

WH6503-05-7054-7055_scroller

Date: 1965-03-10

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Nicholas deB. Katzenbach

Start Time: 21:32?

Place: Mansion

SCROLLER TITLE: "This Minister Is Going to Die, Isn't He?"

SCENE SETTER: Dozens of ministers had answered a call to participate in a second Selma march on 9 March 1965, the day before this conversation. That march led to little violence, but later that day White segregationists attacked three White ministers outside a restaurant. One of those clergymen, Unitarian Universalist minister James Reeb of Boston, would die from his wounds on 11 March. Here, Attorney General Nicholas deB. "Nick" Katzenbach explained Reeb's prognosis to President Johnson and detailed the possibilities for maintaining law and order in the area.

Nicholas "Nick" Katzenbach: But I think—I don't think that any of the leaders except possibly John Lewis on the SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] people really feel that way at all.

President Johnson: I think one of the thing—

Katzenbach: These kids are hard to handle. I mean, we've been having them all over the country, and—

President Johnson: Yeah, I know, but what are all these ministers coming in [from] all over the country for if they don't feel like they're being mistreated here?

Katzenbach: [*Pause.*] Well . . .

President Johnson: This minister [James Reeb] is going to die, isn't he?

Katzenbach: Yes, sir.

President Johnson: Is he already dead?

Katzenbach: No, sir. But he is for all intents and purposes. I think they're just trying to keep him alive, you know, in a technical kind of way, as long as they can, at least, so that he dies . . . doesn't die at a time when, you know, flare things up. I think—I expect he'll be dead by early morning.

President Johnson: What time do you think he'll die?

Katzenbach: They tell me that he could stay alive for another 24 or 36 hours under these mechanical things, but I think he'll probably die early tomorrow morning.

President Johnson: Ah. Do you think you'll have your court order in the morning?

Katzenbach: Yeah, I think we'll do . . . I think we'll get it worked out tomorrow sometime. I think the judge [Frank M. Johnson Jr.] is going to be pretty good. He's not going to embarrass [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] on this. He's not going to find that King was in violation of any laws. And then

we're working out the terms of that march in, I think, be pretty satisfactory terms. Then, as I told Bill [D.] Moyers, King has accepted the idea that if this minister dies, that the Montgomery—the Selma—Montgomery March, or what they're going to call a march, is going to be in his honor. Now, that'll do a lot to relieve the other demonstrations people would feel they had to make about this and, in addition, will give a funereal quality to it. You know, be like going to church? And that'll keep the rowdies down. I think that's a good idea.

President Johnson: [*Pause.*] All right. Now, I think that—

Katzenbach: We ought to do something with the ministers to . . . [*unclear*]—

President Johnson: I think Bill ought to talk to some of them tonight and get the feel, and then maybe you and Bill, or you and Lee [C.] White and Bill, ought to invite some of them in in the morning to take . . . to take this heat off and to explain to them what's behind our reasoning and our thinking, and I think particularly yours and the Vice President's [Hubert H. Humphrey Jr.'s] and Bill's, any way that you can to get me out of the line of fire as much as we can.

Katzenbach: Right. Well, that's what—

President Johnson: He has—the Vice President has a memorandum. He doesn't have any recommendations.

Katzenbach: Yeah.

President Johnson: But he's just transmitting. That's about all he's doing. And we need to have somebody say to them, now, federal marshals were not dispatched to the area to arrest persons attacking federal officials, because there weren't any federal officials being attacked, were they?

Katzenbach: No. We had one FBI [Federal Bureau of the Investigation] fellow bungled up.

President Johnson: Now, the second thing they say is leaders of White segregationist forces, including [Albert J.] Al Lingo, [will] be arrested for encouraging their officers and troops to violate the civil rights of others.

Katzenbach: Mm-hmm. We may have a case against Lingo. We may arrest him. [*President Johnson acknowledges.*] I've been—and that may be possible to do if . . . It's a delicate decision.

President Johnson: Sheriff [James G. "Jim"] Clark?

Katzenbach: The sheriff, well, hell, we got three cases against Sheriff Clark now. I don't mind arresting him much.

President Johnson: Has it already been brought?

Katzenbach: Yes, sir. But these are—I mean, these are cases over the past eight months [*President Johnson acknowledges*] against Clark, and we're awaiting a decision, which we ought to get momentarily from the Court of Appeals in one of those. I don't really mind . . . I'm a little more reluctant on Lingo, because it touches the governor [George C. Wallace Jr.] more. But . . . I've got—I just sent seven more lawyers down there to go over all this evidence and pictures and whatnot to see what we *could* do on that.

President Johnson: Well, I think you ought to say in response to this, “Now, we’ve got three cases against Clark already in the courts. I don’t suppose y’all know that, but I’ve got seven lawyers going over this evidence, and it’s not something that the President does. He doesn’t [*slight chuckle*] go after White segregationists or White integrationists. It’s a matter that we follow law and order here.”

End of excerpt.

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