

Remarks at the International Association of Fire Fighters Legislative Conference
March 6, 2023

Hello, hello, hello! Thank you. Thanks, Mike. I appreciate it very much. Please, have a seat if there's one for you to have. *[Laughter]*

I said that early on in my Presidency. I said, "Have a seat," and then the press—there were no chairs. *[Laughter]* The press looked and said, "He's so dumb, he didn't even know there's no seats there."

Folks, look, it's—I want to thank your president, Eddie Kelly. He's been a friend of mine a long, long time. *[Laughter]* A lot of you have been great friends and good with my family.

You know, I joined many of you virtually in October at the U.S. Fire Administration's Summit on Fire Prevention and Control. I was told that I was the first President since Truman to participate, and I made sure to do it, because as long as I can remember, you have been with me, from the very, very beginning. First outfit ever to endorse me.

There's three political parties in Delaware: Democrats, Republicans, and firefighters. *[Laughter]* Oh, you all think I'm kidding. You all think I'm kidding. I'm not kidding, man. *[Laughter]* It's not a joke.

And I got the firefighters. And I won by a landslide of 3,800 votes. Anyway. *[Laughter]* And that was in 1972, when I had a little bit of hair.

You know, look, you know, throughout my career, I've tried to be there for you all, because you've been with me my whole career.

Many of you know that when I first started in politics, you were the first outfit—not this particular firefighting group—but the State firefighters association were the first group to really jump behind me. And you heard me say that—many times—God made man, and then he made a few firefighters. Because you're all nuts. *[Laughter]* You're the only ones that run into flames. Everybody runs away from them.

The overwhelming human instinct is to run away from danger, but when the bell rings, you run toward it, no matter what. And, folks, you know, you put on that helmet and you put on that gear, you jump on the back of that truck, and you jump in the ambulance. You do what you do, and you do it well.

And you say you're just doing your job. Well, we know it's not just a job. Being a firefighter is not what you do, it's who you are. It's who you are. It defines you.

As a kid in Claymont, Delaware—we moved down from Scranton. It used to be a steel town; there's no steel anymore. There used to be Worth Steel. And I lived in a apartment complex when we moved down. And up the street was a little Catholic high school—grade school I went to called Holy Rosary.

And right across the street was the Claymont fire hall, and that was a place where you got buried, you got married, you got—it was—it was the center of the town, for real. Not a joke.

And a lot of my buddies, we all either became firefighters, cops, or priests. And here I am. *[Laughter]* I wasn't qualified for any of them.

But, folks, it's been part of my career my whole life. And I'm not going to go through it all, but you literally—my fire company at home saved my life. I came back from a trip, after being

away for a couple of days, and—I had these terrible headaches. I was diagnosed with having a—well, anyway. They had to take the top of my head off a couple times, see if I had a brain.

But I—all kidding aside, what happened was: There was a snowstorm. And I had a cranial aneurysm. And it had to be operated on immediately. And the doc who was going to do it was the best doc that was around—it was down at Walter Reed—because he had operated on so many folks.

And I couldn't get down. The President—the Republican President offered me to—Marine One to get down, but they couldn't fly it because of the weather. So my fire company got me down in the middle of a snowstorm for a 9-hour operation and saved my life.

You saved the life of my sons and my—my two sons, when my wife and daughter were killed right after I got elected. A tractor-trailer broadsided and killed my wife, killed my daughter. And my two boys were on top of their dead sister and mom for—they tell me up to—I never wanted to know the detail, but up to close to 3 hours. It took the—my fire company and the Jaws of Life to get them out and get them to the hospital.

When I was down doing the last show for—with Tim Russert, "Meet the Press," the last show he had done—lightning struck in a pond behind my house, went up underneath the conduit, and caught the—caught fire underneath the floorboards of my house. And it was during the summer. Air conditioning was on. Smoke that thick all three stories. The reason I can show you that is because every piece of furniture had to be replaced because of the smoke.

But guess what? My fire company was there to go in and save my wife, get her out; the cat; and my '67 Corvette. [*Laughter*]

But, in all seriousness, you've been there too many times. And people don't really appreciate what you do until they need you. They don't really understand it. And you're there every single day for families all across the country.

