

Remarks at a Juneteenth Concert

June 13, 2023

My name is Joe Biden. I'm Ashley's father. *[Laughter]* She's the love of my life and the life of my love. I know I couldn't be prouder of her.

Thank you all for being here: our outstanding Vice President, Kamala Harris; the Second Gentleman. Members of the Cabinet and the Congress.

Grandmother to the movement of Juneteenth, a Federal holiday, Ms. Opal Lee. Opal, thank you for being here. You're the reason we're here, in large part.

And a special thanks to tonight's gifted performers.

You know, I was leaning over and telling Kamala: I've followed some tough acts. *[Laughter]* I've spoken before Nobel Prize winners. I've spoken before the—after the Pope. I've spoken to every—the Medal of Honor winners, military heroes. But, my Lord, I've never spoken before a group like this. *[Laughter]*

I had the honor to bestow some of our Nation's highest awards to some of our most important Black artists, writers, performers, producers, theater and ballet companies. To paraphrase Maya Angelou, "People will never forget how you make them feel." And you all made us feel incredibly well.

Tonight's performers helped us feel the power of Juneteenth and Black Music Month, among other things.

As Kamala described earlier to honor the true meaning of Juneteenth, our entire administration is continuing the charge forward to literally redeem the soul of America. When I announced I was running the first time, I said I was running for three reasons. And even some of my staff thought I was crazy. I said one—the first reason is to restore the soul of America. Restore decency and honor.

Let me just add this: To me, making Juneteenth a Federal holiday wasn't just a symbolic gesture. It was a statement of fact for this country to acknowledge the origin of—original sin of slavery. To understand the war [that; White House correction] was never fought over it—it wasn't just about a Union, but it was most fundamentally about the country and freedom.

To remember the Emancipation Proclamation wasn't just a document, it captured the essence of freedom that galvanized the country. It proved that some ideas are more powerful; they can't be denied. It's a reminder that the promise of America is we all are created equal in the image of God, and we deserve to be treated equally throughout our entire lives.

We're the most unique country in America—in the world. Other countries are founded based on faith, on ethnicity, on other things, religion. But we—we are founded on an idea. An idea unlike any other country in the world, that we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men and women are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.

While we've never fully lived up to that promise, we've never walked away from it either. On our best days, enough of us have the guts and the heart to stand up for the best in us. It matters. It really matters.

As the past few years remind us, our freedoms have been put at risk by racism that's still too powerful a force. You know, I was a kid in the civil rights movement, and I used to think—I

honestly believed that you could defeat hate. But hate only hides. It hides under the rocks. And when given oxygen—just a little oxygen—it comes roaring back out again. And we have to stand up and deny it the oxygen.

So Juneteenth, as a Federal holiday, is meant to breathe a new life into the very essence of America, to make sure all Americans feel the power of this day and the progress we can make as a country; to choose love over hate, unity over disunion, and progress over retreat. Choosing to remember history, not erase it; to read books, not ban them, no matter how hard some people try.

That's what's great about it. That's what great nations do. And we're a great nation.

Let me conclude with this: As your President, I visited Tulsa, Oklahoma, to say what happened there on Wall Street—on Black Wall Street 102 years ago was not a riot; it was a race massacre. It wasn't a riot; it was a race massacre.

And from the pulpit of Ebenezer, from the bridge of Selma, in front of a graduating class at Howard, we've prayed, we've marched, we've celebrated. And here at the White House, we've hosted champion teams with Black athletes continuing a legacy of social activism and advocacy.

I signed a law, a hundred years in the making, to—believe it or not, to make lynching a Federal hate crime and hosted the first screening of the "Till," a movie a hundred years after "The Birth of a Nation" was screened in the same room.

Folks, my message on these occasions and on this Juneteenth day is, we've got to go forward. We have to move forward together. When we choose to protect the freedoms we all deserve—when they are attacked, that's when we cannot remain silent. Silence is complicity.

To heal the wounds of division so racism no longer tears us apart, we have to choose to be believers in a dream, doers of the world.

As the gospel song goes: "We've come too far from where we started. Nobody told me that the road would be easy. I don't believe He brought me this far to leave me."

My fellow Americans, I don't think the Lord brought us this far—[*applause*]*—the good Lord brought us this far to leave us behind. We just have to remember who we are. We're the United States of America, and there's nothing—nothing—beyond our capacity when we act together!*

So happy Juneteenth! Bless you all. May God protect our troops. Thank you very much. Let's get the job done! Let's get the job done!

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:53 p.m. on the South Lawn at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Douglas C. Emhoff, husband of Vice President Kamala D. Harris; and Fort Worth, TX, resident Opal Lee.

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