



Turning “Tax-Eaters” into “Taxpayers”

Date: 1964-07-29

Conversation: WH6407-18-4407

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: George H. Mahon

Start Time: 19:33

Duration: 02:10

Place: Unspecified

SCENE SETTER: During a summer of civil unrest in American cities and just over three months before the Election of 1964, President Johnson spoke with House Appropriations Committee chair George H. Mahon [D–Texas] about passing the Economic Opportunity Act—the enabling legislation for Johnson’s War on Poverty. The President explained that his approach would turn “tax-eaters” into “taxpayers.”

President Johnson: I want you to take a good look now and help me on my poverty [bill]. That’s what the Republicans want to beat, that one bill, and I’m going to take tax-eaters and make taxpayers out of them, and I’m going to stop these damn riots. I’ve gotten every one of these cities—all these young people have nothing to do, sitting around, and I got them all to agree today no more demonstrations. [*Mahon attempts to interject.*] And they’re asking, “Please, put these people to work.” And I’m going to put 150,000 of them to work in 90 days’ time on useful, hardworking projects. Teach them some discipline, and when to get up, and how to work all day, and in two years, I’ll have them trained where they can at least drive a truck instead of sit around a pool room. [*Mahon acknowledges.*] And I’ve got . . . [Charles N. “Charlie” Halleck [R–Indiana] said he’s going to have every Republican vote against it. And this is the only Johnson proposal that’s strictly mine, is the poverty bill. And I’ve got it out of existing funds that they’ve been using in [Departments of] Labor and HEW [Health, Education, and Welfare], and I’ve got it in my budget estimate, and I’ve got it all centralized under the best administrator I got. So, please, for God’s sakes, try to—the [Omar T.] Burlesons [D–Texas] and the rest of them that run off, tell them they can vote against me the rest of the year, but don’t vote on that one thing where the Republicans are going to brand my nose.

George H. Mahon: Well, I’m going to help you get all the money. Now, I’m a little in the problem here, but I’ll pray over it, and I’ll be in touch.

President Johnson: Oh, please. Don’t you—you help me, because this is one I just can’t lose. This is the only Johnson proposal I’ve got. The only bill, and it’s as sound as a dollar. I’m making them work for it. I want to take taxpayers . . . and make taxpayers out of them. And all they’re doing is sitting around on the porch now. Every home I’ve gone into has had an old 18-, 19-year-old boy that’s been turned back from the [U.S.] Army, and all he’s doing is sitting there with a relief check. I want to take him and work [the] hell out of him, and I’ll work a good many of them right in your Lubbock [Texas] and show them how to do it, and they’ll be bragging on it more than they are the Peace

Corps. And the conservatives will be leading the hay way, because my NYA [National Youth Administration] produced the governor of Texas [John B. Connally]. That's where I got him.

Mahon: Yes, that's right.

President Johnson: He came right off of Floresville for 15 dollars a month. [*Mahon acknowledges.*] But you pray at it and look at it.

Mahon: OK, I'll do it.

President Johnson: Bye, bye.

End of excerpt.

CITATION: "Lyndon Johnson and George Mahon on 29 July 1964," Conversation WH6407-18-4407, *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition* [Lyndon B. Johnson: Civil Rights, Vietnam, and the War on Poverty, ed. David G. Coleman, Kent B. Germany, Guian A. McKee, and Marc J. Selverstone] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–).

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