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THE
KENNEDYS
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NEW YORK

Asked to comment at his Nov. 14 press conference on the South Vietnamese coup, Kennedy said he hoped it would mean an increased effort in the war. "The purpose of a planned Nov. 20 Honolulu meeting for top Administration and military officials, he said, was to attempt to assess the situation, what American policy should be, and what our aid policy should be, how we can intensify the struggle, how we can bring Americans out of there." His Administration's object he went on, "is to bring Americans home, permit the South Vietnamese to maintain themselves as a free and independent country, and permit democratic forces within the country to operate—which they can, of course, much more freely when the assault from the inside, and which is manipulated from the north, is ended."

Day of Pres. Kennedy's Assassination

Pres. Kennedy began a 2-day tour of Texas Nov. 21. Addressing the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce at breakfast Nov. 22, Kennedy said: His Administration had "increased our special counter-insurgency forces which are now engaged in Vietnam by 600%. I hope those who want a stronger America and place it on some signs will also place those figures next to it."

After the breakfast at the Texas Hotel in Fort Worth, Kennedy flew to Love Field, Dallas. There he acknowledged greetings for a brief period and then entered an open car. The motorcade traveled along a 10-mile route through downtown Dallas on its way to the Trade Mart, where the President planned to speak at a luncheon. At approximately 12:30 p.m. CST he was struck by 2 bullets fired by Lee Harvey Oswald. Kennedy was pronounced dead at 1 p.m., Nov. 22, 1963.

Lyndon B. Johnson became President when John F. Kennedy died. Johnson pledged Nov. 24 that his Administration would continue to pursue the U.S. policies on South Vietnam that had been established by Kennedy.

POST MORTEM

According to British journalist Louis Heren (in *No Hail, No Farewell*), John F. Kennedy left "to his successor a terrible mess the like of which few Presidents had inherited since the other Johnson succeeded the murdered Lincoln." The Washington journalist I. F. Stone wrote in his *Weekly* a short while after Kennedy's death: "He died in time to be remembered as he would like to be remembered, as ever young, still victorious, struck down undefeated, with almost all the potentates and rulers of mankind, friend and foe, come to mourn at the bier. For somehow one has the feeling that in the tangled dramaturgy of events, this sudden assassination was for the author the only satisfactory way out. The Kennedy Administration was approaching an impasse, certainly at home, quite possibly abroad, from which there seemed no escape."

After Kennedy's death many commentators and former associates of the late President speculated at length about what Kennedy would have done about Vietnam had he lived to complete his term and to be reelected in 1964. One of the most significant comments to date has come from Kenneth O'Donnell, Kennedy's appointments secretary at the White House. In an August 1970 article in *Life* magazine, excerpted from a forthcoming book, O'Donnell asserted that Kennedy had decided by 1963 to withdraw all U.S. troops from South Vietnam by the end of 1965, although he planned to delay such an announcement until after the 1964 election.

According to O'Donnell, Pres. Kennedy first began to have doubts about Vietnam in 1961 when both Gen. Douglas MacArthur and Gen. Charles de Gaulle warned against fighting a non-nuclear war on the Asian mainland. During the course of a 3-hour meeting with Kennedy in 1961, MacArthur was said to have called the "domino theory" ridiculous in a nuclear age and to have told Kennedy that the nation's domestic problems were more important than Vietnam. According to O'Donnell, "Kennedy came out of the meeting stunned. That a man like MacArthur should give him such unimilitary advice impressed him enormously."

Late in 1962, following a trip to Vietnam, Sen. Mike Mansfield, according to O'Donnell, advised Kennedy to withdraw U.S. forces from South Vietnam, "a suggestion that startled the President." After his meeting with Mansfield, O'Donnell reported, Kennedy said: "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."

In the spring of 1963, according to O'Donnell's account, Mansfield, at a White House breakfast for Congressional leaders, criticized the U.S. Vietnam policies. After the meeting, Kennedy

invited Mansfield to his office. O'Donnell, who was present for part of that meeting, reported that Kennedy told Mansfield that he then agreed with him on the need for a complete military withdrawal from Vietnam. Kennedy, however, said, according to O'Donnell, that "I can't do it until 1965—after I'm reelected." After Mansfield left, O'Donnell reported, Kennedy told him (O'Donnell): "In 1965, I'll be 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."

Asked on a later occasion (by O'Donnell) how the U.S. could withdraw from Vietnam without losing prestige, Kennedy was quoted by O'Donnell as saying: "Easy. Put a government in there that will ask us to leave."

Following the release of O'Donnell's article Sen. Mansfield was reported by the *Washington Post* Aug. 3, 1970 to have confirmed O'Donnell's account concerning the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam. "He had definitely and unequivocally made that decision," Mansfield was quoted as saying. Commenting on his 1963 meeting with Kennedy following the Congressional breakfast, Mansfield was further quoted as saying: "Pres. Kennedy didn't waste words. He was pretty sparse with his language. But it was not unusual for him to shift position. There is no doubt that he had shifted definitely and unequivocally on Vietnam, but he never had the chance to put the plan [the 1965 withdrawal] into effect."

In an interview published in the *Washington Post* Aug. 4, O'Donnell said that he did not think Kennedy had told State Secy. Dean Rusk ~~about his plans for withdrawal~~ but that he believed that Defense Secy. Robert S. McNamara had been informed. According to O'Donnell the idea was never presented in clear terms to the National Security Council (whose sessions O'Donnell had attended). Robert Kennedy knew of the plan, O'Donnell was reported to have said, but he refused to discuss it during his 1968 political campaign for fear of appearing "cheesy."

O'Donnell's *Life* article appeared in the midst of his unsuccessful campaign for the Democratic nomination for governor of Massachusetts.

In discussing O'Donnell's article, Tom Wicker, a close student of the Kennedy Presidency, noted in his Aug. 4, 1970 column in the *N.Y. Times* that "others who believe themselves knowledgeable about Mr. Kennedy differ" with O'Donnell. "It often has been pointed out," Wicker wrote, "that Mr. Johnson ordered military intervention in 1965 while surrounded by virtually the same advisers who would have counseled Mr. Kennedy, had he lived. Moreover, it was Mr. Kennedy, not Mr. Johnson, who ordered the first substantial escalation in late 1961." According to Wicker, Kennedy's last major statements on the war "are conflicting."

The most significant factor, according to Wicker, "however, probably is not what Mr. Kennedy said, but what he had experienced. By late 1963, it must be remembered, he had suffered in the Bay of Pigs episode both a defeat and a disillusioning exposure to military solutions; he had tested himself against the redoubtable Khrushchev, in the 1962 missile crisis, he made plain to the world his personal strength and determination. None of that proves that he would have refused to intervene in Vietnam. It does suggest that he would not have been under quite the same human and political pressures as those that undoubtedly acted on Mr. Johnson in 1965 and on Richard M. Nixon in Apr. 1970" (when he sent U.S. troops into Cambodia).