News and Comment

Kennedy's Politics: How To Make the Republicans Look Nasty; the GOP Searching for a Response

The Senate passed the higher education bill this afternoon easily defeating, 50–37, an effort to substitute an expansion of existing student loan programs for the Administration-backed plan to grant about 50,000, 4-year scholarships annually. The stage was thus set for a fight in the House if, as expected, the House conferees write all or part of the Senate scholarship program into the final bill. In any case, a bill providing $300 million a year in aid for colleges and universities is virtually certain to reach the President's desk within a few weeks. It will extend to academic facilities — libraries, classrooms, and laboratories—the aid that has been available for several years for dormitory construction.

A point worth noting is that the higher education bill very nearly marks an end of the first phase of the Kennedy Administration. Until now everything of major importance in domestic legislation has been a holdover from the last Eisenhower years: legislation that was held up until Kennedy took office not because the House was too conservative to pass it, but because Eisenhower was not interested in it.

A possible exception was the minimum-wage bill, where a key factor was the retirement of Graham Barden of South Carolina, the conservative chairman of the House Labor Committee.

For the rest, the two other major bills (housing and depressed areas) had been passed before Kennedy took office and had been vetoed by Eisenhower. Now we have the higher education bill, which in the House version, at least, is not particularly controversial. With this bill, the agenda is pretty well cleared of old business. Now what is going to happen? When does Kennedy move onto the New Frontier? How can he move when the House does not want to move?

The answer, of course, is that very little movement can be expected, or is expected. The most interesting things to watch in the current session will not, except for the tariff fight, be the progress of legislation, but the tactics of the Administration and of the now sharply divided factions of the Republican Party as they prepare for the November elections. With again the major exception of the new trade policy, the substance of what is done in Congress this year is not likely to be very memorable, but the political maneuvering to be climaxed in the November election may make a major turning point in American politics.

The first thing to note about Kennedy's tactics is their aggressiveness. During his initial year, Kennedy played an essentially nonpolitical game. Partly this was forced on him by the series of international crises which required him to assume almost exclusively the position of national leader and consequently minimize his position as leader of the Democratic Party. Partly it presumably was a political decision, aimed at solidifying his public support after his hairline victory in the election. Now the international crises have quieted down, and, by all accounts, he has become an enormously popular president. Kennedy can now afford to be a politician again, and he is being one with great gusto.

The change is particularly marked in Kennedy's meetings with the press. There was always a fair amount of humor at these meetings, but through most of last year it was the rueful humor of a man determined not to let things get him down. The President frequently looked both tired and worried. Now the conferences are often dominated by talk of domestic politics, and the humor is high-spirited. Kennedy is dealing with an area where the issue is not life and death but the outcome of the congressional elections; where he can afford to be daring and take chances; where his opponents are not Khrushchev and Mao but Goldwater and Halleck and Dirksen.

Last year when the Rules Committee killed his education program by an 8 to 7 vote, he merely told his press conference how disappointed he was. He did not mention that if only one of the five Republicans on the Rules Committee had voted in favor of sending the bills to the floor, the program would not have been bottled up. This year when the Rules Committee attempted to kill his urban affairs proposal by a 9 to 6 vote, he promptly announced that he was "somewhat astonished" that every Republican on the committee had voted against the poor city people. If he was astonished even somewhat, it was primarily at his good fortune. It appears that the Administration deliberately brought the proposal up in the Rules Committee when it did in the hope of trapping the Republicans into defeating it.

Since the proposal involves no new program, only a regrouping of already established government agencies, Kennedy was able to send the proposal back to Congress as a reorganization plan, which would take effect in 60 days unless vetoed by either House of Congress. He promptly did so after taking the highly unusual step of announcing who would get the new cabinet seat before the position had come into existence. His *supporters* in both houses then took the further unusual step of introducing resolutions of disapproval of the proposal. The effect of the first move would be to dramatize the existence of a conservative coalition in the House, with Republicans opposed to the Urban Affairs Department joining Southerners opposed to both the department itself and to the idea of having a Negro in the cabinet.

The effect of the resolutions of disapproval introduced so quickly by Kennedy's own supporters would be to assure a prompt vote on the plan in the hope, presumably, that the Republicans would fall into the trap before they realized how unpopular their position might be with the 70 percent of the population that lives in urban areas. The strategy is to bring the proposal up in the Senate first if the Senate seems reasonably certain to support the President; if there is doubt about how the Senate will vote, the plan will then be to bring it up in the House first, for if

the plan were defeated in the Senate the House would then escape having to go on record. In any case the point is to arrange things to make the House, more particularly the Republicans in the House, the villains in this little drama.

So far the House Republicans have been cooperating perfectly, and quite obviously either Kennedy or the Republican leadership is dead wrong in his appraisal of the mood of the country. Unless the Republicans in the House have a sudden change of heart they will vote overwhelmingly against the proposal and present Kennedy with what he obviously regards as an extremely useful campaign issue.

