

Remarks in Kearny, New Jersey

October 25, 2021

The President. Thank you. Hello, New Jersey! Thank you, Lieutenant Commander Mikie Sherrill. *[Laughter]*

Well, Governor Murphy, so many of the national challenges we're confronting are areas where you're already leading—and that's not hyperbole—and whether it's making health care or preschool or college more affordable; providing paid family leave; replacing lead in pipes; and protecting public health. So thanks for showing the way, pal. Thanks for showing the way.

It's also good to meet my old friends—a lot of my friends in Congress. But, Bill, you and I have been doing this a long time, pal. Thanks for the passport back into Jersey and your district.

And Josh Gottheimer has been the best go-between I've had trying to get all of this done, whether it's the Build Back Better for—portion or the infrastructure portion. And Tom Malinowski has done a hell of a job—and Don Payne and Frank Pallone.

I keep telling Frank, I remind him—we've been doing things together a long time: I know Delaware is small, I know how important New Jersey is, but Delaware owns the Delaware River up to the highwater mark in New Jersey. *[Laughter]* So you know what I mean? *[Laughter]*

And one of my favorite Members of Congress, who I campaigned for and she won in spite of it: Mikie Sherrill—lieutenant commander of the United States Navy, a naval graduate, Georgetown Law. Incredible person.

And I want to acknowledge both Senators Booker and Menendez, who represent you so well in Washington. They're down there trying to get this all moving.

I'm here today to talk about what's fundamentally at stake for families of New Jersey, the whole region here, and for our country. For most of the 20th century, we led the world by a significant margin—not just led the world, by a significant margin—because we invested in ourselves, we invested in our people. Not only in our roads and our highways and our bridges, but in our people, in our families.

We were among the first to provide access to free education—12 years of free education for all—anyone who is an American—beginning back in the late 1800s and the early 1900s. And that decision to invest in our children and our families was a major part—a major part—of why we were able to lead the world for so much of the 20th century. But somewhere along the way, we took our eyes off the ball.

Our infrastructure used to be the best in the world. Not hyperbole—the best in the world. Today, according to the World Economic Forum, we rank 13th in the world. Twelve other nations have superior infrastructure to us, and China has trains that go 230 miles an hour for long distances. And we got money to do that back in the administration of Barack Obama and Joe Biden, and you had a Republican Governor who didn't want it, didn't want any parts of it.

And we used to lead the world in educational achievement. Now, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development ranks America 35 out of 37 major countries when it comes to investing in early childhood education and care—35 out of 37. We cannot be competitive in the 21st-century global economy if we continue to slide.

My wife, who's a community college professor, says, "Any nation that outeducates us will outcompete us." I'll say it again: "Any nation that outeducates us will outcompete us." And that's

a fact. That's why I resolved that we have to, once again, build America from the bottom up and the middle out.

I've never seen a time in American history when the middle class did well, the wealthy didn't do very well. But I'm tired of trickle-down. Trickle-down doesn't—hasn't worked so much for the last 15 years for working class and middle class folks.

That's why I proposed two critical pieces of legislation being debated back in Washington right now. These bills are not about left versus right or moderate versus progressive or anything else that pits an American—one American against one another.

These bills are about competitiveness versus complacency. Competitiveness versus complacency. They're about expanding opportunity, not opportunity denied. They're about leading the world or continuing to let the world pass us by.

First, the infrastructure bill. It's about rebuilding the arteries of America. And the Portal Bridge project is showing why investments like this are so important.

When the Portal Bridge was built, it was state of the art—and it really was, but 110 years ago. Today, it's been called something different: a "chokepoint," a "bottleneck," an "Achilles heel" of the Northeast Corridor.

Since the Portal Bridge was built, it has become the busiest rail span in the entire Western Hemisphere. Let me say that again: It's the busiest rail span in the entire Western Hemisphere. At peak usage, 450 trains pass over it every day; 200,000 Amtrak and New Jersey Transit passengers.

