

*Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023*

**Remarks at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Phoenix Awards Dinner  
September 23, 2023**

*Vice President Kamala D. Harris.* Good evening, CBC. Good evening, everyone.

To our CBC chair, Steven Horsford, our CBCF chair, Terri Sewell, I want to thank you both for your years of service to the CBC and to our Nation.

I also thank our leader, Hakeem Jeffries, for your outstanding leadership at this time. And of course, always, Assistant Leader Jim Clyburn.

And then, of course, there is the Secretary of the Housing and Urban Development and the former CBC chair, the incredible Marcia Fudge.

I also extend congratulations to all our Phoenix Award winners, including LL Cool J and MC Lyte representing 50 years of hip-hop.

And to all the members of the CBC here tonight, we have worked together on so many issues over the years: from combating maternal mortality to protecting voting rights, from eliminating lead pipes to expanding access to capital. So, as a proud former CBC member, I thank you for your partnership and for your leadership.

The CBC has always been a conscience of our country, a truth teller. Truths about where we have been and where we must go. Tonight let us continue to speak truth. Across America there is a full-on attack on many of the hard-fought, hard-won freedoms that the CBC has achieved: the freedom to vote; to teach America's full history; to address inequity and diversity; to love who you love; to access education, health care, and economic opportunity; and the freedom of a woman to make decisions about her own body.

And on that last point, let us be clear. Just consider: The highest Court in our land—the Court of Thurgood—just took a constitutional right that had been recognized from the people of America, from the women of America. And as a result, in State after State across our country, extremist so-called leaders passed laws to criminalize doctors and punish women. Many with no exception even for rape or incest.

And let us be clear: One does not have to abandon their faith or deeply held beliefs to agree the government should not be telling her what to do with her body.

And so, so many of us decided before the midterms to take it to the streets: to energize, to organize, and mobilize. And let us remember all those pundits who predicted a red wave. Well, that didn't happen.

Instead, up and down the ballot, the American people elected leaders who stand for freedom and liberty, including several new members of this very caucus.

Together, the CBC is helping to lead the fight for reproductive freedom, just as you continue to lead the fight for civil rights.

And I do believe the right to be safe is also a civil right. Today, however, gun violence is the number-one cause of death for children in America. But instead of protecting our children, extremists obstruct.

We all know the story of the Justins: silenced microphones, expulsion from the chamber. So outrageous that the next morning, I got on Air Force Two and flew down to Nashville, where I saw thousands of young leaders with the courage, determination, and moral clarity to demand

action. Demanding, as we all do: "red flag" laws, universal background checks, and a renewal of the assault weapons ban.

And, CBC, please, let us just take a moment to call out the hypocrisy, that while we tried to ban assault weapons, they tried to ban books. We want to keep guns out of schools; they want to keep books out of schools.

And it does not stop there. In Florida, they intend to tell our children that enslaved people benefited from slavery. And then proposed a debate on this point. Well, I said, when I went down to Florida, there is no roundtable, no lecture, no invitation we will accept to debate an undeniable fact: There were no redeeming qualities to slavery.

I have also been on a national college tour to convene our best and brightest on the importance of defending our hard-fought freedoms. And with great joy, I can report back: These young leaders are in the fight, because they know it does not have to be this way.

They know when Congress passes a bill to put back in place the protections of *Roe v. Wade* that our President, Joe Biden, will sign it. When Congress renews the assault weapons ban, President Joe Biden will sign it. And when you pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act and the Freedom to Vote Act, Joe Biden will sign them.

So I conclude with this: I believe—I believe—that it is a sign of the strength of a leader to have some level of curiosity, concern, and care for the struggles of the people. That a real leader has empathy.

Well, our President, Joe Biden, is such a leader. He has the courage and compassion, the skill and purpose that meet this very moment in our country. And he is ready to fight.

So please join me in welcoming the President of the United States, Joe Biden.

*The President.* Whoa! Hello, hello, hello. It's good to be home. Hello, CBC.

Look, I came for one really important reason: to say thank you. Thank you for all you've done for the country. But selfishly, thank you for what you've done for me.

I started off in—a kid in the civil rights movement in Wilmington, Delaware, when I was in high school. And the community—we won the—we won by a staggering 31- or 3,200 votes when I ran the first time for the Senate at 29 years old. And Nixon won by 64 percent of the vote in my State. I won because virtually 90 percent of the African American community—we have a large community—voted for me. I owe you. I owe you. I owe you. Thank you.

