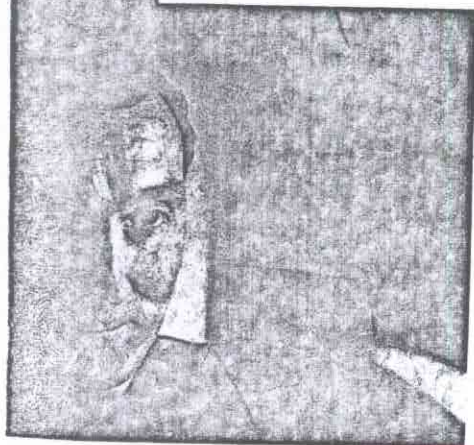


- Why JFK really picked LBJ as his running mate
- How the LBJ-Bobby feud began
- How LBJ tried to ditch Humphrey in 1964

LBJ and the Kennedys

by KENNETH O'DONNELL

Kenneth O'Donnell worked closely with the Kennedys and with Johnson. He was an intimate friend and confidant of both John and Robert Kennedy. He served President Kennedy as White House Chief of Staff, stayed on as Chief under Lyndon Johnson and operated L.B.J.'s '64 campaign. This excerpt is from a book soon to be published by Little, Brown and Company.



There have been many stories circulated since the 1960 Democratic Convention about why John Kennedy gave the Vice Presidency to Lyndon Johnson. Surprisingly, the real story has never come out. On that hectic Thursday morning, when Bobby Kennedy and I were trying to recover from the shock of his offer to Johnson, John Kennedy told me his reasons.

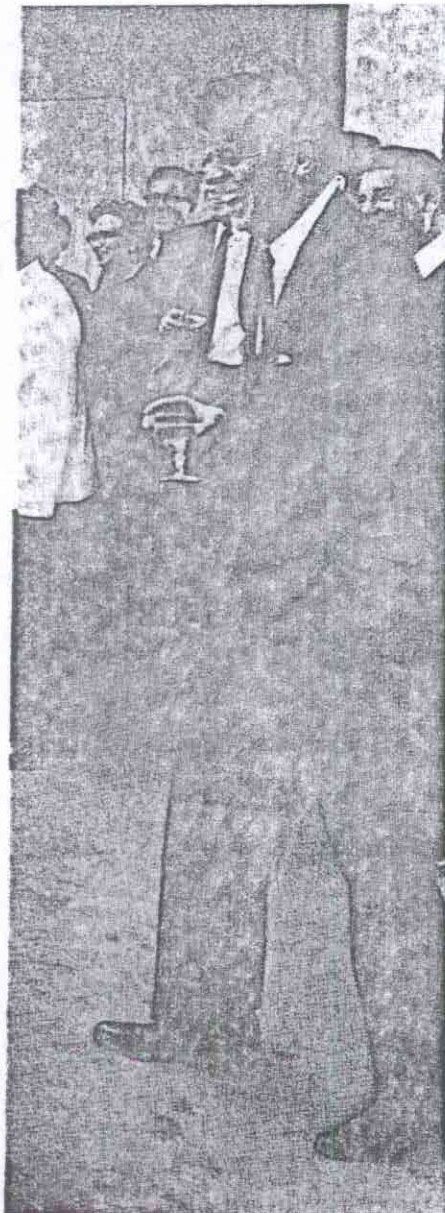
The Kennedy suite in the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles was filled with a throng of Northern Democratic leaders, the old pros like David Lawrence and Bill Green of Pennsylvania, Mike DiSalle of Ohio, John Bailey, Abe Ribicoff, Dick Daley, all of them milling around Kennedy and congratulating him for offering the Vice Presidency to Johnson. Jack was saying that he had just talked with Lyndon, and Lyndon wanted a little time to think it over but it looked as though he would take it. "Johnson has the strength where you need it most," David Lawrence was saying to Kennedy. I could have belted Lawrence. I was vehemently against the Johnson selection because it represented precisely the kind of cynical, old-style politics we were trying to get away from. I also knew our liberal friends would be appalled by it.

