



“Make the Law Bend to the Problem”

Date: 1965-09-14

Conversation: WH6509-03-8858

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Robert Y. Phillips

Participant: Russell B. Long

Start Time: 18:10

Duration: 04:08

Place: Oval Office

SCENE SETTER: On 9 September 1965, Hurricane Betsy made landfall in Louisiana and Mississippi. President Johnson surveyed the damage the following day, and on 14 September, he and Sen. Russell B. Long [D–Louisiana] urged Office of Emergency Planning leader Robert Y. “Bob” Phillips to “cut out all the red tape” and “to work around the clock” to coordinate relief services among government agencies and local businesses.

President Johnson: Mr. Phillips, this is Lyndon Johnson. Senator [Russell B.] Long [D–Louisiana] is here in the office, and we have reviewed the problems that are a result from this tra[gedy]—terrible disaster that we’ve suffered there. And we have gone from agency to agency, beginning with the [Army] Corps of Engineers and the Veterans’ Administration [VA], the Food and Drug Administration [FDA], Agriculture Department, Small Business Administration, all the [armed] services, [U.S.] Army, Navy, and Air Force, the National Command Center, the Department of Agriculture, [Department of the] Interior, Maritime [Administration], Housing and Home Finance [Agency], and Bureau of Yards and Docks of [the] Navy, Federal Communications [Commission] [FCC], Federal Aviation [Administration] [FAA], Bureau of Public Roads, Treasury [Department], Commerce [Department], and Interstate Commerce Commission [ICC].

Now, in times of distress, it’s necessary that all the members of the family get together and lay aside any individual problems they have or any personal grievances and try to take care of the sick mother. And we’ve got a sick mother on our hands. And as I said the other night when I was there, we’ve got to cut out all the red tape, we’ve got to work around the clock, we’ve got to ignore hours, we’ve got to bear in mind that we exist for only one purpose, and that’s to the greatest good for the greatest number. And the people who’ve lost their homes, people who’ve lost their furniture, the people who’ve lost some of their crops and their—even their families—are not going to be very interested in any individual differences between federal or state or local agencies.

So I hope that all the government people can put their shoulder to the wheel without regard to hours, without regard to red tape. Bring to these people the kind of assistance they need in this emergency, which is worthy of a great government and a great country. And I want to thank all the local officials and the city and county and state and parish officials. And I want to assure you that up here, if you have any problems, let me know about them. We’ll get them straightened out. And down there, I don’t want any problems to—that the—[Hurricane] Betsy didn’t create to exist. I don’t—

Robert Y. “Bob” Phillips: [*Unclear*] those orders, sir.

President Johnson: Well, here’s Senator Long [who] wants to say a word to you. And we’ll do the job here, and we expect y’all to do it there.

Phillips: Yes, sir.

President Johnson: Bye.

Russell B. Long: [*Takes the receiver.*] Thank you so much, Mr. Phillips. You’re doing a great job down there.

Phillips: Thank you, Senator.

Long: And I know you’ve got your problems. We don’t want—we’re not trying to make you violate the law, but insofar as you can find a way to make the law bend to the problem, why, that’s what we want you to do.

Phillips: I think I understand, Senator.

Long: [*Slight chuckle.*] And as I say, there’s one more thing about it: we’ve got some things in these laws indicating that they have to do with private enterprise where we try to protect them, but it’s time for private enterprise to make their move to help the people, too, because they’ve got their place to fulfill, and they shouldn’t play the part of a dog in the manger. They’re—now’s a time when they ought to be doing the extra hour of duty, and I think they’re doing it. I’m very proud of all these people who kept their stores open on Sunday and other times after hours and folks who provide their service below the cost of service or sometimes giving away services for free to help their fellow man. It’s a fine thing that they’re doing, and insofar as some few people want to chisel and cheat and take advantage of the unfortunate conditions of their neighbor, I think we’ll all remember who those people were when the time comes later on when they need us.

Phillips: We’re going to work with everybody, Senator, along the lines that the President has told us to, and that he encourages us to, and we’re sure we will do.

Long: Thanks so much. God bless you.

End of excerpt.

CITATION: Conversation WH6509-03-8858, 14 September 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Draft Transcript, Presidential Recordings Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia.

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