

“He’ll Live”

Date: 1973-01-02

Participant: Richard M. Nixon

Participant: Charles W. Colson

Start Time: Unknown

Place: Oval Office

In a conversation with special assistant Charles W. Colson, President Nixon considered whether or not to attend the funeral of former president Harry S. Truman. Nixon ultimately decided against it, basing his decision partly on the fact that former president Lyndon B. Johnson would not be in attendance either due to recent “heart pains,” which Nixon dismissed as hypochondria. Johnson died of a heart attack less than three weeks later, on 22 January 1973.

Charles W. “Chuck” Colson: Well, if [Lyndon B.] Johnson came, I would feel differently, Mr. President, because it’s right here in Washington [D.C.], [*President Nixon acknowledges*] and there I think you would have to . . . many of the [Harry S.] Truman Democrats are our Democrats. That’s the only political argument I would—

President Nixon: I know, I know. But this is a different matter. I’ve been out. They all saw me go out there [to Independence, Missouri]. That was a hell of a gesture to fly out there. It took me six hours from the Christmas season.

Colson: That’s correct.

President Nixon: To fly the hell out there the day after Christmas.

Colson: So . . . and I feel very much like [John A.] Scali does that it’s too much and unnecessary. And with the [Francis B.] Sayre [Jr.] thing, I’ll be goddamned if I give him the satisfaction, frankly.

President Nixon: I’m just going to tell Johnson it’s not my intention to go and just wanted to be—I understood he was not coming.

Colson: And that you thought—

President Nixon: And I thought that we both should not have—I’m going to say what I was going to say was that we had family—we have paid our respects [*unclear*]. OK. How about the others?

Colson: [*Unclear.*]

The telephone rings, and President Nixon answers and speaks with Lyndon Johnson.

President Nixon: Happy New Year! How you feeling?

End of excerpt 1.

President Nixon: He said, “No,” he said, “[Lady] Bird [Johnson] and I talked about it. We decided to go pay our respects privately.” He doesn’t even know what he’s going to do tomorrow. He went to the ball game yesterday, and he’s had heart pains all day—

Colson: Hmm.

President Nixon: —and he’s a hypochondriac. [*Unclear.*]

Colson: No, he’s—

President Nixon: He’ll live. And—

Colson: —he’s still pretty fit.

President Nixon: —and he said I didn’t know whether he saw [*unclear*], but he’s definitely not coming to this [Truman’s funeral]. [*Clears throat.*]

Colson: In my opinion, if that’s—

President Nixon: Let’s get it handled.

Colson: Well, the way to handle it, Mr. President—there’s two ways to handle it: one is to say that Vice President [Spiro T. “Ted”] Agnew will be representing you, but then that—

President Nixon: No.

Colson: No.

President Nixon: He goes in his own right.

Colson: He goes in his own right.

President Nixon: “The President has attended. The President has attended the . . .”

Pause.

Colson: Yeah, I think the way to do it—

President Nixon: Put it in the most positive way, that neither—I think if we could get it out that “neither President Johnson nor President Nixon will be attending the services *here*.”

Colson: “Since they went to Independence.”

End of excerpt 2.

“Richard M. Nixon and Charles W. Colson on 2 January 1973,” Conversation 830-006, Draft Transcript, Presidential Recordings Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia.