

Remarks at the Dedication of the Dodd Center for Human Rights at the University of Connecticut in Storrs, Connecticut

October 15, 2021

Thank you so very much. My name is Joe Biden. I am Jill Biden's husband. I'm delighted to be here. Thank you. Thank you.

It is truly—it's not hyperbole to suggest—it's a great honor to be here, a genuine honor, and—at this great public university celebrating the life and legacy of not one, but two proud sons of Connecticut: Senator Thomas Dodd and my good friend—and we truly are really good, close friends—Senator Chris Dodd.

Chris and I have known each other for a long time. But if you'll excuse a point of personal privilege, as we used to say in the Senate, I saw up close how he fought for human rights and human dignity in the Senate.

Do you know my measure? Madam Ambassador, Ambassador Kennedy, do you know what my measure is? People who tell me they care about people and then disrespect the waitress or a waiter. People who tell me they care about how, in fact, people are entitled to be treated with dignity and walk by someone at a shoeshine stand and doesn't say "hello." People who do not do the just simply decent things for ordinary people. That's the real measure.

I've never seen Chris, figuratively or—speaking, walk by anybody. I've never seen him ignore his wife, ignore his two brilliant, beautiful daughters.

I remember the passion and eloquence that you brought to the floor, Chris, whether you were fighting for American families or serving as the Senate leader—leading voice on engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean. And your brother, the Ambassador, did a pretty damn good job as well.

I think that the work this Senator is doing to bring human rights to the forefront of public understanding is making a real and immediate impact for all young people today. I know—I think it's going to rate high among your family's many great and lasting contributions to the country, Chris. And I know this is truly a family commitment for the Dodds, so thank you for inviting me to be part of this. I think it's a—I really mean it: It's an honor to be able to be here.

Of course, I owe Chris. I remember when—as he pointed out, when were both running for President back in 2007 with almost no cash in either of our campaigns—[*laughter*—you let me hop a ride with you in a twin-engine prop plane—[*laughter*—true story—from our Senate vote in DC to a Democratic debate in New Hampshire.

And we were on our way to the debate one other time, but the whole way up, we just laughed and told stories before we were debating one another. And then the next day, to get back to the Senate to vote, we had to flag down a young—remember this?—flag down a young Senator named Barack Obama—[*laughter*—to get to even open the airport. [*Laughter*] God's truth. Remember that, Chris? [*Laughter*] Here, he'd just been there 2 years. He was on my Foreign Relations Committee—I was chairman. I said, "Can you get the airport open for us?" [*Laughter*]

I used to—I'd kid Barack. I couldn't understand why he so soundly defeated me in that primary. [*Laughter*] And then I realized when he'd be introduced, he'd be introduced by the "Voice of God." I'd get introduced by "Johnny Scanafrana." [*Laughter*] So it took a while for me to figure all this out. [*Laughter*]

Luckily, Chris, I got to travel on a much nicer plane these days. *[Laughter]* And it's yours to travel on any time you would like.

I want to thank a few more proud Connecticut leaders who have been spending time with me today: Governor Lamont, you have been—you're one of the finest Governors in the country. I'm not being solicitous; that's a fact. Exceeded only by your wife. *[Laughter]* And Senator Blumenthal—who I mentioned earlier today—I apologize for repeating this, but my son Beau Biden is the one who should be standing here talking to you. My son Beau Biden was the attorney general of the State of Delaware. And one of the people he went to and sought advice from, for real, was then-Attorney General Blumenthal. They became friends. And my son was a great admirer. And I think the Senator knows that.

And Senator Murphy—if I have to have someone in the foxhole with me, I want Murph with me, man. *[Laughter]* No, I'm serious. This guy knows as much about foreign policy as anybody does, and his failure to remain silent has meant a great deal to me, because he's spoken up on so much.

