

WH6610-02-10916_scroller

Date: 1966-10-03

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Dwight D. Eisenhower

Start Time: 17:24

Place: Mansion

SCROLLER TITLE: "I Didn't Say I'd Use Atomic Bombs"

SCENE SETTER: Former president Dwight D. Eisenhower expressed annoyance with rumors that he had threatened the use of atomic weapons during the Korean War and had advocated use of such weapons in Vietnam. He reiterated to President Johnson that in the current conflict "I *never* vary from my stand that this is your responsibility."

Dwight D. Eisenhower: Mr. President, what bothers me is this: you see, in the Korean War, these people are trying to say, "Now, you said so-and-so in the Korean War." I said, "My friends, no two military situations are the same, and no two political situations. Here is a war that is the most nasty and unpredictable thing we've ever been in, and it's just as much political as it is military. Therefore, when I said in Korea, I didn't say I'd use atomic bombs. I said that I would no more be inhibited or limited by the gentlemen's agreement that'd been prevailing up to the time I got there. That if we had to bomb the Yalu [River] bridges, or going over to the bases in China where this stuff was coming from, I'd do it, and I'd use whatever weapons were necessary to win." Now, I sent that through three different avenues, and we got—I said, "unless—this is going to be done unless the armistice is signed." Well, now, the conditions—well, at that time, we had a practical monopoly of all bombs, and there was no—the conditions are *not* the same, that the war is different, and now they're trying to say that—they want me to say, wouldn't I raise atomic bombs [in Vietnam].

President Johnson: No.

Eisenhower: I said, "Nobody could make such a decision except the President of the United States, and I'm not even going to attempt it."

President Johnson: That's right. And, General—

Eisenhower: But I just want to point out that I *never* vary from my stand that this is your responsibility. If I have any ideas, that what we should do or could do, I communicate them to you through [*unclear*]

President Johnson: I know that. I know.

Eisenhower: —channels. And whenever I have to say about—that may sound critical, it's merely that I want [*President Johnson attempts to interject*] to win the damn war before I go to the moon or anything else.

President Johnson: General, you'd never—you've just hit—you've said what I think. And [*slight chuckle*] you told me this: you may have forgotten it, but the first visit you made to my office when I talked to you [about] Vietnam, over in the Old Executive Office Building, you told me that you sent word through [John Foster] Dulles to [Jawaharlal] Nehru, that you were not going to be bound by [*clears throat*] any sanctuaries or any weapons. That you were going to do what was best for your country, and you wanted to bring it to an end.

Eisenhower: That's right.

President Johnson: And you didn't get specific or anything. You just said, "Let that word get around." And [Robert B.] Bob Anderson told me that he heard the same thing, and I think it was a proper thing. And they're trying to get you to say that you want to drop an atomic bomb on somebody, [*Eisenhower attempts to interject*] and we know that you—you don't do anything that's not well thought out.

Eisenhower: They wanted me to say that I want to tell you publicly how to run this war, and I said, [*President Johnson laughs*] "I won't do it."

President Johnson: [*chuckling*] Well, I sure [*unclear*]*—*I need all the help I can get, so you—

Eisenhower: As I say, the President knows I'm always available.

President Johnson: I know that.

Eisenhower: And I'm just not going to be in a position of dividing the United States at a time when it needs unity.

President Johnson: I know that. You've always shown that, and I told Everett [M.] Dirksen [R-Illinois] this morning—he said he made a little statement this morning—said "We got one blood out there, and one flag, and one uniform." And I said, "Well, I've been paid 1,000 percent." I said, "Everett, do you remember when I used to have to stand up when [William F.] Bill Knowland would go in the back row and attack the President, and I'd stand up and do it?" He said, "You sure did." I said, "Well, I've been paid 100 percent dividends for three years now."

End of excerpt.

CITATION: Conversation WH6610-02-10916, 3 October 1966, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Draft Transcript, Presidential Recordings Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia.