



“This Country’s in Trouble”

Date: 1967-07-27

Conversation: WH6707-01-12009

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: John V. Lindsay

Start Time: 17:02

Duration: 03:02

Place: Mansion

SCENE SETTER: President Johnson reached out to New York City mayor John V. Lindsay, a liberal Republican and a rising star in his party, to join what would become the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, more popularly called the Kerner Commission after its chair, Illinois governor Otto J. Kerner Jr. The commission, with Lindsay as its vice chair, would release its report in February 1968.

President Johnson: John, you know what I think of you, don't you?

John V. Lindsay: I certainly do, Mr. President, and vice versa.

President Johnson: I've got to ask you now to act like the good American I believe you to be.

Lindsay: Mm-hmm.

President Johnson: I'm going to seriously consider appointing a small group of seven or nine tonight to look into the cause of these [civil] disorders.

Lindsay: Mm-hmm.

President Johnson: I want nothing but competence, and I want nothing but compassion, and I want nothing but patriotism. [*reading aloud*] “The commission will investigate the origins of the disorders in our cities. It will make recommendations to me, to the Congress, to the state governors, to the mayors for measures to prevent or contain such disasters in the future. In their work, the commission will have access to all the facts gathered by the federal government, including the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]. They will continue to exercise full authority in the Justice Department to investigate riots, search for evidences of conspiracy, and to present them, if available. To date, all the reports indicate no such evidence has ever been uncovered. But even before the commission begins its work, even before all the evidence is in, there's some things we can tell about the outbreaks this summer.”

“First, make no mistake about it: the looting, the arson, the plunder, the pillage, which have occurred are not a civil rights protest. There is no right to loot stores, and to burn buildings, or to fire rifles.

But innocent people—Negro and White—have been killed. Damage to property—property owned by Negroes and Whites—is disastrous. Worst of all is the fear and bitterness, which have been loosed, which will take long months to arrange,” and so forth.

“It would compound the tragedy if we should settle for order imposed by the muzzle of a gun. In America, we seek more than the uneasy calm of a martial law. We seek peace based on one man’s respect for another.”

End of excerpt 1.

President Johnson: “Most Americans, Negro and White, seek safety in their neighborhood and harmony with their neighbors. Nothing can destroy goodwill more quickly than a period of needless strife and suspicion between the races. Let us condemn the violent few, but let us remember that it’s law-abiding Negro families who have suffered most at the hands of rioters. It’s responsible Negro citizens who hope most fervently and need most urgently to share in America’s prosperity. This is no time to turn from that goal. To reach that goal will require more than laws and more than dollars. It’ll take the dedication and heart of every citizen,” and so on, and so forth. And I ask them to pray and ask them not to tear down—a few things like that.

End of excerpt 2.

President Johnson: And I don’t want you to even consider thinking about it; I just want you to say, “Yes, sir.”

Lindsay: Yes, sir. I will.

President Johnson: OK. Good.

Lindsay: You asked me; I’ll do it.

President Johnson: I know it. Now, don’t say a word about it until I make up my mind I’m going to do it. I’ve got to talk to the Attorney General [W. Ramsey Clark]. But what I want to come out of this—what’s good for America—and I think you represent everything that is good, and I’m awfully grateful that you’ll go as quick on this as you would Vietnam if I had to have you.

Lindsay: Well . . . Mr. President, this country’s in trouble at the moment, and when you ask for help, you’re entitled to get it.

President Johnson: All right. I’ve always had it from you. Thank you.

Lindsay: Bye, Mr. President.

President Johnson: Bye.

End of excerpt 3.

CITATION: “Lyndon B. Johnson and John V. Lindsay on 27 July 1967,” Conversation WH6707-01-12009, *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition* [Lyndon B. Johnson and Civil Rights, vol. 2, ed. Kent

B. Germany] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–). URL:
<http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4005337>

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