



“I Think It’s Dynamite”

Date: 1964-02-06

Conversation: WH6402-07-1912

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Robert S. McNamara

Start Time: 13:01

Duration: 02:27

Place: New York City

SCENE SETTER: When Cuban prime minister Fidel A. Castro cut off the water supply to the U.S. Navy’s base at Guantánamo, President Johnson discussed his options with Secretary of Defense Robert S. “Bob” McNamara.

President Johnson: What do you think about this Cuba water thing?

Robert S. “Bob” McNamara: Well, from a military point of view, we’re in no trouble. We have tankers and contingency plans, and we can keep up our water supply for some time. From a political point of view, I think it’s dynamite. I was just sitting here talking to Clark [M.] Clifford, who was over with us on some other problems, and I think we all agreed it has great potential domestic . . . effects associated with it. I talked to Dean Rusk a few minutes ago about it. He’s got [Department of] State working on the political aspects of it. [Maxwell D.] Max Taylor’s already started putting into effect our own contingency plans to ensure maintenance of supplies to the base.

Pause.

President Johnson: Well, what are our alternatives? I guess we could—you’ve got a water supply program where you can supply them without any great difficulty, haven’t you?

McNamara: Yes, that is correct.

President Johnson: Now, I guess there’ll be great demands that we declare war. Go after them. [*Chuckles.*] I mean, the rabble-rousers will start hollering. And I guess that we could probably go to a blockade of some kind, couldn’t we? Would that be our best pressure?

McNamara: Well, we could, but I doubt very much that that would be the first act, Mr. President. It—

President Johnson: Oh, no. Oh, no. No.

McNamara: —seems to me, and I haven’t—

President Johnson: I'm not talking about the first one, but I'm talking about the alternatives: what we could do, short of . . . the . . .

McNamara: Well, it seemed to me the first thing we should do is check up on the details of these plans, and we have [Rear] Admiral [J. W.] Davis, who's presently doing that, so we know exactly how much water we can get in there and how long we can last with it. If it is as I believe it is—that we can hold out indefinitely—then I think soon as this news is made public, we ought to immediately put out our statement that we—that it's an inconvenience, but we have other ways of supplying water to the base, and it'll not affect our military deployment in any way whatsoever. And that will give State a little time to figure out how to put some pressure on Cuba.

End of excerpt.

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