

107
209 3, 1970

Kennedy Plan Told for '65 Viet Pullout

Sen. Mansfield Backs Account by O'Donnell

BY JOHN H. AVERILL
Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON—John F. Kennedy decided in 1963 that he would pull all U.S. forces out of Vietnam after his expected reelection in 1964, according to Kenneth P. O'Donnell, one of the late President's most trusted associates, and confirmed by Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield.

Mansfield said in an interview that he was convinced Mr. Kennedy would have carried out the withdrawal if he had lived. The Montana Democrat emphasized:

"That's what he indicated to me that he would do."

White House Meeting Disclosed

Mansfield's comments came in reaction to O'Donnell's disclosure of a White House meeting in the spring of 1963 when, O'Donnell said, President Kennedy told Mansfield of his plans "for a complete military withdrawal from Vietnam."

"The quotation is correct," Mansfield said.

The senator was asked why he had never spoken of the incident before in view of speculation over what President Kennedy would have done in Vietnam had he lived. Mansfield gave this reply:

"I never keep notes on executive meetings with a President. I consider it a trust and I would not break a confidence. It was up to him (Mr. Kennedy) to break it if he wished but he is dead and I would not consider that it was up to me to do so, and I wouldn't now except that it is in print."

O'Donnell's account of President Kennedy's hitherto untold turn-

about on Vietnam appears in this week's issue of Life magazine. The article was excerpted from an incomplete book manuscript.

O'Donnell, now a candidate for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination in Massachusetts, also said in the Life article:

—That the "real" reason Mr. Kennedy chose Lyndon B. Johnson as his vice presidential running mate in 1960 was because he wanted Mr. Johnson out of the Senate so that Mansfield, "somebody I can trust and depend on," could become Senate leader.

Please Turn to Page 6, Col. 1

Continued from First Page

—That President Johnson, whom O'Donnell served for a year after the Kennedy assassination, wanted Mansfield rather than Hubert H. Humphrey as his running mate in 1964. O'Donnell suggests that it was the concerted effort of the Kennedy forces that finally persuaded Mr. Johnson to take Humphrey on his ticket.

—That President Kennedy, much to the President's surprise, developed a warm admiration for Gen. Douglas MacArthur. O'Donnell said the old general, during a private three-hour lunch at the White House in 1961, implored the President to avoid a military buildup in Vietnam or any part of the Asian mainland because he felt the "domino theory was ridiculous in a nuclear age."

However, it was Mansfield who was most responsible for persuading Mr. Kennedy that U.S. involvement in Vietnam was a mistake, according to O'Donnell.

Mansfield corroborated O'Donnell's report that President Kennedy had told him in the spring of 1963 that he planned a complete withdrawal from Vietnam in 1965.

Controversy Expected

Mansfield said he had no idea whether President Johnson, who started the massive U.S. buildup in Vietnam in 1965, had known of Mr. Kennedy's reported pullout plans.

The report of President Kennedy's contemplated Vietnam withdrawal — backed up by Mansfield's confirmation of it—seems certain to provoke controversy. The timing alone is ironic: With the political and military situation in South Vietnam having deteriorated greatly during 1963 and 1964, Mr. Johnson, in early 1965, after weighing whether to withdraw American forces, ordered a massive buildup of

484

U.S. ground forces and the bombing of North Vietnam.

Mansfield first communicated his misgivings about Vietnam to Mr. Kennedy in a still-secret report after a global trip he

made at the President's request late in 1962. Mansfield personally delivered the report to the President as they were cruising in a presidential yacht on the choppy waters off Palm Beach, Fla., on Dec. 28 of that year. According to O'Donnell, the report angered President Kennedy.

"I got angry with Mike for disagreeing with our policy so completely and I got angry with myself because I found myself agreeing with him," O'Donnell quoted the President as saying.

'Kind of Shocked'

"Yes, he was angry," Mansfield said in an interview. "I got the feeling he was kind of shocked. He read the report and I could see a color developing in addition to his tan. I watched his facial expression and it was obvious he was in some turmoil. He said, 'Well, Mike, it's not very encouraging.' I said, 'No, sir, but that's the way I see it.' He said, 'Well, let's eat and we'll continue this later.' I stayed overnight at his home and we talked a lot more."

Mansfield declined to reveal what he told the President but O'Donnell, in his article, said the Senate majority leader emphatically advised against sending any more men to Vietnam and also advocated "a withdrawal of U.S. forces from that country's civil war, a suggestion that startled the President."

Yet in the next spring, O'Donnell said the President had him call Mans-

field into his office after a breakfast meeting of congressional leaders.

"I sat in on part of their discussion," O'Donnell wrote. "The President told Mansfield that he had been having serious second thoughts about Mansfield's argument and that he now agreed with the senator's thinking on the need for a complete military withdrawal from Vietnam."

O'Donnell said the President felt and Mansfield agreed that to announce a total withdrawal before the 1964 elections could produce "a wild conservative outcry against returning him to the presidency for a second term."

After Mansfield left,

O'Donnell said the President told him:

"In 1965, I'll be damned everywhere as a Communist appeaser. But I don't care. If I tried to pull out completely now, we would have another Joe McCarthy Red scare on our hands but I can do it after I'm reelected. So we had better make damned sure that I am reelected."

O'Donnell wrote that "the real story has never come out" of why Mr. Kennedy picked Lyndon Johnson as his 1960 running mate.

