

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks on Hurricane Idalia Damage and Recovery Efforts and an Exchange With Reporters in Live Oak, Florida
September 2, 2023

The President. Is everyone here?

Audience member. Yes.

Audience member. Yes.

The President. That's a dumb question because if you're not here, how would you know you weren't here?

Folks, first let me thank the mayor for sticking with me and showing me around. Thank you, Mr. Mayor.

And you know, as you just walk around here and look at these few homes—my mother used to have an expression, "But for the grace of God." Can you imagine—can you imagine—this tree falling through your roof in your home?

I met the family who lives one door down from the—this is used as a church. Had that tree—it's got to be 75, 100 feet long. Had that gone 10 degrees to the right, it would have been through a young woman's bedroom. She would have been gone.

So, I tell you what, you know—you know, I just did this aerial tour with Live Oak Police Chief Keith Davis surveying the damage on the way up here and then on the ground since we've been here—surveying the damage of a category 3 hurricane that made landfall Wednesday morning. No winds this strong had hit this area in a hundred years. Pray to God it will be another hundred years before this happens again.

Senator Rick Scott, who was with me today, I want to thank him for his cooperation and his help. And he shares the view I do about FEMA: They're doing an incredible job.

But the work, in a sense, is just beginning. We've got a lot of work to do.

And all the officials from Florida, I want to thank them.

Jill and I spent time with the incredible first responders and folks who ran toward the danger instead of away from the danger when this storm was coming and when it hit. And with their families whose—the families whose lives have been upended. We didn't get to meet everybody, but we met a lot.

Here in Live Oak, massive trees—as we—I just was referring—were uprooted from intense hurricane-force winds. Flooding and severe damage of homes and businesses.

Police Chief Davis, who's probably—can hardly wait until I go because we're spending so much time with him today—and I appreciate it. I really do, Chief. As—you know, he not only—while he was doing his job, he lost part of his house, and he lost the roof on his barn. It was destroyed. A leader at school lost part of her roof, and her car was destroyed.

Power is out across the county as chicken-processing plants and lumber mills—so they can't operate, affecting the economic well-being in the near term. Just here in this county, millions—millions—of broiler chickens had to be destroyed. I know a little about that. Delaware—in the Delmarva Peninsula, it's a \$4 billion industry. It's the way people make their living. It's a way you feed the world. It's amazing.

And hundreds of broken power poles, downed powerlines means many of you in Live Oak have—still have no power. I know it's frustrating and it's hard, and I've directed FEMA to help you in every way they can. And FEMA in the future can fund and replace these wooden poles with steel poles that are much safer and much more resistant to further kinds of storms like this.

Families pulling—piecing their lives back together. But through it all—you've seen it and the press has seen it too—neighbors helping neighbors. I mean really, genuinely neighbors helping neighbors with determination and optimism.

The spirit of this community is remarkable. When people are in real trouble, the most important thing to give them is hope. And there is no hope like your neighbor walking across the street and seeing what they can do for you or the local pastor or someone coming in and offering you help. It gives you hope.

And hundreds of dedicated line workers are here restoring power. I asked for an estimation, how many line workers from other States came, knowing the hurricane was coming? Twenty States, including Georgia and Alabama, sent line workers to try to reestablish the electric connections here in this State. Twenty different States to get this community back.

I've been in frequent touch with Governor DeSantis since the storm made landfall. And at my direction, FEMA Administrator Criswell—she traveled to Florida Wednesday night after having been here earlier.

And I approved the request within 6 hours of the time that Governor DeSantis asked for a mass—a major disaster declaration. At the same time, a request from Governor McMaster of South Carolina for an emergency declaration. That's a fancy way of saying "just getting help immediately and all we can do under the law."

And, folks, we're making Federal assistance available for Florida survivors whose homes or businesses are damaged and destroyed. We're helping Florida and South Carolina deliver meals and water and remove debris. And we pre-positioned ahead of time the—FEMA pre-positioned, knowing this storm might hit, meals and water throughout this area.

Before this storm, we predeployed 1,500 Federal personnel and 900 Coast Guard personnel. That's not to mention the National Guard—the State National Guard that's here, that's weighed in as well.

