

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2021

Commencement Address at South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, South Carolina

December 17, 2021

Mr. President, distinguished faculty, I learned a long time ago that if you wanted to get anything done with Jim, you went to his wife. *[Laughter]*

All kidding aside, the story Jim tells is absolutely accurate. I had—I got what we call in my old neighborhood in Claymont, Delaware, I got shellacked in the first two primaries. And I kept saying, I'm waiting to go to South Carolina to—no, no, I mean it sincerely, because I come from a State that has the eighth largest African American population, and that's the source of all of my support in Delaware—for real.

And I got down here, and things were moving pretty slow. *[Laughter]* And I remember Ms. Emily kept saying to me, and I heard her say it Jim: "We should be for Biden." And she was an incredible woman. I'll speak about her in a little bit.

But you know, not only did we win, I think we won every single district. And I just want you to know it matters. And Jim saying to you, you know, if you don't succeed at first, try again. Well, a lot of you have already figured out that you can do anything you want to do if you set your mind to it.

But one of the things that most people don't focus on anymore is that an awful lot of people—like Jim, like me, like Ms. Emily, like a lot of you—who no one expected to do something significant. I come from a family with a—raised in a three-bedroom, split-level home with four kids, a dad, mom, and a grandpop. We were fine, don't get me wrong. We weren't up by our bootstraps. But we were, I guess, technically, low-middle class, economically.

And I used to stutter really badly. And stuttering is the only thing everybody can still laugh like hell at—*[laughter]*—but it's devastating to a stutterer. If you ever saw "The King's Speech," it's worth seeing. And I had tr-tr-tr-trouble talking until I was well into high school. And—but I was convinced that—my mother would say: "Never bend, never bow. Never kneel, never give up. Just get up. Just get up." And that's one of the things I like so much about HBCUs, which I've been part of for a long, long time.

The reason I got elected in 1972 was because of an HBCU called Delaware State University. They organized for me. So, folks, you're inheriting an incredible tradition graduating from this university.

On Inauguration day, I placed my hand on the Bible and looked out towards the National Mall, and what did I see? I saw a South Carolina State baseball cap. *[Laughter]* Oh, no, not kidding. Not kidding. Talking to two former Presidents, Clinton and Bush.

Today I look out and I see Jim in his South Carolina State cap and gown. Jim, I'm honored you asked me to be here as you receive your diploma you earned 60 years ago, but never got a chance to receive it in person.

You know, I know this: that Ms. Emily is here, her spirit in the students who are here today, students on scholarship in her name, students in the honors college in her name. And she is always in our hearts. She was a genuine gift, a dear friend to Jill and me, and a great American. And she loved this institution. She loved this institution.

Thank you, President Conyers, the board of trustees, the faculty, staff at one of our Nation's great universities. Though I'm from Delaware—I've got to put Delaware State up there. The president of Delaware State used to work for me. He went and got his doctorate and said, "This is not the good job; I'm going to be president of the university." [Laughter] But, all kidding aside, of course, [Vice]* President Harris, who's a proud Howard alum, she might have something to say about Delaware State.

And to my family and friends, the class of 2021: I know the pride you feel for this day as well. Graduates—you already did this, because Jim did it, but I always do it, and Jim, as usual, always is ahead of me—you really do owe those folks up in the bleachers a whole hell of a lot. [Applause] A whole heck of a lot. And I'm sure not a one turned to their husband or wife and said: "Guess what? No tuition next semester." [Laughter]

But I just want to say to the parents: We know—like my family—we know the sacrifices you made to make sure this day arrived. And you're the ones that helped you get through this period. And you've got a lot to look forward to.

Graduates, I know you've already stood to thank your parents and your families, but you know, the fact is that: Congratulations. You earned it. You earned every bit of it. I know it wasn't easy: remote learning; fearing getting sick from COVID-19, feeling the pain for those who lost loved ones, and you know people who have lost loved ones; the uncertainty of a devastated economy; the reckoning on race not seen since the fifties and sixties.

Your time here has come during a tumultuous and consequential moment in modern American history, and it has led you to graduate at a real inflection point in history. No graduating class gets to choose the world into which they graduate. Every class enters the history of the Nation up to the point that has been written by others.

But few classes, every once in a few generations, enter at a point in American history where it actually has a chance to change the trajectory of the country. And that's not hyperbole. You face that inflection point today, and I'm confident you'll meet the moment.

