that Robert Kennedy has other ideas.