And, Representative Courtney, I thank you. Thank you for your help and your support. And Rosa DeLauro. Rosa—I don't owe as much as Chris does to Rosa, but I owe a hell of a lot to her. My son was married, and it was his second year of law school, and he transferred to Yale Law School. And Rosa heard that I was coming up with him.

And the apartment he rented was less than ideal—*[laughter]*—and the whole thing had to be painted. My brother Jimmy fixes everything—my brother Jimmy was with us, and we went down and bought about 28 gallons of paint. I don't know how—but, for real, it was hot as hell as well.

And I'm up on a—on an 8-foot ladder, painting the crown molding and sweating like the proverbial you-know-what. And I hear——

[At this point, the President knocked on the podium.]

——at the door. I said, "Come in." And the then-alderman—is it alderman or councilman at the time? Alderman. Alderman DeLauro walked in—her mom.

And she said, "Where's Biden?" *[Laughter]* And I said, "I'm here." She said: "No, stop fooling with me, son. Where's Biden?" I said: "No, no, I'm Biden. I'm Biden." And she came—she says, "I just wanted to come over and introduce myself and tell your son I'll be taking care of him." And in walks the chief of police. *[Laughter]* I thought, "Holy God, what did I do?" *[Laughter]* She says: "You're going to have nothing to worry about. You have nothing to worry about." Talk about constituent service—Rosa, you come by it honestly.

And, Rosa, we've all—and I'm not being solicitous—again, I'm using that word twice now—we've all learned a great deal from you. I want to thank you for your longstanding dedication to the—relating to the well-being of children and families, and for championing and expanding the child tax credit, which is a gigantic middle class tax cut for working families that finally got passed in the American Rescue Plan, which we were able to get done immediately upon being elected.

And Rosa will not tell you, but she's the first person I called to ask for her help as to how I should do this. And that put money in the pockets of families all across this country, even as we speak. It's how we're going to cut child poverty in this country. And we've already cut it in—nearly in half. And none of us should lose sight of what it meant to American families when we think about our mission to defend human rights and dignity at home and around the world.

Twenty-six years ago today, another United States Senator—a United States President—who I just spoke to, Chris, literally an hour and a half ago—Bill Clinton—and he sends his best, by the

way—visited this university to dedicate the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center—a library and archives of papers that amount to an incredible first-person first draft of history.

And let me say that we're all thinking about President Clinton today and sending him his good wishes to a speedy recovery. And he's always been the "Comeback Kid." He's getting out of the hospital. Everything is going well. But he wanted to send his best.

As a young lawyer, Tom Dodd had already built a record of fighting hatred by prosecuting the KKK in the South, but—when, in 1945, he left behind his beloved Grace and his five young children—a young Christopher just 14 months old at the time—to travel to the bombed-out cities of Europe to document the shocking atrocities, still fresh in their horror; to question and cross-examine some of history's most notorious villains—and that's not hyperbole; some of history's most notorious villains—and to expose beyond question the depravity and the crimes against humanity that the Nazi regime committed.

Tom Dodd dedicated his intellect and his moral passion and his resolute sense of right and wrong to making the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal a testament to justice. And that's what it was: a testament to justice. Nothing like it ever happened before.

And all the while, he was writing letters to his Grace, lamenting their separation but recognizing the momentous weight of history that rested on his shoulders. And, Chris, I came up—the same sentence from your book: "Someday," he wrote, "will be recognized as a great landmark in the struggle of mankind for peace. . . . Never before has such a record been written and men will read it for a thousand years in amazement and wonder . . . how it [ever] happened."

When President Clinton spoke at this first dedication, he ended on a pointed reminder. He said, and I quote, "The road to tyranny, we must never forget, begins with the destruction of . . . truth." The road to tyranny begins with the destruction of truth.

In my view, that was the lesson at the heart of the Nuremberg trials: finding truth, documenting it so it could never be denied. In court, Tom Dodd built the case fact-by-fact, using the Nazis' own meticulous records of crimes and shocking human evidence to pin down Nazi leaders who tried to deny their complicity and feign ignorance.