And thank you, Kamala, for that introduction and for your partnership. Always fighting for freedom, she's doing an incredible job. And she really is. I told you I was going to have a smart Vice President and an African American woman. And we got one. And I'm honored to be with all of you tonight.

Steven, the CBC chair, and, Terri, thank you very much for—your foundation's cochair.

And Senator Warnock and Congressman [Congresswoman; White House correction] Plaskett and—the evening's chairs.

Look, the CBC members, staff, and alum here include those who serve across my administration, like the Secretary of Housing and Urban Affairs [Development; White House correction], the great Marcia Fudge, who is joined by several other Cabinet members.

Tonight's awardees: Hakeem Jeffries, a leader with integrity and courage. Courage. Courage. And Karen Bass, a visionary mayor—and mayor, and does whatever she says she's going to do. And Karine Jean-Pierre, my Press Secretary. [Laughter] No wonder I'm doing okay. [Laughter]

And Justin Jones, a new voice who gives us hope for the future. Justin. And two of the great artists of our time, representing the groundbreaking legacy of hip-hop in America: LL J—Cool J—uhh—[laughter]—by the way, that boy's got—he—that man's got biceps bigger than my thighs. I think he's been—[laughter]—and MC Lyte. Both of you, thank you.

Because they're both have the night off on the mike, you know, you're—you're all here to listen to the New Edition. Mike Bivins, 40 years producing music that lifts our souls. Forty years and still considered new, I can understand that. [Laughter]

In February of 1971, the year before I got to the United States Senate—200 years ago—[laughter]—13 Black Members of Congress, determined to create a better future and leverage their collective strength, formed the Congressional Black Caucus: the conscience of Congress calling us to follow our Nation's North Star, a light for the dreams and the pains of centuries of enslaved people in America.

The idea—once the most simple and the most powerful idea in the history of the world—that we're all created equal and deserve to be treated equally throughout our entire lives. We've never lived up to that fully, but we've never walked away from it either.

Look, because of members of CBC, I think about the progress we've made together in the past 2½ years. I think of the incredible resilience and spirit of the American people, especially Black Americans.

In 2020, in the middle of a deadly pandemic, the historic march for justice and equality—you showed up in historic numbers. Your voices were clear. Your votes were decisive. You elected me and Kamala and more members of the CBC. And together, we enacted historic laws to fundamentally transform this nature—Nation and deliver the promise of America to all Americans.

But we need—we need—to get the word out on promises made and promises kept. We must get the word out.

With so much information [misinformation; White House correction] and outright lies and the media that dwells on negatives, the people don't know the progress we've made. But they're going to or they're in a process.

You know, folks have the audacity to say I cut HBCU funding, and people believed it. Let me clear: We've invested more than \$7 billion in HBCUs, and it's just starting. More than at any time in American history. A promise made and a promise kept.

Let's be clear, Kamala and I came into office determined to transform how the economy works, change the way it literally functions.

If you notice, a lot of the mainstream economists are starting to talk about Bidenomics that grow the economy from the middle out and the bottom up, not the top down. Because when you do that, the poor have a ladder up and the middle class do well and the wealthy still do very well, expect they've got to start paying their taxes. We all do well.

Folks, our plan is working. A record 13.5 million new jobs just since we came to office 2 years ago, more jobs than any President has created in a single 4-year term. Black unemployment reaching historic lows. Black small businesses starting up at a faster rate than any time in the last 25 years.

Without a single Republican vote, we took on Big Pharma, that I've been fighting for 30 years. We capped—and we won, by the way. We won. We capped the cost of insulin for seniors at 35 bucks instead of 400. We capped out-of-pocket expense for drugs, for seniors at \$2,000 a year for all medications, all expensive drugs, including those cancer drugs that are \$10-, \$12-,

\$14,000. They'll never have to pay more than \$2,000 a year, no matter what your bills are. And we did it without a single Republican vote.

And by the way, we've got to do it for everybody, not just seniors.

Look, we passed the most significant climate law ever, anywhere in the history of the world. And that's not hyperbole; it's a fact. Environmental justice and jobs to frontline and fenceline Black communities suffering from a legacy of pollution like Cancer Alley in Louisiana, Route 9 in Delaware.

Thanks to my Justice40 Initiative, 40 percent of all the benefits that flow from climate investments must flow directly to disadvantaged and underserved communities, like electrifying schoolbuses so kids don't have to breathe polluted air from diesel buses. And this—all this matters.

I made a promise in my campaign to put the first Black woman on the United States Supreme Court. And I meant it. And we did it. And with the support of the CBC, Ketanji Brown Jackson is on the Bench. And she's the brightest of anybody on that Bench.

