



“We’ll Find Some Central Theme”

Date: 1967-07-25

Conversation: WH6707-01-12005

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: J. Edgar Hoover

Start Time: 10:33

Duration: 03:39

Place: Mansion

SCENE SETTER: Responding to a wave of antiwar protests and civil unrest, President Johnson regarded these actions as the work of left-wing agitators. This call with Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director J. Edgar Hoover highlighted Johnson’s conviction that the recent disturbances in Detroit and Newark were rooted at least as much in anti-American activities as in the pent-up frustrations of marginalized Black communities.

President Johnson: Yes.

J. Edgar Hoover: —Mr. President. I just got word that Martin Luther King [Jr.] will give a press conference at eleven o’clock this morning in Atlanta [Georgia]. Now, the statement King is to make will differ very greatly from what Roy [O.] Wilkins has said and what Whitney [M.] Young [Jr.] has said and will, in a sense, condone the national result from the inhuman conditions that the Negroes are forced to exist in the country.

King has . . . was told by [Stanley D.] Levison, who is his principal adviser—and who is a secret Communist—that he has more to gain nationally by agreeing with the violence that is coming out against it, as the President is afraid at this time and is willing to make concessions for it. King said that the worst has not yet happened in this country in such places as Cleveland [Ohio], Oakland [California], and Philadelphia [Pennsylvania]. King referred specifically to Chicago [Illinois] and said, “They gave me the plan today in Chicago. They don’t plan to burn down the West Side; they are planning to get the Loop in Chicago.” That’s the substance of information. We got that highly confidentially over the technicals.

President Johnson: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Well, I hope you’ll communicate that to [Richard J. “Dick”] Daley, so that his people will know. I’d let your man—

Hoover: We will.

President Johnson: —in Chicago tell him that they’re saying this, and the President asked he be told.

Hoover: Yes. I’ll take care of that right away.

President Johnson: And I gather that things went pretty good after our statement last night. [Cyrus R. “Cy”] Vance and [Warren M.] Christopher and they reported about, oh, 6:30 and then again 7:30 this morning that no federal troops had shot anybody, that they went in right, and the General had cautioned them carefully. And that they had fully briefed them, and that your men and the [Department of] Justice men and the [U.S.] Army men were all working 100 percent. All agreed at the same time. No divisions among them. And that they insisted the troops should be told what the situation was and be given good orders. And if they were fired upon, to fire back, but—

Hoover: But they didn’t have to do it.

President Johnson: —they didn’t kill anybody.

Hoover: No.

President Johnson: The federal troops didn’t, and they didn’t get any of them shot at.

Hoover: [*Unclear.*]

President Johnson: And the incidents dropped after they went in. And after our statement, they dropped from about 30-some-odd to 5 per hour.

Hoover: My word from out there this morning is that the business offices are open. General Motors is open. All the automobile factories are open. And people are getting back to work.

President Johnson: They asked them—I told Vance that we ought to tell them to do that. That may take their mind off of it a little bit.

Hoover: Yes, it will. [*President Johnson acknowledges quietly throughout.*] Now, over at Cambridge [Maryland] this man [H. Rap] Brown, who is one of the worst in the country—Governor [Spiro T. “Ted”] Agnew has ordered his arrest for inciting the riot over there. They burned down, I think, two squares of the Negro ghetto. The thing that is significant is that both in Detroit [Michigan] and in Cambridge the Negro homes have been burned and destroyed, so it hasn’t been limited solely to the White merchants and the White homes.

President Johnson: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Hoover: Which I think is very significant.

President Johnson: Yes, it is.

End of excerpt 1.

Hoover: And I’ll have for you tomorrow that memorandum you want on all the riots in the country—

President Johnson: That’s right.

Hoover: —that’s been studied.

President Johnson: And I want you to keep your men busy to find a central connection. I’m not—I wouldn’t be a damn bit surprised if this poverty group here is not stirring up some of this, and some

of my friends and your old friends that are after both of us are not stirring this up around the country. [*Hoover attempts to interject.*] So you better watch Newark [New Jersey] and watch Detroit and watch Plainfield [New Jersey] and see, and we'll find some central theme down the road a little bit.

Hoover: We'll dig into that very thoroughly.

President Johnson: All right. OK.

Hoover: Fine. Thank you, Mr. President.

End of excerpt 2.

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