But ships and barges also need to get under it, and many can't fit. That means the bridges need to swing open and closed again, a process that stops rail traffic and causes other problems. The bridge opens over 100 times a year. And 15 percent of the time, something goes wrong. Fifteen percent of the time.

For example, if the rails don't lock back in place exactly right, the bridge closes. And sometimes, you know what fixes it in the 21st century? A sledgehammer. Come out with a sledgehammer and align the tracks. Literally a sledgehammer to knock it back into place in the year 2021.

One report, couple years ago, found that the Portal Bridge was particularly responsible for 2,000 hours of delays between 2014 and 2018. You know that old expression: "Time is money." As one commuter said, "If you're on the train, and they say 'Portal Bridge,' you know you'd better make other plans."

Aging infrastructure like this is more than an inconvenience or a nuisance, it's an impediment—an impediment—to America's global competitiveness. We're in a worldwide race. Things have changed. Take a look. That's why what's happening right now is so important.

Today, we're moving forward on a new bridge that will be higher over the water so it won't need to open and close. It will allow us to increase speed, safety, and efficiency, and capacity. It's going to make life a lot better for New Jersey's commuters. It's also going to create nearly 8,000 construction jobs in this area alone—this area's workers—8,000 union jobs. Union.

It was pointed out to me not long ago that I said I'm a "union President," that I apparently use—someone calculated I use the word "union" more than the last seven Presidents combined. Because guess what? It's a decent wage. It's about to make rail transportation—which is a cleaner, greener way to travel—the better choice for a lot of New Jersey residents, but not just New Jersey, everybody up and down the East Coast.

If I can pause for a second—I apologize because some have heard this: I commuted every single day, 263 miles a day, on Amtrak from the time I got elected United States Senator. As matter of fact, when I was Vice President, I used to like to take the train home because my mom was very sick and dying, and I'd come home every weekend to make sure I'd take the train home. And Secret Service—and I'm not criticizing them—legitimately would rather me fly, because it's safer, because too many people can get on and off, et cetera.

And I'm getting on one Friday, and then one of the senior guys on Amtrak, Angelo Negri—I got to know all the conductors really well; they became my friends. I mean, really, my genuine friends. I have them in my home at Christmas and during the summer. And Ange walks up to me and goes, "Joey, baby!" Grabs my cheek. *[Laughter]* And I thought the Secret Service was going to blow his head off. *[Laughter]* I swear to God. True story. *[Laughter]*

I said, "No, no, he's a friend." I said, "What's up, Ange?" He said, "Joey, I read in the paper—I read in the paper you traveled 1,000—1,200,000 miles on Air Force planes"—because they keep meticulous tabs of it. I said, "Yes?" He said, "Big"—I won't say the whole thing—"Big deal." *[Laughter]* He said, "You know how many miles you traveled on Amtrak, Joey?" And I said, "No." He said, "The boys and I figured it out at the retirement dinner." He says, "You traveled 2 million"—I think it was 180, but—"2,200,000 miles."

I said, "How did you get that answer?" He said, "Well, 267 miles a day. We figured you traveled 119 days a year for 36 years, and then you traveled as Vice President." And he goes, "So, Joey, I don't hear this about the Air Force anymore." *[Laughter]*

I'm a train guy, because it also is the single most significant way we can deal with air pollution, the single most significant way we can deal with global warming. It's going to help the region's vital maritime industry as well, by making the movement of ships and bridges safer and more efficient.

Look, with my infrastructure bill, we're going to make sure projects like this are just the beginning. Across the country, there are 45,000 bridges in disrepair, some of them dangerously so; 173,000 miles of roads are in poor condition. We're going to create them totally new. We're going to fix them. This is going to be good union jobs, a prevailing wage you can raise a family on, jobs that can't be outsourced.

