

President Johnson with Alabama Governor George Wallace and Tennessee Governor Buford Ellington.

March 15, 1965

President Johnson: Governor?

Governor Wallace: Mr. President?

LBJ: Yes, sir. Glad to hear you.

GW: Well, I'm glad to hear you. Governor Ellington had said that you were standing by and that I could call you.

LBJ: Yep, I'm always standing by and you always can call me any time you want to.

GW: Well, thank you very much. Mr. President, I want to give you just a brief run-down, I know how busy you are. The court, as you know, has ordered this march. And, uh, 'course, it's an unlimited march and you know, we have very limited amounts of state policemen, and they are off the roads. We've had drunken drivers running into people and killing them, the last eight weeks, as a result of us not having adequate protection on the highways. These people are pouring in from all over the country. The hotels of all the cities are full. The motels, well, some of the motels have gone up double on their prices you know so, and they're flying in nuns and priests. We've got hundreds of bearded beatniks in front of my Capitol now. And the point I'm making is that uh, we're going to do the best we can, but we hope that you might use your influence to at least make them have an orderly march because I-I-I don't know, it looks like the group coming here, with the language they're using. They made a speech on the street of our city two days ago and James Forman suggested in front of all the nuns and priests that if anybody went in a café and they wouldn't serve 'em, they'd kick the fuckin' legs of the tables off. It all and making that kind of intemperate remarks, it inflames people, you know I'm asking people, I'm going to ask them to stay away from this highway, to "use your superior discipline." And I'll do everything that I can, but what I want to say quite frankly is that they've been stirred up by a lot of things. Of course, I know you don't want anything to happen that looks like a revolution. But if these people keep pouring in here, uh and conducting themselves in the manner they are, why, it's going to take...it's gonna take everybody in the country to stop something and I mean they're also pouring in from all across the country, I reckon on both sides.

LBJ: Well, uh, Governor, uh, I, uh, the court has acted now. Obviously, the longer the march is postponed, the greater the presence and the longer the people from outside are going to stay in Alabama, and the more problem you're going to have, and the more problem I'm going to have, and the more problem the country is going to have. And I think that your concern is justified and that if uh, if you can do anything, get that request for a stay out of the way so we don't have to sit here and wait days and days and days for that to be acted on while this stuff builds up and blows the cork out, why, it would be good and if you'd call up your own Guard, the conduct has

been very good. If you say your patrolmen got to go on back to watch the highways and you call up your own Guard into the service of the state and I would ask our best people to cooperate, our Defense Department to provide a group of counselors, advisors to work with them. And, if you wanted me to, work with you and assure you that proper contingents of men would be stationed at Craig and Maxwell. In the event, in the unlikely event they would need it, if the situation were to deteriorate, you can't always anticipate, maybe we'd have to federalize it but put it under single command the troops of Craig and Maxwell could be called in. I'd be glad to take those steps if you felt that the orderly needs of the situation there justified and required, it. Maybe by all of us saying to them, "Let's have the march. Let's get it over as soon as we can." Let's everybody stay at home at will. And lets don't, when you talk about revolution, that really upsets us all and we don't, I know you don't, and I know I don't we've just got to work together best we can to see that we discharge our duties and I'm willing to do it if it seems, if this, if this is what you want.

GW: Well, let me say this Mr. President, when I say revolution-

LBJ: I know that. I understand that.

GW: I do have some revolutionaries down here.

LBJ: Well I know that. I understand that.

GW: And of course if I was a revolutionary I would have invited a quarter of a million of people to come help us. But of course I don't want anything like that at all.

LBJ: I know.

GW: I don't want anybody to get hurt. But the reason I don't want to be in the position of intimating that I'm asking for federal troops or anything of that sort. I just hope that this state was asked for purposes that I just don't see. And of course the Justice Department has been contacting the court down hear but what we want to know is if after this march is over, if we strain ourselves and beg our people and don't have any trouble. Of course we've got some in their ranks. We have ministers down here that walk up and scratch the patrolmen on their hands, you know, and they turn it around. And a Negro priest yesterday asked all the patrolmen what their wives were doing, whether some of their friends could have dates with their wives. You know, trying to provoke them, those kinds of things, you know. We are just telling them to just take all that stuff and don't pay any attention. But what we want to know is what after the march is over. Now I've given all these boys ten extra days to register. I got the free textbook packs yesterday in the senate for the negroes and the whites involved in that and of course that has helped them more. And what about the next day after the march is over. These fifty thousand people are gonna be jammed in this place are going to be here the next day, and the next day and the next day. They're going to bankrupt our state and we don't have the money. Well if they want to take, if these revolutionaries, as I call them, want the federal government to take a state over well of

course they will probably precipitate a condition that will sometime require that-unless we can use the good influence of your office to say, "You made your march. Now let's don't keep marching." That's what I'm worried about. What after the march, Mr. President?

