

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON

A P R E S I D E N T ' S V I S I O N

PRIMARY SOURCE WORKSHEET

EXCERPT FROM A TRANSCRIPT OF A TELEPHONE CONVERSATION BETWEEN LYNDON B. JOHNSON AND MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., JANUARY 15, 1965, AT 12:06 P.M.

Citation #6736, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library.

KING: Hello?

JOHNSON: This Lyndon Johnson. I had a call . . .

KING: Who's that?

JOHNSON: . . . from you and I tried to reply to it a couple of times, Savannah, and different places, and they said you were traveling and I got to traveling last night. Just got down here to meet the Prime Minister of Canada this morning and I had a moment, I thought maybe we better try to—I better try to reply to your call.

KING: Well, I certainly appreciate your returning the call and I don't want to take but up to a minute or so of your time. First, I want to thank you for that great State of the Union message. It was really a marvelous presentation. I think we are on the way now toward the Great Society.

JOHNSON: I'll tell you what our problem is. We've got to try with every force at our command, and I mean every force, to get these education bills that go to those people under \$2,000 a year income. Billion and a half, and this poverty is a billion and a half, and this health that's going to be 900 million next year right at the bottom. We've got to get them passed before the vicious forces that concentrate and give them a coalition that can block them. Then we have got to—so we won't divide them all and get them hung up in a filibuster—we've got to, when we get these big things through that we need: Medicare, Education—I've already got that hearing started the 22nd in the House and the 26th in the Senate—your people ought to be very, very diligent in looking at those committee members that come from urban areas that are friendly to you to see that those bills get reported right out because you have no idea, it's shocking to you how much benefits they will get. There's 8 billion, 500 million this year for education compared to 700 million when I started. So you can imagine—you can imagine what effort that's going to be. This one bill is a billion and a half. Now if we can get that, and we can get a Medicare, we ought to get that by February, then we get our Poverty that will be more than double what it was last year; then we've got to come up with the qualification of the voters. That will answer 70 percent of your problems.

KING: That's right.

JOHNSON: If you just clear it out everywhere, make it age and read and write. No tests on what Chaucer said, or Browning's poetry or constitutions or memorizing or anything else.

KING: Yes.

JOHNSON: And then you may have to put them in the post office [and] let the postmaster, it's a Federal employee that I control, who they can say is local—he's recommended by the Congressman, he's approved by the Senator, but if he doesn't register everybody, I can put a new one in.

KING: Yes.

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JOHNSON: And it's not a Washington outside influence; it's a local man. But they can just all go to the post office like they buy a stamp. Now, I haven't thought this through, but that's my general feeling. And I've talked to the Attorney General and I've got them working on it. I don't want to start off with that anymore than I do with 14-B because I wouldn't get anything else.

KING: Yes, yes, yes.

JOHNSON: Do you—And I don't want to publicize it. But I wanted you to know the outline of what I had in mind.

KING: Yes, well I remembered you mentioned it to me the other day down at the White House and I have been very diligent about making this statement.

JOHNSON: Well, your statement was perfect about the vote's important, very important. And I think it's good to talk about that. I just don't see how anybody can say that a man can fight in Vietnam, but he can't vote in the post office.

KING: Yes, yes.

QUESTIONS

Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. On what date did this conversation between Johnson and King take place?
2. Characterize Johnson's tone and attitude in the conversation. Is he speaking formally or informally? Does he address King as a political ally or foe? Provide details to support your answer.
3. Looking back through the conversation transcript, list Johnson's priorities in terms of getting legislation passed in Congress.
4. Explain what Johnson means when he says, "If you just clear it out everywhere, make it age and read and write. No tests on what Chaucer said, or Browning's poetry or constitutions or memorizing or anything else." What does this tell you about the type of requirements African American voters faced when trying to register to vote during this time period?
5. Why does Johnson refer to the Vietnam War in this conversation? What does this have to do with voting rights?
6. How do you think King felt after this conversation? Do you think he was happy with the results?
7. How do you think Johnson felt after this conversation? Do you think he was happy with the results?
8. Johnson feared that Southern congressmen would be upset with him if a voting rights bill was pushed through Congress. Do you find evidence of this anywhere in the conversation?

ACTIVITIES

Use your textbook and other print and online resources to complete the following activities.

1. Listen to the recording of this conversation online:
<http://www.lbj100.org/otd/audio/lbj&mlk/LBJ&MLK.mp3>. What insight did you gain from listening to the conversation that you would have missed if you had only read the transcript? Be specific.
2. Imagine you are a journalist who received a copy of this phone conversation the day after it occurred. Write a brief article about the conversation and its significance.
3. Write a script of a conversation that might have occurred between King and one of his top assistants after his conversation with Johnson ended.

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