

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks to Servicemembers, First Responders, and Their Families on the Anniversary of the September 11, 2001, Terrorist Attacks at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska

September 11, 2023

Thank you, Chief Master Sergeant Miller, for that introduction and for your service to our Nation.

Governor Dunleavy, it's good to see you. The Governor and I have something in common: We're both from Scranton, Pennsylvania. *[Laughter]* I wish I had him playing on my high school ball club when I was playing. Then I would have—could have been an all-American, having you in front of me.

Representative Mary—Mary, thank you, for speaking. And the mayor, David Bronson, and Major General Eifler, I really appreciate all you do, and Adjutant General Saxe and the Tribal leaders and stewards of these sacred lands and to all servicemembers and families at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson and distinguished guests.

I join you on this solemn day to renew our sacred vow: Never forget. Never forget. We never forget. Each of us—each of those precious lives stolen too soon when evil attacked. Ground Zero in New York, and I remember standing there the next day and looking at the building. I felt like I was looking through the gates of hell, it looked so devastating because of the way you could—where—from where you could stand.

Shanksville, Pennsylvania; the Pentagon in Virginia. I have spent many 9/11s in those hallowed grounds to bear witness and remember those we lost. Every day, but especially the last few days, their memory has been with me.

I am just returning from the G summit—the G-20 summit in India, where we strengthened America's leadership on the global stage, followed by a historic trip to Vietnam, where we transformed our partnership in one of the most critical regions in the world.

These trips are an essential part of how we're going to ensure the United States is flanked by the broadest array of allies and partners, who will stand with us and deter any threat to our security, to build a world that is safer for all of our children, something that today, of all days, we're reminded of is not a given.

Because through this military base is located on Ground Zero—isn't—we know that distance did not dull or diminish the pain we felt all across the Nation on September 11. Because we know that on this date 22 years ago, *[jets; White House correction]* from this base were scrambled on high alert to escort planes through the airspace.

Alaskan communities opened their doors to stranded passengers. American flags sold out in every store and were placed in front of seemingly every home. We know that, on this day, every American's heart was wounded. Yet every big city, small town, suburb, rural town, Tribal community—American hands went up ready to help where they could, ready to serve like so many of you here.

Ready like Chief Master Sergeant Shadi *[Sari; White House correction]* Taylor, here with us today, who had recently started college when Flight 93 went down a few miles from Shanksville. She said, and I quote, "I immediately knew I wanted to sign up and suit up to serve my country."

Ready like General—excuse me—General Eifler, who said on that day: "When our Nation calls, we must be ready. It called, and we went without hesitation."

My fellow Americans, September 11, 2001, tested our strength, our resolve, and our courage. The billowing smoke and ash that darkened the clear, blue sky that September day. The shredded steel and concrete slabs that rained down from the World Trade Center. The plume of fire that shot up in the sky and Pentagon. I remember seeing it as I got off the Amtrak train on my way to work in the United States Senate. The pit into the earth in Shanksville, a testament to the unbreakable courage and resolve of the American people.

But we'll never forget that when faced with evil and an enemy who sought to tear us apart, we endured—we endured. But while every year we mark this hallowed day, it's never easy. To anyone here or anyone across the country who is grieving a lost child, parent, spouse, sibling, friend, or coworker; to all those who still bear the wounds from the searing September morning, I know how hard it is on a day like this.

How can we reopen that wound? It's like opening a black hole in your chest, sucking you into it again, bringing you back to that moment when you saw the news, the moment you got that phone call, the moment you realized you'd never say again, "See you later, Mom" or "Talk to you soon, Son."

You think of everything your loved one might have done if they'd had a little more time. What would they have done? And though that can leave you so hollow, it also makes you full at the same time.

On this day, I'm thinking about a friend of mine named Davis who grew up with me in Delaware. Twenty-two years ago, he and his family had just passed the first year without their youngest son of three sons, who died in a boating accident at age 15. His oldest son, Davis, Jr., was just 6 days into a new job on the 104th floor of the South Tower of the World Trade Center.

