

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks at a Community Engagement With Residents Impacted by Wildfires in Lahaina, Hawaii

August 21, 2023

The President. Aloha.

Audience members. Aloha.

The President. As I've heard various people on the island speak today, I'm reminded of a phrase that—of a tradition in my house. Because we're always so busy, over the last 25 years, whenever my daughter or my sons, when they were both alive, wanted to leave me a message, they'd tape it on my mirror where I shave.

And I was having a particularly tough time at one point years ago, and my daughter taped on my mirror a quote from Kierkegaard. He said, "Faith sees best in the dark." "Faith sees best in the dark."

When things look the most bleak, that's when we need faith—faith in our family, faith in ourselves, and faith in our God. And I've seen just in the several hours I've been here so far remarkable resiliency. Such an incredibly good people.

Jill and I are here to grieve with you, but also we want you to know the entire country is here for you. That's not hyperbole. We mean that. The entire country—country is here for you. We just surveyed the damage. I want you to know: whatever it takes, as long as it takes.

And I look at your Congressmen and Senators and Governor and Lieutenant Governor. We're going to get it done for you, but get it done the way you want it done, not get it done somebody else's way. *[Applause]* No, I mean it.

I don't want to compare difficulties, but we have a little sense, Jill and I, what it's like to lose a home. Years ago—now 15 years ago—I was in Washington doing "Meet the Press." It was a sunny Sunday, and lightning struck at home on a little lake that's outside of our home—not a lake, a big pond—and hit a wire and came up underneath our home into the heating ducts—the air conditioning duct.

To make a long story short, I almost lost my wife, my '67 Corvette—*[laughter]*—and my cat. But all kidding aside, I watched the firefighters, the way they responded.

You know, there's an old expression—I grew up right across the street from a fire hall in Claymont, Delaware. And the expression is, "God made man, and then he made a few firefighters." You're all crazy, thank God. The only people who run into flames to help other people. And they ran into flames to save my wife and saved my family. Not a joke.

The smoke—and the firefighters here can tell you—sometimes smoke is so thick. From the windows out, it was that thick inside the home. And we were insured. We did not have any problem, but being out of our home for a better part of a year was difficult.

I can only imagine what it's like to lose your home completely burned to the ground and, more importantly, all the things that matter to you—from that ring he gave you when you were 19 years old, from that special letter that came from your son or your daughter. The little things that matter most. The album—the family albums. All of it is a touchstone to all the things we care about and lose.

And many of you have lost more than just that. Many of you have lost family and not even sure where some are.

I've had a similar experience. I was a young Senator being taken care of—not a joke—by Danny Inouye, who was my mentor. I was 29 years old. I wasn't old enough to be sworn in as a Senator yet. And for—by the way, for 36 years, I was listed as the poorest man in Congress, so I didn't get there based on my income.

And what happened was, I was down in Washington interviewing for staff. Before—after I was elected in December 18, before I was sworn in, and I got a phone call from my fire department saying I had to come home immediately. There had been an accident.

A tractor-trailer had broadsided my wife Christmas shopping with my three children. She was killed. My baby was killed. And my two boys were thought not to make it, initially. So I have a little bit of a sense of what it's like driving from Washington to Wilmington, 150 miles, wondering what in God's name is it going to be like when I get to the hospital.

Only thing worse than losing someone is not sure whether you've lost someone. Not sure where they are. My heart goes out to you—Jill and I—it aches for you, those of you who are trying to determine whether or not the person who is missing is missing and unaccounted for reasons that are devastating.

And what I've observed in my short time here today is the courage, the community, the sense of togetherness you have. This is not an ordinary community. It's a community based on faith in one another. I've watched. I've had an opportunity to get to know your Governor, I know your Senators, know your folks. What they said about who you are is true. It's true, and it matters.

There's an old—there's as an Irish poet who wrote a poem called "The Cure at Troy." There's a stanza in it that seems to be appropriate. He said: "History teaches us not to hope on this side of the grave. But then once in a lifetime, that longed-for tidal wave of justice can rise up, and hope and history rhyme."

It's time it rises up for you all. It's time to rebuild this community the way you want it built—the way you want it—so it's still a community, not a group of beautiful homes, but a community.

And I promise you—I give you my word, as a Biden—as long as I am President, your Governor is Governor, and this group of you—your elected officials are there, we're not going to stop until it's done.

As I flew over the carnage today in a helicopter, you'd see a lovely home completely unscathed and a whole bunch of homes around it burned to the ground. Well, I asked what the average age of the homes were that were in this community. They said close to 50 years. The shingles are changed, the way in which the glass and the windows are built.

We're not only going to build back for you, we're going to build back better, better than you had. But what you want, what you need.

Because, folks, the truth of the matter is that the rest of the world is looking at you. You know, it's not the same circumstance that—no losses are the same. But the truth is, the feeling for families that have already been notified, it matters.

It's going to be a long road, but you've got to have hope. Hope really does spring eternal. It's based on faith, faith in one another.

You know, I've been impressed how you look out for one another and turn your pain into purpose. This town has stood in this sacred spot for centuries. So much history. So much beauty.

Just before coming here, I stood in front of a banyan tree that's stood for 150 years, that burned, but it still stands. One resident called it a "diamond in the rough of hope." Another said, "Fire cannot reach its roots."

I know it's a metaphor, but that's you. That's who you are. That's Hawaii. There's no quit in Hawaii. There's no quit in America. There's no quit in us if we remember, for God's name, who we are.

Let me end with my prayer for all of you, a prayer that was said at the funeral Masses affecting my children and my—it's based on the 91st Psalm in my church, and it says, "May he raise you up on eagles' wings and bear you on the breath of dawn, make you to shine like the sun, and hold you in the palm of his hand."

To you, the people of this island, who've shown such absolute courage: The Nation stands with you. It really does. May God bless you all, and may you find the faith to be able to endure what you have to endure.

I don't want to be a—I don't want to do anything out of line here, but if anyone would like to speak with me when this is over, I'll stay around, because I just want you to know I really care. Not a joke. Not a joke.

And besides, if I didn't—Danny, I know you're watching. [*Laughter*] I know you're watching. I think I learned the lessons you taught me. God bless you all.

Every time I'd walk out of my grandpop's house—he was an old Irish guy—he'd yell, "Joey, keep the faith." And my grandmother went, "No, Joey, spread it." Let's spread the faith.

God love you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:25 p.m. at the Lahaina Civic Center. In his remarks, he referred to Reps. Edward M. Case and Jill N. Tokuda; Sens. Mazie K. Hirono and Brian E. Schatz; Gov. Joshua B. Green and Lt. Gov. Sylvia Luke of Hawaii; and Lahaina, HI, resident Tiffany Kidder Winn.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Community engagement with residents impacted by wildfires in Lahaina, HI.

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