

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2022

Remarks at a Memorial Service for Former Senate Majority Leader Harry M. Reid in Las Vegas, Nevada

January 8, 2022

The President. Well, Mr. President—Barack—I have to tell you: Every time I hear a dial tone, I think of Harry. [*Laughter*] You all think I'm kidding? I'm not.

Jill and I are here for Harry, but he—if he would—he wouldn't want us to really be here for just him, as everybody has referenced. Landra, we're here for you and for the family. Eulogies are for the living.

You know it's a true love story when you're still talking about your first date 60 years later, Gov. Harry never tired of telling of the time you two kids had to push-start his car, making your way down the road with wide smiles on your face. My recollection is, he called it, when he told me the story, one of those, quote, "moments that turn a life and that stay with you until the last breath." Landra, what a life you turned together until his last breath.

To Lana and Rory and Leif, Josh, Key, all the grandchildren, great-grandchildren: Seeing and hearing you talk about him today, it's clear. My dad used to have an expression. He'd say you are blood of his blood, bone of his bone. You are the product of Harry and Landra Reid. What a gift. What a gift God gave you. What a gift that was and is.

Elder Ballard; President Obama; Vice President Harris; Second Gentleman; Governor Sisolak, thanks for the passport into the State; and Iris and Chuck Schumer; and Paul and Nancy Pelosi; Members of the Nevada congressional delegation; Senator Cortez Masto and Rosen; and Representatives—excuse me—Horsford and Lee and Titus; Members of Congress—Democrat and Republican, past and present; and distinguished guests: What a gift Harry Reid was to this State and to this Nation and to so many of us individually.

I know he's smiling right now. Only Harry Reid, at his sendoff, would sandwich a speaker between a former President of the United States, Carole King, and the Killers. [*Laughter*] Thanks, Harry. [*Laughter*] You've always had a great sense of humor. [*Laughter*] You always had to win, and you always did. He got me again, but he always got me.

The first time I met Harry, I got a call asking whether as—I had just been elected, at 29 years old, to the United States Senate; I hadn't even turned 32 yet. He was a newly—I was a newly elected Senator. And he asked me to campaign for his election for Nevada's Senate seat being vacated by a man I'd only just begun to know, Alan Bible.

The first thing when he met—when I met him in Nevada, we were talking about where he's from, and he said, "Well, I used to have a go out and shoot mad dogs." And I thought, "What in the hell am I doing here?" [*Laughter*] I swear to God. "I used to go out and shoot mad dogs." And I'm thinking: "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. What's going on?" [*Laughter*]

Harry lost that general election by less than 600 votes to Paul Laxalt. And he never let me forget thinking that I'd probably cost him those 600 votes. [*Laughter*] I'm only kidding about that piece, but I probably did.

But when he asked me to come back and campaign for him when he ran for the House in 1982, he won that time, and then he won in '86. And we'd go on to serve in Congress together for more than 30 years. We worked together with Barack during the 8 years we were in office.

And even when Harry was done in the Senate, he was never really done, as all of you from Nevada know. He'd ask me to campaign for an awful lot of Nevada Democrats, many of whom are here today. I could never say no, although you probably said, "Oh, God, he invited Biden into my district?"

But I talked to him often during this last election, taking his advice—and Landra can tell you—of coming to his home on more than one occasion to visit and get his advice and where I should be going in order to win.

After we won, one of the things that Harry did—which was sort of incongruous with Harry, as you've heard today—he sent me a text. I've saved it. He said: "I'm so proud. Joe, you're my brother. We won." Well, it made a big deal to me—it was a big deal to me that he felt that way. I know Harry never wrote what he didn't believe. It made me feel good.

And he gave me a sense of confidence. It felt like he was my brother. I counted on him. And I know so many of you felt that same way about Harry as well throughout his career and your great relationship with him.

