

**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 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 in his ideas and goals.

His political career began with JFK's 1960 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 men, major agent in political patronage, and a principal political coordinator to the president. He controlled who saw JFK. 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." (Boston 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 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 had ~~f~~ired, 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, an emotional rather than a logical decision. 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 full and proper examination, and put the corpse into the hands of unqualified military prosecutors.

The Kennedy aide who remained longest with LBJ for fourteen months O'Donnell served as presidential assistant for LBJ. But for LBJ O'Donnell utilized his knowledge of urban politics where he exclusively functioned as a political advisor. 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 O'Donnell had made public earlier in a *Life* magazine article 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).

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 in Boston contains some miscellaneous personal papers. An important oral history is found in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. O'Donnell's 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. 271-272, 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).

**RUBY, Jack Leon.** (? , 1911-January 3, 1967), assassin, was born Jacob Rubenstein in Chicago, Illinois, the son of Joseph Rubenstein, a carpenter, and Fannie Turek Rutkowski, Yiddish speaking Polish-Jewish immigrants. The fifth of eight living children he grew to manhood in the midst of poverty in a violent slum, his father an irregularly employed alcoholic and his mother suffering from intermittent mental disease. Amid constant family tumult he finally completed the eighth grade. He was quick tempered, impulsive, a street brawler, and emotional.

A nobody who aspired to be somebody he possessed neither the means nor the natural resources to achieve his goal. In this respect he was not much different from non-Jews born into unhappy families whose parents could not make a living. So Ruby began making a living anyway he could; he became a creature of society and his tainted environment as he sought to rid himself of their hobbling restraints. He did not have the ability to become a real gangster, but was a hanger-on at pool halls, gymnasiums, and local establishments. He looked to others to do what they wanted him to. The overriding desire of his life was to have others like him. He failed at every project or business enterprise he undertook throughout his life.

In the 1930s he engaged in street peddling, selling of racing sheets, and running sales promotions. From 1937 until 1940 he worked as a union organizer for Local 20467 of the Scrap Iron and Junk Handlers Union. He then sold novelties and punch boards for gambling until drafted into the Air Force in 1943. Upon discharge in 1946 he sold novelties until 1947 when he moved to Dallas, Texas. The same year he changed his name.

With rocky finances he ultimately became owner of the Carousel Club, a sleazy night club featuring striptease acts. Chaos marked his finances and taxes. He was noted for a volatile temper and sudden violent acts. He was a police buff,

making friends of officers and in other ways ingratiating himself to those in positions of visible power.

He had earned several minor arrests, traffic tickets, and license violations, and had charges made against him. Some charges were serious. The Dallas District Attorney Henry Wade files carried a letter from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Ruby had a dog named Sheba whom he sometimes referred to as his wife, e. g., a rabbi related he once remarked "'this is my wife'--and pointed to one of the dogs" (Kaplan and Waltz, p. 275). The SPCA's concern was Ruby was treating her that way. It had reason to believe it.

Another complaint charged that at a fair Ruby publicly fondled the breasts of girls entering puberty, remarking to friends, "I'm just breaking them in to come to work for me."

Under pressure the FBI grudgingly admitted contact with Ruby to enlist him as a criminal informant, but that he did not make the grade. It refused to release its records. The processes of contact, enlistment, pay, and results would have generated Criminal Informant classification files 137 at the Dallas Field Office and FBI Headquarters.

The November 22, 1963, death of President John F. Kennedy gave Ruby a serendipitous opportunity to be a somebody. The time and act negate a conspiracy. On November 24 the police announced they would move Oswald from the city jail to the county jail at 10 a.m.. As they proceeded a postal inspector arrived to complete his interrogation of Oswald and delayed the transfer. After that at 11:15 the transferring of Oswald began by taking him to the police garage in the basement to a waiting van. At 11:17 a.m., Ruby stopped at the Western Union building opposite the police station to send money to one of his strippers, the time unequivocally sustained by witnesses and documents. He then walked into the station basement with 70 police officers in the area as Oswald

emerged, handcuffed to Detective James R. Leavelle. At 11:21 a.m. Ruby killed him with a single fatal shot.

