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O'Donnell put cloud over JFK's credibility

Washington — What this country needs is a President who can make the people believe that principle and the nation's welfare goes above politics.

The people definitely did not believe that about Lyndon B. Johnson, a man they considered an "operator" who figured all the political angles even when he brushed his hair.

Looked toward 1965

Now Kenneth O'Donnell has told us that John F. Kennedy put his yearning for reelection ahead of the issue of war and peace and let the U.S. drift deeper into conflict in Indochina although he had come to believe that tragedy might result.

According to O'Donnell, who was Mr. Kennedy's chief of staff, the late President called in Sen. Mike Mansfield to say he agreed with

Mansfield's view that a complete withdrawal from Vietnam was necessary.

"But I can't do it until 1965 — after I'm elected," O'Donnell quotes Kennedy as saying.

Perhaps O'Donnell wrote this thinking that he would compliment his martyred chief by portraying him as wise enough to see impending tragedy long before others did. Perhaps O'Donnell's intent is to say to the nation: "The man who shot down JFK got the nation into this debacle, because if Kennedy had lived he would have gotten us out in 1965."

'No better' than LBJ

The whole thing comes off, however, making Kennedy look not one whit purer than the Lyndon Johnson who said during the 1964 campaign against Sen. Barry Goldwater:

"Some others are eager to

enlarge the conflict. They call upon us to supply American boys to do the job that Asian boys should do."

LBJ went on, of course, to supply half a million American boys.

O'Donnell makes Mr. Kennedy look not one iota more of a statesman than the Richard M. Nixon who had a plan to end the war during the 1968 campaign, but who widened it into all Indochina and is certain to keep thousands of GIs involved until the 1972 elections approach and some grand gesture seems advisable.

Assertion unsupported

O'Donnell's "revelations" seem all the more odious when one observes that the full record just does not support any blunt assertion that John Kennedy would have gotten out in 1965. When you recall that he lifted the number of "U.S. military advisers" in Vietnam from 600-plus to 18,000, and when you remember the tough line he took during the Cuban missiles crisis, you have to believe that his reaction to the Gulf of Tonkin incidents and the Communist attack on Pleiku in early 1965 would have been just as tough as President Johnson's.

There are other reasons for wondering whether Mr. Kennedy was just massaging Mansfield's ego and telling the truth, or whether he really foresaw calamity in Asia but wouldn't take the political risk of telling his coun-

trymen.

We have been led to believe that John Kennedy confided in his brother, Robert, more than in anyone else. If he told Bobby of his doubts, why would the President let Attorney General Kennedy go to Saigon in February of 1962 and say, "We are going to win in Vietnam. We are going to stay here until we win"?

There is simply no answer that adds to the credibility of President Kennedy or to public confidence in the Office of the Presidency.