Over five decades, we became genuine friends: the Irish Catholic kid from Scranton, Pennsylvania, and the Latter-day Saint from Searchlight. *[Laughter]* You think I'm kidding? Harry was like the guys I grew up with back in Scranton and in Claymont, Delaware. Harry would always have your back like the guys I grew up with. Harry had mine, and he knew I had his.

Although, I sometimes wondered, when I was trying to make an important point to Harry, about whether he really did have my back as he hung up. But to tell you the truth, every time—every time he would do it, I knew it was real—the real Harry. It was him.

He had all he needed. He didn't want any more or need any more. And we did share some similarities. As Barack said, we have loving families, wives that are smarter and better looking than we were. And Harry and I both liked to talk a lot. I'm just testing whether you're asleep yet. *[Laughter]*

But whether you served with Harry for decades or you were new to America just a few days ago, you wanted Harry in your corner. And that's not hyperbole.

His toughness was distinctively Nevadan. His story was unmistakably American. His remarkable journey has been told so many—by so many because it has been traveled by so few. The desert shack he called home. The miles he hitchhiked to school. A boxing ring where he always got up. The family tragedies he endured. The cancer he and Landra fought. The halls of power he walked. The State he transformed. The country he shaped. He was proof that there is nothing ordinary about America.

Ordinary Americans can do anything given half a chance. "We, the People" are pretty damn extraordinary. America is an idea. An idea that anybody, given a shot, can reach their potential.

Harry was extraordinary though. He and I grew up on different sides of the country, but we came from the same place, where certain values ran deep: first, loyalty, faith, resolve, service, your word. It was pounded into my head from the time I was child: "Joey, you're a man. You either have your word—without your word, you're not a man." And he met the marker for what I always believed was the most important thing which you can measure a person by: their actions and keeping their word.

If Harry said he was going to do something, he did it. He didn't do what the modern-day rationale is: "When I told you I would do that, I didn't realize that this would happen." No matter what happened, if he gave you his word, he kept it. You could bank on it.

That's how he got so much done for the good of the country for so many decades. That's how he literally saved—we forget it—Social Security during the Bush years; stopped Yucca Mountain from becoming a nuclear waste site; secured the votes for the Affordable Care Act.

It's how he helped us rein in Wall Street—the excesses—and repealed "don't ask, don't tell." It's how he created Nevada's first national park and conserved Lake Tahoe. And how he was always championed Native Americans and Tribal communities and so much more.

None of it was easy. Not a lot of it was particularly popular when he was doing it. That's the thing about Harry: He never gave up. He never gave up. He never gave up on anybody he cared about.

Like every great leader, he led the Democratic Caucus just—not by speaking, but by listening, by hearing all points of view and finding a common ground.

Harry cared so much about his fellow Americans and so little about what anybody thought of him. He was all Searchlight, no spotlight.

I always appreciate the private comfort—and so does Jill, who is with me tonight—that he offered me and Jill in difficult moments in our lives. We know we're not the only ones.

Since his passing, we've all heard those wonderful tributes. The gracious way he would console grieving—the grieving and encourage someone living with a disability. I still have that picture of our buddy Max Baucus [Cleland],* Max losing three of his limbs. He's—Harry is standing in front of him in the wheelchair, holding his cheeks. And you know Max knew—Max knew Harry cared about him.

The generous way he would empower a new colleague or insist that the new moms and dads on his staff would put their family first, even before their jobs, and do it always. And the genuine friendships he made with the Capitol Police have been recognized three times, because he was one of them—he wore the uniform.

To a friend in need, Harry's voice was soft and gentle. In praise of himself, he was stone-cold silent. In the pursuit of fairness and prosperity, his voice would echo and will echo for generations in this State.

Look, let there be no doubt: Harry Reid will be considered one of the greatest Senate Majority Leaders in history. I've served longer than all but about 12 United States Senators—served there for over 36 years. I've had the honor of serving with a few names of those names to be on that shortlist.

For Harry, it wasn't about power; it was about the sake of power, about the power to be able to use power to do right by people. That's why you wanted Harry in your corner, and that's what we should remember as a nation today. Harry knew better than most how difficult democracy is, that the idea of America itself is under attack from dark and deepening forces, that we're in a battle for the soul of America.

Landra, I remember sitting in a room with Harry when he was supporting me for President and my explaining to him the reason I decided to run when I had decided I was never going to do that again was watching all those neo-Nazis come out of the fields down in Virginia, chanting anti-Semitic bile, carrying Nazi flags. And he asked me, "What?" I said, "We have to restore the soul of America."

No one knew it better than Harry: Protecting democracy requires vigilant stewardship. Harry's life shows that for all—from our darkest days, we can find light and find hope.

* White House correction.

Just look at his life: In just about every respect, Harry Reid came into this world with the odds against him. He believed life—and he lived it, and he left it believing anything was possible. He has demonstrated that anything is possible. Look at this incredible family.

Harry, in a small way, reminds me of my dad. My dad used to say, "Joey, never explain and never complain." I remember one day we were having an event when I was running for my, I guess, it was fifth term. We were at my house. I was feeling a little sorry for myself, talking about a family—loss of a daughter. My dad said, "I'll be back in a minute."

He left the house—we were waiting for people to show up—went up to the local Hallmark store and came back with a cartoon that was a little brass plaque with two sections to it. There were two clips from the cartoon character Hägar the Horrible.

And in one, Hägar the Viking, on his ship, had been moving along near the rocks, lightning comes out of the sky, charged his horns of his helmet, breaks the mast of his ship. And he's looking up at God, and he's going, "God, why me?" In the next frame is a picture with Hägar and the ship and a voice coming down from Heaven saying, "Why not?"

That was my dad: "What makes you so special these things wouldn't happen to you? Why not? Stand up, get up, never bow, never bend, never yield." That was Harry. "Never complain." That's what I admired so much about him.

Above Harry's desk, as we all know, in his Senate office was a giant portrait of Mark Twain. They both—Harry and Mark Twain—loved Nevada, and they both—they both—knew how to say things we know to be true about ourselves and about our country.

For Harry, it was this, as he said himself—he said, quote, "I grew up around people of strong values, even if they rarely talked about them." He went on to say, "They loved their country, worshipped God, never shunned hard work, and never asked for special favors."

That's Harry. That's America. Here is someone Mark Twain himself would have written about as a defining character in America's story had he known Harry.

To his staff, known as "Team Reid," you've lost an incredibly genuine role model. But we see you carrying on HMR's legacy. The people of Nevada, you lost a beloved son, but his spirit is always going to burn as bright as the desert sun. To the Nation, we lost a giant of America, a plainspoken, honorable, decent, brave, unyielding man.

May this be his legacy: to call on each of us to be our best, to speak truth from the heart, to take up the remaining rounds of Harry Reid's good fight for the America we all love. What a gift. I mean this from the bottom of my heart. What a gift. What a life of a nation that he turned until his last breath.

Landra, God bless you, God bless the entire family, God bless my friend Harry—a great American—and God protect our troops.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:59 p.m. at the Smith Center for the Performing Arts. In his remarks, he referred to Lana Reid Barringer, daughter of former Sen. Reid; M. Russell Ballard, acting president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Douglas C. Emhoff, husband of Vice President Kamala D. Harris; Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer and his wife Iris; and Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi and her husband Paul.

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Names: Ballard, M. Russell; Biden, Jill T.; Bush, George W.; Cortez Masto, Catherine; Emhoff, Douglas C.; Harris, Kamala D.; Hosford, Steven A.; King, Carole; Lee, Suzanne K.; Obama, Barack; Pelosi, Nancy; Pelosi, Paul; Reid Barringer, Lana; Reid, Harry M.; Reid, Josh; Reid, Key; Reid, Landra; Reid, Leif; Reid, Rory; Rosen, Jacklyn S.; Schumer, Charles E.; Schumer, Iris; Sisolak, Stephen F.; Titus, A. Constandina.

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