We're going to make the largest investment in public transportation in the history of America, replacing transit vehicles that are past their useful life and make the most significant investment in rail since the creation of Amtrak 50 years ago.

During peak periods when railroads are congested and rail carriers more—have more passengers, rail is up to 10 times more energy efficient than a person driving. Ten times. We have a huge opportunity here to provide fast, safe, reliable, and clean transportation in this country. All—every study shows—I won't bore you with them all because I've been working them my whole life—every study shows if you can get from point A to point B faster on rail and you can drive your automobile, you take the rail.

The Northeast Corridor—we're talking about a \$30 billion investments in major projects like the Hudson River Gateway tunnels and the Portal Bridge, which it feeds into.

Look, we're going to create jobs replacing lead water pipes so families can drink clean water, something New Jersey and Governor Murphy have been leading on.

We're going to make sure high-speed internet is affordable and available everywhere in America, including the nearly one in three New Jersey families that don't have the internet subscription. How many times did you see people pulling up to McDonald's, sitting outside

during the pandemic so they could do their homework because they couldn't get—get it off of their line?

We're going to create jobs laying thousands of miles of transmission lines to build modern, resilient—an energy grid. And we're going to invest in strengthening our infrastructure against the impacts of climate change.

The Gov and I were talking a little bit earlier. You know, just this year, we've—global warming has caused over \$1 trillion—excuse me, \$100 billion—\$100 billion in damage. I visited New Jersey, as the Gov mentioned, after the Hurricane Ida came through. The Governor and several of you were with me.

In Manville, we met people who had been put out of their homes by flooding. It was devastating. Watermarks over people's heads. They'd show me where the water had gotten to. I told them that help was on the way.

Since then, FEMA processed assistance applications for nearly 30,000 New Jerseyans and approved \$150 million in repairs, replacement, and rental assistance and other needs. Between 2010 and 2020, this State has had 24 extreme weather events—24. Nationally, extreme weather, as I said, cost the taxpayers \$100 billion a year [last year].*

Our plan is going to build our roads higher, our levees stronger, our power grids more durable, all to withstand the ever-increasing ferocity and intensity of extreme weather. And with my Build Back Better plans, we're going to address the root cause of ever-increasing extreme weather and destruction. The climate crisis—we have a climate crisis.

I've flown all over this Nation this year, in helicopters, going from Lake Mead—you know, more land, Gov, has been burned to the ground in the West—to the ground: forest, homes—than the entire State of New Jersey, from all the way down to Cape May, all the way up to the Hudson. That's how much has burned to the ground.

My infrastructure bill will also put Americans to work for long-overdue national environmental cleanups, like cleaning up the Passaic River, the Nation's most expensive superfund site.

We're going to invest \$42 billion in modernizing and electrifying our ports and airports—like the Port of New York and New Jersey, Newark Liberty International Airport—reducing congestion and emissions and creating thousands more good-paying union jobs.

This is going to help us meet the moment of the climate crisis in a way that creates good jobs, makes us more economically competitive, and we can breathe.

Look, we haven't passed the transformation—the transformative infrastructure bill for a decade. Think about this: How many times, under the former guy, did we have—we had "Infrastructure Week"? Not a single thing happened. We need to get this done.

And it isn't enough just to invest in our physical infrastructure. We also have to invest in our people. That's what my second bill—the Build Back Better plan—does.

I just had the opportunity to visit a preschool in East End Elementary in North Plainfield. North Plain [Plainfield]* provides access to preschool for all kids four years and above. My plan is going to make it possible for the district to expand that program to 3-year-olds all across America. The earlier our children begin to learn, the better for themselves, their families, and for the Nation.

* White House correction.

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Studies show that children who have attended high-quality preschool are 50-percent more likely to finish high school and get a 2- or 4-year degree after high school. But right now we're lagging behind.

Today, only about half of 3- and 4-year-olds in America are enrolled in early education. In Germany, France, the U.K., and even Latvia, that number is over 90 percent. Over 90 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds are in school. My Build Back Better plan gets us back on track. And we'll make 2 years of high-quality preschool available to every child in America.