LBJ: Oh, I guess no one can really prophesize what any group will do. I sure don't know. I wish I knew. I had the feeling that from what Governor Ellington and the Attorney General had said, and they were both very understanding the situation and of your problem and our problem, that I might issue a statement later today saying that I ask people to not go into the state and that we're going to jointly try to protect the march in accordance with the order of the court. But that the more problem they give us and the more people and the greater the trouble is. I would hope that if your men, your highway people have to go back as you suggest that I think it would be better if you called up the guard in the service of the state and I just approved it and gave some advisors with them rather than our doing it. And then I would just have available, as we have had, proper contingencies there in case, in the unlikely event, that the police and the guard and our appeals uh, were not sufficient. And if the situation deteriorated then I would have to give some thought to federalizing the guard and putting it under single command of the Craig and Maxwell people. Put I would start out, if I could, trying to say to them that we want to get the order carried out as promptly as we can. I thought your statement on the election thing was good. I thought on the voting thing was good. I thought that the whole appearance the other day was uh, helpful. And the ticker today carried stories, I haven't seen the paper, but about your education statement to the educators. And that is going to have its affect and a good affect. But we are confronted with a fact and not a theory. And we can't wait till it's to late. If your uh guard, if your uh troops, if your uh highway patrolmen are going back to the highways to take care of the drunken driver and things like that. And if you've got this group of uh that's a coming, and the highways moving and the tourist courts filling up. I would . . . if you call up your Guard, I'll put the best people we've got to work right with them. And our people here applaud the conduct of the guard the last time they had them. They think you are all right. And we'll just, we'll have them sitting back alerted ready for whatever help you need these others. And I think I would say that. And I think I just ought to say that I'm asking people in the country not to let this thing get out of hand. We don't need any more marching down there. They've got enough to march.

GW: Well, I think that would be excellent. And here is what I will do. We are going to keep close touch with the situation.

LBJ: Wait a minute. Let me put the attorney general on so if he's got any question here he can ask you. He's on line one. I am going to leave here in a little bit. I am trying to go down to Texas. Attorney General.

NICHOLAS KATZENBACH: Yes, yes.

LBJ: Governor can you hear him?

GW: Yes sir I can hear him.

LBJ: Go ahead Governor.

GW: Thank you Mr. President.

LBJ: I'm on too Governor. I'll just stay here I just wanted him to hear what the program was.

GW: What I'm going to do is this. I'm going to keep close touch with the situation and I am going to do whatever we consider necessary to maintain law and order. In other words we're going to use the patrolmen we have available and all the other forces and we'll do, take any other step. If necessary, we call the Guard. If we thought that's necessary we've got them alerted because we are wanting to protect the marchers and other folks too. But uh I just wanted to tell you I appreciate the fact that you may make an appeal that there's enough people in the state to march without other folks coming in.

LBJ: Well I would seriously consider doing that. I don't want to go, wait now, if you send your folks back as Governor Ellington indicated you are going to have to have some of them return to the work they were doing. I don't want that to get out of hand where I will be called on and I'll have to take action. I want you to take the action if you will with your Guard so the governor of the state can do it and we will supplement it and support you.

GW: What I mean Mr. President. I'm not going to take them away. But I am just saying that if this matter continues on and on and on we've got to have these people in other parts of the state. We can handle it through the march, but then after the march, if they are just going to stay in this state eight straight weeks and congregate fifty thousand strong a day, then we're going to have a revolution. Well I don't mean to use the word revolution. We are just going to have some trouble. We'll have to have hip. That's what I am saying. It's hard to control people. We've got people picketing in Selma. They're picketing private residences. Thirty of them went to the Mayor's home. Marching around his house, around on his own private property.

LBJ: Don't you think we ought to act before it gets beyond where we can?

GW: It's not in any such condition as that now.

LBJ: I thought you felt like that we ought to have some Guard called up.

GW: We'll I've got the Guard alerted. And uh let's see about when the march takes place. We are not so worried about the march itself so much. We are going to be able to handle that, but if they are there the next day, and the next day and the next day that's what we are concerned with more than anything else. It'll be hard to keep our patrolmen away another two or three or four weeks and so. I don't mean to indicate that we can't handle the situation but if they stay on and on and on. That's when it might get unmanageable.

NK: Governor. This is Nick Katzenbach, Governor. Uh-uh I think that uh whether they stay on and on and on-

LBJ: They're going to stay there until they take action, Governor that's what they're going to do.

GW: What do you mean? Action on the voter business?

NK: I think if that march goes well and goes smoothly and they are protected and there's no incidents, that's the best chance of their not staying on and on.

GW: Well let me just say this, I'm going on statewide television tonight and tell people what I told them in Tuscaloosa that, "If you want to stand with me, I am asking you to stay away, and use your restraint." And I believe that the people are going to listen to me because the people are for me in this state. And so far they have done what I have asked them to do. And in my judgment we are not going to have any trouble in the march and if you say that will help us keep them from staying on and on, that's what we're going to do.

LBJ: Buford, do you want to say anything? I

BUFORD ELLINGTON: George, it's Buford. I think this from our conversation this morning, I think the wisest move you can make is to put your men back out on the highways and call your Guard. I will say it in all frankness because then when they get there the dispersment of these people is going to be a problem. And that way, I think we get it all over with at once. And I think it will work out better.

GW: I'll consider it. I'll tell you this. We've got them alerted. And I'm going to do what is necessary. And we may do that. But I do say we can handle this right now.

BE: I think this. If they know you're going to call out the Guard, then this wild element is not going to come to Alabama in the droves they are going to come under the conditions you in. That's the thing that I'm afraid of. I'm not afraid of the good people on either side.

GW: Of course, I hate to call out the Guard. You-all federalize them each time I call them out.

BE: I'm not worried about that. You can take my word. I'm not worried about that. And I'm standing in front of all these people while we talk. As long as we keep our heads together and cooperate to find a solution.

GW: We'll I hope that you all really can sense that I don't want anything to happen.

BE: I am. I can tell you that and I fell like I can speak for all the rest of these men.

GW: Well I appreciate you all talking to me. And just remember this we are surveying. And we

are going to take what action is necessary to protect. Now let me say this. When we say protect it is almost impossible to guarantee that one person is not going to get hit with a rock. Now you know, the President of our nation was slain with all the protection he had over in Texas. And you just sometimes can't guarantee that nobody is going to get hit by a rock. If they can't protect our President from being brutally slain, why, it's sometimes hard to keep somebody from getting hit with a rock.

LBJ: Governor, that's sure right. We know that. Of course if we could have anticipated or had any idea something like this, might have happened, why, we might have had our Guard out. We know we got trouble ahead here. We can see it coming. And I sure want to express the hope that whatever facilities you have, that we don't act to late. And we aren't going to nationalize that Guard unless the situation becomes such that we think that law and order require it and it deteriorates. And we think the way to do it, was the way Buford suggested to me. Let's try to get this uh, stay out of the way, and let the march start before people can get there from these other states. And you call up your Guard and let them know that you are going to do it. And we'll applaud the conduct of your Guard, the last time it was used. And we will have people available, alerted, if you don't have enough and then that way I think we will have taken every precaution. And we wouldn't federalize any Guard unless it just got to the point where that was all that was left. But we will not take this through you before it gets all out of proportion. Now you are on the scene. And you can see it better than we can. And if you have a different viewpoint and you think you got it in hand, well-

BE: George, are you by yourself?

GW: Uh yes. No sir I have Mr. Tramble and Mr. Jackson.

BE: That's all right. I'm not worried about them. Here's my thinking. I haven't even discussed this with the President, but here's what I've had in the back of my mind all the time. This radical element is Lin go and some of the boys. You know that.

GW: Yes, sir.

BE: And I think completely removing them from the scene and back on the duties of patrolling. And bringing in new faces under new conditions, I think is the only way we are going to solve this now.

GW: Now people at the head of the thing are going to do their office work. And we're not going to have the general out in front. We're going to have the corporals and sergeants out in front. I think that is a good way to express that type of thing.

BE: See I think very strongly that the more strength you show right here in this time depends on how quick the solution to this thing is. Of course, what you want and what we want is to get them out of there.

GW: I'll show strength insofar as protecting the people on the march, but I would like for you-all to help me after they've made that point. Now you say they're going to stay here until the problem's solved but with everything they are asking for they'll be here from now on because the people of this state-

BE: I don't think you get what we mean there. I think the fact is once the march is over and they are successful under the Guard sponsorship, then they would move on.