And I want to publicly thank Cory Booker and Dick Durbin on the Judiciary Committee for getting it done. Look, with their help, I've appointed more Black women Federal appellate judges than every other President in the history of the United States combined. More than every one.

We made the largest increase in Pell grants in over a decade, helping students from families who near—who nearly make less than 60,000 bucks a year afford college. It matters when more than 70 percent of Black undergraduate borrowers are Pell grant recipients. It matters.

And our new student debt repayment plan is going to help millions of borrowers, including a significant number of Black students. We know Black college graduates have an average of 25,000 more—dollars more in student debt than White graduates. My plan is to help Black students and families cut their total lifetime payments per dollar in half—in half. And I'm going to get it done.

I'm keeping my promise that no one—no one—should be in jail merely for the use of, possession of marijuana. God Almighty. And those who are in jail are out—they're going to be released, and their records are going to be expunged.

Look, folks, thanks to your advocacy, especially Lucy—Jordan's mom—we passed the most significant gun safety law in nearly 30 years, and we'll continue to fight to reinstate assault weapons ban, which, when I was a United States Senator, I got passed. It—only could keep it for 10 years, but we're going to get it back again. It matters. It matters. It matters.

And by the way, look at the numbers. When it was there for 10 years, mass shootings dropped precipitously across the Nation. It works.

And we stand with the CBC to reduce disparities in jobs, health care, and education, working hand in hand to close the racial wealth gap and staying committed to Black America's prosperity.

I was proud to sign a permanent authorization of the Minority Business Development Agency for the first time in history, helping even more Black borrowers—Black-owned businesses grow. Last month, Vice President Harris announced the recipient of more than \$100 million in Federal funding to help underserved entrepreneurs start small businesses in high-growth, high-wage industries like health care and infrastructure.

Plus, my administration oversees hundreds of billions of dollars in Federal contracts: everything from refurbishing the decks of aircraft carriers to installing handrails in Federal buildings. I made a commitment that I would increase the number of those contracts going to African American small businesses by double—to 10 percent. That will bring—15 percent—that

will bring my—by 2025, 15 percent. That will mean an additional \$100 billion going to Black small businesses—\$100 billion.

To help close the racial wealth gap, Secretary Fudge is expanding efforts to build a Black generational wealth through home ownership, like all middle class folks made it. That means addressing the cruel fact that Black families' homes, often appraised at half the value—a significant—20-percent less value—same home built across the highway, different neighborhoods. If the same home—the Black home will be valued at 20-percent less—built by the same builder, by the same outfit.

Look, folks, we're aggressively combating racial discrimination in housing, including working to restore the rule that says: If a community gets Federal housing aid, it's not enough just to say it won't discriminate. It has to be meaningful—take meaningful, affirmative steps to overcome patterns of segregation to give everybody—everybody—a fair shot that lives there.

We're also working with leaders to strengthen programs to redress the negative impacts of redlining. We're launching a \$1 billion private project—a pilot project, funded by my bipartisan infrastructure law, to help connect—reconnect communities that highways have rolled through. Any of you ever been to my city of Wilmington, Delaware, you go up I-95, it goes underground for a long ways. It divides a community that—the Black community. They're separated. No way to get together.

Highways have physically broken up, blocked out predominantly Black communities from opportunities and economic growth. These things matter. They matter in terms of growth.

With the American Rescue Plan, passed without—I might add—with a single—without a single Republican vote, we reduced Black [child; White House correction] poverty by half by expanding the child tax credit. Well, when we tried to renew it, with your help, we're going to fight to make it permanent and expand the childcare tax credit.

And by the way, it doesn't just help children and their families. It helps everyone. When a mom can go to work and her child is cared for, everything gets better. The economy grows. Everyone grows. It's good for everybody. "Just a little breathing room," as my dad would say.

Look, and while we're at it, we're building new roads and bridges; high-speed internet—affordable internet for every American; replacing every lead pipe in America—in as many as 10 million homes, 400,000 schools and childcare centers—so everyone can turn on a faucet and be sure they're drinking clean water and not damaging their brains.

Folks, presumptuous to say, but it's true. Our economic vision is working: creating jobs, building wealth, providing communities with a sense of dignity.

My dad used to have an expression. He'd say, "Joey"—and I swear to God this is what he would say. He said: "Joey, a job is about a lot more than a paycheck. It's about your dignity. It's about your competence. It's about being able to look your kid in the eye and say, 'Honey, it's going to be okay.'"

From our administration, a promise made is a promise kept. Because of you, we're putting in work—we're putting the work in, and we're getting the results. But we've got to get the word out. We have to get it out.

Just think about it. There are those in Congress who are sowing so much division, they're willing to shut down the Government. You know it better than anybody.

Just a few months ago, after a long negotiation between myself and the new Speaker, we agreed to spending levels. The Government will fund essential domestic and national security priorities, while still—while still—cutting the deficit by \$1 trillion over the next decade. Now, a

small group of extreme Republicans don't want to live up to the deal. So now everyone in America could be forced to pay the price.

Let's be clear. If the Government shuts down, that means Members Congress—members of the U.S. military are going to have to continue to work and not get paid. A Government shutdown could impact everything from food safety, to cancer research, to Head Start programs for children.

Funding the Government is one of the most basic responsibilities of Congress. And it's time for Republicans to start doing the job America elected them to do. Let's get this done.

And, folks, you know, when I was Vice President at the end of the Obama-Biden administration, I had no intention of running for office again. I'd just lost my son Beau, a major—decorated—anyway. My son Beau, who I wish some of you had gotten to know.

I was going to write a book. I wasn't going to run again. And I set up a foreign policy institute at the University of Pennsylvania, where I became a professor, and a domestic policy institute at the University of Delaware. That's what I did.

But then along came Charlottesville in August of 2017, something I never, never thought I'd see in America. I'm sure you remember what happened, along with me.

We saw people marching out of fields with lighted torches, literally carrying swastikas, their veins bulging, and chanting the same anti-Semitic bile, the racist bile we heard in Germany in the thirties—neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, White supremacists. And in the process of this ugly demonstration, a young woman was murdered.

And when the President at the time was asked what happened, he said, quote, "There were very fine people on both sides." Very fine people on both sides. When I heard that, I knew I could no longer sit in the sidelines, because the President of the United States had just drawn a moral equivalency between those who stood for hate and those who stood against it.

Folks, in 2020, hate was still on the march in America, and the sitting President was breathing oxygen into that hate. Everything we stood for, everything we believe in, everything that made America "America," even our very democracy was at risk.

So I chose to run, because silence is complicity, and I would not be silent. I thank the people here tonight for being—and some thought, by the way, at the time—when I made that speech at Independence Hall—that I was being hyperbolic. "Joe, what do you mean our democracy is at risk? What do you mean we're in a battle for the soul of America?"

Well, people don't say that anymore, because they've seen it. And they don't think it anymore, and they don't doubt it. Democracy is at stake—was at stake in 2020. And thank God, because of all of you, we won.

I might add, we won convincingly and clearly with a—by a margin of 7 million votes, 81 million votes cast, the most in history. And that victory withstood not one, but 60 legal court challenges and an insurrection on January 6.

So I'm running again. And you may have noticed, a lot of people have focused on my age. Well, I get it, believe me. I know better than anyone. *[Laughter]*

But there's something else I know. When I came to office and this Nation was flat on its back, I knew what to do. I vaccinated the Nation, and it rebuilt the economy.

When Russia invaded Ukraine, I knew what to do. I rebuilt NATO and brought our alliance to rally the world.

And above all, when democracy was at stake, I knew what to do.

But you know what? I wish I could say the threat to our democracy has ended with our victory in 2020, but it didn't. Our democracy is still at stake. Don't kid yourself.

So we have more work to do, you and I, because our most important freedoms—the right to choose, the right to vote, the right to be who you are, love who you love—these basic rights are being attacked. They're being shredded.

Because our children should have the right to go to school without fear of being gunned down with a weapon of war.

Because of people banning books. Did you ever think we'd be banning books in America in our——

*Audience member.* No!

*The President.* I didn't.

Because all across America, hate groups have been emboldened.

Our intelligence people say the greatest threat is domestic. That's the greatest terrorist—is domestic. Because far too often it's still the case that you can get killed or attacked walking the streets of America just because you're Black or because you're wearing a symbol of your faith.

Look, because hear—hear this. Hear it clearly. I want the entire Nation to join me in sending the strongest, clearest, most powerful message possible that political violence in America is never, never, never acceptable in our democracy. Never! Because democracy is at stake.

And let there be no question: Donald Trump and his MAGA Republicans are determined to spread anger, hate, and division. They seek power at all costs. They're determined to destroy this democracy.

I cannot watch that happen, nor can you. And I'll always defend, protect, and fight for our democracy.

Let me close with this. In the last 2 years, we've shared some powerful moments together. I stood with the CBC and Bennie and Danny and the family of Emmett and Mamie Till at the lynching—they—it allowed us for the first—think about this. We've been fighting to make lynching a Federal hate crime, and I finally got to sign an Executive order doing that. Established a national monument so we'd always remember them and they couldn't rewrite history.

