



“That Wasn’t Smart at All”

Date: 1964-02-01
Conversation: WH6402-02-1815
Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson
Participant: R. Sargent Shriver
Start Time: 18:28
Duration: 00:47
Place: Oval Office

SCENE SETTER: Three weeks before President John F. Kennedy’s assassination, the president of South Vietnam, Ngô Đình Diệm, was assassinated in a coup d’état along with his brother and top adviser, Ngô Đình Nhu. Speaking to Kennedy’s brother-in-law, R. Sargent Shriver, President Johnson recalled his opposition to the Diệm coup when it was debated at the highest levels of the Kennedy administration.

President Johnson: We were—we weren’t . . . We . . . we’ve assassinated a few people, you know, [*Shriver acknowledges*] and that always gives us problems. That’s not . . . We went in there and killed them off, and now you see what shape we’re in.

R. Sargent Shriver: I’ve often wondered whether—how smart that was.

President Johnson: That wasn’t smart at all. Wasn’t smart at all.

Shriver: Was it—yeah, that’s that CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] business [*unclear*].

President Johnson: Well, it just wasn’t smart at all, my friend.

Shriver: Because they’re better off—they [Ngô Đình Diệm and Ngô Đình Nhu] were better off than what you got now.

President Johnson: I attended one meeting, and they asked me my opinion, and I said, “If you boys want to play cops and robbers, why don’t you get on television, but goddamn it, let’s don’t go to doing it with our allies, because you—take you six months to get back where you are now.”

Shriver: You’re right.

President Johnson: But . . . They wanted to play cops and robbers, and they have, so . . . Anyway, that’s water over the dam.

End of excerpt.

CITATION: “Lyndon Johnson and Sargent Shriver on 1 February 1964,” Tape WH6402.02, Citation #1815, *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition* [Toward the Great Society, vol. 4, ed. Robert David Johnson and Kent B. Germany] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–).

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Full information about this conversation: [“That Wasn’t Smart at All”](#)