What has been happening on the urban affairs proposal is typical of the way the President is handling political matters these days. His basic assumptions seem to be: (i) that he can hope for only the most limited kind of success for his program in the House this year; (ii) that if he suffers the normal off-year election losses his hands will continue to be tied at least until 1964; and (iii) that, therefore, the most useful thing to do during this session would be to concentrate on painting the Republicans, and particularly the Republicans in the House, in the worst possible light. This might well make the current session even *less* productive than it otherwise might be, but if it results in a victory in November it will make his first term as a whole a good deal *more* productive than it otherwise might have been.

Congressional Tactics

The tentative plans to force roll-call votes in the House on a federal scholarship plan and on medical care for the aged are other steps in this direction. The form of the conference report on the education bill will be a particularly useful gauge of how far the Democrats intend to push these tactics, for they will have the choice of adopting a modest student aid program with the hope of winning enough Republican support to get the report through the House, or of adopting a large-scale proposal with no chance of passing, but with the advantage that it would produce a heavy Republican vote against it.

Meanwhile Kennedy is pursuing the "nasty Republicans" tactics in other areas. Consider his highly unusual request for the Senate to investigate the stockpiling program. Needless to say, the executive branch does not normally request the legislative branch to investigate it, the principal exception being when the executive branch has reason to want a great deal of publicity for whatever is about to be exposed, a condition that implies that questionable activities by the previous administration are about to be brought to light. In this case what the executive branch wants to be publicized, it is generally believed, is that the stockpiling program was badly mismanaged, that it operated in substantial measure as a hidden subsidy program for certain businesses selling materials to the stockpile, and that these subsidies were not only not authorized by Congress, but concealed from Congress on grounds of military secrecy. All of this, of course, would be quite useful campaign material for a Democratic administration that would like to offset Republican charges that it is too loose with the taxpayer's money.

Republican Response

In reaction to Kennedy's tactics the Republicans have become badly split—on the far right Senator Goldwater is arguing for down-the-line opposition to Kennedy; on the left the Republican liberals, who are basically in sympathy with most of what Kennedy is trying to do, argue for constructive opposition, which would consist largely of building a record of Republican amendments and substitutes for Administration programs, and so enable the Republicans to claim that it was their influence that was turning Kennedy's program from one of reckless experimenting to one of responsible progress. They would like, for example, to take the lead from Kennedy on aid to education, and push for a compromise program of aid to school construction, leaving the question of teachers' salaries to another year. They fear, though, that Kennedy will be allowed to suggest this compromise and that the House Republicans will then play into his hands by voting it down.

In the middle are the Republican congressional leadership and the bulk of Republican Congressmen. They suspect that the liberals are right about where the votes lie, but they cannot bring themselves to accept the liberals' strategy. They are by no means as conservative as Goldwater, but they cannot bring themselves to repudiate him. So they talk in generalities about big government and fiscal responsibility and tinker with the idea of launching a campaign against security risks and communist sympathizers in the Administration, while Kennedy maneuvers them into a record of obstructionism.

The Republicans, both liberal and conservative, try to comfort themselves with the notion that the split in their ranks is, after all, not so wide as the split in the Democratic ranks. They remind themselves that Governor Rockefeller and Senator Goldwater are not quite so far apart as Senator Humphrey and Senator Thurmond, a point which is at once perfectly true and perfectly meaningless, for no one doubts which way the Democrats are going, and no one knows which way the Republicans are going. Both sides, at heart, know this, but the conservatives, fairly satisfied with the way the party has been moving, are content to smooth over the differences, while the liberals, intensely dissatisfied, are uncertain how far they should go in openly attacking the leadership for fear that a poor showing in November might be blamed on them, for splitting the party, rather than on the conservatives, for failing to build a record of constructive opposition.

Last week the Republicans held a great series of fund-raising dinners, linked coast-to-coast by closed-circuit television. Onto the screen came some clips from Dirksen and Halleck's weekly news conference, through which the congressional Republicans speak to the people. The excerpts from the "Ev and Charlie show" produced from this highly partisan Republican audience the same reaction it gets from the press corps in Washington: it was laughed at.

So there are the Republicans, divided, led in Congress by men who, however capable in backroom political dealings, strike the public as peculiarly inept, and with their most prominent national spokesman, Goldwater, a man who is opposed to almost everything that has happened in the last 30 years. It is not too surprising that Kennedy seems so full of good cheer as he discusses national politics. He is taking a risk in departing from his role, so successful in his first year, of carrying on Eisenhower's tradition of essentially nonpolitical leadership. He is openly playing the game of politics. But for the moment, the contrast between the President and the Republican spokesmen reminds one of a bullfighter, the Republican taunted into both weakening itself and showing off the style of its opponent as it charges at its tormentor. Sometimes the bullfighter is gored, but that is not the way things usually end. —H.M.