

“Those Damn Black Athletes”

Date: 1972-09-10

Participant: Richard M. Nixon

Participant: Charles W. Colson

Start Time: 11:44

Place: Camp David Study Table

After reviewing the political climate on college campuses, President Nixon and presidential aide Charles W. Colson discussed the suspension of athletes Vincent Matthews and Wayne Collette from the Olympic Games in Munich. During a medal ceremony three days earlier, in which Matthews and Collette received gold and silver medals for their performances in the 400-meter run, some perceived the actions of both athletes as disrespectful atop the podium. Colson thought the affair would benefit the President politically.

President Nixon: Hello.

Charles W. “Chuck” Colson: Good morning, Mr. President.

President Nixon: Well, you been to church today?

Colson: No, sir. I’m up at—drove up last night to Princeton, New Jersey, to see my son. It’s his first weekend in school, so—

President Nixon: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Colson: We’re just visiting—

President Nixon: Up there at the Ivy Leaguers, huh?

Colson: Well, I must say, it’s not as bad as I thought. My—

President Nixon: Ha!

Colson: My son, who’s a freshman, said that they have 120 freshmen signed up to work for the President [Nixon] and about 100 for [George S.] McGovern [D–South Dakota]. So I think that’s not bad for—

President Nixon: Hmm!

Colson: —eastern Ivy League—

President Nixon: Hmm.

Colson: —liberal—

President Nixon: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Colson: It's really—I've been amazed. I just [*clears throat*]*—*we just got here last night, and coming back this afternoon. But just walking around the campus, the . . . the kids even look different, and—

President Nixon: Do they really? Good.

Colson: Yes, sir. There's really quite a different atmosphere. I'm amazed. Even from a year ago when I was taking him around to schools, I now—now see a difference. But—

President Nixon: Mm-hmm.

Colson: Maybe the polls are right. Like [George H.] Gallup this morning, which I find almost hard to believe, but—

President Nixon: Mm-hmm.

Colson: [*Clears throat.*] Did you see that poll on—the breakdown on the Gallup youth?

President Nixon: Yeah, yeah.

Colson: I'm really—I'm not so sure that that is a—

President Nixon: May not—

Colson: —big enough sample to really—

President Nixon: That's right. You can't tell much about it, but it means something.

Colson: Oh, it's a good—yeah, it's—

President Nixon: Sure, it'll mean something to people that read it.

Colson: That's right.

President Nixon: To the politicians, of course. Yeah, yeah. Well, I'm glad to hear that they do look a little different, a little bit cleaner?

Colson: They look cleaner, and they seem to be more interested in [*President Nixon acknowledges throughout*] studying and partying on a Saturday night. But they're not interested in changing the world or blowing up buildings anymore. At least, it doesn't seem that way.

President Nixon: Yeah, yeah. [*speaking over Colson*] Well, it's not that bad as it was, really. Let's face it. The only really sour note we have with the kids at the moment are the way those damn Black athletes are handling themselves.

Colson: Well, I think—

President Nixon: Incidentally, I think they're turning off millions of Americans. What do you think?

Colson: Oh, God. I think it's the greatest thing in the world. I think that—

President Nixon: What do you run into? Just a minute, Chuck, I'm want to get some coffee; he just opened the door. [*Colson acknowledges.*] Go ahead. That what?

Colson: Well, I was just going to say, I think that that Howard [K.] Smith commentary Friday night was [*unclear*], Mr. President. I think that—

President Nixon: What'd he say?

Colson: Well, he said that it was a sad day at the Olympics, and how these fellows had conducted themselves so badly and reflect on the country—reflected on the country.

President Nixon: Hmm!

Colson: And then last night there was a—an interview [*clears throat*] with one of the Black athletes who had been suspended.

President Nixon: Mm-hmm.

Colson: And he was an obnoxious-looking son of a bitch, and he talked [*President Nixon chuckles*] down on the country.

President Nixon: Yeah.

Colson: And that's just not the mood today, Mr. President.

President Nixon: Well, particularly, they don't want to hear it from the Blacks, [*Colson acknowledges*] because they know the Blacks have had a better break than the Whites!

Colson: Sure!

President Nixon: You know, the poor—I mean, the poor Whites . . .

Colson: Exactly. And here's this—

President Nixon: Yeah. Of course, thank God the kid that won yesterday behaved himself.

Colson: Well, I [*clears throat*—this happened four years ago, as you remember, and I—

President Nixon: In Mexico City, yeah.

Colson: Yeah. And I remember the people being just mad about it. You know, it's the kind of thing that . . .

President Nixon: Mm-hmm.

Colson: It doesn't hurt us when that happens, because you don't stand for that. That's the kind of thing McGovern [*President Nixon acknowledges*] stands for, but you don't.

President Nixon: Yeah. Yeah.

End of excerpt.

“Richard M. Nixon and Charles W. Colson on 10 September 1972,” Conversation 141-002, Draft Transcript, Presidential Recordings Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia.