



“I Don’t Want to Be a Warmonger”

Date: 1965-07-07

Conversation: WH6507-02-8311-8312-8313

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Martin Luther King Jr.

Start Time: 20:05

Duration: 05:20

Place: Oval Office

SCENE SETTER: A long telephone call between President Johnson and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in July 1965 revealed a close link between the issues of civil rights and Vietnam. Having recently delivered a speech that seemed critical of Johnson’s Vietnam policies, King phoned in to clarify his remarks. The President responded with a torrent of speech, outlining his dilemmas.

Martin Luther King Jr.: In the last few days, in fact, last week I made a speech in [Petersburg] Virginia, where I made a statement concerning the Vietnam situation.

End of excerpt 1.

King: And I think the press, unfortunately, lifted it out of context and made it appear that I made a statement saying that we should unilaterally withdraw troops from Vietnam, which I know is very unreasonable, and that the civil rights movement should take on the whole peace struggle of the foreign policy issue as a part of this whole struggle. And this was totally out of context, and I felt it would eventually come to your attention. And I wanted you to know exactly what I said.

End of excerpt 2.

President Johnson: Well, you’re very . . . helpful, and I appreciate it. I did see it. I was distressed. I do want to talk to you. I’d welcome a chance to review with you my problems and our alternatives there.

End of excerpt 3.

President Johnson: I’ve tried to do my best to . . . I’ve lost about 264 lives up to now.

King: Yes.

President Johnson: And I could lose 265,000 mighty easy, and I’m trying to keep those zeros down and, at the same time, not trigger a conflagration that would be worse if we pulled out.

I can't stay there and do nothing. Unless I bomb, they run me out right quick. That's the only pressure we have, and if . . . if they'll quit bombing, if they'll quit coming in, if they'll quit tearing up our roads and our highways, and quit taking over our camps, and bombing our planes, and destroying them, why, we'll quit the next day if they'll just leave the folks alone. But they won't do it. So the only pressure we can put on is to try to hold them back as much as we can by taking their bridges out and delaying them, by taking out their ammunition dumps and destroying them, by taking out their radar stations that permit them to shoot down our planes.

Now, that's what we've been doing. A good many people, including the military, think that's not near enough; I ought to do a lot more. But I've tried to keep it to that so I won't escalate it and get into trouble with China and with Russia. And I don't want to be a warmonger.

At the same time, if I didn't do that, I'd stayed as long as I could the other way. I held up till February after I came in in November. I went from November to November, and from November to February, but they kept coming. They just kept coming, and I couldn't stand it any longer. I had to get out or do it. Now, I'm doing it with a restrained and with the best judgment that I know how.

King: Yes.

President Johnson: If I pulled out, I think that our commitments would be no good anywhere. I think it would immediately trigger a situation in Thailand that would be just as bad as it is in Vietnam. I think we'd be right back to the Philippines with problems. I think we'd . . . the Germans would be scared to death that our commitment to them was no good. And God knows what we'd have other places in the world. I think it's the situation we had in Lebanon. I think it's the situation we had in Formosa. I think it's the situation we had in Greece and Turkey and Iran. And [Harry S.] Truman and [Dwight D.] Eisenhower, none of these people, allowed them to go in and take these people's freedom away from them. And I'm trying—I didn't get us into this. We got into it in '54. Eisenhower and [John F. "Jack"] Kennedy were in it deep. We had 33,000 men out there when I came into the presidency.

Now, I don't want to pull down the flag and come home running with my tail between my legs, particularly if it's going to create more problems than I got out there, and it would according to all of our best judges. On the other hand, I don't want to get us in a war with China and Russia, so I've got a pretty tough problem. And I'm not all wise. I pray every night to get direction and judgment and leadership that permit me to do what's right.

End of excerpt 4.

King: Well, I certainly appreciate your position [*unclear*]. And the breadth of your concern, [*unclear*] represents true leadership and true greatness. And [*unclear*], and we all think it.

President Johnson: Well . . .

King: I don't think I've had a chance to thank you for what I consider the greatest speech [at Howard University] that any president has made on the question of civil rights. [*Unclear*] the depth, the grasp, and the sensitivity, and everything [*unclear*]. [*Unclear*.]

President Johnson: Well, I'll send out—I'm having some new copies printed. I'll send you some of them. And got one with your picture in it. Got one of our leadership meetings here, and I put some pictures in the printed copy. I'll send you some.

King: Well, I'll [*unclear*]—

President Johnson: If you're up this way anyway, you let me know and [we'll] talk about it. And I hope that you do talk to Roy [O. Wilkins], and y'all see what can be done quick, [*King acknowledges*] 'cause tomorrow's Thursday, and this thing will be decided Thursday and Friday.

King: Well, I'll get right to work tonight.

President Johnson: OK.

End of excerpt 5.

CITATION: "Lyndon Johnson and Martin Luther King Jr. on 7 July 1965," Conversation WH6507-02-8311-8312-8313, *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–).

URL: <http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4002519>

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