

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks on Signing a Proclamation on the Establishment of the Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley National Monument

July 25, 2023

Vice President Kamala D. Harris. Good afternoon, everyone. Please have seat. Good afternoon.

To our President, Joe Biden; Members of Congress; the members of the Till family; and my fellow Americans: Today we gather to remember our history. We gather to remember an act of astonishing violence and hate and to honor the courage of those who called upon on our Nation to look with open eyes at that horror and to act.

The story of Emmett Till and the incredible bravery of Mamie Till-Mobley helped fuel the movement for civil rights in America, and their stories continue to inspire our collective fight for justice.

When I served in the United States Senate, I was so profoundly honored to sponsor the Emmett Till Antilynching Act alongside Congressman Bobby Rush. And it was an even greater honor to stand beside our President, Joe Biden, as he signed the law that finally made lynching a Federal crime. So many leaders here today made that progress possible.

Our history as a nation is born of tragedy and triumph, of struggle and success. That is who we are. And as people who love our country, as patriots, we know that we must remember and teach our full history, even when it is painful—especially when it is painful.

Today, there are those in our Nation who would prefer to erase or even rewrite the ugly parts of our past; those who attempt to teach that enslaved people benefitted from slavery; those who insult us in an attempt to gaslight us, who try to divide our Nation with unnecessary debates.

Let us not be seduced into believing that somehow we will be better if we forget. We will be better if we remember. We will be stronger if we remember. Because we all here know: It is only by understanding and learning from our past that we can continue to work together to build a better future.

And so now it is my great honor to introduce a leader who has dedicated his life to preserving and protecting our history. And Reverend Wheeler Parker, Jr., just also shared with me that he and his wife will be celebrating this weekend their fifty——

Reverend Wheeler Parker, Jr. Sixth.

Vice President Harris. ——sixth anniversary of marriage. [*Laughter*]

Reverend Wheeler Parker, Jr.

Rev. Parker. In fact, we were married 56 years on Sunday. My wife say, "When we get to heaven, I'm going to say, 'Lord, not up here too.'" [*Laughter*] I see we have a whole lot of amens to that. [*Laughter*]

I'm truly humbled by this honor. You see, I was born in Mississippi. I spent my early years as a sharecropper and was focused up on filling up a 9-foot sack—focused up on my quota, not making history. From the outhouse to the White House—[*laughter*]—from a time when we lived in fear to a time when President and Vice President gave us this great hope—kept their promise by delivering—this is what America means to me: promises made, promises kept.

It has been quite a journey for me from the darkness to the light. When I set with my family on the night of terror—when Emmett Till, our beloved Bobo, was taken from us, taken to be tortured and brutally murdered—back then, when I was overwhelmed with terror and fear of certain death in the darkness of a thousand midnights, in a pitch-black house on what some have called Dark Fear Road. Back then, in the darkness, I could never imagine a moment like this: standing in the light of wisdom, grace, and deliverance.

There is something amazing you feel when you meet President Biden, like I did when he signed the Emmett Till Antilynching law—Antilynching bill into law. He welcomed me into this place of great power. I felt the power of his personal devotion: his devotion to justice, to equality, his commitment to keeping the promise of America. This came from his heart, from his soul.

God bless you, President Biden, for all you have done and will do to preserve our history.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in recognizing President Joe Biden.

[At this point, Rev. Parker spoke briefly off-mike to the President.]

The President. I'm not going to tell you what he whispered to me. *[Laughter]* Thank you, Reverend Parker. And thank all of you for being here.

I want to thank Kamala for her—not only capacity to do what she does, but the fire with which she brings to the things she cares a lot about.

To all the Members of Congress, including Representative Bennie Thompson, Senator Tammy Duckworth, Representative Danny Davis, and Senator Dick Durbin, who is—we wish a speedy recovery from COVID; he's just recovering from COVID right now—and who have long fought to honor the Till family. It's not new to any of them.

To the Till family, it's an honor to be with you again.

You know, when I was preparing these remarks, I quite frankly—and my colleagues will understand this—I found myself trying to temper my anger as I was writing it. I'm not joking. I can't fathom—I can't fathom what it must have been like. It's hard to believe I was 12 years old, and I just—you know, I know no matter how much time has passed—how many birthdays, how many events, how many anniversaries—it's hard to relive this. It brings it all back.

We were talking about, Rev, as if it happened yesterday—the images in your head, and you—things you remember. But it's inspiring to see how many of your family have continued as mother's courage to find faith in pain, purpose in pain. That's a remarkable thing, it seems to me.

