

O'DONNELL, Kenneth P. (24 March 1924-9 September 1977), politician, was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, the son of Cleo O'Donnell, Holy Cross College football coach, and Alice M. Guerin. Christened Philip Kenneth years later he changed his name to P. Kenneth and then to Kenneth P. Following high school graduation he enlisted in the Army Air Force. Commissioned a lieutenant he had completed thirty bombing missions over Germany when shot down over Belgium and taken prisoner. Although severely wounded he nevertheless soon escaped to England where he required extensive hospitalization. A genuine war hero he earned the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with four clusters.

After the war he entered Harvard (Class of 1949) where he met and became close friends of Robert F. Kennedy, brother of the future President. He then held a variety of jobs in industry, mostly as a public relations consultant while attending Boston College Law School. He worked for John and Robert Kennedy from 1952 until 1963, then for fourteen months with President Lyndon Baines Johnson before returning to public relations work in Boston. In 1966 and 1970 he ran unsuccessfully for Massachusetts governor, the last time losing badly. He lacked finances, an inability to present a public image, and was relatively unknown. He turned to private affairs and ran his public relations and management consulting service.

Like so many young men of that generation intense idealism coupled with a sense of duty suffused his character and principled his public actions. They found their fullest expression as an astute political aide, advisor, and friend of President John F. Kennedy with a loyalty so intense and genuine that he subsumed his own aspirations and political identity in his ideas and goals.

His political career began with JFK's 1946 run for Congress when at the behest of Robert Kennedy he actively worked in a minor way on the campaign. In 1951 he joined the JFK organization to participate in the first campaign for Senator, where his maturing knowledge and intense efforts were fundamental to victory over Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. Afterwards he served as the senator's unpaid state representative. He slowly grew in stature and gradually earned the full confidence of JFK, a tribute not only to his own qualities but also to the astuteness of the rising senator as he pulled able and bright young men onto his staff. He moved to Washington in 1957 to work as Robert's assistant as counsel of the Senate Rackets Committee and the next year joined JFK's Washington staff as part of the close knit inner circle of friends and advisors.

Upon election to the presidency JFK appointed O'Donnell Special Assistant to the President where he served as the White House appointments secretary, in charge of the staff, travel and advance man, major agent in political patronage, a principal political coordinator, and transmitter of information to the president. He also acted as a political advisor, confidant, and sounding board for JFK's ideas, ranking next to Robert in the President's trust, a position that had come slowly, only crystallizing in 1961. In these capacities his friend and political associate Lawrence O'Brien remarked, he "played a major role in national politics and government." (Globe) O'Donnell, like so many of JFK's closest staff was a liberal in politics and progressive in social issues, suggesting the measure of the President reflected by his selection of closest aides. His devotion to Kennedy was complete, he had no political identity of his own.

O'Donnell carefully planned JFK's November tour of Texas, an ordinary schedule and with the usual careful security arrangements, concurred in by all agencies concerned. On November 23 at JFK's order O'Donnell had the non-bullet proof bubble top removed from the limousine. He and David Powers, another

Controlled
White House
of JFK

close friend and assistant of JFK, sat in the rear of the Secret Service's open top follow up limousine just behind the President in the motorcade. They witnessed the shooting with great clarity. Before the Warren Commission O'Donnell affirmed the official conclusion that all shots came from the rear where the official lone assassin allegedly fired, but he later confided to his Massachusetts friend Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill a radically different story. Both men from one of the best perches in the plaza had actually seen a shot fired from the front or grassy knoll hit JFK. He alleged respect for the feelings of JFK's widow kept them silent, (a motive neither understandable nor acceptable. O'Donnell with other JFK aides in the face of local law notwithstanding removed President Kennedy's body to Washington for an autopsy, an act that unwittingly denied it a professional examination, and put the corpse into the hands of unqualified military prosecutors.

should say autopsy

full and proper

The Kennedy aide who remained longest with LBJ O'Donnell served as presidential assistant for LBJ. But for LBJ he exclusively functioned as a political advisor, the source of his strength. He was of great service to the new president who lacked an urban, northern, and far western political grounding. His oral history of those years are remarkable for candor and trenchant insights on political affairs. In 1968 he helped convince Robert Kennedy to run for the presidency. After the June assassination of RFK he worked to place a peace plank in the Democrat Party platform but was defeated in the convention. In 1970 with David Powers and ghost writer Joe McCarthy he published "*Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye*": *Memories of John Fitzgerald Kennedy*. They included a point he had made public earlier that President Kennedy had planned on withdrawing the troops from Vietnam after he won the 1964 election. Although vigorously criticized by conservative columnists and politicians at the time, history has accorded his statement solid support (e. g., Newman).

role, length of time!

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Who?

The assassination of President Kennedy had profoundly stricken him; the loss forever governed his life.

On September 19, 1950, he married Helen Sullivan. They had five children. She died in January 1977. In April he married Hanna Helga Steinfatt, a German national working in the United States.

Bibliography. Many of O'Donnell's papers were destroyed, others have not been made public. The John F. Kennedy Library contains some miscellaneous personal papers. An important oral history is found in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. O'Donnell's controversial article taken from his forthcoming book appeared in "LBJ and the Kennedys: Excerpt," *Life*, Aug. 7, 1970, pp. 44-48. The only biography is the well researched 1982 Harvard bachelor's honor thesis of Daniel Charles Kenary, "The Political Education of Kenneth P. O'Donnell."

Discussions of O'Donnell can be found throughout Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (1965) and *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (1978). Patrick Anderson, *The President's Men* (1968) devotes a chapter to him. See too, Herbert S. Parmet, *Jack: The Struggles of John F. Kennedy* (1980) and James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (1991). Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr., and William Novak, *Man of the House: The Life & Political Memoirs of Speaker Tip O'Neill* (1987), pp. 217-272, recounts O'Donnell's comment on the frontal shot to JFK.

Obituaries include, *Washington Post*, 10 September 1977; the *New York Times*, 10 September 1977; and the *Boston Globe*, 10 September 1977 with Mike Barnicle's appreciation in the same issue "Kenny O'Donnell 'casualty of history'".

The discussion of Vietnam and President Kennedy can be approached by John M. Newman, *JFK and Vietnam* (1992). The removal of the body and the autopsy of JFK is discussed in Harold Weisberg's *Post Mortem* (1975) and *Never Again* (1995).