



“The President Has This Authority”

Date: 1966-02-20

Conversation: WH6602-05-9649

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Dean Rusk

Start Time: 10:10

Duration: 01:57

Place: Mansion

SCENE SETTER: Following hearings in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that challenged President Johnson’s prosecution of the Vietnam War, Johnson and Secretary of State Dean Rusk considered the value of seeking a resolution from Congress to update the August 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which authorized the President to protect U.S. national security in Southeast Asia. Both thought that doing so would be unwise.

President Johnson: I talked [to] Clark [M.] Clifford a long time last night. He thinks that we are . . . we would just be idiotic . . .

Dean Rusk: [*Unclear*] the vote [*unclear*]?

President Johnson: To ask for a new resolution. [*Snorts.*] [*Rusk acknowledges throughout.*] He says that that resolution cannot be plainer than it is. That it is unlimited. That you cannot set to what you do. You imply that you question yourself about what you’ve been doing. You imply to the people that, well, hell, you didn’t have authority all along. “Now,” he said, “the first thing you got to do is make abundantly clear that you got all the authority you need as commander in chief—160 times you’ve gone in. Number two, you got to make it clear that this treaty requires you to stand up to your commitment. Number three, you got to make it clear you wouldn’t exercise any of these troops, wouldn’t put them out there, and wouldn’t start the bombing, until they said they’d go in with us, and we’re all together, and we’re one nation, united, indivisible. Now, then,” he said, “you come along and say, ‘Well, I want a new resolution.’ You imply that you—something wrong with this one.” And said, “Would this one just last 18 months like the last one? And where the hell would you be?” He says you—

Rusk: Well, in the floor debate in the Senate, it was pointed out and—that the President has this authority.

President Johnson: Yeah.

Rusk: And that this is a case of the Congress joining with the President.

President Johnson: That’s right.

Rusk: And several of them made that point.

President Johnson: That's right.

Rusk: Now . . . I think—

President Johnson: I think that'd be one good thing, though, for George [E. Reedy] [*Rusk acknowledges*] to point up: that there's 160 times the President has gone in without a declaration of war to protect the interests of the United States. That we—the President has this constitutional power. [*Unclear*]—

Rusk: The figure I had was 125, Mr. President.

President Johnson: Well, whatever it is. [*Rusk acknowledges.*] Let him get it. They told me 163.

Rusk: Yeah.

President Johnson: But whatever it is, and—or [1]23. I don't care. [*Rusk acknowledges.*] Just assert that he has it.

Rusk: Right.

End of excerpt.

CITATION: Conversation WH6602-05-9649, 20 February 1966, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Draft Transcript, Presidential Recordings Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia.

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