

# JFK Opposed Combat Units in

WASHINGTON, Aug. 8 (AP). — Kenneth O'Donnell, a special assistant to both Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, says he is certain Mr. Kennedy never would have sent U. S. combat forces to fight a war in South Vietnam, as Mr. Johnson did, even if his refusal had meant a Communist takeover of that country.

"I am quite clear in my mind he would not have sent American troops on to the mainland of Asia," O'Donnell said in an interview, "even in the situation that we would have lost Vietnam."

## MILITARY WITHDRAWAL

O'Donnell also insisted, despite conflicting information, that Mr. Kennedy definitely had decided in 1963 on a "complete military withdrawal" from South Vietnam in 1965 — well after his 1964 campaign for reelection.

This account goes beyond published versions by other Kennedy Administration intimates.

Under questioning, O'Donnell conceded Mr. Kennedy might have reached a decision to pull U. S. soldiers out of South Vietnam in the fall instead of the spring of 1963, but otherwise generally stood firm on his version.

## FALL DECISION

In a Life Magazine article published this week, O'Donnell put the timing of Mr. Kennedy's asserted reversal of Vietnam policy in the spring. When the record showed Mr. Kennedy was taking a strong line in support of South Vietnam help in public statements as late as September 1963, O'Donnell said the decision might have come in the fall of 1963 — just weeks before



KENNETH O'DONNELL

... JFK Vietnam Stand

President Kennedy was assassinated.

The United States then had 16,000 military men in South Vietnam. The troops served with South Vietnamese combat forces as "advisers" 47 had been killed in battle. The United States was pressuring the South Vietnamese government of President Ngo Dinh Diem for extensive domestic and military reforms.

## NOT MANUFACTURED

Diem, who was ousted shortly thereafter in a military coup, and assassinated, resisted change. Mr. Kennedy, fearing for the South Vietnamese war effort, foresaw the United States would have to escalate if South Vietnam was not to be lost, O'Donnell said, and this changed his thinking.

On a related subject, O'Don-

nell said that when Mr. Johnson ordered air strikes against North Vietnamese bases in August 1964 in retaliation for torpedo attacks on U. S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin, Mr. Johnson did not think the incident was in any way "manufactured." Senate critics have questioned sharply whether the torpedo attacks actually occurred as reported or whether the incident was manufactured.

"I don't know whether it was," O'Donnell said, "But I know that Lyndon Johnson didn't think so."

O'Donnell said he never told Mr. Johnson that Mr. Kennedy planned to pull out of Vietnam "because President Johnson never indicated to me at any time I worked with him that he had any intention other than following President Kennedy's course."

## STATEMENT EXPLAINED

One of the questions asked O'Donnell was:

"In an interview with Walter Cronkite Sept. 2, 1963, President Kennedy said of South Vietnam and its government: '... In the final analysis it is the people and the government itself who have to win or lose this struggle. All we can do is help ... but I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake.' How does that statement square with your recollections?"

O'Donnell replied:

"I reconcile it on the basis that at a given moment he was faced with a price—the price of going on in Vietnam. Forty-seven Americans had

been killed in Vietnam up to that time. It was not a startling figure. But as it began to

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## Vietnam, Aide Says

appear that our commitment was not sufficient to maintain South Vietnamese independence, he came face to face with the prospect of having to put in a lot more."