O'Donnell said he was furious at the decision and that President Kennedy, to escape the crowd milling around his Biltmore hotel suite in Los Angeles,

ushered him into a bathroom to explain. Before Mr. Kennedy could speak, O'Donnell said he told him:

"This is the worst mistake you ever made. You came out here to this convention like a knight on a white charger, the clean-cut young Ivy League college guy who's promising to get rid of the old political ways. And now, in your first move, you go against all the people who supported you. Are we going to spend the whole campaign apologizing for Lyndon Johnson and trying to explain why he voted against everything you ever stood for?"

President Kennedy, O'Donnell continued, "be-

came pale, livid with anger, so upset and hurt that it took him a while before he was able to collect himself."

O'Donnell then proceeds, with Mr. Kennedy's purported words, to offer an account that materially conflicts with all other published explanations of why Mr. Johnson was of-

Please Turn to Pg. 7 Col. 1

Continued from 6th Page

ferred the vice presidential nomination.

"I'm 43 years old and I'm the healthiest candidate for President in the United States," President Kennedy was quoted as telling O'Donnell. "You've traveled with me enough to know that I'm not going to die in office. So the Vice Presidency doesn't mean anything. I'm thinking of something else, the leadership in the Senate. If we win, it will be by a small margin and I won't be able to live with Lyndon Johnson as the leader of a small Senate majority. Did it occur to you that if Lyndon becomes the Vice President, I'll have Mike Mansfield as the Senate leader, somebody I can trust and depend on?"

Not Mentioned

That thought, O'Donnell said, had never occurred to him or to anyone else around Mr. Kennedy. "Bobby had wanted Henry Jackson for Vice President. I had been with Stuart Symington. I had never heard anyone even mention Johnson's name. But Kennedy saw it differently and the way he explained it sounded like an elementary history lecture."

O'Donnell said Mr. Kennedy reminded him that Congress was still in session and that he had to go back and fight for the issues in his platform—housing, urban renewal, Medicare and relief for depressed areas. Mr. Kennedy said he couldn't afford to alienate Mr. Johnson and his fellow-Texan, the late House Speaker Sam Rayburn.

"If Johnson and Rayburn leave here mad at me," Kennedy was quoted as saying, "they'll ruin me in Congress next month. Then I'll be the laughing stock of the country. Nixon will say I haven't any power in my own party and I'll lose the election before Labor Day."

O'Donnell said he and

Robert F. Kennedy were assigned the task of persuading labor leaders, who did not like Mr. Johnson's Senate voting record, not to fight Mr. Johnson's nomination for Vice President.

"Bobby's own feeling about Johnson at this point was neutral," O'Don-

nell said. "It has been widely reported, and accepted, that Bobby Kennedy tried to block Johnson from the ticket. This is simply not accurate."

It was not until after Mr. Johnson became Vice President and began missing the patronage and power he had as majority leader that bad feelings developed between him and Bob Kennedy, who was then attorney general, O'Donnell said.

"He felt that Bobby had taken over his rightful position as the No. 2 man in the government, which was true enough," O'Donnell said.

President Kennedy was "uncomfortably aware of Johnson's unhappiness," O'Donnell said, and leaned over backwards to keep him involved in important affairs.

Only one month after President Kennedy's death, O'Donnell said, Mr. Johnson told him he did not want Robert Kennedy as his running mate in 1964.

"I don't want history to say I was elected to this office because I had Bobby Kennedy on the ticket with me," President Johnson was quoted as telling O'Donnell.

"The simple fact was that Johnson didn't want anybody to be his Vice President," O'Donnell said. "He felt threatened by anyone who had a constituency. That, in Johnson's eyes, would detract from his own victory."

O'Donnell, who was made executive director of Mr. Johnson's election campaign, said the President remarked on several occasions that he wanted a Catholic as his running

mate.

Among others, O'Donnell said Mr. Johnson mentioned Sargent Shriver, a member of the Kennedy family by marriage, and Sen. Eugene J. McCarthy (D-Minn.). O'Donnell said he asked how President Johnson could "pick the No. 2 senator from Minnesota over the No. 1 senator from Minnesota, Hubert Humphrey, who is better qualified and more strongly backed, only because the second man is a Catholic? Catholics would resent that."

O'Donnell said by then it was clear to Mr. Johnson that the Kennedy camp wanted Humphrey to be

the Vice President and "it was equally clear to us that Johnson was not eager to have Humphrey."

A few weeks before the convention, O'Donnell related, "Johnson made one last stab at dropping Humphrey and picking somebody else whom even Humphrey's supporters would have hesitated to oppose—Sen. Mike Mansfield."

O'Donnell said he and others in the White House did not suspect Mr. Johnson was considering Mansfield until William S. White, the columnist who is one of Mr. Johnson's closest friends, wrote that President Johnson badly needed a Catholic on the ticket and that Mansfield was the perfect candidate.

The suspicions were confirmed, O'Donnell said, when Mr. Johnson telephoned him the Friday before the convention and said:

"I've been looking at some new polls. I've decided on Mike Mansfield." O'Donnell said he replied that he did not think Mansfield would take the nomination but Mr. Johnson insisted he would.

Settled on Humphrey

O'Donnell said he heard no more about the Mansfield proposal at the Atlantic City convention, where Mr. Johnson finally settled

on Humphrey as his running mate. Only last year, O'Donnell said, did he finally learn what had happened between Mansfield and Mr. Johnson.

"I saw White's column, too," Mansfield told O'Donnell, "and like everybody else in Washington, I knew what it meant. I waited a while and then I decided to beat him to the punch. I went to the White House and said to him, 'Mr. President, I saw Mr. White's article about me and I want you to know that under no circumstances will I ever accept the nomination as Vice President.' And that ended that."