And even more important, it denied the entire German policy [population]* the ability to feign ignorance. To deal with the past, you must face the truth, whether it was Dachau or Buchenwald, Auschwitz, or other camps. Millions of Jews rounded up, along with members of other minority groups, and thrown into camps, abused, used as forced labor, medical experimentation. Six million Jews murdered, including so many who met their ultimate fate in the gas chamber.

He made sure no one could deny their own eyes and what they saw. He preserved the truth, ugly and as traumatic as it was, for all of history so that the horrors of the Holocaust could never be diminished or denied. An evil that we still have to guard against to this day has to be watched.

Chris, as you heard me say many times before—because you got to meet my dad—my dad was a well-read, high school-educated fellow whose greatest regret was he never went to college. But he cared deeply about human dignity.

Our dinner table—my dad was what many would call a "righteous Christian." He happened to be a Catholic, but he was a righteous Christian. And growing up, my dad would come home for dinner before he went back to close the business he managed. And the dinner table was a place where we sat down to have conversation and, incidentally, eat. [*Laughter*] I'm serious.

* White House correction.

My dad used to talk about, as a student of the Holocaust, what a tragedy it was we didn't bomb the railroad tracks toward the end of the war; how wrong it was that we turned away the *St. Louis*, a ship full of Jewish refugees from Europe.

He believed passionately the only way we could make real the promise of "never again" was to keep reminding ourselves of what had happened and how so many people—otherwise thought themselves decent people—rationalized that it really wasn't happening—"we didn't know what was going on"—because they weren't turning on the gas valve, they had no responsibility.

That's why, if you'll again excuse a point of personal privilege, when each of my children—and now my grandchildren—turned the age of 15, the first thing I've done—my word as a Biden—is put them on an aircraft and fly to Dachau, one at a time, at age 15. "Work sets you free"—as you go through the entrance.

But that's not what I wanted them to see. I wanted them to see the lovely homes that were right up against the fence line with their beautiful roofs. People living in there rationalized that: "It's not me. I'm not doing this. And I don't know, really, what's going on in there." I wanted them to see the ability of the human mind to rationalize cannot be underestimated.

I would say, parenthetically, the reason why Germany has been able to turn it around, unlike other countries, is because they faced it head on, acknowledged. So let me say it again: Nuremberg was unlike anything that ever came before. It was not about vengeance. It was about accountability. For only acknowledging the truth can we prevent the repetition of atrocities, which are happening now in other parts of the world.

It elevated our conception, as Chris said, of the rule of law. It set a marker for the future of justice, uplifted the importance of human rights in international affairs. We see it in the Nuremberg tribunals—the blueprint we see in those tribunals—the blueprint for future United Nations tribunals that would help deliver justice after atrocities committed in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia.

We see it in the values championed at Nuremberg and the antecedents of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the foundation of a rules-based international order built out of the wreckage of two wars—world wars—not just to prevent us from destroying ourselves, but to actively build a better future.

We see it in the passion of a young prosecutor, the commitment to prioritizing the human impacts of policies, the commitment carried through in his son's career of public service and by all the students of this institute who've been inspired by the example. We need you. We need you badly. And as we look around the world today, we see human rights and democratic principles increasingly under assault. We feel the same charge of history upon our own shoulders to act.

We have fewer democracies in the world today than we did 15 years ago. Fewer. Not more—fewer. Cannot be sustained. That's why, from day one of my administration, I've taken concrete steps to put human rights back at the center of our foreign policy and reassert our moral leadership on the global stage; to lead, as Chris has so often heard me say, with the power of our example, not the example of our power.

When Chris and I served on the Foreign Relations Committee, we excoriated the abuses elsewhere in the world and called for action overseas. But human rights, in some ways, stood apart from the domestic struggle of civil rights and civil liberties and equal justice here at home. Today, we know that our efforts to defend human rights around the world are stronger because we recognize our own historic challenges as part of that same fight.

