

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks at a Reception Commemorating the 60th Anniversary of the Founding of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law

August 28, 2023

The President. Mr. President, thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Please have a seat.

Judge, what's the dog's name?

Judge David S. Tatel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit.
Vixen.

The President. Vixen? Well, I tell you what, I got a German shepherd upstairs. His name is Commander. They'd get along well. *[Laughter]* They'd get along well.

Judge Tatel. *[Inaudible]*

The President. *[Laughter]* All right. We can work something out here maybe.

President Hewitt——

Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law President and Executive Director Damon T. Hewitt. Yes, sir.

The President. Thank you, man. Thank you for that introduction and for your leadership of one of America's great civil rights organizations.

Attorney General Garland, haven't seen you in a long while. Good to see you. Secretary of Homeland—you think I'm kidding? I'm not. *[Laughter]* Secretary of Homeland Security, the guy who took the job, thank you for taking the job, pal.

Members of Congress, I'm looking around. Where are the Members—any Members of Congress here? Stand up if you are. Oh, they're right in front of me, man.

Members and supporters of the Lawyers' Committee on Civil Rights Under the Law, including the former president and current Assistant Attorney General of Civil Rights, Kristen Clarke—*[applause]*—Kristen.

We're all too often reminded of what you do matters so very much, and you're reminded of that on a regular basis. On Saturday morning, the Nation observed the 60th anniversary of the March on Washington. By the evening, a White gunman in Jacksonville, Florida, reportedly driven by racial animus, went on a shooting rampage at a store near Edward Waters University, a historical Black university. Three Black Americans were murdered in cold blood.

Racist violence today harkens back to the church bombings of the cross—and the cross burnings. You know, in that same town 5 years earlier, there were another five—young Blacks were killed.

While we gather the facts and law enforcement has opened a Federal civil rights investigation to treat this as a terror as—this terror as a possible hate crime, the act of domestic violent extremism it clearly is.

You know—but we know this: As I made clear in my Inaugural Address, White supremacy is a poison. It's a poison that's been allowed to grow faster and fester in our communities to the point where the intelligence community has determined—the U.S. intelligence community has

determined that domestic terrorism, rooted in White supremacy, is the greatest terrorist threat we face in the homeland—the greatest threat.

We have to act. We have to act.

After the racist mass shootings in Buffalo last year, I got an opportunity to meet with every one of the family members. The Lawyers' Committee and other leaders helped us host a United—United We Stand summit here in the East Room in the White House.

We made clear that America is the most multiracial, most dynamic nation in the history of the world. All of us—all of us—need to say clearly and forcefully, as forcefully as we can, that hate will not prevail in America. Hate will not prevail in America.

But pause for just a moment. I thought things had changed. I was able—literally, not figuratively—talk Strom Thurmond into voting for the Civil Rights Act before he died. And I thought, "Well, maybe there's real progress."

But hate never dies. It just hides. It hides under the rocks. And when someone breathes a little oxygen in it, it comes out—roaring out. And silence—silence is complicity. And we're not going to remain silent. You're not, nor am I, nor are the vast majority of Americans. Denialism is worse. And we'll call out—we'll call it for what it is.

While we know tragedy can't be forever overcome or fully understood, there are certain things that we do know. With your help—with your help, I signed the most significant gun safety law in nearly 30 years, but we must not stop until we ban assault weapons and high-capacity magazines.

If hate will do that once, it will do it again. We can't fully prevent people from being radicalized to hate and violence, but we must—we must—address the relentless exploitation of the internet to recruit and mobilize violent extremists. And that's going to be hard. It conflicts in many cases with the First Amendment. We've got a lot to do.

That's why I issued the country's first-ever National Strategy on Countering Domestic Terrorism, and I signed landmark hate crime legislation that we—that we've passed.

And we have to continue to act, though. Now is the time for all America to speak up, when history is being erased, books are being banned. Did you ever think we'd have this conversation here at this time? Diversity is being attacked.

As I said earlier, we're one of the most diverse countries in the history of the world. Diversity is a strength of our Nation, a cornerstone of our democracy. Now is the time for all of us, especially all of you who make this your life's work, to protect that essential truth. And that's why we're here today.

In June 1963, a defining time for America, one single day—on one single day, Vivian Malone and James Hood, two Black students, arrived at the doors of the University of Alabama, opened by the hope of *Brown v. the Board of Education*, were blocked by the organized hate of George Wallace. President Kennedy spoke to the nation from the Oval Office warning of a moral crisis of bigotry facing the Nation and announced—announced a landmark civil rights bill.

Late that night, the NAACP leader Medgar Evers was assassinated outside his home in Mississippi. Bernard Segal, a Jewish lawyer in New York, published a statement signed by dozens of other lawyers, White and Black, in an Alabama newspaper issuing a call to action for attorneys around the country to fight this injustice.

By the end of June, more than 200 of you—200 lawyers of different races from all across America—were invited to the White House to strategize in this very room. That day in June 1963, in the East Room of the White House, they established the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights

Under the Law, its mission, quote, "to mobilize the nation's leading lawyers as agents of change in the Civil Rights Movement." And that's what—who you are, and that's what happened.

