

“Respect for the Flag”

Date: September 11, 1972

Participant: Richard M. Nixon

Participant: Charles W. Colson

Start Time: 12:40

Place: Executive Office Building

At the Olympic Games in Munich, two Black athletes, track stars Vincent Matthews and Wayne Collette, had been perceived as acting disrespectfully during a medal ceremony. President Nixon and presidential assistant Charles W. “Chuck” Colson discussed this recent controversy and its implications for perceptions of Black Americans writ large.

President Nixon: I called [Christopher E.] Chris Schenkel today, who’s [unclear], and I must say that I . . . that I have a feeling [unclear] selection [unclear]. The Olympics . . . the left people think it hurts, but I think the Olympics first brought a little bit of pride in country; people don’t like to be [unclear]. And second, and certainly, whether [unclear] Black [unclear]. Nobody liked to see those Black athletes turn their back on the flag.

Charles W. “Chuck” Colson: Yeah.

President Nixon: They like [unclear] and Sugar Ray Seales. [Unclear] say it doesn’t matter [unclear], but, Jesus Christ. What do you think about it, [unclear]? Do you think that’s the attitude?

Colson: Absolutely. I think that—

President Nixon: Oh.

Colson: —I think—I remember four years ago it was the same thing [unclear], that people just don’t like that, especially from a Black. They resent it from a Black, because they figure the Blacks have been given special treatment [unclear] something a little more than [unclear]. [President Nixon acknowledges.] No, I think it—I think it helps us because we . . . we’re the flag.

President Nixon: That’s good. You’ll see [unclear] there’s that and the International Olympic Committee.

Colson: [Unclear.]

President Nixon: That’s right.

Colson: [Unclear.]

President Nixon: I hope he does.

Colson: Well, so do I, but I—

President Nixon: I think exactly the opposite. I think our [U.S.] Olympic Committee should be discharged for trying to say that they should . . . goddamn those people, they didn't show respect for the flag. Our Olympic committee should say, "Bravo!"

Colson: And they were representing the flag. That's why they're there. They're not there as individuals; they're there as Americans. Well, the interview, besides that [unclear] turned me off immediately watching it [unclear]. What's with this, you know?

President Nixon: Well, you know, I feel for the Blacks because Blacks are [unclear]. [Coughs.] They must be horrified by such [unclear].

Colson: Yeah, because it hurts them. It hurts them because people just put them all in the same boat.

End of excerpt.

"Richard M. Nixon and Charles W. Colson on 11 September 1972," Conversation 360-012, Draft Transcript, Presidential Recordings Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia.