

Remarks at the Truman Civil Rights Symposium
July 27, 2023

Hello, hello. Thank you. Please—please be seated.

You know, I had an opportunity to meet members of the Truman Board. And we were talking about all that Harry Truman did. And I was reminded—and I will—I'm going to send the—the Truman Library a copy of it.

My grandpop was an Irishman named Ambrose Finnegan. And I lived in Scranton until—until the economy just drew down and there was no work. My dad was a salesperson. And we moved down to Delaware—Claymont, Delaware.

We would go home all the time to Scranton. And one day, we went back to—I was back in Scranton, and a lot of my friends—I moved there to Delaware when I was in third grade, but we had been home a lot. We still called Scranton home and—and we were up there on St. Patrick's Day when I was 14 years old. And I was standing on the corner watching everybody go by; they're going to the event.

And Harry Truman was a speaker at the Truman Dinner that year. And the—sort of the David Broder of the Scranton Times—it was a guy named Tommy Phillips, who was an elderly man—younger than me, but elderly man—[*laughter*]*—*who was the chief political reporter. And they got a picture—and I hadn't thought about it a long time, but I'll send it over to the library—of me at 14 years old standing on the corner in a—and it was a warm day for February. And I'm standing on the corner in long-sleeve shirt with my buddies.

And President Truman was coming around the corner, coming off of Dimmick Avenue, and he was in a convertible. And purely by accident—I assume it was an accident—the photographer from the newspaper got a picture of me making eye contact with Harry Truman. It was just—I'm sure a lot of people made eye contact with him—[*laughter*]*—*but I was looking and you can see in the photograph we're looking at one another eye to eye. And that's when this—Tommy Phillips, the David Broder of the day in Scranton, wrote, "That's when Joe Biden knew he was going to be President." [*Laughter*]

I knew I was going to be President when Jim Clyburn went ahead and endorsed me. That's when I knew I was going to be President. Thank you, Jim.

This is a great honor to be here tonight, and I mean that sincerely.

Summer 1918. The first war—world war. A train moves through the outskirts of Paris. An American Army captain rides alongside an all-White regiment heading to the frontlines.

A son of a slave State, the grandson of slaveowners, Captain Harry S. Truman looks through his glasses toward the blood-stained soil of the Second Battle of the Marne that ended just a few months before. It was a pivotal victory that led the vital part of America's—led by the vital part of America's 369th Infantry Regiment: the Harlem Hellfighters, an all-Black regiment that spent 191 days on the front, longer than any unit of its size in history.

A link in a distinguished line of ancestors and descendants, enslaved and free, risking their lives in every war since our founding for ideals they hadn't fully known on American soil: equality and freedom. A fearless captain on a consecrated battlefield in a segregated military. A snapshot in time of the work of all time to redeem the soul of America, which we're still struggling to do.

Representatives Clyburn and Cleaver, the Truman family, and leaders of the Truman Institute, distinguished guests, my fellow Americans, I speak to you tonight not from a battlefield, but from another sacred place: the National Archives, home of timeless words that point to our North Star.

A light for the dreams and the pains of centuries of enslaved people in America.

An idea once the most simple and the most powerful idea in the history of the world: that we're all created equal, endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights, and deserve to be treated with equality not just in the beginning, but throughout our lives.

A covenant—a covenant we made with each other so central to who we are that we enshrined it in our Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident." Our Constitution: "We the people." Our Bill of Rights: with the freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly, and more. All safeguarded in this hallowed place.

History requires us to acknowledge that we have never fully lived up to the promise of America captured in the essence of these documents. But our aspirations to be a more perfect Union ensure that we never fully walked away from it either.

Just like Army—just like the Army captain who became President of the United States of America walked toward our North Star when he signed Executive Order—that Jim mentioned—9981 that desegregated the United States Armed Forces on July 26, 1948—75 years as of yesterday.

Harry Truman, born in Missouri to a family and community that embraced the Confederate sympathies. But savage violence and venom toward Black veterans and the power of the civil rights movement changed his mind and his heart.

