



## “We Found the Car”

**Date:** 1964-06-23

**Conversation:** WH6406-14-3837-3838

**Participant:** Lyndon B. Johnson

**Participant:** J. Edgar Hoover

**Start Time:** 16:05

**Duration:** 04:00

**Place:** Oval Office

SCENE SETTER: A few minutes before this call, Sen. James O. “Jim” Eastland [D–Mississippi] told President Johnson that the disappearance of three civil rights workers—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—was a “publicity stunt.” Johnson then took a call from Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director J. Edgar Hoover and learned that the Bureau had found the activists’ burned-out car. Hoover speculated that “these men have been killed.”

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**J. Edgar Hoover:** Mr. President?

**President Johnson:** [*talking on speakerphone*] Yeah.

**Hoover:** I wanted to let you know we found the car.

**President Johnson:** Yeah?

**Hoover:** Now, [*clears throat*] this is not known. Nobody knows this at all, but the car was burned, and we do not know yet whether any bodies are inside of the car, because of the intense heat that still is in the area of the car. The license plates on the car are the same that was on the car that was in Philadelphia, Mississippi, yesterday, and apparently this is off to the side of the road. It wasn’t going toward Meridian, but it was going in the opposite direction.

Now, whether there are any bodies in the car, we won’t know until we can get into the car ourselves. We’ve got agents, of course, on the ground, and as soon as we get definite word, I’ll, of course, get word to you. But I did want you to know that apparently what’s happened: these men have been killed. Although, as I say, we can’t tell whether there are any bodies in there in view of the intense heat.

**President Johnson:** Well, now, what would make you think they’d been killed?

**Hoover:** Because of the fact that it is the same car that they were in, in Philadelphia, Mississippi, and the same license number is on the outside of the car. Now, as I say, the heat is so intense you can’t tell—on the inside everything’s been burned—whether there are any charred bodies or not. It is

merely an assumption that probably they were burned in the car. On the other hand, they may have been taken out and killed on the outside.

**President Johnson:** Or maybe kidnapped and locked up.

**Hoover:** How's that?

**President Johnson:** Or maybe kidnapped and locked up.

**Hoover:** Well, I would doubt whether those people down there would even give them that much of a break. But, of course, we're going to go into that very thoroughly, not only as to the fact as to whether they're still alive. If they're not in the car, then they maybe have been killed and their bodies buried in one of those swamps down there.

**President Johnson:** Where did you find the car? How far from Philadelphia?

**Hoover:** The car was about, I'd say, eight miles from Philadelphia, but not in the direction of Meridian. It was in the opposite direction. Now, they had left Philadelphia—according to the reports that we had earlier—to go to Meridian, which is about 20 miles. This, however, was on State Highway 21, and the car was off to the side of the highway, although it could be seen from the highway. And an Indian agent—there's an Indian [Choctaw] reservation down in that area, although the car is not on the reservation—an Indian agent saw the car and immediately notified us, and we went there, and there we found this condition.

**President Johnson:** How long had the car been burnt, you reckon, six, eight hours?

**Hoover:** Well, we . . . we frankly don't know. The intense heat would have indicated that the car probably had been burning for nearly six hours, or five or six hours.

**President Johnson:** What would you indicate? They filled it with gasoline, and . . .

**Hoover:** I would think so, yes. There wasn't any indication of any explosion like dynamite or anything of that kind. And, of course, dynamite wouldn't have caused the intense heat and fire that kerosene or gasoline would have.

**President Johnson:** Well, looks like a poor fellow would jump out of a car that's burning.

**Hoover:** Well, you would think they would, unless they'd been bound and were locked in that car, and then the car set afire.

**President Johnson:** Well, why wouldn't an agent be able to look at a car and see if there's any bones in it?

**Hoover:** See whether there are any bodies in it?

**President Johnson:** Any bones, yeah.

**Hoover:** Well, the reason for that is the car is so burned and charred with heat that you can't get close to it, except that we did get the license number, which is on the outside of the car.

**President Johnson:** You mean it's still burning?

**Hoover:** Well, the car is still burning, yes.

**President Johnson:** You mean you think this happened in the last few minutes, then?

**Hoover:** No, I don't think it's the last few minutes. I think it's something that's happened within the last maybe five or six hours. You see, they didn't leave there until sometime yesterday, I think it was.

**President Johnson:** OK, you call me as soon as you can.

*End of excerpt.*

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