

OBITUARIES

JFK Aide David Francis Powers Dies at 85

By BART BARNES
Washington Post Staff Writer

David Francis Powers, 85, who helped a young Navy veteran named John F. Kennedy win his first election to Congress and then served as his personal aide and confidant through his presidency, died March 27 at a medical facility in Arlington, Mass. The cause of death was not reported.

Mr. Powers was an unemployed veteran of the Army Air Forces and the famed "Flying Tigers" of World War II when the 27-year-old Kennedy climbed three dimly lighted flights of stairs in an apartment house near Bunker Hill in the Charlestown section of Boston and knocked on his door one day in 1946.

"My name is Jack Kennedy. I'm a candidate for Congress, and I'd like you to work for me," Kennedy said. Mr. Powers, who was known for his connections, access and savvy in the rough-and-tumble of Boston's Irish ethnic politics, took a day to consider the offer. But he finally agreed, and for the next 17 years he was at Kennedy's side for every major decision, crisis, political campaign and presidential trip.

He was part of the original coterie of Kennedy aides who with Lawrence F. O'Brien and Kenneth O'Donnell came to be known as the Irish Mafia. At the White House, his title was "special assistant," which as applied to Mr. Powers meant receptionist, gatekeeper, greeter, court jester, sounding board and repository of trivia.

When Joe Cronin, the president of the American League, came to the White House to give the president a season baseball pass, Kennedy asked Mr. Powers, "Dave, what was Cronin's lifetime batting average?"

Without missing a beat, Mr. Powers answered: ".302. But he is more famous for being the fifth Hall of Famer struck out in a row by Carl Hubbell in the 1934 All Star Game. The others were Ruth, Gehrig, Simmons and Foxx."

To announce a visit by the deputy premier of the Soviet Union, Anastas Mikoyan, Mr. Powers would open the door to the Oval Office with these words: "The real Mikoyan is here."

The Shah of Iran was introduced as "my type of Shah." British Ambassador David Ormsby Gore, a special favorite of the Kennedys, was announced with this message:

"Our type of ambassador is in the Cabinet Room."

Mr. Powers was in the presidential motorcade in Dallas when Kennedy was shot on Nov. 22, 1963. When the president's limousine reached Parkland Hospital, Mr. Powers helped remove Kennedy from the car and place him on a stretcher.

That afternoon, he flew back to Washington sitting with Kennedy's widow, Jacqueline Kennedy, next to the casket carrying the president's body on Air Force One.

"On that long, sad ride home, Jackie sat next to the casket. She was so brave on the trip back to Washington. At one point she turned to me and said, 'Oh, Dave, you've been with him all these years. What will you do now?'" Mr. Powers wrote in an article for Life magazine. "I choked up—I couldn't answer her."

After the assassination, Mr. Powers remained on the White House staff, greeting visitors and juggling presidential appointments. But the magic of the Kennedy years was missing in Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency, and in 1965 Mr. Powers resigned.

He went on to help in the

campaigns of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy (D-N.Y.), the slain president's brother. He also began work assembling records and memorabilia for the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum in Boston. He served as curator from its opening in 1979 until he retired in 1994.

A native Bostonian and the son of Irish immigrants, Mr. Powers sold newspapers on the Charlestown waterfront as a boy, and he once described himself as "just a newsboy who met a president." On Sundays, he was an altar boy, assisting at Mass at his neighborhood church. He knew just about everyone in the blue-collar Charlestown, and he was recruited to add a sense of working-class realism to what the Harvard-educated Kennedy feared might be perceived as his own lace-curtain credentials as a political candidate.

There soon developed a personal bond between the two men that would last until Kennedy's death. Mr. Powers developed an acute sensitivity to Kennedy's likes and dislikes. They swam together in the White House pool, watched television together, ate meals together and stayed up late at the end of a long day just to talk, sometimes of politics and elec-

"The president hates to be alone, except when he is catching up on his reading," Mr. Powers said in 1962. "So in the evening we watch television together or talk. But when the president starts to read, you don't say anything until he speaks to you."

Hanging above Mr. Powers's desk at the JFK Library and Museum was a picture of the Kennedy children and a thank you note from Jacqueline Kennedy for Mr. Powers's assistance during the weeks after the president's assassination.

For several months after Kennedy's death, Mr. Powers left his White House office daily at noon to have lunch with Jacqueline Kennedy and John F. Kennedy Jr. at their house in Georgetown. There he usually read stories to the young John Kennedy.

"Mrs. Kennedy thinks the boy eats a bigger lunch when I'm there. I'm always glad to do it," Mr. Powers said.

"Dave Powers was a loyal and devoted friend whom my mother and father adored," said Caroline Kennedy, president of the Kennedy Library Foundation. "I will always be grateful for his personal kindness and for his tireless efforts on behalf of the Kennedy Library."

Survivors include his wife, Jo, and three children.