Guided by a prayer he memorized as a child, and the prayer went like this: "Oh, almighty and everlasting God, creator of Heaven, Earth, and universe, help me to be, to think, to act what is right because it is right." That was the prayer he memorized, and I—history says he spoke to.

When the time came, Harry Truman did what—a very American thing: He rose to the occasion, and he chose to do right.

The American military had been segregated since our founding, yet hundreds of thousands—hundreds of thousands of people of color, men and women, still courageously served with a love of country that often didn't love them back.

They served in our Revolutionary War, declaring independence from a king only to be enslaved by a master. They protected the Union in the Civil War only to face disunion under Jim Crow. They sacrificed during two World Wars, fighting against autocracy only to be denied the freedom of their own democracy.

They are patriots like the Buffalo Soldiers: legends for their valor in combat. The Tuskegee Airmen, flying more than 15,000 sorties into battle.

Native Americans serving in our military at the highest rate of any demographic and nearly five times the national average.

Hispanic Americans, like those in the 65th Regiment—Infantry Regiment helping liberate a Nazi concentration camp and protect Allied roads and airfields and posts.

Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, like the 442d Regimental Combat Team liberating Europe, a team that included one of my dearest and closest friends and a mentor of mine when I got here as a 29-year-old kid: the late Senator Danny Inouye, who served in the Senate with another friend, a great Hawaiian veteran: the late Senator Daniel Akaka.

The list goes on, including rank-and-file cooks, custodians, secretaries, mailmen, too often overlooked and forgotten, but made it work.

Yet, when these veterans came home, they were still denied equal opportunity in housing, education, jobs, even marriage. Families held in incarceration camps. Many of them denied the benefits of the GI bill because the States—the States put up barriers to be able to collect that GI benefit. And targeted in racist violence that was callous and all too often casual and common.

Let me take you back to 1946. Jim already spoke to this: February, South Carolina. Sergeant Isaac Woodard, a decorated Black World War II veteran, saw 3 years of war in the Pacific. Returning home to finally see his family, he asked the bus driver to stop so he could use the restroom. Instead, the driver called the police.

On arrival, the cops pulled him off the bus while he was still in uniform, beat him so badly they permanently blinded him. Beat him so badly they blinded him. And he was in his uniform.

I'm still astounded by the cruelty and viciousness.

Sergeant Woodard reunited with his family, but he could never look into their eyes again.

Five months later, July in Georgia. Army veteran George Dorsey, who spent 5 years in the Pacific—home with his wife for just 10 months. They were driving with his brother-in-law and sister, who was 7 months pregnant, when a White mob attacked them, pulled them from their car, and fired 60 shots—60—60 shots at close range, leaving their bodies barely identifiable.

My God, how sick. It's unbelievable what racism fueled by ignorance can unleash in this country.

The next month, August 1946, in response to similar acts of racist terror, a 17-year-old college student wrote a letter to the Atlanta Constitution, and here's what he said. He said, quote, "We want and are entitled to the basic rights and opportunities of every American citizen." End of quote.

That was a college student at Morehouse College. His name was Martin Luther King, Jr.

But a young King wasn't the only person awakened. A President was awakened as well.

Harry Truman felt a moral imperative to respond to the mistreatment of Black veterans. He heard their calls for a "Double Victory" to win freedom abroad and at home. He felt the urgency from civil rights leaders like A. Philip Randolph and the NAACP.

An unlikely character in the civil rights story of America, Harry Truman set his sights on our North Star. He created the President's Commission on Civil Rights that issued the groundbreaking report entitled, "To Secure These Rights"—that was the title, "To Secure These Rights"—condemning segregation and outlawing—outlining, I should say, changes in law and policy: protecting the right to vote, prohibiting discrimination in jobs and transportation, desegregating the military, and much more.

But as you might guess, the backlash was instant—instant.

A friend wrote to him, pleading to change course, but President Truman wrote back, quote: "I am asking for equality of opportunity for all human beings. And as long as I stay here, I'm going to continue to fight." End of quote.

Members of his own party, members of the military rejected the civil—his civil rights agenda. Undeterred, Harry Truman acted. And we're much better a nation—a much better nation for his courage and commitment and for the sacrifice and service of all our patriots who fought for our democracy.