We surged millions of meals, thousands of tarps, blankets, and cots. And from the moment this storm hit, Federal-search-and-rescue teams helped people whose homes were surrounded by water.

And now the storm has passed and you're dealing with what's left in its wake, and we're not going anywhere—the Federal Government. We're here to help the State as long as it takes.

FEMA and the Small Business Administration are here to help residents whose homes and businesses were destroyed or damaged. And you can determine whether you're—qualify and how to get the help if you haven't been contacted already by going to disasterassistance.gov and register for assistance. If you had any damage, go to disasterassistance.gov to register for assistance.

Earlier this week, I visited FEMA headquarters in Washington to thank the emergency responding personnel who are working 24/7 here in Florida and throughout the Southwest—Southeast and in Maui, in Hawaii. I want to reiterate that appreciation today.

I also convened my entire Cabinet as part of a whole-of-Government response. And that response is to [the; White House correction] increase [in; White House correction] the number

and intensity of the extreme weather events and be wary—we're going to be—use all the resources available to the Government to do it.

Nobody can deny the impact of climate crisis—at least nobody intelligent can deny the impact of the climate crisis anymore. Just look around—around the Nation and the world for that matter: historic floods, intense droughts, extreme heat, deadly wildfires—wildfires that have caused serious damage like we've never seen before.

Just since being President, in 2½ years, I've flown over more land burned to the ground as a consequence of wildfires than occupy the in State—the entire land of the State of Maryland. From down in New Mexico and Alabama all up into Montana and around, it's been devastating.

Folks, when I took office, I directed my team to raise our game in how to lead and coordinate our response to national disasters. I met people here today that are—and when they need our help the most, there's a reason why we've done it. Just look around this community and every other community you followed me to.

Folks, to not only meet people where they are when they need help the most, but to build back—to build back stronger and more resilient. Just like I directed my entire Cabinet to do in Maui, to help the devastated communities recover and rebuild there as it was before.

You know, these crises are affecting more than—more and more Americans. And every American rightly expects FEMA to show up when they are needed, to help in a disaster. So I'm calling on the United States Congress—Democrats and Republicans—to ensure the funding is there to deal with the immediate crises, as well as our long-term commitments to the safety and security of the American people.

I'm here today to deliver a clear message to the people of Florida and throughout the Southeast. As I told your Governor: If there is anything your State needs, I'm ready to mobilize that support—anything they need related to these storms. Your Nation has your back, and we'll be with you until the job is done.

Before I conclude, as I'm about to head back north, I want to say a word to the people of Jacksonville, Florida, on a different subject, who are still reeling from the shooting rampage near Edward Waters University, an S—HBCU last weekend, a terrorist act driven by racial hatred and animus. Our hearts are with you, those of you who were affected and all your families. A terrorist act, as I said, driven by hatred and animus.

And, ladies and gentlemen—and let me say this clearly—hate will not prevail in America. Hate will not prevail in America. Racism will not prevail in America. Domestic terrorism will not prevail in America.

And to make it real clear: Silence on this issue—both public and private, from the private sector—silence is complicity. We must not—we will not—remain silent.

I'll have much more to say about that later, but I did want to mention it while I was here.

Ladies and gentlemen, you saw firsthand. And thanks to the press, the rest of the Nation has got to see it. These are good people—good people—who have been devastated. They need help.

Imagine yourself in this position. Imagine you being in this position. Imagine you being the family that a tree that is about a hundred—more than a hundred feet, a gigantic tree, coming that close to taking out your daughter's bedroom and taking out your daughter in the process.

You know, this is tough stuff. But again, if people know we're with them, they'll get through this. Just knowing we're not going to forget. And we will not forget.

Thank you all so very much.

I'll take a few questions. Yes, ma'am.

Governor Ronald D. DeSantis of Florida

Q. Mr. President, are you disappointed that the Governor didn't join you on your visit today and that his handling of your visit makes it seem like politics is getting in the way of your joint response to this crisis?

The President. Well, no, I'm not disappointed. He may have had other reasons, because—and—but he did help us plan this. He sat with FEMA and decided where we should go, where would be the least disruption.

