



“A Very Complex Problem”

Date: 1965-07-07

Conversation: WH6507-02-8311-8312-8313

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Martin Luther King Jr.

Start Time: 20:05

Duration: 05:06

Place: Oval Office

SCENE SETTER: During a long call about Vietnam and civil rights, President Johnson and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. discussed strategies for securing Republican support for the voting rights bill, particularly in Rust Belt states. Johnson and King also wished to stop an amendment that would derail the administration's attempt to eliminate poll taxes.

President Johnson: There's been nobody really around here shoving it. I've done the best I could, but they're hitting me on different sides, and the press is kind of . . . Vietnam or the Dominican Republic or some mistake here or some mistake there. And I'm getting kind of cut up a little bit. And [Roy O.] Wilkins is having a national convention, and you were somewhere else. And I called [George] Meany to ask him to help; he'd gone to Europe. I called [Walter P.] Reuther; he won't be back till August. I called [Joseph L.] Joe Rauh [Jr.] and said, "For God's sakes, you try to get in here before it's too late. We're all off celebrating and doing something else, and they're going to put a package together that I can see forming." And I called [Andrew J. "Andy"] Biemiller, and I got him to agree to go send some, and they got a wire sent from Roy to all the Republicans.

But the Republicans are going to hold pretty well. They're not going to—they're going to quit the Nigras. They will not let a Nigra vote for them. They just, every time they get a chance to help out a little, they'll blow it. And they could help out here, and they could elect some good men in suburban districts and in cities, but they haven't got that much sense. That's why they're disintegrating as a party. So they're going to wind up being pretty solid. Then they're going to get the southerners. And put the two together, it'll probably be within ten votes of counting. Now, when I went up with my message, I could have probably passed it by 75. But it's deteriorating.

End of excerpt 1.

President Johnson: Now, the smart thing to do . . . if we had people that would all stay with us and follow leadership and get in, and when the ball goes through the center or around the end, would follow it . . . would be to get some language that the leadership conference would agree on. And go in and see [John W.] McCormack [D–Massachusetts] and our friends and say, "Now, let's take this language that the Senate will accept without it going to conference so we can go on and get this bill passed and start registering our people and get them ready to vote next year."

That's what we need to do. But we—they're playing us, and we're not parliamentary-smart enough. If you want to be honest, now, you asked for my advice, I'm just telling you. Y'all are either going to have confidence in me and in [Nicholas deB. "Nick"] Katzenbach, or you ought to pick some leader you do have and then follow. Now, I started out on this voting bill last November right after the election. I called them down and told them I was going to do it. Then I called you down here and told you what I was going to do. Then I went before the Congress and made a speech and asked them to work every weekend. Then we all went off, and they haven't had any heat except from me. And they're getting tired of the heat from me. They don't like for me to be asking for rent one day, and poverty the next day, and education the next day, and voting rights the next day. And they know I can't defeat them out there in their district in Michigan, or some other place. So I'm just fighting the battle best I can. I think I'll win it, but it's going to be close, and it's going to be dangerous.

End of excerpt 2.

Martin Luther King Jr.: Well, I certainly appreciate your advice, because I'm—I've been very much concerned about this, and I have . . . it's a real job for the people [*unclear*] the South. I guess this amendment came out before I really realized the extent of it and the real danger of it. And I just want us to get in front of it. People by the thousands [are] going back down into the Black Belt of Alabama and other cities and are trying to register [to vote]. They can't register. It means that there's a lot of demonstrations on our hands that we really can't control. And this is my great concern. It gives a psychological lift [*unclear*], and I see the voting bill as our way out.

President Johnson: It is.

King: And this is why I've taken the position that I've taken now. Something should be done to avoid a long battle in the conference between the House and the Senate, because this again complicates the problem. This makes it much more difficult for us to control the work that we have going on in—we have in [*unclear*]. Our work is in 84 counties now, and the whole summer [*unclear*], the whole summer program is predicated on passing this voting bill, which we have all been involved with. [If] we get bogged down for the rest of the summer, there's a danger of an amendment, which keeps the automatic trigger in there. This [*unclear*] a very complex problem on our hands.

President Johnson: You sure do.

End of excerpt 3.

CITATION: "Lyndon Johnson and Martin Luther King Jr. on 7 July 1965," Conversation WH6507-02-8311-8312-8313, *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/4002519>

This conversation was transcribed by the [Miller Center's Presidential Recordings Program](#) with the generous support of the [National Historical Publications and Records Commission](#).

Full information about this conversation: ["A Very Complex Problem"](#)