This year commemorates two other significant milestones: the 75th anniversary of women in the military and the 50th anniversary of an All-Volunteer Force. And as Commander in Chief, I'm honored to oversee the greatest fighting force—literally, not figuratively—in the history of the world. And that's not hyperbole. And I might add: the most diverse fighting force in the history of the world. And, folks, these two parts are not—these two points are not unrelated.

More than 40 percent of our Active Duty force are people of color. Forty percent. About 20 percent are women, up from just 2 percent in 1948. A fighting immigrant force and those native born, hailing from big cities, suburbs, small towns, Tribal communities.

As our military became more diverse, it became stronger, tougher, and more capable, proving our diversity is a strength, not a weakness; a necessary part of our warfighting and our deterrence and our successful military operations.

And our unity out of many, not division, ensures good order and discipline, unit cohesion, effectiveness, and military readiness. We've seen it with generations of patriots, regardless of who they are mentored by and trained by. Fellow servicemen from every background, like my friend, the late Colin Powell—he was a friend.

Like so many veterans I've had the privilege to award our Nation's highest honors. Working toward the same mission, forming lifelong friendships, returning home to put on civilian clothes and enrich every part of American life. Bonding through a deep love of our Nation that draws our greatest strengths and our greatest strategic assets the full talents of all the American people—and I mean that. Think about it. The full—of all the American people.

Some of you are tired of hearing me saying it, but I've been saying it for many years: We have many obligations as a government. We only have one truly sacred obligation: to prepare and equip those we send into harm's way and care for them and their families when they come home and when they don't.

For me and my wife Jill, for our family, it's personal, like many of you.

Among the most important duties, Jill and I have stood at Arlington to undertake the rite of remembrance so we have back home—as we have back home in Delaware for our son, Major Beau Biden, Bronze Star, Conspicuous Service Medal.

In fact, Jill couldn't be here tonight because she just returned from Europe, where she paid her respects at the Brittany American Cemetery, the final resting place of thousands of Americans, World War II troops.

It matters to Vice President Harris and our entire administration. It matters that we have the best leaders to lead the best force in the world that represent our entire country. From my perspective, that's America. That's America.

It includes the first-ever Black Secretary of Defense, who wanted to be here tonight, but he's traveling to the Indo-Pacific to strengthen our security ties in the region. Secretary Lloyd Austin, a decorated former four-star general, a warfighter with more than 40 years of service embodying the very spirit of why we are here tonight.

And there is Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks, a prodigious scholar and leader, the first woman confirmed as Deputy Secretary of Defense. It's also—I also got confirmed two four-star generals that lead our common—our combatant commands, the second and third women in history to do so. It matters.

But something dangerous is happening. I've worked across the aisle my entire career; I think my colleagues will attest to that. I have good friends who are Republicans. We disagree. A guy I

disagree like the devil with, but is a decent and honorable man and does what he says is the Republican leader in the Senate. We disagree on almost everything.

The Republican Party used to always support the military. But today, they are undermining the military. The senior Senator from Alabama, who claims to support our troops, is now blocking more than 300 military operations [nominations; White House correction] with his extreme political agenda.

Like General C.Q. Brown, F-16 pilot and a wing commander and the first African American to lead any branch of the Armed Service to be the next Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. That's who I've nominated. He's waiting.

Admiral Lisa Franchetti, the second woman in our Navy ever to achieve the rank of four-star admiral, who I chose to be—make history again as the first woman as Chief of Naval Operations.

I've also nominated other outstanding leaders of all backgrounds. We need them.

Right now tens of thousands of America's daughters and sons are deployed around the world tonight keeping us safe from immense national security challenges. But the Senator from Alabama is not. For the first time in more than 100 years, we don't have a sitting confirmed Commandant of the Marine Corps. By the fall, we may not have a Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. We might not have the military leaders for our Army and Navy either.

This partisan freeze is already harming military readiness, security, leadership, and troop morale; freezing pay; freezing people in place. Military families who have already sacrificed so much, unsure of where and when they change stations, unable to get housing or start their kids in the new school because they're not there yet. Military spouses forced to take critical career decisions, not knowing where or if they can apply for a new job.

