

WH6402-09-1932_scroller

Date: 1964-02-07

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Richard B. Russell Jr.

Start Time: 16:30

Place: Oval Office

SCROLLER TITLE: "We Don't Want Your Damn Water"

SCENE SETTER: After Cuban leader Fidel Castro shut off water to the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo Bay in reaction to the United States's detainment of Cuban fishermen near Florida, President Johnson discussed the proposed U.S. response with Senate Armed Services chair and longtime mentor Senator Richard B. "Dick" Russell Jr. [D-Georgia].

President Johnson: Hello?

Richard B. "Dick" Russell Jr.: Yes, sir.

President Johnson: Dick, we're going to meet again at 4:30.

Russell: Well, that's right now.

President Johnson: Yeah. I wanted to talk to you before I went in the meeting. They're meeting downstairs. Now, here's the . . . Nobody wants to do much. They think that [in the] first place these fishermen oughtn't to even have been picked up, that it was a mistake, and that they [were] over the limits, but we ought [to have] told them to get on back home and not make a big incident out of it, because [there is] not anything to be gained from it. And we ought to let him [Fidel A. Castro Ruz] show his hand, whether this is in concert with [Nikita S.] Khrushchev, and what all it means, before we act irrational.

There's an opposing viewpoint—that's pretty well the viewpoint of [Dean] Rusk and [John A.] McCone and, I would say, [Robert F.] Bobby Kennedy. He wants to turn everybody loose and let them go on home.

[Robert S. "Bob"] McNamara feels like the sentiment in this country is such that we've got to do more than that, and that even though we would stand acquitted in the eyes of the world and maybe some of the liberal papers in this country, that we probably ought to do two things: declare the independence of that base by saying, "We're going to furnish our own water, and we don't want your damn water, and to hell with you." And, number two, tell the people that are on there that they can pledge allegiance to us and live there—the 600—and the other 2,500 to go on back, and we're going to quit financing [Cubans]. "We're going to operate the base independently, so our country can be secure, and so we can operate it independently. And it's going to hurt you more by this action than hurts us, and we just don't need your people."

Now, that's his feeling. He's about the only one that feels that way. That's my feeling. I think we ought to rap them.

Russell: That's mine.

President Johnson: I think that they'll say we're cruel, and these people have been loyal to us for two or three generations, been working there. We're just firing them outright without anything on their part, 'cause Castro did this. And USIA [United States Information Agency] thinks it'll get a good deal of sympathy from the rest of the nations, and . . .

Russell: Well, that's their professional attitude. These nations ain't as silly as we attribute them to be, as we seem to think they are. And while they're envious as hell of us, when they get down to where their self-interest is involved—and when we get hurt, their self-interest is injured—they're not nearly as bad as everybody makes out like they are.

End of excerpt.

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