And with the climate change becoming so severe, we're calling on you more and more and more. Extreme heat and drought have turned wildfire season into wildfire years. Cities and towns have never had to confront this before, and they're now facing it head on.

As President, I saw firsthand the devastating wildfires that burned homes and businesses, from New Mexico, Colorado, California, Idaho. I met with firefighters, many of whom are—never trained to fight wildfires, saving lives and risking their own.

They brought boats and rescue equipment after hurricanes in Florida, Puerto Rico, New Jersey, New York, Louisiana, all of which I've been to since I've been President. Rescuing families from ruined homes, ferrying people and pets to safety.

You travel far and wide with Urban Search and Rescue and other disaster response teams, and you help your fellow Americans take care of your own—take care of your own.

And you don't just show up at disasters. In many of the places I've been in the last year with all these disasters, the very firefighters who were helping out, their homes were burning while they were helping. Their homes were burning. They were still showing up to the job.

You show up every single time that bell rings. You respond to hundreds of thousands of fires, medical calls, and other emergencies.

When a building collapsed in Surfside because of the foundations going on, it was firefighters pulling people from that wreckage when I was down there.

When mass shootings ripped through communities, from Michigan State University to Monterey Park and El Paso—to El Paso to Buffalo, you rushed in to save lives with your own law enforcement partners.

Look, this is tough work. And you bear the scars, and you pay the price for your courage.

Just last week, I lost one of my own. Well, you lost, excuse me, one of your own in a four-alarm in—fire in Buffalo: firefighter Jason Arno. Thirty-seven years old. Just married. Young daughter.

To Jason's family and to firefighters' families here today and around the country who have lost someone—loved ones and colleagues: We can never thank you enough. We can never repay you.

I've done more firefighter funerals than I want to acknowledge. I've—the only thing that protects you is more firefighters—more firefighters.

In 2022, there were 99 line-of-duty deaths. I've been to, as I said, far too many firefighter funerals in my life. And I know too many of you are dealing with cancer from chemicals and toxins on the job and in your gear. It's wrong. It's wrong.

Well, let me tell you something. I have your back. Eddie just talked to me about the three requests he has. And I won't go into them now, but I'm going to push all of them.

And I promise you—I promise you: You've had my back, and I'll have yours. You know, when I—[*applause*]-folks, I—thank you, but that's—I should be clapping for you.

You know, when I served in the Senate, I fought to create the SAFER grant program. As Vice President, I worked to double its funding.

In my first months as President, I invested \$350 billion from the American Rescue Plan to help States and cities keep firefighters on the job during the pandemic. Cities like Tampa, Dallas, Tulsa, Knoxville used the funding for premium pay, new fire and rescue vehicles, extra staff during peak times.

The law also increased Federal firefighting grants by \$300 million, paying for hundreds of emergency response vehicles; thousands—thousands—of sets of turnout gear, and there's so much we have to do; critical cancer research; and putting more local firefighters in the field.

And since I spoke at the Summit on Fire Prevention and Control last October, FEMA has funded 400 more firefighting positions, bringing the total to 1,600. Because I know—I know you know—that the things that protects firefighters, again—I'll say it again and again—is more firefighters.

My dad used to have an expression, for real. My dad was a real gentleman. He never went to college, but he was a guy who cared a lot. And my dad used to have an expression. He'd say: "Joey, a job is about a lot more than a paycheck. It's about your dignity. It's about respect. It's about being able to look your child in the eye and say, 'Honey, it's going to be okay.'"

That's why I fight so damn hard to protect your right to collective bargaining. I'm not—[*applause*]-I mean it. And to make sure you have what you need to manage the risks of your job.

Today, emergency response and preparedness standards, including the rules on fire brigades, are outdated and incomplete. They don't address the full range of hazards we face, and they lag behind the latest innovations in protective equipment, industrial standards, and so much more.

That's why the Occupational Safety and Health Administration convened a multiple-agency panel to draft better standards to protect folks like you, to protect all the rest of it—who protect the rest of us. They're on track to propose an updated rules this fall.

And when it finally comes time for you to leave the job and enjoy some hard-earned peace, you should be able to retire with dignity. That's why last year I was proud to sign legislation to make sure your disability retirement benefits remain tax free the whole life.