You're ready because you're part of a proud and sacred tradition, an HBCU tradition. More than 180 years of excellence. Institutions that instill a sense of purpose and commitment to make a difference in all their students, not just to lift up yourselves, but to lift up others. An institution grounded in the belief that every American of every race, background, and ZIP Code should have a fair and equal chance to get as far as their God-given talents give them. Incubators of scholars and educators, advocates and athletes, leaders of industry and entertainment, faith and medicine, arts and science. The molders of trailblazers, visionaries, and public servants. You know it. You know it better than anyone.

HBCUs have helped produce 40 percent of all the Black engineers in America, 50 percent of all the Black lawyers in America, 70 percent of all the Black doctors and dentists in America, and 80 percent of all the Black judges in America. Folks, I see HBCU excellence every single day in my administration. And that's not—I'm not exaggerating: Vice President Harris; my Cabinet—Michael Regan, Administrator of the EPA; senior White House staff; staff across my entire administration.

Graduates, I'm here to congratulate you, but also to let you know that your country—and this is not hyperbole—is counting on you, they're counting on you to change, to turn the dial at a moment we have a chance to do it; and that I'm committed to doing everything I can to make real the promise of America for all Americans, for all of you.

* White House correction.

That's why my administration has delivered \$5 billion, so far, to HBCUs just this year—[*applause*]*—just this year, with more to come. Because there's nothing you're unable to do if you have the product, if you have the laboratories, if you have—a lot of these HBCUs aren't endowed like these other universities.*

For South Carolina State, it helped—to help clear the balances of more than 2,500 students from student debt. It helped students weather financial hardships caused by the pandemic and stay in school. It financed the residence hall, the largest in South Carolina.

And that's why we're working to increase—and we will get it done, with Jim's help in the House—Pell grants by another \$1,500 so particularly Black students and lower income families can attend community college, 4-year schools, and Black universities—HBCUs.

That's why I'm proposing historic investment to create and expand HBCU programs in high-demand fields like cybersecurity, engineering, and health care. These are the big-paying jobs getting out now. But too many—too many—HBCUs don't have the laboratories, don't have the capacity. They have the intelligence, they have the intellectual capacity, but they don't have the research—[*inaudible*]*—in front of them. We're going to create new research and development labs that prepare students for jobs of the future and establish HBCU research hubs all across this Nation.*

I also reestablished the President's Board of Advisers on HBCUs, led by a friend of mine, Dr. Tony Allen, the president of Delaware State University; as I said, used to work at my staff—to engage the private sector to advance HBCUs. And it's beginning to happen, I think your president will tell you.

Vice President Harris is in constant contact with leaders of the Divine Nine. I signed an Executive order to advance HBCU excellence across the administration in everything from policies to funding. And part of that effort includes recognizing outstanding HBU [HBCU]* student scholars, like your student government president we just heard from: Javonni. Congratulations.

But there's always more we can do. We're going to lead the way, just as Jim has led the way. What makes Jim so effective as the highest ranking southern—[*laughter*]*—African American ever in the House of Representatives is, Jim never forgets where he came from. Don't you ever forget where you came from. That's your secret power: You understand. There's no one more effective, who knows how to get things done, than someone who understands the needs to get things done and the people who need it—I mean it—who understands what folks are going through.*

That's Jim, and that's many of you, and that was me graduating years ago.

With the infrastructure law we just wrote and signed into law and that Jim did so much to pass, we're going to create better jobs for millions of people to rebuild our roads, highways, bridges, cities, small towns, rural communities. It means more opportunities for Black businessmen, Black contractors, Black engineers, building Black communities back to where they have to be. And I mean it. Because if you don't know the community, it's hard to know what it needs.

It means every American, every child being able to turn on a faucet and drink clean water, because we're going to rip up every lead pipe in America. And something that Jim has really championed: It means everyone should be able to access high-speed internet: urban, suburban, and rural.

* White House correction.

Graduates, you lived it. No student should have to go to a coffee shop or a fast food restaurant to get the internet so they can do their homework. We're going to make sure it never happens again. This is the United States of America, for God's sake.

And on criminal justice reform: We need it from top to bottom. I believe we need judges who understand the experience of the people where they come from. That's why I'm proud I appointed Black—more Black women to the Federal bench and the circuit courts and more former public defenders to the bench than any administration in American history.

The previous record was three Black women in 8 years. We've confirmed four in less than 8 months, and there's more we can do. There will be lawyers and judges who will be in charge, who understand—understand—real people and the needs of people.

On police reform, I share the frustration—and I know the family well—George Family [Floyd]* Justice Act—in Policing Act. I know the family well. It's not been passed in the Senate, but the fight's not over. Despite Republican obstructionism on this bill, we've made changes to the Federal law enforcement policies that I have the ability to do with the stroke of a pen.

