

Three of the Boston Originals
(from left): Kenneth O'Donnell, Dave Powers, and Lawrence O'Brien.

JFK's Irish "Cabinet"

St. Patrick's Day finds Irishmen galore on President Kennedy's staff, but they're there because of talent—not Old Sod sentiment

By ARDEN EIDELL

LIFE HAS its low spots, even for a clever young Irishman with a notable gift of gab—and Dave Powers was going through such a low.

He had just gotten out of the Air Force, he had no job, and he was living in a third-floor walk-up apartment in Boston with his sister and her 10 kids.

So, when a knock came at the door, he welcomed it as a chance for some diverting banter, but the young man standing outside had more serious things on his mind. He extended his hand and said: "I'm Jack Kennedy. I'm running for Congress, and I'd like your help."

Although Powers did not know it at the time, he had just opened the door to a new career—and a friendship that has lasted 17 years.

Kennedy was looking for potential political talent, and Powers was noted for having a way with people. Everybody in the tight-knit Irish community knew him as the likable young man who ushered for five Masses every Sunday at St. Catherine's and played a razzle-dazzle second base on the church's ball team.

Kennedy was sold on Powers. Soon Powers was sold on Kennedy—and he pitched in furiously to help his new friend. At Dave's insistence, every veteran in the district registered to vote. And in his spare time he escorted Kennedy on tours of housewives' kitchens ("that's where the votes are, not in the parlors"). Running against young Jack were nine candidates, including two fellows named Joe Russo and an ex-WAC who campaigned in full uniform. But with Dave's help, Kennedy won.

At 49, Dave is still working for John F. Kennedy, although he now calls him Mr. President. As White House receptionist, he is noted for his breezy "Hi, pal" greeting (during a state visit to France, he varied it to "Comment allez vous, pal?"). But Dave's most important function is

serving as the man with whom the President can relax. He and Mr. Kennedy swim together at least once a day; on many evenings they watch tv together; and on Sundays they often attend church together.

Powers' camaraderie with the President is shared by few other men, and most of them are in a little circle of long-time confidants that Washington calls the Boston Originals, Kennedy's Irish Cabinet, or the Irish Mafia.

But the closeness of these men to Mr. Kennedy has nothing to do with their being Irish. Although the President is proud of his forebears, he is notably unsentimental about nationality ties. Irish Boston is a place he left at 9 and where 122 Bowdoin Street is strictly his voting address. For him, the charm of the White House does not depend on the fact that it was designed by an Irishman with a Dublin mansion as a model.

Mr. Kennedy's Irish Cabinet took shape because the base of his political power until 1960 was one state, Massachusetts—and in the Bay State when you recruit Democrats to work for you, they are likely to be Irish.

ONE OF THE FIRST and brightest recruits was Kenneth P. O'Donnell, a friend of Robert Kennedy from Harvard days. He is the kind of man the Kennedys like: intelligent, discreet, tough. A bombardier-navigator during World War II, he had completed 13 combat missions by the time he was 21 and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. After the war, he won grid glory for playing in the Harvard-Yale game of 1948 with a broken leg.

During the 1960 campaign, O'Donnell was the man who engineered Kennedy's tight, fast schedule, and after the inauguration he became Presidential appointments secretary. His job is to ride herd on the stampede of people and paper work headed for the President, and he does it with such steely firmness and sphinxlike silence that he has been nicknamed The Arab.



O'Donnell sees Mr. Kennedy up to two dozen times a day—more than any other man in Washington. He gets to the office long before the President arrives at 9 a.m. and stays until 10:30 or 11 p.m., or whenever the President leaves.

Another around-the-clock worker for Mr. Kennedy is Lawrence F. O'Brien. The chunky 45-year-old former public-relations man handles patronage and Congressional relations for the President through endless telephone calls—and a card file that lists the legislators' soft spots.

O'Brien's devotion to politics is total, as his wife Elva attests: "During our courtship, Larry's idea of a date was to go to a political rally."

LARRY HAS TOLD REPORTERS: "I don't know why I'm in this crowd. I didn't go to Harvard; I don't even play touch football." But if Larry doesn't know, JFK does. He characterizes O'Brien as "the best election man in the business."

Powers, O'Donnell, and O'Brien are the most talked-about members of the Irish Cabinet. But other Presidential assistants who hold important portfolios in it include Richard K. Donahue, 35, a brilliant lawyer who is an expert in dealing with big-city politics; Timothy Reardon, 46, a Harvard roommate of the President's late brother Joe, Jr., who has worked for Jack ever since he became "the Kennedys' Presidential candidate"; and Ralph Dungan, 39, a Princeton-educated political scientist who has been called the Irish Cabinet's only intellectual.

It is true that the Boston Originals are basically the action men of the Administration. The idea men are another group, sometimes called the Harvard Clique. But the quality that really sets the Irish apart is their personal loyalty to Mr. Kennedy. The eggheads could just as well have been Stevenson men or even Rockefeller men. But the Irish—they are Kennedy men to the core.

Kenneth O'Donnell was speaking for all of the Boston Originals when he said: "The President and I are not friends . . . It's deeper than that."

COVER:

Honey-haired, blue-eyed Julie Lochridge, going on three, is caught in a wistful mood by photographer Phoebe Dunn. Diagnosis: a mild, early case of spring fever.

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