



“Can’t You Help Me”

Date: 1964-01-23

Conversation: WH6401-19-1492 and WH6401-19-1493

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: R. Vance Hartke

Participant: Abraham A. Ribicoff

Start Time: 13:11 and 13:14

Duration: 04:38

Place: Oval Office

SCENE SETTER: As part of an extraordinarily complex legislative strategy, President Johnson needed key Democratic votes in the Senate Finance Committee for parts of the tax cut bill. With an eye on the November election, he applied the legendary “Johnson Treatment” to Sen. R. Vance Hartke [D–Indiana] and Sen. Abraham A. “Abe” Ribicoff [D–Connecticut] in back-to-back conversations.

President Johnson: Vance?

R. Vance Hartke: Yes, sir?

President Johnson: Can’t you help me on this excise tax thing? You’re going to wreck this damn bill. We’re not going to have any. And they’re going to get together this afternoon and try to make a motion to keep all excise taxes in there, and we need your help.

Hartke: Well, I mean—I suppose, that way started out—

President Johnson: I know it. And [Clinton P.] Clint Anderson [D–New Mexico] [*unclear*], they got all mad yesterday, because y’all screwed up that oil vote. And they’re after the oil companies, and [John J.] Williams [R–Maryland] and everything else. And those big oil companies oughtn’t to be raising hell [for] 40 million [dollars]. They got off with 400 million [dollars], and they ought to let y’all off the hook.

But, now, we’ve got it in a big screwed-up mess, and we—all of us are going down in defeat if we can’t operate any better than that. There’s no leadership in the committee, so, for God’s sakes, get in there. Clint Anderson says he’ll change, and you change, and get two or three more, and let’s . . .

Hartke: [*Unclear*] my—one big thing in there, one thing I wanted, was musical instruments.

President Johnson: Oh, well—

Hartke: This is—

President Johnson: —what’s important is the big credit to the Democratic Party, and let’s go on. The goddamn band and musical instruments—they won’t be talking about it next November.

Hartke: Well, they will in Elkhart [Indiana].

President Johnson: What they’re going to be judging us by is—they’re going to be judging us whether we can pass a tax bill or not and whether we got prosperity. And if we haven’t, we’re going to—every day, it costs us 30 million [dollars] in our economy. [*Unclear comment by Hartke.*] So get in there and try to help me on this thing.

Hartke: OK, I’ll . . . Can I save one vote out of there?

President Johnson: Well, we want to just have a general vote. One vote to put all the excises back. That’s the way we can get the majority of people [*background voices speak*] out of the bill.

Hartke: Yeah. Well, let me try to get that done. I’ll—

President Johnson: You do that and get ahold of Clint Anderson. And y’all go together. And see if you can’t do that for me.

Hartke: [*Chuckles.*] All right.

President Johnson: I’ll do something for you.

Hartke: I know you will.

President Johnson: Good-bye.

Hartke: All right. Bye.

President Johnson: Now, do it.

End of WH6401-19-1492 excerpt.

President Johnson: Abe? Can’t you go with us on this excise thing and let us get a bill? Goddamn it, you need to vote with me once in a while. Just one time.

Abraham A. “Abe” Ribicoff: Well . . . look. I made a comm[*itment*]*—*Mr. President, let me say this: the Treasury Department is reaping the whirlwind of [*unclear*].

President Johnson: I know it. I know it. I know it.

Ribicoff: I talked to [*unclear*]*—*

President Johnson: We were ready to report this bill, and now we got it just good and screwed up. And the Democrats are going to be a miserable failure in the eyes of the whole country. Now, why can’t y’all meet at two o’clock, and let’s leave this excise like we had it before you met this morning?

Ribicoff: Well, I don’t know how you’re going to get it—the thing was—

President Johnson: Well—

Ribicoff: —overwhelming.

President Johnson: No, it's not. No. Clint Anderson's going to help us, and Hartke will help us, and if you'll help us, we'll have it over. And I'll appreciate it, and I'll remember it, and help me one way or the other.

Ribicoff: Well, let—you know, just one word, Mr. President.

President Johnson: You've had these problems, executive—

Ribicoff: [*Unclear*]—

President Johnson: —and you know we've had that damn bill there since September, and every day it's costing us 30 million in consumer income. Every single day.

Ribicoff: Well, one of my problems is one of the amendments in there is for something in my own home state that's already been [*unclear*].

President Johnson: I know it, but every one of them have—

Ribicoff: [*Unclear*]—

President Johnson: —got it in there, my friend. But, God Almighty, I think about the problems I've had, and—

Ribicoff: Well, [*unclear*]—

President Johnson: —when you wanted to go on that committee, I just stood up and said, “By God, it's going to be.” Now, I just want one vote, and I want to get that bill out of there, and I got to have it, Abe. And you've had problems. You've been an executive. And you can find a way to help me. [*Pause.*] I—They've asked me to call you 40 times this year, and I've never done it. But this time, [*Ribicoff acknowledges*] when it means 4[00] or 500 million dollars—this is going to be a whole motion to leave all the excises as they were before Williams and them got mad on the oil thing. And don't let John Williams and Everett [M.] Dirksen [R-Illinois] screw me this way.

Ribicoff: Well, it isn't—Mr. President, I wish you had called me. I had talked to President [John F. “Jack”] Kennedy before he died about what I looked at [as] the troubles in the Finance Committee. And then he said to me, he said, “Abe,” he said, “look, once we get this up there, I will call all the Democrats together and try to work it out.” Now, the Treasury—the great tragedy to me, Mr. President, and I want to be very frank with you, is that [C. Douglas] Dillon doesn't know the politics, and the . . . If he was well, he would—

President Johnson: I think that's right, and he's sick. He's sick. And I don't know them either, but I want you to know them this afternoon, and go in there, and either don't vote one way or the other, but let them put these damn things back and vote with us, if you will. And we can't lose 4[00] or 500 million [dollars] revenue in this thing.

Ribicoff: [*Pause.*] Well, let me see how I can save my face. I've got a problem with saving [*unclear*].

President Johnson: Don't you worry about saving your face. Your face is [in] damn good shape, [Ribicoff laughs heartily] and it's going to be better when I get with you. I'll save your face.

Ribicoff: Yeah. Mr. President—

President Johnson: You save my face this afternoon, and I'll save your face tomorrow.

Ribicoff: Well, I—sometime, I would really like to talk with you—

President Johnson: You can do it. Any hour.

Ribicoff: I love politics.

President Johnson: Any hour. I've had 56 days in this job, and they've been the most miserable 56 I've ever had.

Ribicoff: [*speaking under President Johnson*] You're doing good, sir.

President Johnson: And my people are going [in] opposite directions. And now damn Harry [F.] Byrd [Sr.] [D-Virginia] goes one way, and he says, "Cut your damn budget, and I'll help you get your bill out." He called me yesterday and said, "It'll be reported tomorrow." I thought it was all settled.

Ribicoff: You're doing great, Mr. President. Honest to God. You're doing so great, it isn't even—

President Johnson: Will you go in there and help me this afternoon?

Ribicoff: Let me try. Let me see how I can work it out.

President Johnson: Well, you just work it out. [Ribicoff laughs.] Now, don't say how. I don't give a damn about the details. I just want you to work it out. Will you?

Ribicoff: I'll do my—

President Johnson: All right.

Ribicoff: OK, Mr. President.

President Johnson: Bye.

Ribicoff: Bye.

End of WH6401-19-1493 excerpt.

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