The Justice Department has banned chokeholds, restricted no-knock warrants, required Federal agents to wear and activate body cameras. It—also ending the Justice Department's use of private prisons, rescinding previous administration requirements that U.S. attorneys seek the harshest penalties. The Justice Department has opened a pattern-or-practice investigation into systemic misconduct in police departments in Phoenix; Louisville; Minneapolis; Mount Vernon, New York.

But we're just getting started. This administration is going to continue to fight for meaningful police reform in Congress and through additional executive actions.

And you will be our next generation of elected officials, police chiefs, civil rights leaders leading the way. You see what just happened in New York City? First Black woman to head up the police department.

With my American Rescue Plan, which passed right after historic investment in community policing and violence intervention programs that are shown to reduce violence crime—violent crime as much as 60 percent. We don't have to spend less money, we have to spend more money on police to give them the kind of help they genuinely need. Why is a police officer showing up to a suicide threat, someone threatening to jump off a building? We need more social workers there. We need more psychologists there. They need help. They're basically good people, prevent violence in the first place.

We're expanding summer programs and job opportunities and other services to keep young people safe and set them up for success. We're helping formerly incarcerated people reenter their communities. If somebody gets out of jail now after serving their time, what do they get? They get a bus ticket and 25 bucks. And they end up under the same bridge that got them there in the first place.

So I'm going forward to make sure that everything that's available to anybody else is available to them, and notwithstanding the fact they had already served their time. We're going to reinstate access to Pell grants, job training, and apprenticeships—proven pathways to a better life.

But we need you. We need you to lead a lot of these efforts.

We're also working to stem the flow of firearms and rogue gun dealers to curb epidemics of gun violence in this country. No greater victims than the Black communities. We talk about these massive shootings. Well, guess what? There's a massive shooting every day in urban America, the number of lives that are taken.

But you'll lead the way as community leaders, educators, faith leaders, nonprofit leaders. See what my daughter is doing right now? She's a social worker. She's heading up Boys and Girls Clubs all across the country. We've got to give people alternatives. You've got to give them a reason to think they can make it.

We're also going to use the Federal Government's purchasing power to unlock billions of dollars in new opportunities for devastated small businesses, including minority-owned small businesses, to access Government contracts. The goal I've set is 50-percent increase in the number of minority contracts going to minority firms by the year 2025.

Because, folks, what did we learn? We learned there's no difference between a Black entrepreneur and a White entrepreneur in success, except the Black entrepreneur usually doesn't have a lawyer, usually doesn't have someone who is going to be there, an accountant to get it all set up. Their idea is as profound, but the help is missing. You'll be the entrepreneurs and business owners accessing that opportunity and reinvesting in your communities.

On housing, it isn't right. If a builder goes out and builds the exact same home in two different sides of an interstate, one in an all-White neighborhood and one in an all-Black neighborhood—same exact home—the moment the last screw or bolt is put into that home and somebody occupies it, the Black home is worth 20-percent less than the White home—the moment—the moment.

You live in a Black community, you have a better driving record than someone who lives in all-White community, same automobile—your insurance is going to be higher. It isn't right.

That home owned by a Black family is appraised at a lower rate at the same time the home owned by the White family is raised [appraised]* more. We're aggressively taking on housing discrimination.

How do folks make it to the middle class from working class circumstances? And many of you have done that, many of your parents have. You build equity in your home. That's how 90 percent of the folks make it to the middle class. They get an opportunity to own a home and they build equity in a home. It allows them to borrow against it later to send their kids to school, to do a whole range of things.

And you're going to be the ones having to lead the way, not the ones just benefiting. You're the ones that are going to have to lead the way because you understand.

Maybe most important of all, we have to protect that sacred right to vote, for God's sake. Think about it. I got started in politics because of the civil rights movement. I noticed some of you were looking—and I thought you were wondering, "Well, how does he know the Black national anthem?" Well, because I sat in a Black church after going to 7 o'clock Mass—I happen to be a practicing Catholic—at 10 o'clock on the east side, getting ready to go out and desegregate restaurants and movie theaters in my State.

Well, guess what? I've never seen anything like the unrelenting assault on the right to vote. Never. I don't think any of you have, on this stage, ever seen it. Not a joke.

And, folks, you know, as John Lewis said, it is the only—without the right to vote, there is no democracy. It's not just about who gets to vote or making it easier, as we used to try to do, to make people eligible be able to vote. It's about who gets to count the vote or whether your vote counts at all.

