



“You’re Mr. Poverty”

Date: 1964-02-01
Conversation: WH6402-01-1804
Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson
Participant: R. Sargent Shriver
Start Time: 13:02
Duration: 03:07
Place: Oval Office

SCENE SETTER: In the first of several calls that day to Peace Corps director R. Sargent Shriver, President Johnson implored Shriver to accept a second role as head of the War on Poverty. Shriver repeatedly begged off the assignment, but Johnson persisted. By the end of the day, the President had worn down Shriver and secured his acquiescence.

President Johnson: Sarge?

R. Sargent Shriver: Good morning, Mr. President. How are you?

President Johnson: I’m going to announce your appointment at that press conference.

Shriver: What press conference?

President Johnson: This afternoon.

Shriver: Oh, God, I think it would be advisable, if you don’t mind, if I could have this weekend. I wanted to sit down with a couple of people and see what we could get in the way of some sort of a plan. Because what happens, at least my thought is, that what happens is if you announce somebody or [*unclear*] somebody else, and they don’t know what the hell they’re doing or what the program’s going to be specifically and who’s going to carry it, then you’re in a hell of a hole—

President Johnson: We—

Shriver: —because they all start calling you up and say, “Well, now, what are you going to do?”

President Johnson: Well—

Shriver: “How are you going to carry this out?” And all that—

President Johnson: Well—

Shriver: —and you don't know what [unclear] talk about.

President Johnson: Well, just don't talk to them. Just go away and go to Camp David. Figure it out. We need something to say to the press. We've got to say to them, and I've got to tell them what I talked to you about yesterday.

And you can just take off, work out your Peace Corps any way you want to. You can be head of the committee and have some acting operator. If you want Bill [Moyers] to help you, I'll let him do that. I'll do anything. But I want to announce this and get it behind me, so I'll keep—quit getting all these other pressures. And I think you're going to—you've got to do it. You just can't let me down. So the quicker we get it behind us, the better and—

Shriver: [Unclear]—

President Johnson: You can talk to them as special assistant to the President a hell of a lot easier than you can talk to them just as Peace [Corps] administrator. And if they want to talk to you, you can tell them . . . [you] speak for me.

Shriver: Yes. Well, Mr. President, [unclear]—

President Johnson: But don't make me wait till next week, because I want to satisfy this press with something. I told them we're going to have a press meeting, and—

Shriver: Well, let's just say this: Could I make one point—

President Johnson: —they're going to have all these damn questions, and I don't want to be indecisive about them.

End of excerpt 1.

President Johnson: If you can't run a 100-million[-dollar] program in your left hand and a billion[-dollar program] with your right hand, you're not as smart as I think you are.

Shriver: [Laughs.] The size—the money's got—that's no problem at all. It's the people that I'm [unclear]—

President Johnson: Well, the people . . .

Shriver: Yeah, I want to keep all these people for the government that are in the Peace Corps and bring them into any other programs so that they [unclear]—

President Johnson: Well, that's good. I'm not going to sever you from the Peace Corps at all. I'm going to say that you're going to maintain your identification with the Peace Corps.

Shriver: Mm-hmm.

President Johnson: And how much of the details you do, whether you hire them or sweep out the room, is going to be a matter for you to determine.

Shriver: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

President Johnson: And I'm going to make that clear. But I am going to make it clear that you're Mr. Poverty. And . . . at home and abroad, if you [*unclear*] to be.

Shriver: Mm-hmm.

President Johnson: And I don't care who you have running the Peace Corps. If you can run it, wonderful; if you can't, get Oshkosh from Chicago [Illinois], and I'll name him.

Shriver: I can't get anybody. The only guy that could possibly do it, Mr. President, is Bill. [*Unclear*]—

President Johnson: Well, you can write your ticket. You can write your ticket on anything you want to do there. I want to get rid of poverty, though.

Shriver: Yeah.

President Johnson: And you can organize the poverty right from the beginning. And you'll have to get on a message Monday. But the Sunday papers are going to say that you're Mr. Poverty unless you've got real compelling reasons, which I haven't heard. And I'm going to say that you're going to maintain your identification with the Peace Corps and operate it to such an extent as you may think desirable.

End of excerpt 2.

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