



“I’m Not a Master of Nothing”

Date: 1968-03-24

Conversation: WH6803-05-12844-12845-12846-12847

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Henry H. “Joe” Fowler

Start Time: 16:24

Duration: 03:04

Place: Mansion

SCENE SETTER: President Johnson and Secretary of the Treasury Henry H. “Joe” Fowler discussed the tax surcharge bill and tensions over conservative demands for cuts in social spending as the price for supporting the bill. When Fowler called Johnson the “master of the Senate,” Johnson despondently replied, “I’m not master of a damn thing . . . I’m not a master of nothing.”

Henry H. “Joe” Fowler: Let me run over two other notions about this situation tomorrow: One, whether or not it’d be a good idea to have [Michael J. “Mike”] Mansfield [D–Montana] invite the Democratic members of the Appropriations Committee to meet in his office with me and with [William McC. “Bill”] Martin tomorrow.

President Johnson: [*Pause.*] No, I think it’d get out in the paper and just cause you lots of trouble. I don’t think it’s that strong. I think it’d be a good idea to have Mansfield meet with [Richard B. “Dick”] Russell [Jr.] [D–Georgia] in there. [*Fowler acknowledges.*] I just think that’d be bad, our meeting with his policy group, like [Edmund S.] Muskie [D–Maine] and some of those folks there. I rather think before we do it, we ought to talk to our Cabinet about it, because I’m—my guess is they’re going to come loose on it, unglued. The way I hear them talking and what I feel—I just don’t believe that [Stewart L.] Udall and [Orville L.] Freeman and [Wilbur J.] Cohen and [W. Willard “Bill”] Wirtz and the poverty group and housing—I believe they’re going to think that this is a reactionary Republican move that undoes all they’ve been fighting for. And that they ought to get a tax bill without having to cut them to pieces.

Fowler: Well, they just can’t get it, Mr. President. That’s the long and the short of it.

President Johnson: I think that’s right. I think that’s right.

Fowler: They just can’t get it. That 12–5 vote when [George A.] Smathers [D–Florida] offered the tax bill in committee and we got two Republicans—I mean, two Democratic votes! [*President Johnson acknowledges.*] We got Smathers and—wait a minute, Smathers, [Albert A. “Al”] Gore [Sr.] [D–Tennessee], and [Fred R.] Harris [D–Oklahoma]. Now, that’s what we got.

President Johnson: Is Harris for cutting these things? That’s what I’m—

Fowler: I don't know.

President Johnson: I don't see how he writes the Civil Disorders Committee [*unclear*]

Fowler: I don't know whether he will be or not. I haven't counted him.

President Johnson: He's raising hell about my not embracing this Disorders Committee report, you know. I don't know how I could be—

Fowler: Well, you hear, of course, from this constituency. And I know it's there. I know the concern about it. Of course, the constituency I hear from is just all the other way. And [Richard M. "Dick"] Nixon is preparing a blast for a speech on fiscal responsibility to tear the hide off. He's going to make a major issue of it.

President Johnson: I think that's right. I sure think he's there. [*Fowler attempts to interject.*] And I think that it's right with the Congress. It's not because we haven't—we can't make them do it. We've been abandoned.

Fowler: Well, you see, however, the—as I've told you, the trap that—the plan that [John J.] Williams [R-Delaware] has made is to point out that you've got two-thirds of the Senate. You are the master of the Senate and always have been.

President Johnson: That's not—I'm not master of a damn thing. I haven't got anybody—

Fowler: Well—

President Johnson: —I can't—Mansfield—I can't even get Mansfield! He makes a speech against me every Thursday, just regular. Denounces me and all the world.

Fowler: Well, the more you say that, though, the more the—you're going to feed up to the Williams thesis, which is: the Democrats are not fit to rule.

President Johnson: I'm not saying much about it, but you—I'm trying to give you the facts, though. I'm not master of nothing. I just haven't got it, and we cannot make this Congress do one damn thing that I know of, or the last one, either.

End of excerpt.

CITATION: "Lyndon B. Johnson and Henry H. 'Joe' Fowler on 24 March 1968," Conversation WH6803-05-12844-12845-12846-12847, *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition* [Johnson Telephone Tapes: 1968, ed. Kent B. Germany, Nicole Hemmer, and Ken Hughes] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–). URL: <http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4011067>

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

Full information about this conversation: ["I'm Not a Master of Nothing"](#)