



“I Think He Ought to Be Institutionalized”

Date: 1964-10-23

Conversation: WH6410-14-5948

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: J. Edgar Hoover

Start Time: 18:00

Duration: 02:59

Place: Mansion

SCENE SETTER: On 14 October 1964, White House aide Walter W. Jenkins resigned following his arrest on a morals charge. Nine days later, President Johnson and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director J. Edgar Hoover discussed the political and personal fallout from the incident in a conversation that revealed prevailing attitudes about homosexuality.

J. Edgar Hoover: Well, I had a long talk with [Abraham “Abe”] Fortas this morning. [*President Johnson acknowledges throughout.*] He was on his way to the hospital to see him [Walter W. Jenkins] again. I told Fortas that I thought it’d be very wise if—to see the superintendent in the hospital and get orders issued to the switchboard to—that no incoming calls should be taken. Not to put them through to his room.

President Johnson: I agree with that.

Hoover: Apparently, his wife, you see, was the one who told him all about this last night that set him off.

President Johnson: Well, both of them are really off balance right now.

Hoover: Indeed they are and, of course, it’s—a lot of this is terrible—I’ve been—I guess got 20 or 30 telegrams today, some from pretty prominent publishers, asking whether it was true that I had sent flowers. And I replied back to them that I had, and that he’s a friend, and that they had been sent to him before you had ordered me to make the investigation of it. [*President Johnson acknowledges throughout.*] Which is true, is that I ordered the flowers on Wednesday afternoon [*unclear*] had been notified in New York as soon as I had word the [*Washington Evening*] *Star* had this thing. But my feeling about it is—

President Johnson: Well, that’s terrible. There oughtn’t to be anything said about that. But what it is, it can’t prove anything but that—

Hoover: Can’t prove anything—

President Johnson: —that you’re a compassionate man, an understanding man, and—

Hoover: [*Unclear*] the Bible, you know—

President Johnson: —that’s—

Hoover: —says be careful about throwing the first stone lest you have sinned yourself.

President Johnson: You know, [William F.] Billy Graham [Jr.] called me and said that—and you can quote this [*laughs*—he said that he got out of bed at three o’clock the other night, and he just—he had known him, and he had such great respect for him and knew me and just said his prayers. And he said, “Just remember this: we have to do our duty, and our duty comes first, but remember that one of Christ’s apostles double-crossed him, and remember that he dealt with people with moral problems. He dealt with them gently. And always be compassionate but do your duty.”

Hoover: Well, of course, there’s so damn many hypocrites, you know.

President Johnson: That’s right.

Hoover: Particularly in the press in this country—

President Johnson: That’s right.

Hoover: —which are just like vultures.

President Johnson: That’s right.

Hoover: And I was as stunned as anyone else was, because I [*unclear*] upon him in the highest regard and still do. I think he’s a desperately sick man.

President Johnson: No question [*unclear*].

Hoover: I think he ought to be institutionalized in some place where they can give him the very best of psychiatric treatment. And I think there might some thought be given to getting him into either Walter Reed [Army Medical Center], which has a psychiatric ward, that the criticism that might be made would be that this man was being treated at government expense, but he’s entitled to it as being a colonel.

End of excerpt 1.

President Johnson: Well, I’ll tell you another thing: I think the psychiatrist and all of them agree it is a pretty good thing for some of us to send him flowers or write him or something, because wouldn’t have been any evidence around, and our problem was to try to get the evidence and try to see what had happened. We knew that he’d broken, and they all tell me that the odds were 95–5 he’d kill himself the first day if he didn’t ha[ve]—

Hoover: That’s what I was very fearful of.

President Johnson: —if he didn’t have a little encouragement. And you had to interview him, and you had to go into these things, and I don’t think anybody’d criticize you.

Hoover: Well, I don’t care whether they do. I’ve got pretty calloused hide on that.

President Johnson: *[Laughs.]*

Hoover: I've been through it so long.

End of excerpt 2.

CITATION: Conversation WH6410-14-5948, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Draft Transcript, Presidential Recordings Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia.

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