

SAVING TELEGRAM

USA

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BY BAQ
FM WASHINGTON

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US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN: SENATOR EDWARD KENNEDY

1. Kennedy's humiliating defeat by Carter in the Iowa caucuses (my tel No 346) has plunged his campaign into severe political and financial difficulties. Current polls show him now trailing Carter in Maine (caucuses on 10 February) and New Hampshire (primary on 26 February), where Kennedy had earlier been confident of easy victories and now cannot afford to lose. In Washington on 28 January he sought to re-launch his bid for the Democratic nomination with what was billed in advance as a major speech in which he strongly criticised Carter's handling of foreign and domestic affairs.

2. Proclaiming that the crises in Iran and Afghanistan should no longer be allowed to stifle debate about the Administration's foreign policy, Kennedy criticised the "exaggerations and hyperbole" of Carter's response to the invasion of Afghanistan. The Administration had failed to respond to the Soviet coup in Afghanistan in 1978 and had ignored subsequent signs of further trouble to come; and by backing down over the Soviet combat brigade in Cuba, Carter had led the Russians to conclude that they could invade Afghanistan with impunity.

3. Responding to Carter's State of the Union address, Kennedy said that US policy towards the Persian Gulf area should be based on co-operation with regional countries, NATO and Japan; third world and Muslim opposition to Soviet aggression should be encouraged; the US naval presence in the Indian Ocean should be strengthened; the countries of the area should be strengthened against subversion by the PLO and "other Soviet surrogates"; in return, Middle East oil producers should guarantee the West secure oil supplies at reasonable prices; but nothing should be done to "barter Israel's security for oil or Muslim favours".

4. The Soviet Union must be given "reasons for hope as well as fear" in its relations with the United States. Arms control efforts should not be abandoned. US defence should be strengthened, but by enhancing conventional forces capabilities and readiness, not by excessive spending on "irrelevant" strategic systems. Describing registration for the draft as an empty symbol, Kennedy proclaimed his opposition both to registration and to re-introducing the draft: "We should not be moving towards the brink of sending a new generation of the young to die for the foreign policy failures of the old".

5. The crisis over the hostages in Tehran should never have happened - the Administration should have heeded the warnings it received of Iranian retaliation for the entry of the Shah into the US on "dubious" medical advice. Imposition of economic sanctions against Iran now would only make matters worse. The Administration should support the immediate establishment of a UN commission to investigate Iranian grievances which should start work only when all the hostages had been returned.

6. On domestic issues, Kennedy attacked Carter's policies on energy and inflation as unfair, ineffective and a betrayal of Democratic Party ideals. He reiterated his opposition to de-control of crude oil prices and called for a fair petrol rationing plan without delay. The Administration's wage and price guidelines had failed and the President should impose an immediate six-month "freeze on inflation" followed by mandatory control of wages, prices, dividends and interest rates. In an emotive peroration, Kennedy reiterated his commitment to a catalogue of liberal causes, reaffirmed his candidacy and concluded that he had "only just begun to fight".

7. Later that day Kennedy went over some of the same ground in a speech in New York to the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organisations. In a clear bid for the support of the American Jewish community he accused Carter of holding "pro-Palestine positions" and attempting to coerce Israel and implied that, if re-elected, Carter would be likely to betray Israel's interests. For his part, Kennedy declared that "I know that in advocating Israel's cause I am inevitably advancing the cause of America". Also that evening a special TV statement by Kennedy was screened in New England in which he sought to explain and justify his behaviour at Chappaquiddick, but without apparently adding anything to his previous accounts of the affair.

8. So far, press attention has concentrated on the Washington speech. This was enthusiastically received by a sympathetic audience (members of the Kennedy family and campaign workers were much in evidence) and it may well put new heart into committed Kennedy supporters. But initial press reactions suggest that more will be needed to turn Kennedy's fortunes around. As one student member of the audience commented, "Teddy was blazing away with both barrels, but he was firing blanks". Observers have noted that, viewed against his own

past record, Kennedy's criticisms of the President's fiscal laxity and inadequate responses to Soviet actions are not very credible; and that beneath the hostile rhetoric, much of what he had to say about policy towards the Persian Gulf and even East/West relations differed little in substance from Administration positions. Spokesmen for the Carter/Mondale campaign have dismissed the speech as opportunistic and irresponsible and are suggesting that Kennedy's opposition to the grain embargo and registration for the draft smacks of appeasement of the Soviet Union. However, Kennedy's frankly demagogic speech and the hard hitting criticism of the President's foreign and domestic record in a Republican Party television broadcast on Sunday night suggest that, following Carter's victory in Iowa, all his challengers are taking the gloves off.

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