



“Sure Thought I Had Better Leadership”

Date: 1965-03-01

Conversation: WH6503-01-7007

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Adam Clayton Powell Jr.

Start Time: 21:32

Duration: 03:00

Place: Oval Office

SCENE SETTER: President Johnson berated House Education and Labor Committee chair Adam Clayton Powell Jr. [D–New York] for his failure to advance the elementary and secondary education bill through his committee. Frustrated by Powell’s attempt to gain funding for other priorities as a price for reporting the education bill, Johnson dismissed Powell’s concern about an education clause in the administration’s Appalachia bill.

Adam Clayton Powell Jr.: How’s my friend?

President Johnson: Fine, Adam. What the hell’s been happening in your committee? I thought you told me two months ago that you were going to pass a bill for me.

Powell: That’s right. Well, what happened, all hell has broken loose, because—

President Johnson: Well, what the hell are you blackmailing me on a 400—

Powell: [*speaking under President Johnson*] I’m not blackmailing you.

President Johnson: Well, the hell you didn’t. You want a 400,000-dollar appropriation for you, [but] we couldn’t pass a billion, 200 million [dollars] for the schoolkids. Now, you know I’m for you, and you know that I’m going to help you any way I can. I’ve got nothing to do with what you’re doing in the House investigation, but you’ve damn near defeated the best education bill I’ve got, [*Powell attempts to interject*] and I hope you’re going to be proud of it.

Powell: No. No. Do you know in your Appalachia bill that there is—

President Johnson: Well, Appalachia ain’t got a damn thing to do with you. If you handle your committee and let us handle the other one!

Powell: Yes, but there’s a clause in there, Mr. President—

President Johnson: There’s a clause been in there all the time, and if you’re going to let [William H. “Bill”] Ayers [R–Ohio] and Edith [L. S.] Green [D–Oregon] lead you off the reservation, [*Powell*

acknowledges throughout] well, then I ran for nothing last year with 15 million votes. If you're going to tie up this Congress and screw it up, which you've done for three weeks, by running off till you got 400,000 [dollars] appropriation, well, we never can get anywhere. And you defeat this, and you hold it up, and you delay it, and you get us in this kind of shape, why, we can't pass anything, and that's all right. [*Powell attempts to interject.*] But I think that—I think you'll be the hell of a bunch of your liberal Democrats. And I'm going to be here; it's not going to bother me. But I just sure thought I had better leadership on that committee than what I've got without even talking.

Powell: Well . . .

President Johnson: And I'm awfully disappointed [*unclear*]. Just very disappointed [*unclear*].

Powell: Now, Mr. President. Don't you think I'm entitled to the money?

President Johnson: No, I don't think you're entitled to a damn thing that you did. [*Powell attempts to interject and acknowledges.*] I think you told me, and looked me straight in the eye, and said, "I'll report this bill, and I'll get it on the floor," and you didn't do it.

Powell: March 1st.

President Johnson: And you did not do it.

End of excerpt 1.

Powell: Now, what's wrong with an amendment tomorrow on Appalachia, so the Secretary of Commerce cannot arbitrarily change the formula for education bills? [*Unclear*]—

President Johnson: Well, if you can't—Listen to me, if you can't trust me on Appalachia, you damn sure can't trust an amendment or the Secretary of Commerce or anybody else.

Powell: Mm-hmm. [*Unclear.*]

President Johnson: If there's anything going to happen in Appalachia that's anti-Negro, I won't let it happen. Period.

Powell: Well, I'm not talking about Negro. I'm talking about—

President Johnson: Well—

Powell: —the formulas for the education bill [*unclear*]—

President Johnson: Well, they're not going to do anything with education. What . . . Listen, Adam, don't try to cover everything.

Powell: No—

President Johnson: Just let us . . . They're trying to beat Appalachia. They're trying to beat education. [*Powell acknowledges.*] They're trying to do everything they can, and, for God's sakes, don't get sucked into it.

End of excerpt 2.

President Johnson: But I want that bill reported out tomorrow morning like the administration wanted and what you want me to do, I'll try to do.

Powell: OK.

President Johnson: And you [*unclear*]—

Powell: Your word is my word. I'll have it—I'll [*unclear*] eleven o'clock tomorrow.

President Johnson: Thank you, Adam.

End of excerpt 3.

CITATION: Conversation WH6503-01-7007, 1 March 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Draft Transcript, Presidential Recordings Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia.

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