



“Hot as a Firecracker”

Date: 1964-01-10

Conversation: WH6401-11-1305

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Richard B. Russell Jr.

Start Time: 13:25

Duration: 03:19

Place: Oval Office

SCENE SETTER: Over the previous few days, violent exchanges between American and Panamanian students in the Panama Canal Zone had resulted in over 20 deaths and a rupture in U.S.-Panamanian relations. President Johnson spoke with Sen. Richard B. “Dick” Russell Jr. [D-Georgia] about the American response and relayed a summary of his communications with Panamanian president Roberto Chiari.

President Johnson: *[talking on speakerphone]* I talked to that president [Roberto Chiari]. I have not talked to you since then, have I?

Richard B. “Dick” Russell Jr.: No, sir.

President Johnson: I told him that the [Thomas C. “Tom”] Mann mission was taking off within 30 minutes. That it included some of my most trusted advisers, including Mann and [Cyrus R.] Cy Vance and Harry [C.] McPherson [Jr.]” That it was a good group. That he must bear in mind that the enemies of both of us were exploiting this thing. That—he immediately said that he wanted to revise all of our agreements and that would have to be done. I told him that we couldn’t get into that. That I wanted to get the facts of what happened. That I understood this occurred on soil that we had in our area. That—

Break in the tape.

Russell: That’s something we just should emphasize at every stage of the proceedings.

President Johnson: That these were students, and that I wanted to get the facts on it, and I didn’t want it to be an excuse. I didn’t want people to have to use these methods in order to—violent methods—in order to work out agreeable arrangements. That I appreciated what he had done to ask for quiet. That I was asking our people to do the same. But that these men could go into the factual situation with him and make a report. But I was cold and hard and tough as hell, so far as—

Russell: Well, that is exactly right.

President Johnson: —so far as this is concerned. Then I went back in and told our group here that I thought we had to remember that a week ago—two or three weeks ago—I had to tell them in Bolivia I'd send whatever aid I needed in there to keep—make them release one of our people there. A few days later—A few days earlier, they had someone else locked up [*Russell coughs*] some other place, and I was damn tired of attacking our flag and our embassy and our USIS [U.S. Information Service] every time somebody got a little emotional outburst down there, so they'd better watch it.

Russell: [*speaking under President Johnson*] I'm so pleased. I'm so pleased. Now, you . . . That's a great president. That's a man [who'll] go down in history.

President Johnson: Now, I just wanted you to know that. And this group has gone. And [Edwin M.] Martin'll be coming back tomorrow. But the old man finally said, well, he's glad to be talking to a man that is taking some action. And I said, "Well, they'll be there." And I think Cy Vance will be pretty tough, too.

Russell: Well, that fellow [Andrew P.] O'Meara down there is a pretty good man.

President Johnson: Well, he's—

Russell: General O'Meara.

President Johnson: He's had to order his people to start shooting again.

Russell: He has? Well, that's all right. They got to if they shoot at them. You can't expect our people to stand there and be killed and not fire back.

President Johnson: Well, I mean, it's a hot [*unclear*]

Russell: Anywhere in the world.

President Johnson: I'm not trying to unjustify it or justify it. I'm just saying it's a hot—hot as a firecracker.

Russell: I realize it is.

President Johnson: All right.

Russell: I realize it is, but it's wholly a mental state as far as we're concerned, and a national image so far as the United Nations is concerned. And I think we can protect both.

President Johnson: Well, I think the position that ought to be on the Hill is we ought to be careful what we say, but, for God's sakes, if we say anything, say, "We did right acting promptly to send some—the ablest men we got down there." Now, they tell me that everybody in Latin America is scared of this fellow Mann. They highly regard him, because he's a tough guy. He's not the regular . . .

Russell: Well, I hope he is. I think he's much tougher than the ones we've had. And he has a velvet glove, but I hope he has his little iron fingers under it.

President Johnson: Well, he—I think he does. I think he does.

Russell: Well, I'm counting on that.

End of excerpt.

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