Over time, the committee evolved from volunteers representing individual cases to full-time lawyers leading broader high-impact—high-impact litigation, voting rights, employment, education, housing, and so much more.

Today, you understand civil rights is the unfinished fight of America, and you're leading the fight for them after having led the fight for the past 60 years. You've been critical partners to this administration. You're helping us bring and protect the right to vote, to chart new pathways to further equal opportunity in higher education, protecting the value of diversity and full inclusion of all Americans in the promise of America. That's what it's all about.

To those who came before, to all of you here today, to future lawyers who will heed the call to serve, I say thank you, thank you, thank you. Because the God's truth is, it wouldn't have happened without you, as far as we've gotten. We need you badly.

You know, as the Lawyers' Committee was being established, another kind of planning was going on in June of 1963: Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, Dorothy Heights, and other leaders of the movement were planning a long-distance—a long-discussed march that would finally come to Washington.

The day after convening the Lawyers' Committee, President Kennedy hosted march organizers in the Cabinet Room, expressing—expressing concern that any violence could derail the passage of the civil rights bill.

But the march organizers were undeterred. They would not be slowed. Their crusade was about the law and the Nation bearing witness to the power of the righteous cause. So, on this day in August 1963, hundreds of thousands of Americans of every background descended on Washington, DC, from all over America—from all of America.

They made their way to Lincoln Memorial, where they heard from ministers, priests, and rabbis. They heard from heroes like Daisy Bates, the only woman to speak at the March, who spoke about the power of women in the moment. And she was way ahead of her time—way ahead of our time.

By the way, there's more women in my administration than men. That's not an accident. *[Laughter]*

And they heard from other patriots before hearing Dr. King preach about the dream that declared a new American anthem for jobs and freedom, political rights, and economic justice, to redeem what he described as, quote, "the promissory note to which every American"—every American—"was to fall heir."

A promise derived from the very idea of America, that we are all created equal and deserve to be treated equally throughout our entire lives. While we've never fully lived up to that promise, we've never—thank God—fully walked away from it.

Because of the power—because people never stopped marching, we secured the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and so much more. Yet, for all the progress, there was a backlash in heroes murdered, bombings of Black churches, including the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, where four little girls were murdered.

A reminder that throughout our history, when great nations have taken great steps forward, they often are met by the oldest, darkest, and most vicious forces in that country rising up and dragging us down again. That's why earlier today, I met with a group of our Nation's civil rights leaders, including President Hewitt.

And that's why we gather here in remembrance and in solidarity, as we cannot keep marching forward unless we are determined to do so. And it starts with the administration that looks like America with—that includes our Vice President, Kamala Harris, who was cochair of the San Francisco Lawyers' Committee.

Our for—and for our administration and with your help, it means pushing back against voter suppression, election subversion, and hate-fueled violence. It means when police reform is blocked in Congress, we work together in the civil rights leaders family and law enforcement, enabling me to sign the most sweeping Executive order on police reform ever, as we keep pushing for Congress to act. And we cannot give up until they pass the John Lewis legislation.

I made a commitment that I was going to nominate the first Black woman to be in the Supreme Court. And with your help, we got it done.

Audience member. Oh, yes!

The President. Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson. [*Applause*]

You know, as my daughter would say, "Everybody's going to be surprised she's smarter than those guys." [*Laughter*] She is brilliant.

In addition, we appointed a Black woman—more Black women in the Federal court circuit courts than any other President—as a matter of fact, than every other President combined in American history.

Many of you joined me at a bill signing for making it clear that interracial marriages and same-sex marriages are protected, period; making Juneteenth a Federal holiday to mark when the last enslaved people in America were finally freed.

Progress means a fundamental break with the trickle-down economics that promised prosperity for all but failed Americans, especially Black Americans, for so many decades.

Kamala and I came to office determined—determined—to change our economics, determined to change it in ways that it has been over the last several decades. You know, the direction of this country is to grow from the—in our view, from the middle out and the bottom up, not from the top down. That way everybody does well. The wealthy do very, very well, and everybody has a shot.

We're investing in all of America, in all Americans, the entire Nation's future. And I would argue our plan is working.

But there are those in America who are so consumed with the worst of our past, with grievances and lies and hate and violence, that they're in opposition to almost everything. So we have to—we must be unyielding—unyielding in recognizing that the great cause of America, which is giving everyone an equal chance—just everyone an equal chance.

My dad used to say: "Joey, a job is a lot—about a lot more than a paycheck. It's about your dignity. It's about respect. It's about"—he would actually say this; not a joke—"It's about being able to look your kid in the eye and say, 'Honey, it's going to be okay,' and mean it."

It's the work of all of us to make sure we keep moving in that direction.

We're reminded of that truth on this day that marks another defining moment in our country's history. Sixty-eight years ago today, Emmett Till was lynched and brutalized. He took his last breath at just 14 years of age for talking to a White woman. In him, we remember too many other Black Americans lynched, drowned, burned, castrated for trying to vote, for trying to go to school, for trying to own a business, for trying to preach the gospel, for just trying to live, for God's sake.

