

In The Nation: The Conundrum of John Kennedy

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, Aug. 3—Ken O'Donnell, in an article in *Life* magazine, has shed interesting but not conclusive light on two matters of large historical importance—how John F. Kennedy came to choose Lyndon B. Johnson as his running mate in 1960, and whether Mr. Kennedy, had he lived, would have pursued the war in Vietnam to the extent that Mr. Johnson ultimately did.

Mr. O'Donnell—who was one of those closest to John Kennedy—recounts a conversation at the Los Angeles convention in which Mr. Kennedy told him privately that he had chosen Mr. Johnson for Vice President in order to shuffle a strong rival out of the Senate Democratic leadership and into the comparative obscurity of the Vice Presidency. This is entirely plausible, and a line of reasoning that occurred to some of those who tried at the time to analyze Mr. Kennedy's startling choice.

Mixed Motives

Nevertheless, this explanation contradicts some others that have surfaced earlier, particularly the one that Mr. Johnson himself gave Philip Potter of *The Baltimore Sun*. Mr. Potter, in a magazine article published

in 1964, quoted Mr. Johnson as saying that Mr. Kennedy told him that he "should be the one who would succeed if anything happened to him." But Mr. O'Donnell quotes Mr. Kennedy as having been confident that he was too healthy to die while in office.

Nor is it likely that Mr. Kennedy would have risked losing the election for the secondary objective of getting Mr. Johnson out of the Democratic leadership; if he had thought putting the Texan on the ticket would cost him victory, he would hardly have done it. So the likelihood is that the explanation he gave Mr. O'Donnell is true—as are several other previously published explanations.

Most significant human actions are taken from a complex of motives, and there is no reason to believe that Mr. Kennedy's choice of Mr. Johnson was an exception. Having made it, it would be altogether understandable if, as a politician to the bone, he gave each of those who inquired the explanation most likely to mollify his objection—which in Ken O'Donnell's case was vehement.

Anyway, it is provable historical fact that Mr. Kennedy chose Mr. Johnson and Mr. Johnson accepted. But it may

always be a matter of speculation whether Mr. Johnson's ultimate accession to the Presidency made a significant difference in the nation's course in Vietnam.

Conflicting Views

Mr. O'Donnell, now a candidate for Governor of Massachusetts, says it did. He states flatly that Mr. Kennedy planned to pull out of Vietnam, once safely re-elected in 1964, primarily because he believed there was no American interest there that justified American involvement in an Asian war. In coming to this view, Mr. O'Donnell asserts, the President was heavily influenced by Gen. Douglas MacArthur and by Senator Mike Mansfield of Montana.

Others who believe themselves knowledgeable about Mr. Kennedy's view differ with that (although Theodore Sorensen, for one, has taken the same approach as Mr. O'Donnell). It often has been pointed out 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.

Curiously enough, Mr. Kennedy's last major statements on the matter are conflicting. On Sept. 2, 1963, he told Walter Cronkite: "In the final analysis, it is their war. They [the South Vietnamese] are the ones who have to win it or lose it." But a week later, on the Huntley-Brinkley program, he said that if South Vietnam "went," it would "give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the Communists."

The most significant factor in the conundrum, 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 April, 1970.