



## “A Right to Vote”

**Date:** 1965-01-15

**Conversation:** WH6501-04-6736-6737

**Participant:** Lyndon B. Johnson

**Participant:** Martin Luther King Jr.

**Start Time:** 12:06

**Duration:** 03:26

**Place:** LBJ Ranch

SCENE SETTER: In this call almost two months before the Bloody Sunday march in Selma, President Johnson and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. exchanged ideas about the need for voting rights legislation and for building a coalition of Black voters and moderate White voters. Both men endorsed King’s argument that it would “really make the New South.”

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**President Johnson:** There’s not going to be anything, though, Doctor . . . as effective . . . as all of them voting.

**Martin Luther King Jr.:** That’s right. [*Unclear*]—

**President Johnson:** That’ll get you a message that all the eloquence in the world won’t bring, ’cause a fellow will be coming to you, then, instead of you calling him.

**King:** And it’s very interesting, Mr. President, to notice that the only states that you didn’t carry in the South—the five southern states—have less than 40 percent of the Negroes registered to vote. Very interesting to notice that. And I think a professor at the University of Texas, in a recent article, brought this out very clearly, so it demonstrates that it’s so important to get Negroes registered to vote in large numbers in the South. And it would be this coalition of the Negro vote and the moderate White vote that will really make the New South.

**President Johnson:** That’s exactly right. I think it’s very important that we not say that we’re doing this and we’re not doing [this] just because it’s Negroes or Whites, but we take the position that every person born in this country, when they reach a certain age, that he have a right to vote, just like he has a right to fight, and [*slight chuckle*] that we just extend it whether it’s a Negro, or whether it’s a Mexican, or who it is. [*King acknowledges.*] And number two, I think that . . . we don’t want special privilege for anybody. We want equality for all, and we can stand on that principle. But I think that you can contribute a great deal by getting your leaders and you, yourself, taking very simple examples of discrimination where a man’s got to memorize [Henry Wadsworth] Longfellow, or whether he’s got to quote the first ten amendments, or he’s got to tell you what Amendment 15, 16, 17 is, and then ask them if *they* know and show what happens. And there are some people don’t have to do that, but when a Negro comes in, he’s got to do it. And if we can just repeat and repeat and repeat—I don’t want to follow [Adolf] Hitler, but he had a[n] idea—

**King:** Yeah.

**President Johnson:** —that if you just take a simple thing and repeat it often enough, even if it wasn't true, why, people accept it. Well, now, this *is* true. And if you can find the worst condition that you run into in Alabama, Mississippi, or Louisiana, or South Carolina, where—well, I think one of the worst I ever heard of is the president of the school at Tuskegee [Institute], or the head of the Government Department there, or something, being denied the right to cast a vote. And if you just take that one illustration and get it on radio, and get it on television, and get it on . . . in the pulpits, get it in the meetings, get it everywhere you can, pretty soon the fellow that didn't do anything but follow—drive a tractor, he'll say, "Well, that's not right. That's not fair."

**King:** Yes.

**President Johnson:** And then that will help us on what we're going to shove through in the end.

**King:** Yes. You're exactly right about that.

**President Johnson:** And if we do that, we'll break through as—it'll be the greatest breakthrough of anything, not even excepting this '64 act. I think the greatest achievement of my administration, I think the greatest achievement in foreign policy—I said to a group yesterday—was the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. But I think this'll be bigger, because it'll do things that even that '64 act couldn't do.

*End of excerpt.*

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Full information about this conversation: ["A Right to Vote"](#)