



“We Need Your Help”

Date: 1965-09-10
Conversation: WH6509-03-8847
Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson
Participant: Russell B. Long
Participant: Edwin E. Willis
Start Time: 14:36
Duration: 03:13
Place: Oval Office

SCENE SETTER: Speaking with Sen. Russell B. Long [D–Louisiana] the day after Hurricane Betsy slammed into New Orleans, President Johnson heard about the Category 4 storm’s damage to the region. Long implored Johnson to tour the affected areas—a visit, the senator assured him, that would pay significant political dividends.

President Johnson: Hello?

Russell B. Long: Hello?

President Johnson: Yes, Russell.

Long: Mr. President. [*aside*] [Edwin E.] Ed [Willis] [D–Louisiana], pick up. [*to President Johnson*] Mr. President, I’ve got Ed Willis here. He’s my congressman, Third District. Mr. President, aside from the Great Lakes, the biggest lake in America is Lake Pontchartrain. It is now drained dry. That Hurricane Betsy picked the lake up and put it inside New Orleans and Jefferson Parish in the Third District. Now, [*President Johnson coughs*] you have, if I do say it, our people are just like—well, it’s like my home: the whole damn home’s been destroyed. But that’s all right; my wife and kids are still alive, so it’s OK. But, Mr. President, we have really had it down there, and we need your help.

President Johnson: All right. You got it.

Long: Well, now, if I do say it . . . we’ve only lost one life so far. Why we haven’t lost more, I can’t say. For example, that damn big 400-year-old tree fell on top of my house. My wife and kids were, thank God, in the right room. So we’re still alive. I don’t need no federal aid. But, Mr. President, my people, oh, they’re in tough shape.

Ed Willis is here. If I do say, you could elect [T.] Hale Boggs [Sr.] [D–Louisiana] and every guy you’d want to elect in the path of this hurricane by just handling yourself right. Now, if you want to go to Louisiana right now—you lost that state last time—you could pick it up just like looking at it right now, by going down there as the president to see what happened. Now, if you wanted to, you could just—you could save yourself a campaign speech. Just go there right now. Just go. Say, “My God, this

is horrible. These federally constructed levies that Hale Boggs and Russell Long built is the only thing that saved 5,000 lives.”

Now, if you want to do that, you could do it right now. Just pick one state up like looking at it. You lost it last time. If you do that, you’d sack them up. And Ed Willis is sitting on this telephone, and he knows like I know that all you got to do is just make a generous gesture . . . he’d get reelected [*unclear*].

President Johnson: Russell, I sure want to. I’ve got a hell of two days that I’ve got scheduled. Let me look and see what I can back out of and get into, and so on, and so forth, and let me give you a ring back. If I can’t go, I’ll put the best man I got there.

Long: Well, now, listen: we are not the least bit interested in your best man, as far as we’re concerned. I’m just a Johnson man.

President Johnson: I know that. I know that.

Long: But . . . Let’s just not kid ourselves, now. When I run for office next time, I’m going to be on the same side you’re going to be on, and frankly, if you go to Louisiana right now—you might just make a little stop on the way to Texas—if you go to Louisiana right now, land at Moisant Airport [New Orleans International Airport], say, “The President was very much upset about the horrible destruction and damage done to this city of New Orleans—lovely town, the town everybody loves.” If you go there right now, Mr. President, they couldn’t beat you if [Dwight D.] *Eisenhower* ran!

President Johnson: Mm-hmm. Let me think about it and call you back.

Long: OK. Thank—

President Johnson: I love you. Thank you, Ed.

Edwin E. “Ed” Willis: OK.

President Johnson: Thank you, my friend.

Long: Bye.

President Johnson: Bye.

End of excerpt.

CITATION: Conversation WH6509-03-8847, 10 September 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Draft Transcript, Presidential Recordings Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia.

This conversation was transcribed by the [Miller Center’s Presidential Recordings Program](#) with the generous support of the [National Historical Publications and Records Commission](#).

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