When Jack Kennedy saw the expression on my face, he beckoned to Bobby Kennedy and me to follow him into the bedroom. The bedroom was crowded with people, too, and realizing that I was about to explode, Jack said to Bobby, "I'd better talk to Kenny alone in the bathroom." We went into the bathroom and closed the door behind us.

"This is the worst mistake you ever made," I said to him. "You came out here to this convention like a knight on a white charger, the clean-cut young Ivy

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An aide's album
pictures catch JFK
in a party mood

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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?"

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

"Wait a minute," he said. "I've offered it to him, but he hasn't accepted it yet and maybe he won't. If he does, let's get one thing clear."

I never forgot what he said next.

"I'm 43 years old, and I'm the healthiest candidate for President in the United States. 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?"

That thought never *had* occurred to me or, incredibly enough, to anyone else around John Kennedy. Bobby had wanted Henry Jackson for Vice President; I had been for 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.

He reminded me that Congress was still in session and that he had to go back to the Senate and put on a fight for the issues in his platform—housing, urban renewal, Medicare, relief for depressed areas. By not permanently adjourning Congress, Johnson and Sam Rayburn figured they could pressure various members of Congress in the state delegations into supporting Johnson for President at Los Angeles if the House and the Senate remained in session for the rest of the summer.

"If Johnson and Rayburn leave here mad at me," Kennedy said, "they'll ruin me in Congress next month. Then I'll be the laughingstock of the country. Nixon will say I haven't any power in my own party, and I'll lose the election before Labor Day. So I've got to make peace now with Johnson and Rayburn, and offering Lyndon the Vice Presidency, whether he accepts it or not, is one way of keeping him friendly until Congress adjourns. All of this is more important to me than Southern votes, which I won't get anyway with the Catholic thing working against me. I doubt if Lyndon will even be able to carry Texas, as Dave Lawrence and all those other pols out in the other room are claiming we will."

One of my jobs was keeping the Labor leaders happy and all of them were against Johnson. Kennedy opened the bathroom door and called Bobby

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They had a set routine for handling Johnson's complaints

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in to join us. "Now the two of you can go and see Walter Reuther and George Meany and get to work on them," he said.

While we were gone, bedlam broke out in the suite. Michigan Governor "Soupy" Williams, fighting mad, told a group of Southern governors he would lead a floor fight against Johnson. Jack Kennedy, sitting with one leg hanging over the arm of a chair, watched the whole angry scene without saying a word. He was far and away the loudest of the Kennedys. Bobby used to say, "We can't fire that fellow because he's got five kids." Jack would say, "I'm sorry about his five kids, but he can't handle the job the way I want it handled, so he's out—and let's not have any more talk about it. Put him someplace else, but get him out of there."

After Johnson had relayed the word to the Kennedy suite that he was ready to take the nomination, Bobby and I returned and told Jack that the labor leaders were furious and threatening to put up a candidate of their own. Jack told his brother to go right downstairs and inform Lyndon there might be a floor fight, and Johnson should decide whether he wanted to face it.

Bobby's own feelings about Johnson at this point was neutral. It has been widely reported, and accepted, that Bobby Kennedy tried to block Johnson from the ticket. This is simply not accurate. At first, in fact, he fully endorsed the judgment that picking Johnson was a shrewd political move.

When he went with me to check the labor leaders, and learned for the first time how enraged they were, he began to worry. In any case, the hard feelings that later developed between Bobby and Johnson did not begin here. Bobby was merely acting as an envoy.

Bobby went to Johnson's suite and talked with Sam Rayburn and John Connally, explaining to them that there was a threat of a floor fight against Johnson and suggesting that Lyndon might want to withdraw if he didn't want to get involved in such a battle. "Do you think he might be interested in being chairman of the National Committee?" Bobby asked. Rayburn, incredulous at the idea, dismissed it with a four-letter word.

Kennedy got on the phone and reassured Johnson that if he was willing to face a floor fight the Vice Presidency was his. Johnson agreed, and that was how he got on the ticket.

President Kennedy often used to nuddle me later over a glass in the evening when I was trying to disagree with one of his decisions. "Don't forget that day I had to straighten you out in the bathroom in Los Angeles. If I listened to you, Lyndon would still be running the Senate instead of safely tucked away."