But we also remember the courage of people like Emmett Till's mother. I find this profound. In all the years I've known of it, find it profound. Emmett Till's mother insisted that the casket of her son's mutilated body remain open so the world could see—the world could see—what was done to him.

Imagine as a parent. Imagine on—under any—under any circumstance, you being—having the courage to do that, to let the world see. And if you've lost children, you understand what I'm talking about. It's profound. And she said, "Let the world see what I've seen." That's what she said. And America saw.

And because she found purpose through her pain, I was able to sign the law, believe it or not, for the first time in American history—think of this—for the first time making lynching a Federal hate crime in Emmett Till's name. It took that long—a hundred years. One hundred years.

Well, last month, surrounded by the Till family and friends, once again, I signed a law establishing the Mamie and Emmett Till National Monuments in Illinois and in Mississippi. And I'm very proud to have done that.

The story of how, from trauma, hope can grow and the promise of America can prevail, that's what it's about.

Let me close with this. Among the lawyers who convened in this room 60 years ago was the son of a carpenter, a domestic worker in Alabama. His name was Fred Gray. When Dr. King, Rosa Parks, and Claudette Colvin and other giants in our history needed a lawyer in their fight for freedom, they called Fred.

Fred was one of the most important civil rights lawyers in our history whose legal brilliance and strategy desegregated schools and secured the right to vote for millions of people up to that point who had been denied the right to vote. An ordinary minister, he pursued a righteous calling, that threw him—brought him back here—I was going to say threw him back here, but it brought him back here. It kind of threw him as well back here to Washington. And in the same room 59 years later.

And I had a great honor—I read about him as a public defender involved in civil rights myself as a kid lawyer; I always wondered—I got to bestow on Fred, 59 years later, the Medal of Freedom, our Nation's highest civilian honor.

A remarkable man who also mentioned the youngest speaker at the March on Washington and future Congressman, John Lewis, who became a friend. As Fred wrote about John after John's death, that they spoke and prayed that we, quote, "Keep pushing, keep going, set the record straight," end of quote. That's a defining moment of our time.

This is our charge: Keep pushing, keep going, set the record straight. I know we can. We just remember who in the hell we are. We are the United States of America—the United States of America. There is not a single goal we've ever set that we failed to accomplish when we did it together—not a single, solitary goal.

It takes time, a lot of pain, and a hell of a lot of work. But also, think of all the people, all the individuals, all the children you've all given hope to. It's not hyperbole. I'm being deadly earnest. Think about what you've done and what you continue to do.

Let me conclude by saying this, that I think that we're at an inflection point in history, not just the United States, but in the world. Every—[inaudible]—from five to seven, eight generations, things change. I had a—in fundamental ways.

I had a physics professor who used to say an inflection point's when you're going down the highway at 60 miles an hour, and all of a sudden you take a right turn 7, 8, 10 degrees to the right.

You can never get back on the path you're on, and you have a whole new outline, a whole new destination. You're not sure where it is. You got to adjust to it.

Well, the way I look at it—and I know I'm referred to as a cockeyed optimist—but the way I look at it is it presents overwhelming opportunities in foreign policy, domestic policy, and civil rights. But you're still the engineers. You're still the people that we're going to need to get it done. We have good people in the Government now, but we're going to make sure that we keep you together because there's nothing beyond our capacity when we have you on our side.

Every time I'd walk out of my Grandfather Finnegan's home up in Scranton, Pennsylvania, he'd yell, "Joey, keep the faith," and my grandmother would yell: "No, Joey, spread it. Go spread the faith." [*Laughter*] Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:16 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas; Angela M. Carr, Anolt J. "A.J." Laguerre, Jr., and Jerrald D. Gallion, who were killed in the shooting at the Dollar General store in Jacksonville, FL, on August 26; and Ryan C. Palmeter, the suspected gunman in the shooting. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary on August 29.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, 60th anniversary of founding, commemoration reception.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Biden, Ashley; Carr, Angela M.; Clarke, Kristen; Gallion, Jerrald D.; Garland, Merrick B.; Gray, Fred D., Sr.; Harris, Kamala D.; Hewitt, Damon T.; Jackson, Ketanji Brown; Laguerre, Anolt J. "A.J.," Jr.; Mayorkas, Alejandro N.; Palmeter, Ryan C.; Tatel, David S.

Subjects: Affirmative action programs in higher education; Assistant Attorney General of Civil Rights; Attorney General; Civil rights movement; Diversity, equity, and inclusion, improvement efforts; Domestic terrorism and extremist violence, efforts to combat; Economic improvement; Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley National Monument, establishment in Illinois and Mississippi; Emmett Till Antilynching Act; Federal court nominations and confirmations; Florida, shooting in Jacksonville; Gun violence, prevention efforts; Hate-based violence, efforts to combat; Juneteenth; Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, 60th anniversary of founding; March on Washington, 60th anniversary; Marriage equality, protection efforts; New York, 2022 shooting in Buffalo; Secretary of Homeland Security; Supreme Court Associate Justice; Vice President; Voting rights, protection efforts.

DCPD Number: DCPD202300724.