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INSIDE REPORT: Bobby and the Latins

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WASHINGTON.

An official of the Venezuelan government contacted the State Department the other day to suggest that Sen. Robert F. Kennedy visit the infamous Central University in Caracas.

What makes this so remarkable is the fact that the Venezuelan called to encourage—not discourage—the visit. Central is a hot-bed for over-aged Communist "students" and a staging-ground for Red terrorist bands. Venezuelan authorities usually don't want a touring United States Senator within shouting distance of the University. But Kennedy, they feel, could cope with the Leftist students as he did in Japan and might actually get through to those not committed to communism.

Whether or not Kennedy actually visits Central University, this story illustrates that his five-nation (Peru, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Venezuela) 20-day tour of South America beginning Wednesday is no ordinary Senatorial junket. As the heir to the legacy of John F. Kennedy, he enjoys an absolutely unique popularity throughout Latin America—even among the student Left.

Accordingly, nobody in the State Department writes off the Kennedy trip as routine. But depending on whom you ask, there is a difference of opinion how it will affect U. S. hemispheric policy.

To understand why one Senatorial junket looms so large, a little recent history is essential. While President

John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress revived U. S. esteem in Latin America, it unwittingly encouraged Latins to believe Uncle Sam would bail them out of their troubles. The switch to a harder line demanding self-help by the Latins under President Johnson (which was in the wind even before the assassination) has cooled U. S.-Latin relations the last two years.

Under-Secretary of State Thomas Mann, principal author of this new no-nonsense policy, is not the reactionary his enemies paint him. But he is incapable of the romantic posturing so dearly loved by the Latin. And then, cooling U. S.-Latin relations even further were the Dominican intervention and the Selden resolution in the House endorsing future interventions.

Into this atmosphere steps Bobby Kennedy, a symbol to the Latins of those golden days of the early Alliance for Progress. He inherits the full measure of Latin American sentiment for John F. Kennedy, who is even more popular among the Latins in death than in life. Consequently, it is predictable that he will draw unprecedented street crowds—larger than any world figure.

To some of the hard-line State Department officials, this is a matter for apprehension. They fear that the romantically-inclined Latin mind will view Kennedy as a sort of government-in-exile who will give them what Tom Mann won't—thereby undercutting U. S. policy.

Giving rise to these fears is the presence in Kennedy's traveling party of the brilliant, abrasive Richard Goodwin, ex-speechwriter for President Johnson who recently left the government. A chief Latin-American policy maker in the early Kennedy months, Goodwin is anathema to the pro-Mann Foreign Service officers. It does not ease their concerns that he is ostensibly traveling with Kennedy as a friend rather than a staffer.

But many other State Department officials see the Kennedy trip as a diplomatic asset of enormous potential coming at a low point in U. S.-Latin American friendship. Because the Latin does not live by bread alone, a skillful Kennedy performance could do wonders in making Uncle Sam more *simpatico*—particularly among Latin youth.

Moreover, in private conversation with friends, Kennedy has stressed he will not voice reservations about Mr. Johnson's Dominican policy. And although he feels privately that U. S. aid should be higher than it now is, it's unthinkable that he'll use his trip to brow-beat President Johnson about it. Although he's not going to travel about the continent singing Tom Mann's praises, he's not going to blast him either.

But none of Kennedy's intimates and probably not even the Senator himself know exactly what he will do and say on this trip. The long, uncharted journey has the potential for real accomplishments—or blunders. It is, in fact, another major test in the political career of Bobby Kennedy, who will celebrate his 40th birthday with the Latins next week.