



“They Want Beauty”

Date: 1965-02-05
Conversation: WH6502-01-6802
Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson
Participant: Walter P. Reuther
Start Time: 09:56
Duration: 02:24
Place: Mansion

SCENE SETTER: During a conversation with United Automobile Workers president Walter P. Reuther, President Johnson discussed a yearning among Americans for a more beautiful country and a more meaningful life. Nine months later, thanks in large part to the lobbying efforts of Lady Bird Johnson, Congress passed the Highway Beautification Act, an important step toward realizing the goals outlined in this call.

President Johnson: There's one thing that I'm very distressed about, and I need some of your thinking, and I don't want anybody to know that I'm taking it up with you, because I think it would hurt us instead of help us: Barbara [M.] Ward told me yesterday, and I've had this report from several intellectuals around that, in their judgment, there are more thinking people thinking about improving their land and their life than they have observed in America in any period that they've known it. [*Reuther acknowledges.*] That they find that the county judge and the mayor's really talking about poverty.

Walter P. Reuther: Right.

President Johnson: That the hospital people are really talking about putting an extra wing on and having a better diagnostic center. That they're concerned about natural beauty and getting rid of the cars. They laughed at the people when they said billboards a few years ago, but now they're really concerned, and they're fussing at junkyards along the road and the pollution of the rivers and the whole natural beauty thing. That there've been more editorials about it and more people about it. More garden clubs are getting interested. And I really feel that, and I see it in my mail, and I hear it [from] people I talk to, so I don't believe I'm being misled. Now, if that's true, that's a good sign and something we want to build on.

End of excerpt 1.

Reuther: You're 100 percent right on the basic feeling. You know what's happening in America, Mr. President? People are beginning to understand that just more gadgets is not the purpose of our life.

President Johnson: Yeah.

Reuther: They want beauty. They want depth. They want human values, and this is, I think, one of the most significant things that's happened in this country in the last hundred years.

President Johnson: Well, that's what Barbara was saying yesterday at lunch here.

Reuther: Absolutely right. 'Cause I feel it all over this country. I've organized in the last six months, in my own little community here, a Citizens' Conservation Committee. That I got the people in this community more excited about cleaning up this little stream that goes through here. So this is going all over this country.

President Johnson: That—

Reuther: People want to drive down a highway and see beauty. They don't want to see junkyards and a bunch of automobiles piled up here and ugly billboards. They want to see what *nature* created.

President Johnson: That's exactly what we feel.

End of excerpt 2.

CITATION: Conversation WH6502-01-6802, 5 February 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Draft Transcript, Presidential Recordings Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia.

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Full information about this conversation: ["They Want Beauty"](#)