



“I Do Not Believe I Can”

Date: 1964-08-25

Conversation: WH6408-36-5177

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Walter W. Jenkins

Start Time: 11:23

Duration: 02:34

Place: Oval Office

SCENE SETTER: Two days before his anticipated acceptance of the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination, a dejected President Johnson delivered a bombshell to Lady Bird Johnson and several close advisers: he would withdraw from the race. This conversation with aide Walter W. Jenkins, one of several discussions that reflected Johnson’s state of mind that morning, outlined the President’s plans, which he ultimately abandoned.

President Johnson: I really . . . I do not believe, Walter, that I can physically and mentally—I— [Barry M.] Goldwater [Sr.]’s [R–Arizona] had a couple nervous breakdowns, and I don’t want to be in this place like [T. Woodrow] Wilson. And I do not believe I can physically and mentally carry the responsibilities of the bomb and the world and the Nigras and the South, and so on, and so forth.

Now, there are younger men and better-prepared men and better-trained men and Harvard-educated men, and I know my own limitations. I just don’t believe that I have the physical and mental strength to carry them. And I think the time to make that decision is while they’re there and not after they go home. [Pause.]

And I’ve thought about it a good deal this morning. And I haven’t written a statement in 20 years! But I’m just getting ready to write this one. I just got one more sentence on it, and I told them to have a helicopter stand by, and I’ll decide during the lunch hour. I’m going to meet with the [National] Security Council. And I’ll decide during the lunch hour what I’ll do about it and either come on up there or call in a press conference here.

You have any idea which would be better from your vantage point?

Walter W. Jenkins: [Pause.] I would . . .

President Johnson: From my standpoint, it’d be better here, because you don’t have to . . . you don’t have to go through any of the handshaking and the folderol. On the other hand, you kind of hate for your managers, you know, the folks that are for you, to hear it through the press. [President Johnson’s voice seems to quiver.] And . . . [Pause.]

Jenkins: I think that if you were going to do it . . .

President Johnson: *If* I'm going to do it? I'm going to do it. I told you that.

Jenkins: All right. Well, then, I . . . then it wouldn't make any great difference [*unclear*].

President Johnson: All right. That's what I think it will be. [Lady] Bird [Johnson] thought that I ought to go up there, because it wasn't quite right to hold them up this long and have everybody guessing. And I think I've got to decide on the vice presidency today, 'cause [Hubert H.] Humphrey [Jr.]'s [DFL–Minnesota] just being interviewed every ten minutes, and that's a whole thing. And it's undignified.

Jenkins: Yeah.

End of excerpt.

CITATION: "Lyndon Johnson and Walter Jenkins on 25 August 1964," Conversation WH6408-36-5177, *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition* [Lyndon B. Johnson: Civil Rights, Vietnam, and the War on Poverty, ed. David G. Coleman, Kent B. Germany, Guian A. McKee, and Marc J. Selverstone] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–). URL: <http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4002593>

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Full information about this conversation: ["I Do Not Believe I Can"](#)