

Part 8/16/70

Another Kennedy Book

"The President, while eager to make clear that our aim was to get out of Vietnam, had always been doubtful about the optimistic reports constantly filed by the military on the progress of the war . . . The struggle could well be, he thought, this nation's severest test of endurance and patience. At times he compared it to the long struggles against Communist guerrillas in Greece, Malaya and the Philippines. Yet at least he had a major counter guerrilla effort under way, with a comparatively small commitment of American manpower. He was simply going to weather it out, a nasty, untidy mess to which there was no other acceptable solution. Talk of abandoning so unstable an ally and so costly a commitment 'only makes it easy for the Communists,' said the President. 'I think we should stay.'"

Theodore C. Sorensen. "Kennedy," 1965.

"When Canada's Lester Pearson, asked for his advice during a visit to the White House, suggested that the U.S. 'get out,' the President softly replied, 'That's a stupid answer. Everybody knows that. The question is: How do we get out?' I believe he would have devoted increasing time to that question in the winter of 1963-1964 and found an answer.

Theodore C. Sorensen. "Kennedy," 1965.

"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 re-elected,' Kennedy told Mansfield."

Kenneth O'Donnell, article in Life Magazine.

There is a point to be made about all the foregoing accounts of President Kennedy's thoughts on Vietnam in 1963, and it is not that one version must be true and the others false. Rather, we think, this easily culled, contradictory sampling from the works of Mr. Kennedy's advisers makes a point about the way in which such memoirs should be read. For these do not tend to be works of history so much as personal, partial and limited recollections, and it is therefore left to the reader to provide the missing context or perhaps we should say the fading context since we have in mind, first, the limits of everyone's knowledge in 1963 and, second, the powerful influence subsequent events have had on the way we now recall and appraise what was important then. Mr. O'Donnell's current piece in Life (an excerpt from his forthcoming book on President Kennedy), along with Senator Mansfield's corroboration of his account, can readily be accom-

modated to previous (and conflicting) accounts by readers prepared to take this step. It is not difficult, after all, to believe that by 1963 President Kennedy was disillusioned and of a divided mind on the subject of our involvement in Vietnam or that he said different (and conflicting) things to different people on the subject. Whether he would have followed the course Lyndon Johnson was to take will never be known. Whether he would have been in a position to pull out all troops at the end of 1964 or the beginning of 1965 cannot be known either. The difficulty of the decisions that would have faced him may be elided in the recollections of his memoirists, but is its nicely summed up in President Kennedy's own remark to Lester Pearson, recorded by Mr. Sorensen—"The question is: how do we get out?"

Perhaps the full text of Mr. O'Donnell's book will clarify some of the other arresting statements that appear in the Life excerpt. But for the moment, anyhow, these too are sorely in need of a little historical background on the part of the reader. Anyone who recalls the—how shall we say—unsentimental and rugged campaign that was necessary to win the nomination for John F. Kennedy or the Kennedy administration's realistic approach to the outlying centers of Democratic power once it was in office, will find it a bit hard to fathom Mr. O'Donnell's objecting to Lyndon Johnson's place on the ticket because it was redolent of the "old-style politics." And in the context of the angry scene described by Mr. O'Donnell, it is quite easy to suppose that Mr. Kennedy's explanation of why he took Lyndon Johnson on the ticket (to get him out of the Senate) was something in the way of an argument intended to calm down Mr. O'Donnell. There is just too much evidence at hand that John F. Kennedy had more worthy and more genuinely believed reasons than that.

All this is by way of a caveat. For, judging from what we have read, it seems likely that Mr. O'Donnell's book, like those which have preceded it, will be engaged and engaging, full of fascinating observations and recollections all filtered through the prism of the author's particular place in the Kennedy administration and his particular set of feelings and views—an invaluable source book, in other words, for the disciplined use of future historians—as distinct from history itself.