The killing unleashed a torrent of conspiracy speculation. In the aftermath federal officials launched a massive investigation of Ruby, while at the same time focusing on holding Oswald up as the lone assassin. The official investigation "found no evidence that . . . Jack Ruby was part of any conspiracy, domestic or foreign," (*Warren Report*, p. 21), a conclusion embraced by responsible critics.

No solid reason exists to believe that Oswald and Ruby had ever seen each other, let alone conspired together. The rumors of it are unconfirmed. In killing Oswald Ruby eliminated any assassination trial where evidence could be adduced and tested, that accounts for subsequent controversies and for the ensuing legacy of disenchantment with government that is reflected in all the many polls.

The presumptions that the Mafia or the Central Intelligence Agency or Cuba was behind the assassination through Ruby are mythologies that spurn known and indisputable facts. Ruby's oft cited remark to Chief Justice Earl Warren of the Commission investigating the crime that if taken to Washington he would talk was prattle from a mind increasingly irrational. A psychiatrist who evaluated him for his defense counsel reported that Ruby had serious psychiatric problems and was "not now capable of cooperating intelligently in his own defense" (West).

Ruby was tried for murder, found guilty, and sentenced to death, an unusual act in a city where the typical sentence for gunshot murder was eight years. Appeals overturned the sentence in October 1966. While he awaited a second trial he became ill and was transferred to Parkland Memorial Hospital where JFK and Oswald had also been taken. There doctors discovered advanced stages of cancer of the brain. He soon died of it. The historical question will forever linger of whether the illness so long undetected could have controlled his behavior in 1963.

Ruby never married.

**Bibliography:** Ruby left few papers and gave a half-dozen different dates for his birth, but all in the year 1911. A vast federal collection of documents related to Ruby compiled by the assassination investigations is in the National Archives. The Texas Court of Inquiry left files in the state archives in Austin. The papers of most major figures involved in the investigation contains material on Ruby, including at the federal level Gerald Ford in the Ford Library in Ann Arbor, Richard Russell in Athens, GA., John Sherman Cooper in Lexington, KY., Earl Warren in the Library of Congress, Lyndon B. Johnson in the Johnson Library in Austin, and Allen Dulles in Princeton and at the local level Texas Attorney General Waggoner Carr at Baylor. The psychiatric report of Dr. L. J. West is in the Cooper papers as is that of Dr. R. L. Stubblefield. The papers of critic and scholar Harold Weisberg, Frederick, MD, to be deposited in Hood College, contain essential files, along with his correspondence with District Attorney Henry Wade, his notes and aide memoirs on the Wade files and Ruby. The Warren Commission *Report* (1964) discusses him throughout and includes a biography, pp. 779-806, while its 26 volume *Hearings and Exhibits* (1964) contain essential exhibits and witness testimony. The House Select Committee on Assassinations *Report* of 1979 and its 12 volumes of reports and testimony represent the ineptness of the second major federal investigation. *Its files are a neat addition at the Nat. Arch.*

Almost every book on the assassination of JFK discusses Ruby, most superficially and with scholarship distorted by theories. Four volumes on the trial itself that also discuss his life are, Melvin M. Belli and Maurice C. Carroll, *Dallas Justice* (1964), John Kaplan and Jon R. Waltz, *The Trial of Jack Ruby* (1965), Garry Wills and Ovid Demaris, *Jack Ruby* (1968), and Elmer Gertz, *Moment of Madness: The People vs. Jack Ruby* (1968). Most of the volumes discussing



Ruby are flawed by mythology, such as Renatus Hartogs and Lucy Freeman, *The Two Assassins* (1965) Seth Kantor, *The Ruby Cover-Up* (1978) and Mark Lane, *Rush to Judgment* (1966). A representative refutation of the speculators is in the objective refutation of Lane by Gertz, pp. 507-543, and Wills and Demaris, pp. 160-167, 280-246. The best approach to President Kennedy's assassination is through Harold Weisberg's *Whitewash* (1965) and *Never Again* (1995) and Sylvia Meagher's *Accessories After the Fact* (1967).