

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks Prior to a Meeting With Organizers of the 60th Anniversary of the March on Washington and an Exchange With Reporters

August 28, 2023

The President. Kamala and I wanted to convene this incredible group of civil rights leaders for a simple reason: to thank them and to tell them what they tell us—we know we got a lot more work to do; and also remind them that what they do matters more than I think they even appreciate how—just how consequential it is.

You know, I'll be speaking about it more this evening, and I'm going to be talking—I'll be speaking in a longer fora. But the bottom line is that a lot's happening around the things you wouldn't think would be happening today on the anniversary of the 60 years of the march.

I've spoken with the Governor and the mayor and Black community leaders in Jacksonville, Florida. The sheriff, who's an African American. I spent a significant amount of time speaking to everyone, including the Governor of Florida.

And as I've said to the country, we can't let hate prevail. And it's on the rise. It's not—not diminishing.

Silence, I believe—as we've all said many times—silence is complicity. And we're not going to remain silent. And so we have to act against this hate-fueled violence and this—all that's happening.

And, by the way, almost 5 years to the day that five young Blacks were killed in Jacksonville—I think it was earlier—at the—at a gun—not a gun shop—a store there doing kids toys.

And—but, you know, we have to speak out that there is a whole group of extreme people trying to erase history—trying to walk away from—I mean, the idea that we're sitting here—I never thought that I'd be President, let alone be President and having the discussion on why books are being banned in American schools.

And, you know, as an administration, we're going to continue the march forward—jobs and freedom that we have worked so hard for—this group has worked harder than anybody for.

And we're going to get it done. So I want to thank the group for their leadership and their partnership. And I want to turn this over to the Vice President for a few minutes, and then we'll get moving.

Vice President Kamala D. Harris. Thank you, Mr. President. Our country was founded on many noble principles, including "E pluribus unum," "Out of many, one." And to live up to those ideals, I think, at this moment in time, requires moral clarity on behalf of every American about what is at stake right now.

The vast majority of us have so much more in common than what separates us. Yet, there are those who are intentionally trying to divide us as a nation. And I believe each of us has a duty—a duty—to not allow factions to sever our unity. Our diversity is our strength, and our unity is our power as a nation.

And I do believe that we must be guided by knowing that we have so much more in common than what separates us. We must be committed to building communities, building coalitions, understanding that is how we strengthen ourselves as a nation.

And the members of the King family are here. Ambassador Andy Young is here. I'm going to, if I may, for the children of Coretta Scott King, paraphrase something she said, which is that the fight for civil rights, for justice, for equality must be fought and won with each generation.

We have Yolanda King here, who epitomizes that understanding that it is incumbent on each of us at this moment in time in our country to stand for the sake of unity and foundational principles that out of many, we are one.

Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. Thank you.

Racism/Civil Rights

Q. Mr. President, as we are in this moment of hate, you have laws, you have policies, you have Executive orders. Mr. President, how do you prevent this hate? Is it a hard issue? And how do you intend to stop this hate that you just said was must stop, sir?

The President. By talking directly to the American—by talking directly to the American people, because I think the vast majority of the American people agree with this table. But we got—we have to understand: This is serious.

I said a little earlier when I came in and sat down: I think this is as serious a potential turning point for the negative as it was when—the turning point for the positive when your dad organized that march. I really think this is a—this is a critical time.

We have groups—a significant minority—that—but I think they want to change the direction that we've been working on so hard and making such significant progress on for so long. And we can't let it happen. We just have to speak to it, is my view.

Thank you.

Shooting in Jacksonville, Florida

Q. Sir, do you plan to travel to Jacksonville? Have you spoken with any of the families of the victims?

The President. The last—this is the last thing I'll speak to and I'll get this moving. I've spoken to the—I've—the authorities in Jacksonville, and he—I even spoke to the Governor as well last night for some time—all—all the folks.

And right now I was at—I asked for the—whether or not it was appropriate for the locale—local people to contact the families. Two of them are prepared to be contacted. One does not want to be contacted. I'm letting this just—let things settle because, you know, everybody deals with profound loss in a different way.

And it's important that—I know from experience it's important to try to do it in a way that is most helpful and eases the anxiety the most. So I haven't spoken to them yet.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:01 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Ronald D. DeSantis of Florida; and Mayor Donna Deegan and Sheriff T.K. Waters of Jacksonville, FL. Vice President Harris referred to Bernice King, daughter, Martin Luther King III, son, Andrea Waters King, daughter-in-law, and Yolanda King, granddaughter, of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Coretta Scott King; and former Ambassador to the United Nations and civil rights leader Andrew J. Young, Jr.

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