I joined Jim and Emanuel at the National Archives to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the execution—the Executive order that President Truman signed to desegregate the military.

And with your support, I made Juneteenth a Federal holiday, the first Federal holiday since Martin Luther King's—Junior day.

These weren't symbolic gestures. These were just statement of fact for this country to acknowledge the legacy of slavery and subjugation. To understand the war that was fought over it. It wasn't just about the Union; it was about fundamental freedom.

And remember—to remember the Emancipation Proclamation wasn't just a document. It captured the essence of America that galvanized a country and proved that some ideas are so powerful they cannot be denied no matter how hard people try.

This summer, Kamala and I hosted the first Juneteenth concert in the White House. We heard the great Jennifer Hudson sing her soul—from her soul about the glory that will come and the—echo an anthem of the movement with the words of the Sam Cooke.

I can't sing worth a damn, so I'm not even going to try. [*Laughter*] But I'll quote: "It's been a long time in coming, but I know change is going to come. Oh, yes, it will."

That anthem echoed 52 years—when 13 Black Members of Congress established the Congressional Black Caucus. And one that we commemorate tonight, as we secure our democracy, protect our freedoms, uplift our culture.

So on this night, let's remember that change does come. Let's look to see our North Star shining bright. For if we do, we'll do something few generations can say: We will have saved and extended our democracy.

I know we can. I've never been more optimistic about America's future. We just have to remember who in the hell we are. We are the United States of America. There is nothing beyond our capacity—nothing, nothing, nothing.

God bless you all, and may God protect our troops.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 9:25 p.m. at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to Sen. Raphael G. Warnock and Rep. Stacey E. Plaskett, in their capacity as honorary cochair of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's 52d Annual Legislative Conference; former Rep. Karen R. Bass, in her capacity as mayor of Los Angeles, CA; Tennessee State Rep. Justin Jones; musicians James T. "LL Cool J" Smith and Lana M. "MC Lyte" Moorer; Rep. Lucia K. McBath, whose son Jordan Davis was killed in a 2012 shooting in Jacksonville, FL; Speaker of the House of Representatives Kevin O. McCarthy; former President Donald J. Trump; and Reps. Bennie E. Thompson, Danny K. Davis, James E. Clyburn, and Emanuel Cleaver II. Vice President Harris referred to State Reps. Justin Jones and Justin J. Pearson, who were expelled from the Tennessee House of Representatives on April 6 for participating in a protest on the House floor in support of stronger gun safety laws following the shooting at the Covenant School in Nashville, TN, on March 27, and were later reinstated by their legislative districts. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on September 24.

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*Names:* Bass, Karen R.; Bivins, Michael L.; Booker, Cory A.; Cleaver, Emanuel, II; Clyburn, James E.; Davis, Danny K.; Durbin, Richard J.; Fudge, Marcia L.; Harris, Kamala D.; Horsford, Steven A.; Hudson, Jennifer; Jackson, Ketanji Brown; Jean-Pierre, Karine; Jeffries, Hakeem S.; Jones, Justin; McBath, Lucia K.; Moorer, Lana M. "MC Lyte"; Plaskett, Stacey E.; Sewell, Terrycina A.; Smith, James T. "LL Cool J"; Thompson, Bennie G.; Trump, Donald J.; Warnock, Raphael G.

*Subjects:* 2021 civil unrest and violence at U.S. Capitol; Broadband and wireless technologies; Cancer research, prevention, and treatment; Child tax credit; College costs and affordability; Congressional Black Caucus; Congressional Black Caucus Foundation; COVID-19 vaccines; Economic improvement; Electric and hybrid vehicles, promotion efforts; Environmental justice; Federal court nominations and confirmations; Gun violence, prevention efforts; Hate-based violence, efforts to combat; Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs); Home ownership, access and affordability; House minority leader; Housing discrimination, efforts to combat; Infrastructure improvements; Insulin cost controls; Job creation and growth; Lead service lines, replacement efforts; Marijuana, decriminalization efforts; Pell grants; Poverty reduction efforts; Prescription drug costs, reduction efforts; Racial equality, improvement efforts; Russia, conflict in Ukraine; Secretary of Housing and Urban Development; Small businesses, low-interest loans; Small businesses, promotion efforts; Student loans, repayment options;



Supreme Court Associate Justice; Tax Code reform; Ukraine, Russian invasion and airstrikes;  
Unemployment rate; Vice President; Virginia, 2017 civil unrest and violence in Charlottesville;  
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