



“A Good B-Plus”

Date: 1964-03-07
Conversation: WH6403-05-2395
Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson
Participant: Lady Bird Johnson
Participant: Vicki McCammon
Start Time: 16:10
Duration: 04:31
Place: Oval Office

SCENE SETTER: At an afternoon press conference, President Johnson made several personnel announcements and fielded questions on topics including the vice presidency, relations with France, and Vietnam. A few minutes after it concluded, Lady Bird Johnson phoned the President with her assessment of his performance.

Vicki McCammon: Mrs. [Lady Bird] Johnson is calling, asking if she could speak to the President for a moment concerning his press conference.

President Johnson: [*answering on speakerphone*] Hello? Yeah?

Lady Bird Johnson: You want to listen for about one minute to—

President Johnson: [*Picks up the receiver.*] Yes, ma'am.

Lady Bird Johnson: —my critique, or would you rather wait till tonight?

President Johnson: Yes, ma'am. I'm willing now.

Lady Bird Johnson: [*Slight chuckle.*] I thought that you looked strong, firm, and like a reliable guy. Your looks were splendid. The close-ups were much better than the distance ones.

President Johnson: Well, you can't get them to do it [*unclear*] . . .

Lady Bird Johnson: Well, I would say this: there were more close-ups than there were distance ones. During the statement you were a little breathless, and there was too much looking down, and I think it was a little too fast. Not enough change of pace, dropping voice at the end of sentence. There was a considerable pickup in drama and interest when the questioning began. Your voice was noticeably better, and your facial expression's noticeably better. The mechanics of the room were not too good, 'cause although I heard you well throughout every bit of it, I did not hear your questioners clearly.

President Johnson: Well, the questioners won't talk—

Twelve seconds excised by the National Archives and Records Administration in accordance with the deed of gift.

Lady Bird Johnson: Some of them you could hear and . . . but in—generally, you could not hear them very well. Every now and then you need a good, crisp answer for change of pace, and therefore, I was very glad when you answered one man, “The answer to—is ‘no’ to both of your questions.” You—I thought your answer on [Henry Cabot] Lodge [Jr.] was good. I thought your answer on Vietnam was good. I really didn't like the answer on [Charles] de Gaulle, because I think I've heard you say, and I believe you actually have said out loud, that you don't believe you ought to go out of the country this year.

President Johnson: Well . . .

Lady Bird Johnson: So I don't think you can very well say that you'll meet him anytime that's convenient for both people.

President Johnson: Well, when we can—when it can be arranged. I'm not going out of this country. I didn't say where I'd go. [*Pause.*] [*speaking aside to aides*] I didn't say I'd go out of the country at all, did I?

Lady Bird Johnson: No, I guess—

President Johnson: [*to Lady Bird*] Press says I reaffirmed that I wouldn't go.

Lady Bird Johnson: I see, uh-huh. Well, then, I just didn't hear—didn't get the meaning of it that everybody else did.

I think the outstanding things were that the close-ups were excellent. You need to learn—When you're going to have a prepared text, you need to have the opportunity to study it a little bit more and to read it with a little more conviction and interest and change of pace, because you—

President Johnson: Well, the trouble is that they criticize you for taking so much time. They want to use it all for questions. Then their questions don't produce any news, and if you don't give them news, you catch hell. So my problem was trying to get through before ten minutes, and I still ran ten minutes today.

Lady Bird Johnson: Mm-hmm.

President Johnson: And I took a third of it for the questions, and I could have taken—if I'd have read it like I wanted to—15 minutes.

Lady Bird Johnson: Mm-hmm.

President Johnson: But I didn't know what to cut out. Maybe I ought to cut out Mary [W. Lasker]'s heart names, but I thought that everyplace one of those names was dropped they'd call up the fellow and ask him about it, and he'd get his name in the paper and then publicize it good, and it'd help the committee.

Lady Bird Johnson: Mm-hmm. I believe if I'd had that choice, I would have said use 13 minutes or 14 for the statement. In general, I'd say it was a good B-plus. How do you feel about it?

President Johnson: I thought it was much better than last week.

Lady Bird Johnson: Well, I heard last week, see, and didn't see it and didn't hear all of it. In any rate, I felt sort of on safe ground. I mean, like you had sort of gotten over a hump psychologically and in other ways. I—It'll be interesting to hear everybody else's reaction. And we got . . . I got . . . Well, the Thornberrys [W. Homer and Eloise E. Thornberry], anyhow, are awaiting a reasonably early dinner with us, and I got my ten o'clock date. And you do anything you want to about getting another couple or two to eat with us, and let me know. And I love you very much.

President Johnson: OK, good-bye.

Lady Bird Johnson: Bye.

End of excerpt.

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