Leading by example means taking action at home to renew and defend our own democracy; to advance equity and promote justice; to defend the sacred right to vote in free, fair, and secure

elections. Leading by example means not pretending that our history has been perfect, but demonstrating how strong nations speak honestly about the past and uphold the truth and strive to improve.

We make the best case for gender equality, racial justice and equity, religious freedom, the rights of the LGBTQ+ peoples and other marginalized communities around the world by practicing what we preach. The first 10 minutes I was in office I ended the Muslim ban; advancing racial equity throughout the Federal Government; overturning the ban on transgender individuals serving openly in the United States military; establishing the White House Gender Policy Council.

Demonstrating that our commitment to human rights begins at home is among the most powerful and persuasive tools in our foreign policy kit. And as we defend human rights beyond our shores, we're more effective when we work together, allies and partners in our shared values.

America, as a nation, is unique in all history, not because we're inherently better, because the basis upon which we're organized. Virtually every other nation is organized based on ethnicity, religion, geography, color. We're unique in all the world. We're based on one guiding principle: We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men and women are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

We have never lived up to it. We've never, until very recently, walked away from it. The arc has always bent closer and closer to justice and inclusion. The moment we stop, the moment we rest is the moment that our influence diminishes. So we're reengaging multilaterally and rallying the world to advance universal human rights and fundamental freedoms to prove that democracies can still deliver in an age of fast-moving, cross-cutting challenges.

We have rejoined the U.N. Human Rights Council, which we walked away from—the United States of America, last time, didn't want to be part. I mean, just yesterday we won an election to a new 3-year term that begins in January on that committee. We had to fight to get back on it because the world wondered, "Do we mean it still?" The United States of America—do we mean it?

In December, I will host—the United States will host a virtual summit—a Summit of Democracies—to bring together world leaders to make concrete commitments to defend democratic values and push back against advancing authoritarianism, not war, but important words. We can't return to a world where might is right and strong nations abuse weak or oppress individual rights with impunity.

Nuremberg forced us to look closely at the evil of humankind and what we're capable of perpetrating, to see mass atrocities, crimes against humanity do not happen by accident. They don't happen by accident. They result of choices, choices made by individual human beings and world leaders.

And sadly, when we look around the world today, we cannot say that the specter of atrocity is behind us. We see today the patterns, the choices playing out around the world even as we speak: the oppression and use of forced labor of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang; the treatment of the Rohingya by the military junta in Burma; the rampant abuses, including the use of starvation and sexual violence, to terrorize civilian populations in Northern Ethiopia.

Whenever we hear that kind of poisonous hatred, wherever we see our fellow humans being dehumanized, it doesn't mean we go to war, but we must speak out. Silence—as my dad would remind me—silence is complicity. Silence is complicity. That's what Nuremberg said: Your silence is complicity.

I've raised these issues personally with leaders around the world—our friends and our adversaries alike—and I've made it clear that no U.S. President should stand by when human rights are under attack and maintain their legitimacy.

Those who we are—that's who we are as Americans. It's part of our DNA. We've fought, we've marched, we've sacrificed to ensure that rights are not reserved to just the wealthy or the powerful. They're the God-given inheritance of every person on this planet by virtue of our shared humanity.

As I said to a Supreme Court Justice who I disagreed with in a hearing—we have a different—you think I have my rights because the Constitution granted them to me. I possess my rights because I was born, and I gave up some of my rights in a constitution.

That's the radical idea at the core of the founding of our Nation, as I said, that all women and men are created equal, that we are all endowed by our creator with certain unalienable rights. And those rights don't flow from the power of the Government; these rights exist for every individual. Period. Period. It is the job of the Government to protect them and to uphold them equally for all people.

