



“The Vice Presidency Is an Impossible Job”

Date: 1968-08-29

Conversation: WH6808-04-13330-13331

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Hubert H. Humphrey Jr.

Start Time: 10:41

Duration: 04:10

Place: LBJ Ranch

SCENE SETTER: The day after his nomination as the Democratic candidate for president, Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey Jr. called President Johnson to discuss potential nominees for his vice presidential running mate. Johnson highlighted the qualities necessary in a vice president and reflected that Humphrey himself was the ideal choice for “an impossible job.”

Hubert H. Humphrey Jr.: My dear friend, we’re coming down to crunch here where I got to talk to you a little bit and get some guidance on this next spot. We’ve had lots of suggestions, as you know. I met with your—some of our friends last night, some of the governors. And I’ve talked to George Meany, and I’ve talked with [Louis] Stulberg. I visited with old [James A.] Jim Farley. I’ve talked to Mayor [Richard J. “Dick”] Daley and . . . oh, my goodness, who else? Some of the other labor boys. I’ve even talked with Walter [P.] Reuther.

And most of them, they come out—some of them are for [R. Sargent] Shriver. I figured that that would bring some complications, even though he brings with him some powerful assets. The second man—the first man for many of them—was, strangely enough, [Edmund S.] Muskie [D–Maine]. And I tend—and the other one is—that they speak well of is Fred [R.] Harris [D–Oklahoma]. I thought he was a little young myself. Maybe I’m getting too old. But he’s a dynamic campaigner. I—just sitting here with [James H.] Jim Rowe [Jr.] this morning, and he said that wherever you went yesterday, why—and the day before—that the name Muskie came up. One other name that comes up is [Cyrus R.] Cy Vance. I thought if I got elected, I might have some other things to do for him—for him to do, if he’d do them. [*Pause.*]

What does—what do you have to offer, my . . . my counselor? [*Slight chuckle.*]

President Johnson: Not much. I think all of those are good men. I think what you’ve got to do, as nearly as you can—every one of these guys is trying to influence you. Now, I’m not. [*Humphrey acknowledges.*] I don’t want to influence you, but I do want to balance you, and I’ll always do that long as I live, because I’ll try to be as good to you as you’ve been to me. The one thing I’d do is look at what I got as vice president and see where you’re going to get it.

Humphrey: Yeah.

President Johnson: Now, I just can't improve on that. That's not sentiment, that's not emotion, that's just true. You want lots of energy and go-go. You want lots of articulateness. You want a guy that, when the boss doesn't know whether he can come or not, that he'll tear up his speech, and laugh, and thank him for coming. You want a guy that when you got to go down into the swamps and the boss can't go, that he'll love to do it and be happy, even though it just cuts his toenails off. Somebody's got to do that. Now, you've done it all along. You got to have somebody that's not a coward. And when the going gets tough and everything gets rough, and it will within the year, you got to have somebody that'll just get in a little bit closer and stay a little bit longer. [*Snorts.*] They got to have a wife like yours, and he's got to have a family like yours. Got to have somebody as near as that.

Now, that's the best dimensions I know. Who fits that I just really honestly don't know. I know a good many that don't fit it. You don't want another [Henry Cabot] Lodge [Jr.] campaigning, you don't want another [John Nance] Garner, and you don't want another [Henry A.] Wallace, and you just cannot tell. And what all is gold—all is not gold that glitters.

Humphrey: I know.

End of excerpt 1.

President Johnson: If I had one thing back, I'd appoint everybody like I appointed you vice president. [*Snorts.*] If I had done that—started over new, why, I'd do it. Now . . . So that's what I want you to be careful about. And this thing loyalty, Hubert, there's not many of them that got it.

Humphrey: I know that.

President Johnson: And the vice presidency is an impossible job. No human being ought to be required to endure it four years.

End of excerpt 2.

CITATION: "Lyndon B. Johnson and Hubert H. Humphrey on 29 August 1968," Conversation WH6808-04-13330-13331, *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/4006019>

This conversation was transcribed by the [Miller Center's Presidential Recordings Program](#) with the generous support of the [National Historical Publications and Records Commission](#).

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