As Vice President, Johnson felt sidetracked and ignored, and sorely missed the patronage and the power he had enjoyed when he was the majority leader in the Senate. He blamed his fallen prestige on Bobby Kennedy, and it was on this point that bad feelings between the two of them began to build. He felt that Bobby had taken over his rightful position as the number two man in the government, which was true enough. The President sometimes pointed out with great amusement to Johnson that many of Bobby's friends in the Administration, who were always trying to push him into running the State De-

partment as well as the Justice Department, looked upon his younger brother as the real number one man in the government.

President Kennedy was always uncomfortably aware of Johnson's unhappiness in the Vice Presidency and leaned over backwards to keep him involved in important government affairs. He issued a firm order that everybody in the White House was to be courteous and considerate with Johnson and held me personally responsible that the order not be ignored. Only two men in the government, Johnson and Bobby Kennedy, were given the special privilege of entering the President's office at any time unseen through the back door from the garden, without following the normal route into the front door and through my office. Neither of them ever abused this privilege, and they seldom came to see the President without calling me first. Johnson often called and asked to see the President with various personal complaints, frequently about Bobby. The President and I worked out a set routine for handling Johnson's laments. The President would first hear him out alone, and then call me into his office and denounce me in front of Johnson for whatever the Vice President was beefing about. I would humbly take the blame and promise to correct the situation, and the Vice President would go away somewhat happier.

I remember one day when Johnson's complaint about Bobby ("That kid brother of yours") involved Sarah T. Hughes, the same long-time Texas friend who later as a federal judge in Dallas swore Johnson in as President in the hot and sticky cell in of Air Force One after the assassination.

"Damn it, Kenny, you've gone and done it again," the President said when he called me into his office. "Lyndon, you go ahead and tell him yourself what's happened this time."

Johnson began a long recital of woe, prefacing it, as he usually did, with a recollection of John

Lyndon Johnson listens to a Kennedy speech at a breakfast during the 1960 Democratic Convention. As J.F.K.'s Vice President, Johnson felt sidetracked and ignored.

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Nance Garner describing the Vice Presidency as a thankless office with as much prestige as a pitcher of warm spit. He explained that he had asked Bobby Kennedy a few months earlier for a federal judgeship in Texas for Sarah Hughes, and when the Justice Department told him that Mrs. Hughes, then 65, was too old for the position, he had explained sorrowfully to Mrs. Hughes that she couldn't have the job, and had offered the appointment to another Texas lawyer. Now, Johnson said, he had just returned from Berlin to learn to his deep embarrassment that Mrs. Hughes had been given the judgeship after all, and, checking around, he'd found out how "ole Lyndon had been done in behind his back as usual."

Bobby Kennedy, it turned out, had encountered another prominent Texan, Sam Rayburn, the Speaker of the House, and asked the Speaker when two key Justice Department bills would be getting out of the Judiciary Committee. Rayburn ventured the opinion that the bills might never get out if his friend Sarah Hughes did not get a judgeship in Texas. Bobby explained that she had been suggested by Johnson but she was too old for the appointment. Rayburn, who was almost 80, glared at the 35-year-old Kennedy. "Son, everybody looks old to you. Do you want those bills passed, or don't you?" The next day Sarah Hughes was nominated for the federal bench.

"Mr. President," Johnson cried now, "you realize where this leaves me? Sarah Hughes now thinks I'm nothing. The lawyer I offered the job to after your brother turned Sarah down, he thinks I'm the biggest liar and fool in the history of the State of Texas. All on account of that brother of yours!" The President was unable to keep from laughing, and the Vice President, seeing the humor of the situation, laughed, too.

Johnson suspected that Bobby Kennedy was engineering a move to dump him as the Vice Presidential candidate in 1964. Johnson was sure that Kennedy had been behind the exposure of Bobby Baker, a Johnson protégé. It was a ridiculous assumption because a scandal of any kind reflecting on the Democrats was the last thing the Kennedys wanted. Furthermore, President Kennedy never had any thought of dumping Johnson. I was sitting with the President and Senator George Smathers on the way to Florida the Saturday in November of 1963 before he went to Dallas. Smathers asked him if he was planning to get rid of Johnson because of the Baker case.