And I'm very pleased. The guy who—we don't agree very much at all. The distinguished former Governor and senior Senator, he came, talked about it to me and to you all about how incredible—what an incredible job the Federal Government was doing. And I found that reassuring.

And so I think we can pull this together. I really do.

The President's Travel Schedule/Train Derailment and Chemical Spill in East Palestine, Ohio

Q. You had said in March that you would go to East Palestine, Ohio. You came here. How come you haven't gone to East Palestine yet?

The President. Well, I haven't had the occasion to go to East Palestine. There is a lot going on here, and I just haven't been able to break.

I was thinking whether I'd go to East Palestine this week, but I then was reminded I've got to go literally around the world. I'm going from Washington to India to Vietnam to—and so I—it's going to be a while.

But we're making sure that East Palestine has what they need materially in order to deal with their problems.

Q. Mr. Mayor?

The President. Yes.

Funding for Federal Disaster Assistance

Q. Mr. President, are you confident that there will be enough money to deal with this problem—this disaster and the other disasters that have happened and will continue to happen around the country?

The President. The answer is, I'm confident because I can't imagine the Congress saying, "We're not going to help." There are going to be fights about things that don't relate to this, trying to connect this to other money or not—you know, but I think we'll get through it. I just can't imagine people saying, no, they're not going to help.

Well, ladies and gentlemen—

White House aide. Mr. Mayor is going to make some remarks too.

The President. Oh, I'm sorry. I—I wasn't even supposed to take the questions now.

Mr. Mayor—[laughter]—I apologize. I apologize. The floor is—the podium is yours, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Frank C. Davis of Live Oak. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. President. And, again, thank you so much for coming to Live Oak and highlighting the tremendous suffering that has taken place here. And, again, I am with you and my heart is with these folks who have this damage.

But you did hit on some themes that I think are important. One is "but for the grace of God." We're so grateful that there was not more damage or loss of life. These kinds of things we can replace. People will get back to normal, and things will move on. And we're just so grateful that people are safe here in our county.

You also mentioned something that my wife said to be sure to say, and it's already been said, and that is "neighbor helping neighbor." And we've seen so much of that. That each one helping another, and it's very important and very impressive to me.

And then the third thing that you hit on was thanking all those who have responded—first responders. I mean, we could just go down a long list: the Federal Government, the State government. I appreciate the—Senator Scott here and you guys working together and talking together. It is really, I think, impressive and important to have that unity.

We've had a local response, our local people. And then we've had numbers of linemen come in, and we've had a number of other first responders and so forth and many volunteers, people who come for free just to help to get this community back on its feet. We're so grateful for those things.

And you hit on all three of those. And I'm thankful for you doing that to—just to let people know that that type of thing is important. We see that here in Live Oak. And, again, we're so thankful for people who have helped.

I did want to point out, Mr. President, this is an historic site. The old Douglass High School, named after the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, was located here and had to be torn down a number of years ago because of asbestos and other issues. But the Douglass Center remains, and it's become a symbol here of pride for this community. So we're—we're in a good place here today, and I'm glad this is where we could hold this event today.

And thank you for coming here. And, again, thank you so much to the First Lady for coming with you. I'm sure she could have done a lot of other things. But she's kind of like my wife. [Laughter] When I go somewhere, I like for her to go with me, even if it's to jump in the car and go out in the Walmart. So we enjoy being together, and I know you do too.

So, again, thank you, First Lady.

The First Lady. Thank you. Thank you very much.

Mayor Davis. And thank you, Mr. President. And God bless you.

The President. Thank you, Mr. Mayor.

Death of Former Governor William B. Richardson of New Mexico

Q. Mr. President, your reaction to the death of Governor Richardson?

The President. He was a good friend. It's very disappointing.

Recovery Efforts in Live Oak

Q. Mr. President, when can you tell the people when will things go back to normal here?

The President. Well, I'd tell them we're going to stay here until it goes back to normal.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:53 p.m. on Douglas Street. In his remarks, Mayor Davis referred to his wife Amanda Davis. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on September 3.

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