An average two-parent household in this State spends \$15,000 to care for just one young child every year. Everybody says, "How do you know?" I know about this. When I got elected to the United States Senate, my wife and daughter were killed. I had two little boys. I was making a lot of money as a U.S. Senator—\$42,000 a year—and I could not afford. That's why I started commuting every single day. Couldn't afford to have two houses and to have daycare. Thank God I have a sister, who's my best friend; a brother; my mother; and my father who helped out.

My Build Back Better plan is going to cut childcare costs more than in half for low- and middle-income New Jersey residents. Under my plan, no middle class family will spend more than 7 percent of their income on childcare.

We'll also extend historic middle class tax cuts for parents by expanding the childcare tax credit. Everybody talks about children. And Josh has heard me say it: I view it as a tax cut for middle class families—a tax cut. We never have an argument when we talk about the wealthy. This is a tax cut. It changes the lives of the American people. Because many people here in New Jersey understand it means you get \$300 a month for every child under the age six and \$250 for a child between 6 and 17.

That money is already a life-changer for so many working families. It's projected to cut child poverty in New Jersey by 36 percent. These bills are going to change the lives of millions of people in the area and hundreds of millions of people across the country for better and for years to come.

So, everyone here today, especially Governor Murphy and other dedicated officials here today, thank you for showing us what's possible. Because when we make these investments, there's going to be no stopping America. We will own the future.

This initiative is about betting on America, about believing in America, about believing in the American people. If you look at the history of the journey of this Nation, what becomes clear is this: Given half a chance, the American people have never, ever, ever let their country down.

So let's get this done. Let's move. Folks, we have the most—we have the most talented workforce in the world. What are we doing? What in God's name are we doing? And by the way, you hear these numbers—\$3.5 trillion or \$1.75 trillion. We pay for it all. It doesn't increase the deficit one single cent.

So let's get to work. Let's put people to work. And let's once again reestablish America as the most advanced country in the world.

God bless our—America, and God bless our troops. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:56 p.m. at the NJ Transit Meadowlands Maintenance Complex. In his remarks, he referred to Rep. William J. Pascrell, Jr. former Gov. Christopher J. Christie of New Jersey; and former President Donald J. Trump. He also referred to his sister Valerie Biden Owens; and H.R. 3684.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Kearny, NJ.

Locations: Kearny, NJ.

Names: Biden, Jill T.; Biden, R. Hunter; Booker, Cory A.; Christie, Christopher J.; Gottheimer, Joshua S.; Malinowski, Tomasz P.; Menendez, Robert; Murphy, Philip D.; Owens, Valerie Biden; Pallone, Frank J., Jr.; Pascarella, William J., Jr.; Payne, Donald M., Jr.; Sherrill, R. Michelle; Trump, Donald J.

Subjects: Budget, Federal : Deficit and national debt; Children and youth : Childcare, affordability and costs; Communications : Broadband and wireless technologies; Economy, national : Household income and wages; Economy, national : Improvement; Economy, national : Poverty; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Education : Early childhood education programs; Education : Global competitiveness; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Energy : Infrastructure and grid improvements; Environment : Air quality, improvement efforts; Environment : Carbon emissions, reduction efforts; Environment : Climate change; Homeland Security, Department of : Emergency Management Agency, Federal; Infrastructure, national improvement efforts; Labor issues : Unions :: Labor movement and organized labor; Legislation, proposed : Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act; Natural disasters : Response and recovery efforts; Natural disasters : Wildfires, prevention and response efforts; New Jersey : Governor; New Jersey : Hurricane Ida, damage and recovery efforts; New Jersey : President's visits; Taxation : Tax relief; Transportation : Infrastructure, national, improvement efforts; Transportation : Mass transit and rail infrastructure, improvement efforts.

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