The President glauced at Smathers and said, "George, you must be the dumbest man in the world. If I drop Lyndon, it will look as if we have a serious scandal on our hands in the Bobby Baker case, which we haven't, and that will reflect on me. It will look as though I made a mistake in picking Lyndon in 1960, and can you imagine the mess of trying to select somebody to replace him? Lyndon stays on the ticket next year."

President Kennedy first began to have doubts about our military effort in Vietnam in 1961 when both General Douglas MacArthur and General

MacArthur's views on Vietnam stunned Kennedy

Charles de Gaulle warned him that the Asian mainland was no place to be fighting a non-nuclear land war. There was no end to Asiatic manpower, MacArthur told the President, and even if we poured a million American infantry soldiers into that continent, we would still find ourselves outnumbered on every side.

The president's first meeting with MacArthur, a courtesy call on the general in New York after the Bay of Pigs disaster, turned out to be an agreeable surprise to Kennedy. Like a lot of Navy veterans of the Pacific war, Kennedy had assumed that MacArthur was a stuffy and pompous egocentric. Instead, the President told us later, MacArthur was one of the most fascinating conversationalists he had ever met, politically shrewd and intellectually sharp. Later the President invited the general to the White House for lunch. They talked for almost three hours, ruining the whole appointments schedule for that day. I could not drag them apart. The President later gave us a complete rerun of MacArthur's remarks, expressing a warm admiration for this supposedly reactionary old soldier that astonished all of us. MacArthur was extremely critical of the military advice that the President had been getting from the Pentagon, blaming the military leaders of the previous 10 years, who, he said, had advanced the wrong younger officers. "You were lucky to have that mistake happen in Cuba, where the strategic cost was not too great," he said about the Bay of Pigs. MacArthur implored the President to avoid a U.S. military build-up in Vietnam, or any other part of the Asian mainland, because he felt that the domino theory was ridiculous in a nuclear age. MacArthur went on to point out that there were domestic problems—the urban crisis, the ghettos, the economy—that should have far more priority than Vietnam. Kennedy came out of the meeting somewhat stunned. That a man like MacArthur should give him such unmilitary advice impressed him enormously.

Late in 1962, when the U.S. was accelerating shipments of reinforcements to South Vietnam, Senator Mike Mansfield visited the President at Palm Beach, where the Kennedy family had gathered for the Christmas holidays. The Senate majority leader, whose opinions the President deeply respected, had just returned from a trip to Southeast Asia, which he had made at the President's request. Mansfield emphatically advised, first, a curb on sending more military reinforcements to South Vietnam and, then, a withdrawal of U.S. forces from that country's civil war, a suggestion that startled the President. A continued steady increase of American military advisers in South Vietnam, the senator argued, would lead to sending still more forces to beef up those that were there, and soon the Americans would be dominating the combat in a civil war that was not our war. Taking over the military leadership and the



General MacArthur at a three-hour meeting at the

White House. He was fighting in the Vietnam would hurt American not help the South Vietnam own feet, either. The President by the senator's unexpected to it. He said to me later the discussion, "I got agreeing with our pol got angry with myself agreeing with him."

Publicly over the President continued to stress the South Vietnamese though he was embarrassed brother Nhu. But we nobody complained that part of it and the Defense he for getting that our political rather than in 1963, Mike Mansfield involvement in Vietnam congressional leadership fast, much to the President's embarrassment. Leaving I seized my arm and said come into my office." I discussed. The President been having serious Senator Mansfield's argument and the senator's thinking on military withdrawal from

"But I can't do it unaided," Kennedy told Mansfield. President Kennedy with him, that if he annual of American military before the 1964 election conservative outcry against Presidency for a second. After Mansfield left told me that he had his reelection he wouldularity and make a coalition forces from Vietnam

MacArthur's views on Vietnam stunned Kennedy

identity as a pitch-broader had asked for a feedback sheet, and that Mrs. Kennedy had given that sheet to the press, John F. Kennedy had to learn the feedback sheet had been checked.