Folks, I was chairman of the Judiciary Committee for a long time. At the end of my stint, before I became Vice President, I was able to pass the extension of the Voting Rights Act for 25

* White House correction.

years—and guess what?—and convinced Strom Thurmond of South Carolina to vote for it. [Laughter] No, no, not a joke.

I thought, "We're finally, finally, finally beginning to move." But this new sinister combination of voter suppression and election subversion: it's un-American, it's undemocratic, and sadly, it is [not]* unprecedented, since Reconstruction.

Vice President Harris is leading the efforts for us. But on the anniversary of Bloody Sunday, I directed every single Federal agency in the United States Government to promote access to voting, and each agency is heading and—heeding the call.

For example, the Department of Veterans Affairs is going to make it easy for veterans and their families to register to vote. You know why? Because we're going to use VA facilities, and they're going to open them up for everybody. And nobody is going to stop anybody.

But across the board, in addition, the Justice Department—my Justice Department has doubled the voting rights enforcement staff, challenging the onslaught of State laws undermining the right to votes.

We've supported Democrats fighting for voting rights bills since day one of our administration, making sure that we have unanimous support among Democrats in the Senate, which we do. But each and every time it gets to be brought up, that other team blocks the ability even to start to discuss it—"that other team," what used to be called the "Republican Party." [Laughter]

But this battle is not over. We must pass the Freedom To Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Act. We must. And we're going to keep up the fight until we get it done. And you're going to keep up the fight. And we need your help badly.

And finally, we continue to confront the oldest and darkest forces in this Nation: hate and racism. You know, there's a through line from Owensboro [Orangeburg]* Massacre that happened 53 years ago that killed three students for whom this very area—this very arena is named, to darkness that pierced the grace of Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, which I visited right afterwards, 6 years ago; to the torches—those—did you ever think you'd see in the modern times people coming out of the fields down in Charleston—I mean in Charlotte, Virginia—Charlottesville, Virginia, carrying torches and Nazi banners, screeching the most anti-Semitic and anti-Black rhetoric in history, hundreds and hundreds of them.

And when asked—the guy who had this job before, when asked what he thought about it, he said, "Well, there's some very good people there." [Laughter] Hell "very good people." They're racists. They're Fascists! And, folks, that was 4 years ago. I never thought I'd see that in my career; the violent and deadly insurrection on Capitol Hill 11 months ago, on January the 6th.

I'm going to say something self-serving. I supposedly know an awful lot about foreign policy. I've known every major world leader in the last 40 years. I've spoken to over 140 heads of state since I've become President. You know what they all ask me? "Is America going to be all right?" "What about democracy in America?" Did you ever think you'd be asked that question by another leader? I'm not exaggerating, gentlemen.

The leader of China, Xi Jinping, who I've met with more than any other world leader, and Putin—both are very straightforward—say democracies can't function in the 21st century because things are too complicated; they move too fast; and time to get a consensus, which democracies require, that's why autocracies will rule the day.

* White House correction.

Folks, this is a troublesome time, but it's a significant opportunity. I'm engaged—Jim and I have engaged in civil rights work for our entire careers, him more consequential than me. Despite all the laws enacted through the struggles we know, we knew we could make progress. But one of things I thought and Jim probably didn't—but I thought, Jim—I thought when we had some of those major victories, we'd finally crossed a threshold. But what I didn't realize is, you can defeat hate, but you can't eliminate it. It just slides back under a rock. And when given oxygen by political leaders, it comes out ugly and mean as it was before.

We can't give it any oxygen. We have to step on it. We have to respond to it. It's not who we are. It's a minority. But if the majority doesn't speak up, it has a profound impact.

And that's what we've seen the last few years. We cannot, we must not give hate any safe harbor. We have to shine as bright as a light as we can on it. That's the ultimate disinfectant: Call it out. And you're going to be the light. You're going to have to be the light.

Let me close with this: The history of the journey of America, progress and possibility, is written by people who sat where you're sitting right now. Again, not hyperbole. It's a fact. People like Jim and Emily Clyburn, students who met in a jail cell after standing up for what was right and just, who never stopped. In 1961, they were you. Now, in 2021, you are them.

You're part of one of the most gifted—and this, again, is not hyperbole—listen to me, and I'm being precise: You're part of the most gifted, tolerant, talented, and the single best educated generation in all of American history. You are.

But with that comes a hell of an obligation. You accept people as they are: Black, White, Latino, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, transgender, abled, and disabled. You see them as people, as fellow Americans who deserve respect and dignity.