Davis went straight to Ground Zero to search for his son, search deep into the last—as he referred to it—"innings of hope," as he put it. A few days later, I called David [Davis; White House correction] to talk as fathers who know about losing a piece of your soul.

I was on my way to speak to students at the University of Delaware to try to make sense of what happened. And guess what? Having lost two sons within a year, Davis told me: "Just tell them, Joe, 'Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid.'"

The terrorists stole 297—2,977 souls that day—2,977 souls—forever altering the future of so many families and the story of our Nation. But those terrorists could not touch what no force, no enemy, no day ever could, and that is the soul of America.

What's the soul of America? It's the breath, the life, the essence of who we are. A soul is what makes us "us." The soul of America is based on a sacred proposition that we're all created equal, endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights: life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness.

We haven't always lived up to it, but we've never walked away from that proposition either. The soul of America is the fortitude we found in the fear of that terrible September day, the purpose we found in our pain, the light we found in our darkest hour, an hour when terrorists believed they could bring us to our knees, bend our will, break our resolve.

But they were wrong. They were dead wrong. In the crucible of 9/11 and the days and months that followed, we saw the stuff America is made of. Firefighters and police officers and other first responders running into an inferno of jet fuel, debris at Ground Zero, breathing in toxins and ash that would damage their own health, but still refusing to stop for months.

Civilians and servicemembers at the Pentagon rushing into the fiery breach again and again and again to rescue their colleagues in the Pentagon.

And patriot passengers of Flight 93—think of this—who did not know the horror that awaited them, but they confronted the unimaginable, fear and terror, with absolute courage. It's astonishing.

The poet Maya Angelou wrote, "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if we faced it with courage, we need not live it again."

My mother had it a—put it a different way. My mother was a 5-foot-2 little Irish lady who had a backbone like a ramrod. She used to say—and I mean this sincerely—"Courage lies in every heart, and the expectation is that one day it will be summoned."

On September 11, it was summoned at 9:57 a.m. It was summoned, and 40 incredible women and men in Shanksville answered the call. Civilians, they gave their lives. And in doing so, they gave life to our—their country.

We saw that courage at Ground Zero and the Pentagon, and we saw it in so many other ways.

These are heroes, like the faith community leaders all across the country who pushed back against the fear and hate they saw directed at Muslim Americans and Middle Eastern Americans and South Asian descent.

Heroes, like all of you, the brave women and men of the Armed Force—Forces, who never faltered. You have never failed to defend our Nation, our people, and our values in times of trial.

Heroes like the "9/11 Generation," hundreds of thousands of brave Americans who deployed to Afghanistan to make sure the United States would not be attacked again; who served in Iraq, like many of you probably did, in war zones around the world, risking their own safety and the safety of their fellow citizens—for the safety of their fellow citizens; who served and sacrificed again and again to defend our democracy and deny terrorists a safe haven; who followed Usama bin Laden to the end of the Earth and ultimately sent him to the gates of hell 12 years ago.

And then, last year, I made the decision to take out Zawahiri, the number two, who met the same fate. And today, our intelligence community has recently assessed in a declassified memo that Al Qaida threat from Afghanistan and Pakistan has reached a historic low.

Though all this has changed over the last 22 years, the resolve of the American people has proved we never bow, we never bend, we never yield. Our longest war is over, but the—our commitment to preventing another attack on the United States and our people and our allies will never, never rest—never.

Terrorism, including political and ideological violence, is the opposite of all we stand for as a nation that settles our differences peacefully, under the rule of law.

We're going to continue to track terrorist threats in all forms, wherever it may be. We're going to continue to disrupt terrorist activity wherever we may find it. And I will never hesitate to do what is necessary to defend the American people, just as I will never forget our sacred duty to those of you who serve.

Never before in our history—never before in our history has America asked so much for so many over such a sustained period for our All-Volunteer Force. You make up 1 percent of the population. You're the strength, the venue, the—you're the backbone, you're the sinew of America.