And that's why, as Senator, I fought for the Public Safety Officers' Benefit Program and helped strengthen it. As President, I signed legislation extending those benefits to firefighters who are permanently disabled and to families of firefighters who die after experiencing trauma like PS—PTSD on duty. You see so much. You see so much, God love you. I'm not sure how you do it.

Because your families make the sacrifice they make every day right along with you, when you put on that uniform or when they may be in the area where you may be working out of, and they hear that alarm go off, they hear that siren go off, they wonder. They wonder not just who, in fact—who, in fact—is in trouble, but are you going to be coming home—are you going to be coming home.

Every family dreads the possibility of receiving that phone call.

There's a line from the English poet, John Milton. And it goes like this. He said, "They also serve who only stand and wait." "They also serve who only stand and wait."

We owe an overwhelming debt of gratitude to your families: your mothers, your fathers, your brothers, your sisters, your husbands, your wives, and your children. We owe them big for supporting you.

Because no matter how much we kid around, guys, joke—and I've hung out with too many firemen and too many fire events—what you do takes enormous courage. It's a simple proposition: It takes courage. And I want to personally thank your families who had to stand and wait while you keep us safe.

Much of what we're doing is about your right to be treated fairly, with dignity and with respect. Part of that is making a tax system that's fair. By the way, we can make all these improvements and still cut the deficit if we start making people pay a fair share.

I made a commitment: On my watch, no one making under 400,000 bucks will pay an additional penny in taxes. And guess what? I did all we did and all the stuff you guys wanted me doing and some more, and we still cut the deficit in the last 2 years by \$1.7 trillion.

And you know why? There are 550 corporations who made over \$40 billion and didn't pay a cent in Federal taxes.

Now, I'm a capitalist. You want to go make a lot of money? Go do it. But at least pay something. So we put an incredible burden on them. We made them pay 15-percent tax. That's less than you—than you guys. You guys pay a hell of a lot more than that.

And guess what? We were able to afford everything and still cut the deficit. That's why I'm proposing—you know, there used to be, in America, when I started this job, there were, I think, 600—don't hold me to the exact number—I think 680 million—billionaires in America. Not million. Six hundred eighty billionaires in America. Now it's about a thousand.

You know what their average tax rate is? Three—t-h-r-e-e—percent. Poor people. *[Laughter]* That's why I'm proposing a billionaire tax, because no billionaire should be paying a lower tax rate than a firefighter. Nobody.

And by the way, they'll still have hundreds of billions—millions of dollars. It's not like it's going to be a great sacrifice.

Dignity and respect also means protecting your health. Toxic substance you're exposed to on the job are almost certainly why cancer is a leading killer to firefighters.

You don't have to look much further than 9/11, how hard we all fought to make sure they got covered. We stepped up and did something about that. We should step up now.

I have a proposal that I started in the last administration I was part of, with Barack Obama. It's called the Cancer Moonshot. It's a key part of my Unity Agenda in the State of the Union to bring together every part of the Government to cut the cancer death rates in half and invest in research and development and early detection and screening, better support people facing diagnosis, and end cancer as we know it.

We also created a Special Claims Unit at the Department of Labor to process cancer claims, all other claims on Federal—for Federal firefighters and do it faster.

We're going after toxic exposure to PFAS—so-called forever chemicals—that for years have been in your gear, your equipment, your fire supervision [suppression; White House correction] agents. You know, they depend—that you depend on to be able to do your job.

I signed legislation to fund research aimed at understanding the risk you face from PFAS and how to mitigate it. We banned the Department of Defense from buying gear that contains PFAS as soon as it is—alternative is available.

I'm determined—determined—to make sure you have the gear that protects you without making you or your families sick. You deserve it.

We can do this. I met with every major cancer research facility in the world but one, from Asia to Europe to the Middle East. And guess what? We can do it. We've got to fund it.

In December, I was proud to sign the Federal Firefighters Fairness Act, giving more than 10,000 Federal firefighters and their families critical workers compensation and other benefits by making sure certain kinds of heart problems, lung disease, and cancers are presumed to be caused by the job. Got to do it.

If you'll excuse, as we used to say when I was a Senator, a point of personal privilege, I'm wearing a tie that has the insignia of the organization my son set up before he died, for abused children.