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General MacArthur and Kennedy conclude their three-hour meeting at the White House in 1961.

fighting in the Vietnam war, Mansfield warned, would hurt American prestige in Asia and would not help the South Vietnamese to stand on their own feet, either. The President was too disturbed by the senator's unexpected argument to reply to it. He said to me later when we talked about the discussion, "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."

Publicly over the next few months the President continued to stress the need for bolstering the South Vietnamese government of Diem, even though he was embarrassed by Diem's terrorist brother Nhu. But we noticed that privately Kennedy complained that everybody in the State Department and the Defense Department seemed to be getting that our role in Vietnam should be political rather than military. In the spring of 1963, Mike Mansfield again criticized our military involvement in Vietnam, this time in front of the congressional leadership at a White House breakfast, much to the President's annoyance and embarrassment. Leaving the breakfast the President seized my arm and said, "Get Mike and have him come into my office." I sat in on part of their discussion. 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.

But I can't do it until 1965—after I'm reelected," Kennedy told Mansfield.

President Kennedy felt, and Mansfield agreed with him, that if he announced a total withdrawal of American military personnel from Vietnam before the 1964 election, there would be a wild conservative outcry against returning him to the Presidency for a second term.

After Mansfield left the office, the President told me that he had made up his mind that after his reelection he would take the risk of unpopularity and make a complete withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam. "In 1965, I'll be

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The need to get rid of Bobby haunted Johnson

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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."

That fall, before he went to Dallas, the President was so disgusted with Diem and Nhu that he decided to put pressure on them to liberalize their police state government. Along with sharply reducing economic aid to Diem, the President issued an order, against the objections of many around him, to reduce American military advisers in South Vietnam immediately by bringing home 1,000 U.S. soldiers before the end of 1963. This was a considerable troop withdrawal at that time because the American forces in South Vietnam then numbered only about 16,000.

On Oct. 2, when Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and General Maxwell Taylor came to a meeting of the National Security Council to report on a trip to Saigon, President Kennedy asked McNamara to announce to the press after the

meeting the immediate withdrawal of 1,000 soldiers and to say that we would probably withdraw all American forces from Vietnam by the end of 1965. As McNamara was leaving the meeting to talk to the White House reporters, the President called to him, "And tell them that means all of the helicopter pilots, too."

The anti-Diem coup of Nov. 1, 1963 came as no surprise to President Kennedy, but the brutal killings of Diem and Nhu, committed by the rebels in spur-of-the-moment anger, shocked and depressed him. The President was not averse to the idea of changing the government for a practical and useful purpose. One day when he was talking with Dave Powers and me about pulling out of Vietnam, we asked him how he could manage a military withdrawal without losing American prestige in Southeast Asia.

"Easy," he said. "Put a government in there that will take care of itself."

The President's order to reduce the American military personnel in Vietnam by 1,000 men before the end of 1963 was still in effect on the day that he went to Texas.

After the President's death, I had several talks with Bobby Kennedy about going back to work at the White House. I felt that if Kennedy's key people left it would cause party problems dur-

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Strategy in Vietnam

ing the coming election year, and Bobby agreed. The first time I talked alone with Lyndon Johnson after the assassination was in December 1963 aboard Air Force One, on the way to Bill Green's funeral in Philadelphia. He told me then that he did not want Bobby Kennedy as his Vice Presidential candidate 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," he said. "But I'll take him if I need him." In other words, if the Republicans nominated a more liberal candidate than Barry Goldwater, Johnson realized that he might be forced to take Kennedy as his Vice President.

The simple fact was that Johnson didn't want anybody to be his Vice President. He felt threatened by anyone who had a constituency. That, in Johnson's eyes, would detract from his own victory. Through the spring of 1964 I saw firsthand the strange, agonized gyrations that President Johnson went through as he planned for the Democratic Convention.

There were two reasons why I felt we had the leverage with Johnson to influence crucially the selection of the Vice President. First, Johnson badly needed me and other Kennedy staffers as his links to Democratic leaders around the country. His contacts with them were unbelievably slight; he had always directed his energy and attention

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