We have never, as I said, fully lived up to that animating American ideal, but we've never turned our backs on it. In all the years since our founding, that idea has been our Nation's steady North Star, drawing us back on course. That constant struggle to live up to our highest domestic—democratic principles to self-correct has made us a beacon of hope for the rest of the world. It's also made us strong, resilient, innovative, dynamic.

As I said—and I'll repeat; I apologize—America is the only nation founded on an idea, the single most powerful idea in human history. It sparked our revolution. It helped ignite the wave of change around the world that successive generations have built on, expanding our understanding and extending protections to an ever-wider circle.

But we must never forget just how fragile the principle of universal human rights still is: how easily bruised, how often sacrificed in human battles for power and personal enrichment. In an age of increasing misinformation and disinformation, must—we must not grow complacent in our defense of the democratic values that have been the firm foundation for an era of peace and prosperity unprecedented—unprecedented—in human history.

Attacks on truth are still the harbinger of tyranny. Nothing about our democracy is assured, as I'm sure you've all begun to realize of late. Nothing about our freedom is guaranteed. We have to work for it. In those letters from Tom Dodd to his dear wife Grace reflecting his service at Nuremberg, he wrote: "Sometimes, a man knows his duty so clearly, so surely, he cannot hesitate and he dare not refuse it."

Tom Dodd lived a life with a clarity of purpose. He brought it to his service as U.S. Senator, leading the floor fights, with the Kennedys, on civil rights legislation in the sixties; advocating for gun safety in a State that was a major gun manufacturer, legislation that was ahead of its time; fighting always for human rights and democracy against the forces of oppression and injustice.

He passed that passion on to his children—and to his son Chris. Chris forward—carried forward his father's mantle in the United States Senate. He used it to fight for all American children and families, passing the first childcare act we've seen in this country since World War II, passing the Family and Medical Leave Act.

Chris railed against policies that militarized our relationships in Latin America and argued to instead recognize and invest in the people of our hemisphere. He spoke out when he saw the legacy of justice that his father had fought for in Nuremberg being wrapped in the excesses of a "war on terror."

And he helped to create this center, growing it over the years from an archival repository for the truth into a leading center for the study and promotion of human rights at home and abroad; into a widely respected academic institution, training the next generation of human rights defenders and passing the torch to those of you who will carry the fight on into the future and the—for the truth.

So, as we rededicate the Dodd Center for Human Rights to honor the legacies of both father and son, let's also dedicate it to the future of generations, to the students here in the audience today who will discover and defend human rights as the passion and purpose of our life.

So let us dedicate—be dedicated to expanding our shared understanding that we can never fully realize the freedom we wish for ourselves without also helping ensure that liberty and justice for everyone. And let's dedicate—let's dedicate—it to the unending fight to bring our own Nation, our own world closer to a future in which every human being is free to pursue the highest dreams and unleash their full potential.

And for you students that are here—undergraduates at this great institution—there's no reason why you will not be doing what I'm doing as President of the United States, standing here, speaking to audiences now. I mean that from the bottom of my heart. I was taught—I came from very modest means; no Horatio Alger story, but very modest means—that you can be anything you set your mind to if you work at it.

So many of you in this audience, especially on the second tier there, are the people that my grandchildren are going to be looking to. There's not a single reason why—not a single reason why we can't do this. Not a single reason.

As I've told every world leader that I've gotten to know—and I've met many, many of them—it's never been a good bet to bet against the American people.

God bless you all, and may God protect our troops. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:02 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to former U.S. Ambassador to Japan Caroline B. Kennedy; Jackie M. Clegg, wife, Grace and Christina, daughters, Mary, sister, and Nicholas, brother, of former Sen. Christopher J. Dodd; former U.S. Ambassador to Uruguay and Costa Rica Thomas J. Dodd; Ann Lamont, wife of Gov. Edward M. "Ned" Lamont of Connecticut; and former President Barack Obama.

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