As a nation, we have many obligations. But I've been saying for 30 years, we only have one truly sacred obligation: to prepare those we send into harm's way and care for them and their families when they return home and when they do not return home.

It's an obligation not based on party or politics, but on a promise that unites all Americans. And together, over the last 2½ years, I've worked to make good on that promise, signing more than 25 bipartisan laws to support our servicemembers and veterans and their families and caregivers and survivors.

We will not stop. We owe you. And we owe you big, and it matters.

Across the country, many Americans heard our Nation's call in the days right after 9/11. And there are those who were just children, not even born yet when this happened. But when their time came to choose to serve, not because they saw something, but because they felt something, like many of you did—the same feeling that brought Americans together on this painful day 22 years ago: unity.

Now, it shouldn't take a national tragedy to remind us of the power of national unity. But that's the truly honored—that's how we truly honor those we lost on 9/11: by remembering what we can do together; to remember what destroyed, what we repaired; what was threatened that we fortified; what was attacked. And an indomitable American spirit prevailed over all of it.

Ordinary Americans responding in extraordinary and unexpected ways. That's who you are. You are the soul of the Nation. That's not hyperbole. To me, that's the central lesson of September 11—not that we'll never again falter or face setbacks; it's that for all our flaws and disagreements, there is nothing we cannot accomplish when we defend with our hearts, which make us unique in the world, our democracy—our democracy. Every generation has the fight to preserve it.

That's why the terrorists targeted us in the first place: our freedom, our openness, our institutions. They failed, but we must remain vigilant.

Today, we can look across the country and around the world and see anger and fear in places many of you have been stationed before. The rising tide of hatred and extremism and political violence—it's more important than ever that we come together around the principle of American democracy, regardless of our political backgrounds.

We must not succumb to the poisonous politics of difference and division. We must never allow ourselves to be pulled apart by petty, manufactured grievances. We must continue to stand united. We all have an obligation, a duty, a responsibility to defend, to preserve, to protect our democracy.

And always remember: American democracy depends not on some of us, but on all of us. American democracy depends on the habits of the heart of "We the People"—the habits of the heart.

Let me close with this. Earlier today in Hanoi, I visited the marker to honor my friend, war hero, Senator, and statesman John McCain. John and I disagreed like hell. Like two brothers, we'd argue like hell on the Senate floor, and then we'd go to lunch together.

I went out to see John just before he passed away at his home. And as I was walking out, I put my hand on his chest, and he pulled me down, and he kissed me. He said: "I love you. Will you do my eulogy?" John and I were friends, like a lot of us who had differences. Like Ted Stevens and I were friends. We disagreed, but we were friends.

One thing I always admired about John was how he put duty to country first—and that's not hyperbole; he did—above party, above politics, above his own person. This day reminds us we must never lose that sense of national unity.

So let that be the common cause of our time. Let us honor September 11 by renewing our faith in one another. Let us remember who we are as a nation.

We never forget. We're never afraid. We endure. We overcome. We are the United States of America, and there is nothing—literally, historically—nothing has been beyond our capacity when we've set our mind to it together.

Now, God Bless you all. May God protect our troops.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:22 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to CMS Amy Miller, USAF, aerospace medicine service functional manager, 673d Medical Group; Rep. Mary Sattler Peltola; Mayor David Bronson of Anchorage, AK; Maj. Gen. Brian S. Eifler, USA, commanding general, 11th Airborne Division; Maj. Gen. Torrence Saxe, USAF, adjutant general, Alaska National Guard; and Greenville, DE, resident Davis G. Sezna, Sr., and his son Willie. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on September 12.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, anniversary, remarks to servicemembers, first responders, and their families at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, AK.

Locations: Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, AK.

Names: Bronson, David; Dunleavy, Michael J.; Eifler, Brian S.; Miller, Amy; Peltola, Mary Sattler; Saxe, Torrence; Sezna, Davis G., Sr.; Sezna, Willie; Taylor, Sari.

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