Well, you know, he—like many of you, he spent a year in Iraq. He was given a number of awards: Bronze Star, Conspicuous Service Medal. But the problem was he was—he went one of the healthiest guys in his outfit. He was the attorney general and gave up his seat so he could go to Iraq with his National Guard unit.

But he was downwind from one of those toxic dumps, and he came home with stage 4 glioblastoma, for which there is no cure. And he died.

The idea—and that's why I worked so hard to get that legislation passed for veterans—that you have to prove beyond a doubt what caused it, when it's obvious what was in the air, is just wrong.

Senator Klobuchar and Congressman Pascell—Pascrell—excuse me—are working on what they call the Honor Act to extend the Public Safety Officers' Benefit Program to cover firefighters who die from cancer. I support it. Congress should introduce it, pass it, and get it to my desk for me to sign it.

Look, no one is saying you didn't know this was a dangerous profession when you joined it. But that's who you are. It's about helping other people. Like I said to a couple of you downstairs, I don't know any other group of people who risk their lives to save someone's home or property and the next day are out there on a corner with a boot raising money to help them rebuild their home. Name me anybody who does that. Name me anybody but you guys that do that. It's who you are. You're incredible.

But there are things we can do to make your job a little bit safer, like preventing fires in the first place.

One of the things I—you remember I fought like hell to get done, and they said we couldn't get it done? Well, we got it done in a bipartisan way, actually—the bipartisan infrastructure law: the largest investment—over 1 trillion 200 billion dollars in our—modernizing our Nation's infrastructure. Largest investment since the Eisenhower Interstate Highway System.

How can we be the leading country in the world economically and have a second class infrastructure system? When people hear "infrastructure," they think only of roads and bridges, which is important. Well, this includes significant funding for community resilience to wildfires like cleaning—clearing trees and brush, creating fire buffers in high-risk areas, and to harness new tools to keep communities safe.

These new tools include advancing satellite technology that's going to help us get better predictive evidence of where wildfires are going so we can better position resources to respond.

We're rebuilding and reinforcing our water mains in America. Too many firefighters are showing up and—guess what?—no water is coming out of that hydrant.

We're also repairing roads and bridges all across the country so emergency responders can get to people quickly.

Let me give you an example. When I was doing the Recovery Act in the last administration I was in, in Barack's administration, I was in south-central Pennsylvania. And I was—there was—there was a creek about as wide as this—from the—from the buffer there to the wall. And there was a bridge over it, which I guess might have been, I don't know, 35 yards, 40 yards long. And on one side was the fire station. The other side was a school.

Had there been a fire, they couldn't get across that bridge because they couldn't handle the weight of the firetruck. So they had to go—don't hold me this exactly—but I think it was 8 miles up the creek to get to the bridge they could cross to come back. How many kids would be dead by then? We have to go. We have to fix this.

And the Inflation Reduction Act—the Inflation Reduction Act sounds—a funny sounding name—makes the most significant investment in history in confronting climate crisis, including by protecting forest health, reducing fire risk in nearby communities to protect you.

We've made a lot of progress, but there's so much more to do.

When you respond to a fire, you don't leave until the fire is out. Well, I'm telling my colleagues: Don't leave until we finish the job. We've got more to do. I'm determined to finish the job.

We passed this legislation; it's out there. It's out there. And we're going to get it done, make your lives a little bit safer. We can never make them really safe because you do so many incredible things.

Let me close with this. When the worst happens, when those alarms go off, when everything and everyone you love is in danger, there's no better sight in the world than a firefighter ready to

go to work. So thank you for being who you are. And I mean this from the bottom of my heart. It's personal.

Thank you, thank you, thank you. And thank you to all the heroes you represent who are on alert, on call in communities all across the country this very minute.

You guys are the best. You women are the best. And that's not hyperbole. You're the very best America has to offer. We owe you. And I promise, as long I'm standing here, I will never forget what you did for me, for the country, and for all of us.

Thank you, thank you, thank you. God bless you, and may God protect all firefighters. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:17 p.m. at the Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Mike Jackson, president, Federal Fire Fighters Joint Council, and president, IAFF Local F-253 in Fort Myer, VA, who introduced the President; and Buffalo, NY, Fire Department firefighter Jason Arno, who died in the line of duty on March 1, and his daughter Olivia.

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