



“Never Felt Better in My Life”

Date: 1964-01-06

Conversation: WH6401-06-1196

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Walker Stone

Start Time: 15:48

Duration: 04:27

Place: Oval Office

SCENE SETTER: In July 1955, at the age of 46, Lyndon B. Johnson suffered a serious heart attack. Years later, during his presidency, Johnson’s legendary, nonstop work style worried his friends and family. He downplayed their concerns while describing his new life in the White House to Walker Stone, editor of Scripps Howard newspapers and native of Oklahoma.

Walker Stone: All right, will you listen for just a minute?

President Johnson: [*chuckling*] Yes, sir.

Stone: By God, now you asked for it, I’ll tell you.

President Johnson: Well, I want it.

Stone: You’re outpacing. You’re racing your motor, Lyndon. You, goddamn it—

President Johnson: [*laughing*] I’m [*unclear*].

Stone: —you’ve got this thing in the bag.

President Johnson: I’m just enjoying my friends.

Stone: They can’t possibly beat you, but I’ll tell you what you’re doing: you are trying to do too much.

President Johnson: No, I’m not.

Stone: You are—

President Johnson: No, I’m not. You know all I’ve done? I worked on the budget—

Stone: All right. Hey . . .

President Johnson: —and I—

Stone: Listen to me. Now, you promised to listen to me. Old [J. Frank] Dobie asked you to.

President Johnson: [*laughing*] Well, I'm like Roy [W.] Howard.

Stone: [*laughing*] Yeah, you are.

President Johnson: At least like he said he was. Go ahead. [*Both laugh.*]

Stone: You're trying to do too much, and you're racing your motor, and you're drinking too much, and you're not sleeping enough.

President Johnson: Oh, now, listen. Listen there, my friend, [*Stone chuckles*] all that's wrong. I'll tell you what I'm doing: I had a quiet morning. I didn't come to the office until—I waked up at 6:30. All my life I waked up on a road gang, and I can't—goddamn it, you get up early, don't you? You had to, to get through Oklahoma. You can't tell me you ever made the big leagues not getting up early. It takes us a little longer than some other folks. And I get up early, and I read all the papers. I read about 15 of them. But I read them in bed. And I'm relaxing. I drink my tea, and [*Stone chuckles*] go to the bathroom, and watch the television. And then, this morning, I want to tell you: this stuff's got around town, and my friends are really worried. Now, I want to tell you why.

I never enjoyed life more, never felt better in my life, physically, than I do now. At 12:45 today, I took Jack Valenti, Walter [W.] Jenkins, Bill Moyer[s], and I swam the length of that pool eight times. Eight times today. [*Stone acknowledges.*] I went down and had a hamburger. I came back and looked over my State of the Union [address], called up and fussed at a fellow about 40 million dollars too much in a budget, then stretched out and took a little doze—lost consciousness for about five minutes—on my couch. [I] came back, and they said, “Now, are you in a good humor?” I said, “Yeah.” [They] said, “We'll save you this until you're in a bad humor.” And I said, “What is it?” [They] said, “It's George Carmack's article.” [They] said, “We want to give it to you when you're in a bad humor.”

Well, I knew it was going to be bad, if it's George's. [*Stone laughs softly.*] And I read it. And he said that “they always say that folks are not true to their raising. But Johnson *is* true to his raising.” And he wrote the kindest, sweetest, nicest description. I'm going to send it to Dean Rusk and McGeorge [“Mac”] Bundy and all these sophisticated fellows. Angier Biddle Duke. He even compliments Angier Biddle Duke.

Stone: Yeah.

President Johnson: I want you to read it. And—

Stone: I'll catch it—

President Johnson: —then I read Old Man Dobie's letter. And the funny thing was, Houston [H.] Harte wrote about like George Carmack did for all of his papers. The North American Newspaper Alliance used it. [*Stone acknowledges.*] But he said, “If there's ever a place where Angier Biddle Duke, the proper chief of protocol, was not needed, it was Stonewall, Texas.” [*Both laugh heartily.*]

So I thought you would pass. So I'm really—then, I'm going over, and I'm going to bed early. You know, I don't have anything to do at night. I can't go out. I broke out twice. What I do is I go home, and I have myself two or three highballs with my wife. And I have to sit there and read and work. I've got Indonesia; they wanted me to give them 35 million [dollars] the other day, and I had to read on it

till two o'clock in the morning. They came in, and I had to have India 65 [million dollars], and I read on it till two [o'clock] and turned both of them down. But I just thought, "What if I hadn't had the desire to read them? I'd be in a hell of a shape."

End of excerpt 1.

President Johnson: But don't you think I'm overdoing it. If I am, I'll just come out—first time I feel real good and tired and feel like I'm overdoing it, I'll call you and let you come over here and judge it, sit around in the evening. But Lady Bird [Johnson] and I—it's not like you were in the Senate, where you got a hundred people around you every night—we don't do that. We—I had a lunch today with Walter Jenkins, and I was rather lonely. And I had a nice little rest. So don't you worry about me. And I'll guarantee to be more careful, anyway.

Stone: Well, that's—Listen, there isn't anything—you've made the goddamnedest impact on this country imaginable.

President Johnson: Well, you just watch my—

Stone: You've done everything right, except watch yourself.

President Johnson: You just watch my budget message.

End of excerpt 2.

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