



“You Can’t Talk About War Plans”

Date: 1964-08-06

Conversation: WH6408-09-4777-4778

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: James H. Rowe Jr.

Start Time: 13:35

Duration: 03:17

Place: Oval Office

SCENE SETTER: In response to incidents in the Tonkin Gulf, President Johnson launched the first U.S. bombing attacks on North Vietnam. Two days later, he asked political adviser James H. “Jim” Rowe Jr. to speak with Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey Jr. [DFL–Minnesota] regarding comments the senator had made about these events. Johnson feared that Humphrey had been too chatty in his remarks—and too accurate.

President Johnson: I don’t know . . . I don’t know how to get this message over, but this boy—our friend Hubert [H. Humphrey Jr.] [DFL–Minnesota]—is just destroying himself with his big mouth.

James H. “Jim” Rowe Jr.: Is he talking again?

President Johnson: Yeah, all the time. He never . . . he just can’t stop it. He’s just got hydrophobia, and every responsible person gets frightened when they see him. He hasn’t missed any program where he’s just like a wild man, when he kind of sees this thing in the distance. And what he ought to do is be a very retiring, and very sober, and very judicious, and . . . fellow.

Rowe: Yeah.

President Johnson: Now, yesterday morning he went on TV, and looks like he’s got by with it, but he said—everybody in the Joint Chiefs of Staff and every person in town that’s handling the war plans, it just scared them to death, because he just blabbed everything that he had heard in a briefing, just like it was his personal knowledge.

Rowe: Wow.

President Johnson: And almost—he wanted to claim credit for it.

They said, for instance, “How would you account for these PT boat attack[s] on our destroyers when we’re innocently out there in the gulf 60 miles from shore?” And [Robert S. “Bob”] McNamara said that that was a very difficult thing to explain the reasoning of these people. It may be that they wanted to try to scare us out of the area, but that he couldn’t explain Communist thinking on a good many matters.

Rowe: Mm-hmm.

President Johnson: [Dean] Rusk said substantially the same thing. Humphrey said, “Well, we have been carrying on some operations in that area, and we’ve been having some covert operations where we have been going in and knocking out roads and petroleum things, and so forth.”

Rowe: Good Lord.

President Johnson: And that’s exactly what we have been doing! [*Rowe acknowledges throughout.*] But the damn fool has got it up, and now he’s got [Wayne L.] Morse [D–Oregon] talking about it, who wasn’t in on the briefing. And it’s just—he’s just got to understand that you can’t talk about war plans; you just can’t talk about it.

Now, this morning—

Rowe: [*Unclear*] whole carrier out there [*unclear*] the war.

President Johnson: This morning, a fellow called me, very upset—one of the highest officials in the government—and said, “Have you talked to Humphrey about a communication from [Nikita S.] Khrushchev?” And I said “No. I haven’t seen Humphrey. Haven’t seen anybody around Humphrey. Haven’t talked to my wife [Lady Bird Johnson]. Haven’t talked to a human being!” Well, Humphrey has discussed the details of communications with Khrushchev that somebody must have let him know about, and with a correspondent for NBC [National Broadcasting Company]!

Rowe: Oh my.

President Johnson: And it’s the one thing that could make Khrushchev drop a bomb on us! [*Rowe acknowledges.*] And he just ought to keep his goddamn big mouth shut on foreign affairs at least until the election’s over.

Rowe: It’ll be done.

President Johnson: And just say that this has just got people running wild, and they’re running in every moment to me, [*Rowe acknowledges*] and for him not to be speculating on why the Communists would be doing something.

End of excerpt.

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