

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks on United States Democracy and the Legacy of Former Senator John S. McCain III in Tempe, Arizona
September 28, 2023

The President. Thank you, thank you. Please, please, sit down. Thank you.

I'm going to put a little bit more meat on that bone—that last one. *[Laughter]*

John and I used to travel together. When John got back from all that time in Vietnam in prison, when he was released, he decided he wanted to go back to stay in the military. And he was assigned to the United States Senate and to the military office there that travels with Senators when they travel abroad.

And John and I put in a couple hundred thousand miles together. And on our way to—I think I was going to either China—I forget what the destination was—China, I think. And we stopped in Hawaii. And the Chief Naval—of Operations was there showing me around. They did an event for me.

And John kept looking at your mom. Oh, I'm serious. *[Laughter]* And he said, "My God, she's beautiful." *[Laughter]* I said—and I said, "Yes, she is, John." And I said, "Well, you ought to go up and say hi to her." He said, "No, no, no." *[Laughter]* "I'm not going to do that."

Well, as your mom come—I won't go into more detail, but I'll tell you: I insisted that they meet. *[Laughter]* And I take credit. I take credit for you guys. *[Laughter]* And I just told your mom: John and I had something in common, we both married way above our station—*[laughter]*—way above our station.

Cindy—or I should call you Madam Ambassador—thank you for all you've done, all you do, you continue to do. Jack and Bridget, the entire McCain family, and all those who love the McCain family.

[At this point, the President addressed audience members in the balcony.]

Oh, I didn't see you all up there. Whoa! Don't jump. Don't jump. *[Laughter]*

Well, I tell you what, it's an honor to be with you. It's a genuine honor.

Governor Hobbs, you've done an incredible job. You've been a leader and defender of democracy. And you've always been available when I've called, and I hope I've been available when you called as well.

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests: In the end, John McCain thought about the beginning. Five years ago, as John was dying from brain cancer, John wrote a farewell letter to the Nation that he said—that he served so well in both war and in peace.

His words tracked back centuries to America's founding and then toward a triumphant future. Here's what John wrote, and I quote: "We are citizens of the world—the world's greatest republic. A nation of ideals, not blood and soil. Americans never quit. They never hide from history. America makes history."

And John was right. Every other person—every other nation in the world has been founded on either a grouping by ethnicity, religion, background. We're the most unique nation in the world. We're founded on an idea—the only major nation in the world founded on an idea. An idea that we are all created equal, endowed by our—in the image of God, endowed by our Creator to be able to be treated equally throughout our lives.

We've never fully lived up to that idea, but we've never walked away from it. But there's danger we're walking too far away from it now, the way we talk in this debate—in this country. Because a long line of patriots from—like John McCain kept it from ever becoming something other than what it is.

I often think about our friendship of 40 years. The hammer-and-tong debates we'd have in the Senate. We'd argue—we were like two brothers. We'd argue like hell. *[Laughter]* I mean really go at one another. Then we'd go to lunch together. *[Laughter]* No, not a joke. Or John would ride home with me. I mean, that—we traveled the world together.

And by the way, when he found this magnificent woman and got married, I'm the guy that convinced him to run in Arizona as a Republican. Bless me, Father, for——

[The President made the sign of the cross.]

[Laughter] No, but it's—you've got to admit, Cindy, I did. I talked to him, and I said: "John, you can do this job. My only worry is, you'll do it too well." *[Laughter]*

But look, running on opposite sides of the Nation's highest office when he was running for President and I was on the Vice Presidential ticket, we still remained friends.

The conversations we had—he had with my son Beau—the attorney general of the State of Delaware, a decorated major in the U.S. Army, was a guy who spent a year in Iraq—about serving in a war overseas, about the courage in battle against the same cancer that took John and my son.

Two weeks ago, I thought about John as I was standing in another part of the world—in Vietnam. I don't want to be—I—excuse me if I—it was an emotional trip. I was there to usher in a 50-year arc of progress for the two countries, pushed by John and, I might add, another John—this is the former Secretary of State, John from Massachusetts, won the Silver Star as well.

Once at war, we are now choosing the highest possible partnership, made possible through John's leadership. I mean it sincerely. Think about it.

While in Hanoi, I visited a marker depicting where John—what John—where John had endured all the pain. Imprisoned 5½ years. Solitary confinement for 2 years. Given an opportunity—an opportunity—to come home if he just said a couple things, he was beaten, bloodied, bones broken, isolated, tortured, left unable to raise his arms above his shoulders again.

As I stood there paying my respects, I thought about how much I missed my friend. And it's not hyperbole. I—from the bottom of my heart, I mean this.

