



“We Just Have Got to Act Quickly”

Date: 1968-01-24

Conversation: WH6801-01-12610

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Robert S. McNamara

Start Time: 09:18

Duration: 01:12

Place: Mansion

SCENE SETTER: North Korea's seizure of the USS *Pueblo*, a small cargo ship that the U.S. Navy had recently refurbished for electronic intelligence gathering, stunned the Johnson administration. President Johnson discussed the incident with Secretary of Defense Robert S. “Bob” McNamara.

President Johnson: But [Richard B. “Dick”] Russell [Jr.] [D–Georgia] said that what he could not understand, that from the time the man [Lloyd M. “Pete” Bucher] got in trouble [*McNamara acknowledges throughout*] until he was towed in—there is two hours that he did ask for help, we didn't respond, although we had planes in a half hour from him. Now, as I understand it, the planes that we had close by South Korea were loaded and couldn't be unloaded in time. Is that a correct statement?

Robert S. “Bob” McNamara: That's—that's absolutely correct.

President Johnson: Now, second, the man never did ask for help.

McNamara: Sure.

President Johnson: Is that a correct statement?

McNamara: Correct.

President Johnson: Now, third, do you have any—what's your speculation on what happened to him?

McNamara: Mr. President, I honestly don't know, and I called [Nicholas deB.] Nick [Katzenbach] this morning, and later Walt [W. Rostow], and said, “I think we need a Cuban Missile Crisis approach to this.” [*President Johnson acknowledges.*] And goddamn it, we ought to get locked in a room, and you ought to keep us there, insist we stay there until we come up with answers to three questions: What was the [North] Korean objective? Why did they do it? Secondly, what are they going to do now? Blackmail us? Let it go? You know, what? And thirdly, what should we do now? And there are a whole series of things we've thought of here: quarantine them, steal one of their

ships, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. But we just have got to act quickly. I don't think we can let the day go by before reporting to you our at least tentative views on those three questions.

End of excerpt.

CITATION: "Lyndon B. Johnson and Robert S. McNamara on 24 January 1968," Conversation WH6801-01-12610, *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition* [Johnson Telephone Tapes: 1968, ed. Kent B. Germany, Nicole Hemmer, and Ken Hughes] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–). URL: <http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4011030>

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Full information about this conversation: ["We Just Have Got to Act Quickly"](#)