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President Kennedy and Vietnam

(A Wall Street Journal Editorial)

The historical background of our involvement in Vietnam is a deeply serious subject the nation has only begun to scratch, but our understanding will be clouded rather than clarified unless we keep a proper perspective on the kind of insider revelations recently offered by Kenneth O'Donnell.

We see no reason to doubt that President Kennedy said privately in the spring of 1963 that he would withdraw completely from Vietnam once the 1964 election was safely won. In this respect Mr. O'Donnell's Life magazine article has been confirmed by Senator Mansfield, whose criticism of Vietnam policies apparently led to the Kennedy statement. Certainly this is an intriguing and worthwhile revelation, but just as certainly it is only a small part of the story.

In Mr. O'Donnell's telling it comes across as the whole story, the ultimate inside secret. As such it tends to perpetuate the myth, so useful emotionally and politically to the Kennedy circle's insiders, that the agonies of Vietnam can be laid simply to the accident of Lyndon B. Johnson. There is scant instruction in so simple-minded a reading of our recent history.

A given Presidential remark is not an infallible guide to his deepest thoughts, let alone to his eventual policy. It depends on the personal

and political context. Since we have as yet no public indication President Kennedy ever seriously discussed a withdrawal plan with his top military and diplomatic advisers, we might hesitate in relying too much on remarks to his appointments secretary and a critical Senator.

Far more important, the remark in question was at best a pledge that could not be called for nearly two years. As President Kennedy doubtless knew in making it, a lot can happen in two years. A lot did happen in those particular two years. The Vietnam war did not simply fester on at its spring-1963 rate, it intensified in ways that forced the American hand. We have no way whatever to know what President Kennedy might have done if he had faced the point of decision President Johnson faced in early 1965.

With the Communists within an ace of conquering Vietnam, President Johnson decided to thwart them by Americanizing the war. He must bear the full historical responsibility for this decision, and for the collateral one to intervene by gradual stages against the lessons of military history and doctrine. But that is another part of the story, for now we only need recognize that the events that closed in on Mr. Johnson would have closed in on any other President . . .