Insisting on an open casket for her murdered and, I might add, maimed and mutilated son. Fourteen years old. Fourteen years old. She said, "Let the people see what I've seen." Let the people see what I have seen.

My God, all of us who have lost children in other ways, how hard it is even to close the casket or keep it open or to—what a debate it is. But to see the child that had been maimed, and the country and the world saw—saw—not just heard the story of Emmett Till and his mother—as a story of a family's promise and loss and the Nation's reckoning with hate, violence, racism, overwhelming abuse of power, and brutality. It's hard to fathom. Hard to fathom this even in war for me. It's hard to fathom.

But today, on what we've been—would have been Emmett's 82d birthday, we add another chapter to the story of remembrance and healing. Just as we joined together when I signed the law in his name to make lynching a Federal crime—and think how long that took for that to happen—I mean—and we screened the movie "Till" at the White House—today we join together as I sign a proclamation designating Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley National Monument in both Illinois and in Mississippi.

When we ended lynching as a matter of law, we talked about wanting to do this. But the support from the community has been so overwhelming. I thank the Members of Congress for their support and, more than that, their leadership.

At a time when there are those who seek to ban books, bury history, we're making it clear—crystal, crystal clear—[*applause*]—while darkness and denialism can hide much, they erase nothing. They can hide, but they erase nothing.

We can't just choose to learn what we want to know. We have to learn what we should know. We should know about our country. We should know everything: the good, the bad, the truth of who we are as a nation. That's what great nations do, and we are a great nation. That's what they do.

For only with truth comes healing, justice, repair, and another step forward toward forming a more perfect Union. We've got a hell of a long way to go.

That's what's happening. That's what's going to happen with visitors of all backgrounds to learn the history of Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley through our national monument.

Look, telling the truth and the full history of our Nation is important. It's important to our children, our grandchildren, and our great-grandchildren, to our Nation as a whole.

I've said it before. It was a lesson I learned coming out of the—not like real leaders in the civil rights movement—but when I came out of the civil rights movement as a kid, as a public defender. And I used to—you know, I used to say—think that if you pass something that was good, you can make hate go away.

Hate never goes away. It just hides. It hides under the rocks. And given a little bit of oxygen by bad people, it comes roaring out again.

And it's up to all of us to deal with that, up to all of us to stop it. Up to all of us. The best way to do that is with the truth. It's used in a different context, but I think it's apply—applies here. Silence is complicity. I will not be silent, nor will you be silent about what happened.

There's really critical work ahead to continue the fight for racial justice and equality for all Americans. And my administration is committed to leading a path forward. And I know the Members of Congress here are even more committed than that.

I'm going to close with this. The reason the world saw what Mrs. Till-Mobley saw was because another hero in this story: the Black press.

Audience members. Yes!

The President. No, I'm serious. Jet Magazine, the Chicago Defender, and other newspapers and radio announcers who told the story were unflinching in the bravery with which they told that story, making sure America saw—saw—what they saw.

Ida B. Wells once said, quote, "The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them." The way to right wrongs is to shine a light of truth on them. Well, that's our charge today.

By the way, parenthetically, did you ever think we'd be talking about banning books in America? Banning history? I'm serious.

To the Till family and to all of you here today, I thank you for your courage and for never giving up—never, never giving up.

And before I say even what more is on my mind, I'm now going to leave this podium.
[*Laughter*]

No, I mean, it's just barbaric—barbaric—what happened. And seriously, all you moms out there, imagine the courage it took to say, "Let them see." The courage.

It's now my honor to sign this proclamation in memory of Emmett Till and Mrs. Mamie Till-Mobley.

And I thank you all for being here. And I am—I know I'm considered too much of an optimist, but I believe if we keep pushing, we're going to continue to make progress. We're going to continue to make progress. And it's already being made.

The idea that when that 14-year-old was buried, that in this Indian Treaty Room there'd be this many people of color holding powerful office, changing the direction of the country, it would have been beyond our comprehension. And we're just getting started.

The proclamation I'm signing establishes the Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley National Monument.

Okay, ready?

The proclamation I'm signing establishes the Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley National Monument.

[The President signed the proclamation.]

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:29 p.m. in the Indian Treaty Room of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. Vice President Harris referred to Marvel Parker, wife of Emmett Till's cousin Rev. Wheeler Parker, Jr., pastor and district superintendent of the Argo Temple Church of God in Christ in Argo, IL, who introduced the President.

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