



LBJ, King, and the Watts Revolt

Date: 1965-08-20

Conversation: WH6508-07-8578

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Martin Luther King Jr.

Start Time: 17:10

Duration: 03:16

Place: Oval Office

SCENE SETTER: Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reported on his visit to Los Angeles following the uprising in the Watts section of the city. King informed President Johnson that the city's mayor and police chief seemed deeply unresponsive to the problems in the area, and he urged an intensification of the administration's anti-poverty efforts.

President Johnson: [*speaking over King*] But I wanted you to know I'd said that. Pardon me for interrupting. Go ahead.

Martin Luther King Jr.: That's all right. But in my meeting with Police Chief [William H.] Parker and Mr. [Samuel W. "Sam"] Yorty—Mayor Yorty—I just felt that they are absolutely insensitive to the problem and to the needs, to really cure the situation. Now, Mr. Parker is a very rude man—we just couldn't get anywhere with him—but I just don't see a willingness even on the part of the mayor to grant just a few concessions to make—to bring about a new sense of hope and [*unclear*]. Now, what is frightening about it is that you hear all of these tones of violence. The people out there in the Watts area, they'd assumed the National Guard indeed were going back in. The minute that happens there will be retaliation in the White community this time. Last time there was not, which was wonderful. But the people have bought up guns, and Chief Parker went on television the other day, they need to do an anti-riot crew, and all of that.

So that I'm fearful that if something isn't done to give a new sense of hope to the people in that area—and they are poverty-stricken—that a full-scale race war can develop here. And I'm concerned about it, naturally, because I know that violence—a riot at the end of the day wouldn't—doesn't help.

President Johnson: That's right. Now, what should we do about it? What's your recommendation?

King: Well, the problem is I think that poverty—if they could get, in the next few days, this poverty program going in Los Angeles [California], I believe that it would help a great deal.

President Johnson: I'll get him over here in the morning. We'll get at it. Where are you going to be?

King: I'll be in Atlanta [Georgia] in the morning.

President Johnson: All right. We'll call you back. Lee [C. White] will call you, or I'll call you if I have time, and we'll explore it. Is that the net of what you're recommending?

King: That's right. [*President Johnson acknowledges.*] I think this would be greatly—this would help greatly.

End of excerpt 1.

President Johnson: Well, we were ahead of it, and we got to keep ahead of it, and we're not now unless we do. But they never publicized it any, and you—you have—you're on television, and you ought to make them. Hell, tell them to read it, write and get it, [*King acknowledges*] and let's get busy. And let's get into this housing. Let's get into this unemployment. Let's get into this health. Let's get into this Social Security situation. Let's get into this education. Let's get into—I said this morning, "I spent the biggest part of my life for the last four years on civil rights bills, but it doesn't—all of it comes to naught if you have a situation like war in the world or a situation in Los Angeles."

King: Yes.

President Johnson: And I said, "A man's got no more right to destroy property with a Molotov cocktail in Los Angeles than the Ku Klux Klan has to go out and destroy a life. And what we've got to do is all obey the law. But there's no use giving lectures on the law as long as you got rats eating on people's kid—children, and unemployed, and no roof over their head, and no job to go to, and maybe with a dope needle in one side, and a cancer in the other."

King: Yeah, that's it.

End of excerpt 2.

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