



“No Nuclear Weapons in South Vietnam”

Date: 1968-02-19

Conversation: WH6802-02-12722-12723

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Dwight D. Eisenhower

Start Time: 12:17

Duration: 03:17

Place: Mansion

SCENE SETTER: When reports surfaced of tactical nuclear weapons being used in Vietnam, former president Dwight D. Eisenhower called President Johnson to share some concerns expressed to him by a group of his former science advisers. President Johnson assured Eisenhower that “we have no nuclear weapons in South Vietnam” and “nobody has ever recommended it.”

President Johnson: General, let me explain to you what happened: This is a part of the [J. William “Bill” Fulbright [D–Arkansas], pacifist, isolationist stuff, but it has misled a lot of people. They sent—we have a barrier out there [in Vietnam] [*Eisenhower acknowledges throughout*] where we have these electronic things in the trees, and when people go under them, they give a sound, and they notify our planes, and our planes can go in there and hit them, and it’s working out very good.

End of excerpt 1.

President Johnson: And has nothing whatever to do with anything nuclear. The—[William C.] Westmoreland asked that he be given authority to put some of these, what you’d call a “mine.” It’s a—when you touch it, it looks very much like the earth. It’s about the size of your fist, may look like a mushroom or something. You step on it, and it blows them up. Well, as a result, they quit coming that way when you scatter them around. So he wanted to build a circle around Khe Sanh with this what they call “gravel.”

Dwight D. Eisenhower: Mm-hmm.

President Johnson: These scientists were sent out. Well, one scientist at some university, [*Eisenhower acknowledges throughout*] evidently where Professor Brown, we’ll say, was going, who had worked on this barrier—nothing to do with nuclear—he told his wife, and his wife told her sister or something, and anyway, one of these peaceniks got ahold of it. So they called Fulbright’s staff member.

End of excerpt 2.

President Johnson: They got the telephone call. So they called in the *New York Times*, then, [Eisenhower acknowledges] and said, “Johnson’s group has sent a big crowd out to deploy nuclear weapons.” So they put it in all the papers.

End of excerpt 3.

President Johnson: And in the meantime, Fulbright’s written [Dean] Rusk a long letter that says, “We want you to explain if you are doing this.” “Have you quit beating your wife?” That type of letter. So [George E.] Christian [Jr.], the press secretary, same as your [James C. “Jim”] Hagerty, said, “First, they have never recommended anything like this to the President.”

Eisenhower: No.

President Johnson: “Second, the President would have to be the one that would make the decision. It’s never come to him, and you’re not doing your country any good by publicizing all over the world—”

Eisenhower: That’s right.

President Johnson: “—that we’re considering doing something, which has never been considered.”

Eisenhower: [Unclear.]

President Johnson: So that kind of put an end to it. Then *Time* comes along and said, “Well, Johnson said that”—I said—“In seven years that I’ve been in the Executive Branch, I am not aware that anybody has ever made a recommendation to use nuclear weapons.”

Now, I know in the four years I’ve been president, nobody has ever recommended it. But as vice president, I sat in on most of the meetings, and I knew, to my knowledge, it hadn’t there. So they say this week, “Well, Johnson said he was not aware, but that implied that he might not have heard it.” So you just can’t hardly knock it down.

Now, the truth of the business is: we have no nuclear weapons in South Vietnam. The people out there do not think the Khe Sanh area—that the tactical nuclear weapons are suitable.

Eisenhower: No.

President Johnson: But we—needless to say, the Joint Chiefs [of Staff] have never made a study, never made a recommendation, never come to the President, and so forth.

End of excerpt 4.

CITATION: “Lyndon B. Johnson and Dwight D. Eisenhower on 19 February 1968,” Conversation WH6802-02-12722-12723, *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/4005950>

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