



A “Three-Prong Approach” to Medicare

Date: 1964-06-11

Conversation: WH6406-06-3686-3687

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Wilbur D. Mills

Start Time: 15:55

Duration: 03:16

Place: Oval Office

SCENE SETTER: President Johnson discussed the administration’s Medicare bill with House Ways and Means Committee chair Wilbur D. Mills [D–Arkansas]. Later that month, Mills implemented parliamentary maneuvers to block Medicare for the year, but this conversation foreshadowed Mills’s strategy for a 1965 compromise bill that included both Medicaid and coverage of physicians’ bills.

Wilbur D. Mills: We’ll get back on this Social Security bill, then, the 22nd of June, and I’m going to wind it up that week to where we can have it reported, whatever it is, and ready for House action, perhaps even before the Republican convention. We can decide on that, whether we take it up before or after. But we can get—we can wrap—we’ve got most of our language written so that there won’t be a long delay from the time we make our final decision, and we—

President Johnson: If you do that, that’ll do more for us this year than any other single thing that we’ll do except your tax bill, and that’s already behind us. But [*Mills acknowledges*] it’ll be the most positive, affirmative, future thing that we’ll have. And—

Mills: Well, now, let me ask you this to get your judgment on it.

President Johnson: I’d rank it number one.

Mills: If we pass—if I can’t get something that I can get more than 13 votes on—I told you in the beginning, and I thought you and I both felt that it ought to get more than that—

President Johnson: God, what percentage you want, 13 out of 15? That’s 90 percent, isn’t it?

Mills: Yeah, but I mean 13 out of 25.

President Johnson: Oh, no! No, no. Well, you don’t ever expect to get Republicans. They’re going to be against any proposal I make. All of them against poverty. Every single one of them.

Mills: But they’re not always against Social Security. I’ve got them in a bind if they vote against reporting this bill.

President Johnson: They won't always be against the other, either, if you ever give them a taste of it. I'll tell you this: they all voted against Social Security when we enacted it—

Mills: I know.

President Johnson: —when we started it, but they won't do it if you give them a taste of it.

Mills: No, I know that. And they all want to be for these cash benefits, you see.

President Johnson: Mm-hmm.

Mills: This increase in cash benefits, and that's going to—that, too, is very helpful. The Secretary said yesterday in the committee before we quit that what we're talking about is the last—this three-prong approach, he calls it, which would have some hospitalizations connected with Social Security, this cash benefit increase, plus improvements of the Kerr-Mills [Act]. [*Unclear*]—

President Johnson: I'd be for all three of those, if you could put that fourth one in on it, your 13. If you didn't, I'd wait till I could get them all together, because I think if you don't, why, you just murder the other one, and I think the other one's what's got the sex appeal.

Mills: They have—Now, if we didn't put it in, what—would the Senate put it in?

President Johnson: I don't think so.

Mills: You don't?

President Johnson: I think that—I don't—I doubt they'd ever even take it up. I imagine if you don't get that out till July the 1st, I'll have to get them back here between conventions to handle it. And I just—I would do that if you had it, 'cause I think it's the best thing that we can have for 50 states, and I've been in a good many of them, and I'm going to a bunch more this weekend.

When I get back next week from California, I will have been in states that have a hundred million population in the first six months of this year. Like yesterday in Massachusetts, like the day before in Pennsylvania. And when I get through with Michigan and California—I've already been to Michigan and to California, too—when I get through with them, this last run, I'll have a hundred million. My judgment is, that is by far the most popular thing that we've ever touched and will do us more good than all the other put together. And I'd put taxes and civil rights and poverty and education bills, all of which we will have passed—I don't think they're this one's comparison.

Mills: You remember what President [Franklin D.] Roosevelt said: “You don't get any mileage politically out of taxes.”

President Johnson: Well, I think we are, because we're having prosperity.

End of excerpt.

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