You're going to see more change in the next 10 years than we've seen in the last 50 because of the incredible, incredible change in science and technology. You're going to see us traveling commercially in the next 20 years at 12-, 15,000 miles an hour, subsonic speeds—supersonic speeds. I mean, the things that are going to change. But it's going to require the educated population you represent to understand it, to translate it, to move it.

I have every confidence that no matter your career, you're going to translate change into greater opportunity and happiness and prosperity for you and the world around you. For when I looked out on Inauguration day, I saw that South Carolina State baseball cap that I saw—well, your hope and your optimism. That's why I asked a 22-year-old Amanda Gorman, the youngest Inaugural poet in history, to read her poem. As a matter—my professor wife, Jill, who is still teaching full time, found her and asked her to speak.

And here's what she said in her poem: "So, while once we asked how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe, now we assert, how could catastrophe possibly prevail over us? We will not march back to what was but move [on] to what shall be—a country that is" busy—excuse me—"is bruised but whole, benevolent but bold, and fierce and free."

That's who we are. That's who you are, the class of 2021. I'm not joking. That's us. That's America. We face that inflection point that's going to change the course of history, and I'm counting on you to meet the moment. It's an enormous opportunity—an enormous opportunity.

Because I truly believe, someone standing at a podium like this, at this university 40 years from now, is going to be talking about: Did we meet the moment? This moment. Just like there's other moments in our history. Did we meet the moment in World War I? Did we meet the moment—and we go down the list—that's going to determine what happens in the next 5 to 10 years, that's going to determine what it's going to look like 50 years from now?

I'm counting on you. I really am. I'm not kicking off the responsibility, but I'm counting on you.

Congratulations to all of you. Merry Christmas, and happy holidays. And I say to the military: God bless you all, and may God protect our troops, fellas and ladies. May God protect our troops.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:34 a.m. in the Smith-Hamilton-Middleton Memorial Center. In his remarks, he referred to his brothers James B. and Francis W. Biden and sister Valerie Biden Owens; Alexander Conyers, interim president, and Javonni D. Ayers, Student Government Association president, South Carolina State University; Ketanji Brown Jackson, judge, U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit; Candace Jackson-Akiwumi, judge, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit; Tiffany Cunningham, judge, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit; Eunice Lee, judge, U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit; Keechant Sewell, commissioner-designate of the New York Police Department; former President Donald J. Trump; and President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia. He also referred to H.R.1280; and H.R. 4.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, SC, commencement address.

Locations: Orangeburg, SC

Names: Allen, Tony; Ayers, Javonni D.; Biden, Ashley; Biden, Jill T.; Bush, George W.; Clinton, William J.; Clyburn, James E.; Conyers, Alexander; Cunningham, Tiffany; Frimpong, Maame Weusi-Mensah; Gorman, Amanda; Harris, Kamala D.; Jackson, Ketanji Brown; Lee, Eunice; Putin, Vladimir Vladimirovich; Regan, Michael S.; Sewell, Keechant; Trump, Donald J.; Xi Jinping.

Subjects: Business and industry : Small businesses, promotion efforts; China : President; Civil rights : Civil rights movement; Civil rights : Minorities :: Minority rights and ethnic tolerance; Civil rights : Racial equality; Civil rights : Voting rights; Communications : Broadband and wireless technologies; Diseases : Coronavirus, domestic prevention efforts; District of Columbia: Civil unrest and violence at U.S. Capitol; Economy, national : Economic concerns; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Education : Postsecondary education :: Community colleges; Education : Postsecondary education :: Federal assistance; Education : Postsecondary education :: Historically Black Colleges and Universities; Education : Postsecondary education :: Pell grants; Education : Vocational and technical education programs; Education, Department of : Historically Black Colleges and Universities, President's Board of Advisers on; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Environment : Lead service lines, replacement efforts; Environmental Protection Agency; Holidays and special observances : Christmas; Housing : Housing discrimination, prevention efforts; Infrastructure, national improvement efforts; Judiciary : Federal court nominations and confirmations; Law enforcement and crime : Community-oriented policing, strengthening efforts; Law enforcement and crime : Criminal justice system, reform efforts; Law enforcement and crime : Gun violence, prevention efforts; Law enforcement and crime : Parole and ex-convict reintegration programs, improvement efforts; Law enforcement and crime : Policing best practices, improvement efforts; Legislation, proposed : George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2021; Legislation, proposed : John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act of 2021; Russia : President; Science and technology : Research and development; South Carolina : President's visit; South Carolina : South Carolina State University in Orangeburg; White House Office : Vice President.

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