GW: Yes, well, now, that's fine. That's all right. That sounds good.

NK: I don't think that, Governor it's Nick Katzenbach again, it means that the whole thing is over. This march, you build up to a heck of a lot of people on this march. If that goes over and nothing happens and there's are no incidents then most of those people are going to go. Now you may still have incidents and problems here and there.

LBJ: Governor, I want to do whatever I can to be helpful and to get this thing as peaceful as I can. I thought Governor Ellington and you-all kind of had a meeting of the minds on it. Now do you got any suggestion on it? Now what do you want to do? Look at it again.

GW: Well we will have a meeting of the minds Mr. President. The meeting of the mind is we will do whatever is necessary because I'm just as concerned as you are about nothing happening and I will do whatever it takes. If it takes ten thousand Guardsmen, we'll have them. I'll just do whatever is necessary. And I won't wait to late. And of course you know-

LBJ: That's okay. That's good. You keep in touch with Buford. And I'll be flying away a little later this afternoon. But I'll be in constant touch with the situation, and you call us anytime.

GW: Thank you Mr. President.

President Johnson with Tennessee Governor Buford Ellington.

March 18, 1965. 10:00 p.m.

President Johnson: Buford.

Governor Ellington: Yes sir. I'm sorry I left; I thought you were through.

LBJ: I thought so too. You're dealing with a very treacherous guy. You all must not come in even quoting him anymore. Because he's a no-good son of a bitch. And I think you know it. He announced tonight that he would ask Johnson to "Provide sufficient officers to protect the Negroes" He appeared before the joint session and he says that the uh, uh, the uh, "Federal Government has said that our courts are too slow," Wallace said that, "Therefore we must now submit to mob rule. It's a tragedy and a sorrow beyond words but the federal judge compounds the anarchy by ordering the state to protect the army." He said "Tonight that he would ask Johnson to provide protection for Negroes marching from Selma to Montgomery. I intend to call on the President of the United States to provide sufficient officers to guarantee the safety and welfare of the citizens in and around the route. The federal government has created this matter, they can help protect 'em," Wallace told-

[Johnson's secretary Juanita Roberts accidentally picks up the phone and interrupts]

LBJ: He said "It would take 6,171 law enforcement personnel agents working 8-hour shifts to possibly guard the march."

BE: Well, I'm not going to talk to him anymore, now, I'm through with him.

LBJ: Well, now you better tell him that. Tell him you're not, tell him you're not. Tell him you read it on the ticker and I've been leaving messages since 3:30 --messaging with that son of a bitch. And he is absolutely treacherous!

BE: Well, you know I told you when you--

LBJ: "Tonight I shoulda asked the people of Alabama for restraint. I ask you to stay away from tension, I ask you not to play in the hands, I ask you to stay home, I hope that when this march takes place you stay there. He did not immediately specify whether he asked Johnson for troops or armed marshals. Wallace began his speech after a fist fight, where they arrested 90 civil rights activists in a counter-march by segregationists. Deepened racial tensions in Montgomery--"

BE: I told Burke and Lee all the way through that I didn't trust him, and everything. So I'm just not going to answer any calls from him or ever talk to him. I--

LBJ: I'd answer one and just tell him, "Now, listen, George, I offered you-I went over to the president today and talked to him and told him that you needed help--"

BE: Yeah.

LBJ: "He called and offered to give it to you. You ran like a goddamned rabbit! Then you ran down to the television and told them that we had created." Then you're going to ask, "Now, why in the hell didn't you stand up like a man and say what you were going to do to begin with?"

BE: Well, I tell you, if its all right with you-I'm not gonna take his call. If he keeps calling me, I'll wait till in the morning where I can record it.

LBJ: Come over here. You can record it anytime.

BE: Well I can record it from here. That's where I been doing it, from my apartment. You know- - if he starts calling me in a few minutes I'm just not going to answer.

LBJ: No, I don't think, I don't think, I think you ought to. I think you might answer him tonight and just say, "Now, let me tell you, George. I just want this for the record. You called me up, asked for help. I offered to give it to you and then you ran like a rabbit-"

BE: That's right, that's right.

LBJ: "Then you went publicly and you said this. Now I want to know whether you mean it or whether you don't and if you do, why, you come out there and put it on the record. Because I've got a record, and I'm not going to be double-crossed this way .-"

BE: OK

LBJ: I'm going to issue a statement here that kind of burns his tail, I'll ask him to call you and give it to you.

BE: OK, will do.