



## “It’s a Mess”

**Date:** 1964-05-27

**Conversation:** WH6405-10-3519-3520-3521

**Participant:** Lyndon B. Johnson

**Participant:** Richard B. Russell Jr.

**Start Time:** 10:55

**Duration:** 03:47

**Place:** Oval Office

SCENE SETTER: President Johnson asked his mentor, Sen. Richard B. “Dick” Russell Jr. [D–Georgia], for advice on Vietnam. “It’s the damned worst mess I ever saw,” Russell declared, noting the political instability in South Vietnam, the hazards of invading North Vietnam, and the threat of Chinese escalation.

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**President Johnson:** What do you think about this Vietnam thing? What—I’d like to hear you talk a little bit.

**Richard B. “Dick” Russell Jr.:** Frankly, Mr. President, if you were to tell me that I was authorized to settle it as I saw fit, I would respectfully decline to undertake it. [*President Johnson chuckles.*] It’s . . . it’s the damned worst mess I ever saw, and I don’t like to brag—I never have been right many times in my life—but I knew we were going to get in this sort of mess when we went in there. And I don’t see how we’re going [to] ever get out of it without fighting a major war with the Chinese and all of them down there in those rice paddies and jungles. I just don’t see it. It’s . . . I just don’t know what to do.

**President Johnson:** Well, that’s the way I’ve been feeling for—

**Russell:** It’s deteriorating—

**President Johnson:** —six months.

**Russell:** Our situ[ation]—our position is deteriorating, and it looks like the more we try to do for them the less they’re willing to do for themselves.

*End of excerpt 1.*

**Russell:** It’s a hell of a . . . hell of a situation. It’s a mess, and it’s going to get worse. I don’t know what to do. If . . . I don’t think the American people are quite ready for us to send our troops in there to do the fighting. And if it came down to an option of just sending the Americans in there to do the fighting, which will, of course, eventually lead into a ground war and a conventional war with China, and we’d do them a favor every time we’d kill a coolie, whereas [if] one of our people got killed, it’d

be a loss to us—if it got down to that or just pulling out, I'd get out. But, then, I don't know. There's undoubtedly some middle ground somewhere. If I was going to get out, I'd get the same crowd that got rid of old [Ngô Đình] Diệm to get rid of these people and get some fellow in there that said he wished to hell we would get out. And that'd give us a good excuse for getting out. I just . . . it's . . . I see no terminal date or, boy oh boy, any part of that in there.

**President Johnson:** How important is it to us?

**Russell:** It isn't important a damn bit.

*End of excerpt 2.*

**Russell:** I just don't know; it's a tragic situation. It's just one of those places where you can't win. Anything you do is wrong.

*End of excerpt 3.*

**President Johnson:** Well, they'd impeach a President, though, that'd run out, wouldn't they?

**Russell:** No, sir, I don't think they would.

**President Johnson:** [*speaking over Russell*] I just don't believe—outside of [Wayne L.] Morse [D–Oregon], everybody I talk to says you got to go in, including [Bourke B.] Hickenlooper [R–Iowa], including all the Republicans. None of them disagreed with him yesterday when he made the statement that we had to stand. And I don't know how in the hell you're going to get out, unless they tell you to get out.

*End of excerpt 4.*

**President Johnson:** Wouldn't that pretty well fix us in the eyes of the world, though, and it'd make us look mighty bad? [*Sighs.*]

**Russell:** Well, I don't know. [*chuckling*] We don't look too good right now. And, of course, you'd look pretty good, I guess, going in there with all the troops, and sending them all in there, but I'll tell you, it'll be the most expensive venture this country ever went into [*unclear*]

**President Johnson:** I've got a little old sergeant [Kenneth “Ken” Gaddis] over that works for me over at the [White] House, and he's got six children. And I just put him up as the United States Army and Air Force and Navy every time I think about making this decision and think about sending that father of those six kids in there. And what the hell are we going to get out of his doing it? And it just makes the chills run up my back.

**Russell:** It does me. I just can't see it.

**President Johnson:** I just haven't got the nerve to do it, and I don't see any other way out of it.

**Russell:** You've got too much sense to do it.

*End of excerpt 5.*

CITATION: "Lyndon Johnson and Richard Russell on 27 May 1964," Tape WH6405.10, Citations #3519, #3520, and #3521, *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition* [Toward the Great Society, vol. 6, ed. Guian A. McKee] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–).  
URL: <http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/9060283>

This conversation was transcribed by the [Miller Center's Presidential Recordings Program](#) with the generous support of the [National Historical Publications and Records Commission](#).

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