



“The Biggest Damn Mess I Ever Saw”

Date: 1964-05-27

Conversation: WH6405-10-3522

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: McGeorge Bundy

Start Time: 11:24

Duration: 01:38

Place: Oval Office

SCENE SETTER: With the administration contemplating an escalation of the war in Vietnam, President Johnson spoke with National Security Adviser McGeorge “Mac” Bundy about the implications of American action and inaction. Both routes invited grave troubles as the war, Johnson said, was “just the biggest damn mess I ever saw.”

President Johnson: I’ll tell you, the more—I just stayed awake last night thinking about this thing—the more I think of it, I don’t know what in the hell . . . it looks like to me we’re getting into another Korea. [*Bundy acknowledges.*] It just worries the hell out of me. I don’t see what we can ever hope to get out of there with once we’re committed. [*Bundy attempts to interject.*] I believe the Chinese Communists are coming into it. I don’t think that we can fight them 10,000 miles away from home and ever get anywhere on—in that area. I don’t think it’s worth fighting for, and I don’t think we can get out. And it’s just the biggest damn mess I ever saw.

McGeorge “Mac” Bundy: It is. It’s an awful mess.

End of excerpt 1.

Bundy: One thing that has occurred to me—

President Johnson: [*speaking over Bundy*] What the hell is Vietnam worth to me? What is Laos worth to me? What is it worth to this country?

Bundy: [*speaking under President Johnson*] Well, we have to get [*unclear*] to explain this.

President Johnson: Now, we’ve got a treaty, but [*unclear*] . . . we got a treaty, but hell, everybody else got a treaty out there, and they’re not doing anything about it.

Bundy: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

President Johnson: Now, of course, if you start running [*from*] the Communists, they may just chase you right into your own kitchen.

Bundy: Yeah. That's the trouble. And that is what the rest of the—that half of the world is going to think if this thing comes apart on us. That's the dilemma. That's *exactly* the dilemma.

President Johnson: But everybody I talk to that's got any sense, now, they just says, "Oh, my God, *please* give this thought." Of course, I was reading [Michael J. "Mike"] Mansfield's [D-Montana] stuff this morning, and it's just [*Bundy acknowledges*] milquetoast as it can be, got no spine at all.

Bundy: Yeah.

President Johnson: But this is a terrible thing we're getting ready to do—

Bundy: Mr. President, I just think it's the biggest—it's the *only* big decision in one sense that was—this one is one [where] we have a need that we either reach up and get it or we let it go by. And I'm not telling you today what I'd do in your position. I just think the most we have to do is to pray with it for another while.

End of excerpt 2.

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Full information about this conversation: ["The Biggest Damn Mess I Ever Saw"](#)