Dr. James B. Donovan, 53, Dies; Lawyer Arranged Spy Exchange

President of Pratt Institute—Ex-Board of Education Chief Ran for Senate

Dr. James Britt Donovan, the lawyer and educator who arranged the trade of a Soviet spy student for the U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers and negotiated the ransom of prisoners taken by Cuba in the Bay of Pigs invasion, died yesterday. He was 53 years old.

Donovan, who had been president of Pratt Institute since Jan. 1, 1968, entered Methodist Hospital in Brooklyn for Col. Rudolf Ivanovich Abel, Donovan's successful legal practice: influenza. He suffered a heart attack at 2 A.M. Monday. His home was at 35 Prospect Park West in Brooklyn.

For 16 years after his admission to the New York Bar, Dr. Donovan's successful legal practice kept him well out of the limelight. But in 1957, his appointment as defense counsel for Col. Rudolf Ivanovich Abel, the Soviet spy, catapulted him into the public eye.

Between the Abel case and his job as the president of Pratt, Dr. Donovan: negotiated the exchange of Colonel Abel for Mr. Powers and Frederik Pryor, an American student; wrote a book about the experience called "Strangers on a Bridge" (New York: Atheneum, 1962); served on the Board of Education, to which he was appointed in 1961, first as vice president and then as president.

Dr. Donovan's approach to these assignments was unorthodox and highly personal. He once jeopardized his brand of unofficial diplomacy to playing poker: "You have to know your man and be willing to risk all."

In prison and fined $5,000, but before sentence was passed, Dr. Donovan had asked that all charges be eliminated by the taking of Abel's life. His plea was to prove prophetic when, five years later, Abel was returned to the Soviet Union in exchange for Mr. Powers.

When Dr. Donovan appealed Colonel Abel's conviction before the Supreme Court in 1959 and lost, Chief Justice Earl Warren said: "I think I can say that in any time on this court no man has undertaken a more arduous more self-sacrificing task."

The last chapter in the Abel story was written in secret by Dr. Donovan in secret, at the request of the United States Government. After Mr. Powers' U-2 plane was shot down in the Soviet Union, his father suggested the exchange. At the same time, Abel's father was pleading with Dr. Donovan to secure clemency for his husband.

As a result, the Justice Department authorized the secret mission to East Berlin to "explore the situation."

Cited by the C.L.A.

The story leading up to the cold and cloudy February day in 1962 when the prisoners were exchanged is told in Dr. Donovan's book. The sequel came some months later, when Colonel Abel, knowing of his lawyer's extensive collection of illuminated manuscripts, sent him two 16th-century legal volumes, "with gratitude."

For his work on the Abel-Powers exchange, Dr. Donovan was awarded the Distinguished Intelligence Medal by the Central Intelligence Agency, at the direction of President Kennedy. Several months after his success with semi-official negotiations in the Soviet Union, Dr. Donovan was asked by the Cuban Families Committee to work for the Liberation of Prisoners of War to argue their case with Premier Castro. In this case, however, the negotiations were entirely unofficial.

For months, Dr. Donovan shuttled between New York and Havana where, he said, "Castro and I talked about everything under the sun; I found him a rather fascinating fellow."

The visits continued during the missile crisis of September-October, 1962, and by December an exchange of prisoners for baby food and drugs was arranged. The men were released on Christmas Eve.

Between flying trips to Havana, the State Democratic party nominated him as its candidate for the Senate in 1962. To the despair of party workers, Dr. Donovan campaigned like a man with more important things on his mind. Senator Javits won by 975,000 votes.

Dr. Donovan continued the flying trips through the spring of 1963, holding all-night conversations with Premier Castro that eventually brought the release of a total of 9,700 Americans and Cubans from Cuban jails.

Named Board President

In December, 1963, the burly, white-haired lawyer was elected president of the Board of Education. He had been appointed in 1961 when a "reform" board was created by the State Legislature.

He became involved in controversy from the day he became president. Civil rights groups said that Dr. Donovan was not committed to integration. He said he was committed, first, to education.

By mid-March of 1964 civil rights groups had joined in an effort to force Dr. Donovan's removal or resignation. However, he replied that he had no intention of leaving and even called his position a "powerful" one.

As a result, the negotiations were considered a vote of confidence by his fellow members.

At Pratt, Dr. Donovan, likes so many of his fellow educators in recent years, had to face campus disruptions over Negro students' demands and antiwar protests.

At first he threatened to have arrested and expelled any students who demonstrated, who took a vote, who attempted to disrupt classes, or incited nonstudents in any way. After the 400-member faculty went on strike to protest his refusal to modify the policy, Dr. Donovan modified it.

In recent months Dr. Donovan has enjoyed the support of the administration of Pratt's administration council and has begun discussions designed to lead to a new student-faculty senate.

In April, 1963, he entered the New York State Senate as a Democrat for the 20th district. The son of an importer of Scottish whisky, Dr. Donovan was born on Feb. 29, 1916. His father was the owner of a prominent Scottish firm. After graduating from Harvard with a B.A. degree in 1939, he went to the New School for Social Research where he concentrated on public administration. After this period he completed his education at All Souls College in Oxford, England. Dr. Donovan was the author of "Civil Rights in the Federal Government" (New York: 1956), a book that has become a classic in the study of race relations.

On Feb. 11, 1965, the New York Times reported that Dr. Donovan had been named president of the Board of Education. As a result, he became involved in controversy from the day he became president. Civil rights groups said that Dr. Donovan was not committed to integration. He said he was committed, first, to education.

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Son of a Surgeon

Dr. Donovan was born on Feb. 29, 1916. His father was a prominent surgeon and the family's roots in New York City go back to 1837. An only brother, John D. Donovan, became a gynecologist who has taught at the New York law firm that has represented Dr. Donovan in many of his cases. After this period he completed his education at All Souls College in Oxford, England. Dr. Donovan was the author of "Civil Rights in the Federal Government" (New York: 1956), a book that has become a classic in the study of race relations.
see also this file 17 Feb 69; 14 Feb 70