A growing cascade of damage and disruption, all because one Senator from Alabama and 48 Republicans who refuse to stand up to him, to lift the blockade over the Pentagon policy offering service men and women, their families access to reproductive health care rights they deserve if they're stationed in States that deny it.

I think it's outrageous. But don't just take it from me. Hundreds of military spouses petitioned to end the extreme blockade. One spouse referencing the Senator from Alabama said, quote: "This isn't a football game. This nonsense must stop right now." Enough.

It's time for the Senate to confirm the next Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the next Commandant of the Marine Corps. It's time for servicemembers to receive the pay and promotions they've earned and deserve. It's time for the Senator of Alabama to let these generals and admirals fully serve their country and servicemembers care for themselves and their families.

I urge Senate Republicans to do what they know is right: Keep our country safe like Harry Truman. Approve all those outstanding military nominees now—now—now—which was routine in the past, I might add.

And enough with the attacks on our military from those voices slandering American military, saying it's becoming weak, soft, and less capable.

We hear it from the senior Senator from Missouri, who held his fist high in salute of January 6 even as veterans turned police officers protected him and our Nation as insurrectionists held a dagger at the throat of democracy.

We hear it from the junior Senator from Texas who fell for Russian propaganda suggesting that their military—the Russian military—was better than ours, calling our military "emasculated." Where the he- —[laughter]—sorry.

Frankly, they have no idea what in God's name they're talking about.

As Commander in Chief, I can tell you without reservation—not just being in this business for a long time, but being a student of history—we have and always will have the strongest, toughest—[*inaudible*]*—force—fighting force in the history of the world. And, again, that's not hyperbole. That's real.*

I'm sorry to go on, but, as my grandpop would say, this gets my goat. [*Laughter*]

Let me close with this: In June of 1865, a major general from the Union Army arrived in Galveston, Texas, to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation and free the last enslaved Americans from bondage. Juneteenth, a day that reflects the Psalm—what the Psalm tells us, quote, "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."

Last month, 2 years after I made Juneteenth a Federal holiday—the first new Federal holiday since Martin Dr. Martin Luther King Day, nearly 40 years ago—I hosted a Juneteenth concert at the White House—the beacon of our Republic, I might add, built by enslaved people.

Watching their descendants—students, dancers, singers—perform in that lawn of the White House was spiritual. To think thousands—thousands—of Black Union soldiers killed during the Civil War. To think enslaved people remained shackled 2 years after emancipation. To think how many long nights they looked to the light and the North Star to keep the faith that despite America's original sin of slavery, this Nation could be saved.

That is patriotism. That's patriotism.

During that powerful concert, we heard the great Jennifer Hudson sing from her soul about the glory that will come and echo an anthem of a movement. I can't sing, so I'm not even going to try. [*Laughter*] But I'll quote, "It's been a long time coming, but I know a change is gonna come. Oh, yes, it will."

That's what happened 75 years ago when an American President chose to do right. And that's what we commemorate tonight: a forward march in our own lives, in the life of the Nation, toward the North Star, the idea of America that beats in the heart of all of our people.

I know we'll do this. I've never been more optimistic about America's future. Let us reflect and repair. Let us rise to the occasion and redeem the soul of this Nation, treat each other with decency and respect, change the dialogue.

Let's remember who in God's name we are. We are the United States of America, and there's nothing—think about this—literally, there is nothing we've ever set our mind to we haven't accomplished—nothing, ever—if we decided we were going to do it. Nothing beyond our capacity when we act together.

So let's reach out, even to those who have—less than generous. Try to pull them in so we can act together.

And I mean this from the bottom of my heart: May God bless you all, and may God protect our troops.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:54 p.m. in the William G. McGowan Theater at the National Archives and Records Administration. In his remarks, he referred to Gen. Jacqueline Van Ovost, USAF, commander, U.S. Transportation Command; Lt. Gen. Laura J. Richardson, USA, commander, U.S. Southern Command; and Sens. A. Mitchell McConnell, Thomas H. Tuberville, Joshua D. Hawley, and Edward R. "Ted" Cruz. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on July 28.

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