

# Kenneth P. O'Donnell Dies at 53; Key Adviser to President Kennedy

Special to The New York Times

BOSTON, Sept. 9—Kenneth P. O'Donnell, former aide and close adviser to President John F. Kennedy, died at 3:15 A.M. today in the intensive care unit of Boston's Beth Israel Hospital. He was 53 years old.

The death was reported by Dr. Peter A. Banks, a hospital gastroenterologist, who issued the following statement:

"Respecting the wishes of the family, no medical information will be given out by Beth Israel or by any other physician involved in Mr. O'Donnell's case. He was admitted on Aug. 11 in serious condition and had been seriously ill and in intensive care since Friday, Sept. 2. A member of the family was at his side at the time of his death."

## In Coterie of Intimates

Philip Kenneth O'Donnell, a thin, taciturn man with a wry sense of humor and a self-effacing manner, was a member of the so-called Irish Mafia, the small coterie



Visual Departures/Allen Green

Mr. O'Donnell in a recent photo

of Kennedy intimates that included Lawrence F. O'Brien, Theodore C. Sorensen, Pierre Salinger and David F. Powers.

Officially, Mr. O'Donnell was appointments secretary to the President from 1961 until Mr. Kennedy's assassination in 1963. He planned the President's White House schedule, arranged his trips and decided to a large extent who would be allowed to see him.

Informally, however, Mr. O'Donnell was

known as perhaps the President's closest friend and confidant next to his brother, Robert F. Kennedy. He spent much of his time discussing politics and acting as a sounding board for Mr. Kennedy's ideas.

After the 1963 assassination, Mr. O'Donnell was one of the Kennedy aides who stayed on in the Johnson White House, lending continuity to the new Administration. He resigned in January 1965, and returned to Boston as a business and public relations consultant.

## Problems More Than State Issues

Mr. O'Donnell projected none of the Kennedy charisma and addressed himself to national and international problems rather than exclusively to issues of state. He was not well known in Massachusetts and had been out of touch with local politics for some years; in his 1966 and 1970 races for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination, he made poor showings.

In 1970, during his campaign, an article he wrote for Life magazine caused something of a stir. He wrote that President Kennedy had decided in 1963 to order a withdrawal of Americans from Vietnam after the 1964 election and that Mr. Kennedy had chosen Mr. Johnson for the Vice Presidency in 1960. The President did so because he feared, the O'Donnell article said, that he would be unable "to live with Lyndon Johnson as the leader of a small Senate majority."

The allegations were debated hotly by editorialists and political columnists, but never proved definitively.

In 1968, between his gubernatorial races, Mr. O'Donnell joined Robert Kennedy's Presidential campaign and was present when Mr. Kennedy was fatally shot in Los Angeles. Later that year, he worked in Senator Hubert H. Humphrey's unsuccessful campaign for the Presidency.

## Unswerving in Loyalty

Mr. O'Donnell and David F. Powers, another former White House aide to President Kennedy, were the co-authors of a ghost-written and frankly adulatory book of reminiscences of Mr. Kennedy called "Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye," published by Little, Brown in 1973.

A slender man with dark, close-cropped hair, a thin mouth and high cheekbones, Mr. O'Donnell had little of the heartiness of the classic Boston politician. He was not known as a speaker or campaigner, but he had a reputation for making quick, tough political decisions, and he was an unswerving Kennedy loyalist.

A native of Worcester, Mass., and the son of a Holy Cross College football



The New York Times

Kenneth P. O'Donnell and President Kennedy at the White House in 1961

coach, Kenneth O'Donnell grew up with an Irish affection for sports and politics. In World War II, he flew 30 missions as a B-17 bombardier over Europe and was shot down once, but escaped.

After the war, he and Robert Kennedy were football teammates at Harvard, and Mr. O'Donnell, a back, was the team captain in his senior year. He graduated in 1949, a year after Mr. Kennedy.

#### The First Kennedy Senate Race

Mr. O'Donnell jumped into politics in 1951 when Robert Kennedy asked him to work on John F. Kennedy's first race for the United States Senate. After the victory, Mr. O'Donnell became Mr. Kennedy's state representative in Massachusetts.

In 1957, he served as administrative assistant to Robert Kennedy, the counsel to the Senate Rackets Committee. A year later, after Senator Kennedy's re-election, he joined the Senator's Washington staff. In 1960, he and Robert Kennedy were among the principal organizers of the Kennedy Presidential campaign.

The closeness of Mr. Kennedy's friends and trusted political operators, as opposed to the administrators and academicians who formed the Cabinet, put Mr. O'Donnell inside the circle of bright young

associates who worked with the President rather than for him.

As the appointments secretary, it was Mr. O'Donnell who planned and sent out the advance men for Mr. Kennedy's trip to Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963. Mr. O'Donnell was riding in a car right behind the President when the assassin's bullets struck.

"I remember the overpass," he said in testimony for the Warren Commission, which investigated the assassination. "And then the shots occurred—which, at that time, I did not know were shots. I realized then that they had been shots. But as fast as that realization occurred, I saw the third shot hit. It was such a perfect shot—I remembered I blessed myself."

Mr. O'Donnell later stood with Jacqueline Kennedy at Mr. Johnson's side as he took the oath of office as President aboard Air Force One, and sat with Mr. Kennedy's coffin on the flight back to Washington.

Mr. O'Donnell leaves his wife, Asta Hanna Helga Steinfatt O'Donnell, and his children from a previous marriage, Kenneth P. O'Donnell Jr., Kevin, Mark and Helen, all of Boston, and Kathleen Schlichenmaier of Texas. Mr. O'Donnell's first wife, Helen, died earlier this year.