I thought about something else as well. I thought about how much America missed John right now, how much America needed John's courage and foresight and vision. I thought about what John stood for, what he fought for, what he was willing to die for. I thought about what we owed John, what I owed him, and what we owe each other—we owe each other—we owed each other as well—and Americans as well.

You see, John's one of those patriots who, when they die, their voices are never silent. They still speak to us. They tug at both our hearts and our conscience. And they pose the most profound questions: Who are we? What do we stand for? What do we believe? What will we be? For John, it was country first. Sounds like a movie, but it's real with John: honor, duty, decency, freedom, liberty, democracy.

And now, history has brought us to a new time of testing. Very few of us will ever be asked to endure what John McCain endured. But all of us are being asked right now: What will we do to maintain our democracy? Will we, as John wrote, never quit? Will we not hide from history, but make history? Will we put partisanship aside and put country first?

I say we must, and we will. [*Applause*] We will.

But it's not easy. It's not easy.

Audience member. When will you stand against corruption, Mr. President?

Audience members. Boo!

Audience members. Sit down!

Audience member. [*Inaudible*]*—ask why you have yet to declare a climate emergency? Why have you yet to declare a climate emergency? Hundreds of Arizonians have died!*

Audience members. Sit down!

Audience member. Hundreds of Arizonians have died because you won't——

The President. Why don't you wait at——

[*The audience disruption continued.*]

Well, hang on one second. Hang on a second. I'll be happy to meet with you after I speak, okay?

Audience member. You promised no new drilling on fossil fuels. Why have you yet to declare a climate emergency? Not—[*inaudible*].

Audience members. Sit down!

Audience member. We need your leadership, Mr. President.

The President. Well, I tell you what, if you shush up, I'll meet with you immediately after this. Okay?

But democracy never is easy, as we just demonstrated. [*Laughter*] The cause—the cause—is worth giving our all, for democracy makes all things possible.

Let me begin with the core principles. Democracy means rule of the people, not rule of monarchs, not rule of the monied, not rule of the mighty. Regardless of party, that means respecting free and fair elections; accepting the outcome, win or lose. It means you can't love your country only when you win.

Democracy means rejecting and repudiating political violence. Regardless of party, such violence is never, never, never acceptable in America. It's undemocratic, and it must never be normalized to advance political power.

And democracy means respecting the institutions that govern a free society. That means adhering to the timeless words of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident." A mission statement embodied in our Constitution, our system of separation of powers and checks and balances.

Our Constitution—the bulwark to prevent the abuse of power to ensure "We the People" move forward together under the law, rather than believing the only way is one way or no way at all.

But our institutions and our democracy are not just of government. The institutions of democracy depend on the Constitution and our character—our character—and the habits of our hearts and minds.

Institutions like the McCain Institute and the new McCain Library that will be built at Arizona State University with the funding from the American Rescue Plan, which I signed into law when I came to office. A library that's going to house John's archives, host dialogue and

debate, inspire future leaders around the world, to serve tens of thousands underserved Arizonans as a reminder of our obligation to one another.

These principles of democracy are essential in a free society, but they have always been embattled. Today let's be clear. While we've made progress, democracy is still at risk. This is not hyperbole; it's a simple truth—a simple truth.

I've made the defense and protection and preservation of American democracy the central issue of my Presidency. From the speech I made at Gettysburg, in the Inaugural Address, to the anniversary of the June 6 insurrection—or January 6 insurrection, to Independence Hall in Philadelphia, to the speech I made at Union Station in Washington, I've spoken about the danger of election denialism, political violence, and the battle for the soul of America.

Today, in America [Arizona; White House correction], to honor an institution devoted to the defense of democracy, named in honor of a true patriot, I'm here to speak about another threat to our democracy that we all too often ignore: the threat to our political institutions, to our Constitution itself, and the very character of our Nation.

Democracy is maintained by adhering to the Constitution and the march to perfecting our Union——

[A toddler in the audience babbled.]

The President. ——by protecting and expanding rights with each successive generation, including that little guy. He's going to talk about it. *[Laughter]*

That's okay. In my house, kids prevail. Okay? *[Laughter]*

This adherence isn't—this isn't optional. We can't be situational. We can't be only—only there when it's good for yourself. It's constant and unyielding, even when it's easy and, most important, when it's hard.

For centuries, the American Constitution has been a model for the world, with other countries adopting "We the People" as their North Star as well. But as we know, we know how damaged our institutions of democracy—the judiciary, the legislature, the executive—have become in the eyes of the American people, even the world, from attacks from within the past few years.

I know virtually every major world leader. That's what I did when I was a Senator, as Vice President, and now. Everywhere I go in the world—and I've met now with over a hundred heads of state of the nations of the world—everywhere I go, they look, and they ask the question, "Is it going to be okay?"

Think about this: The first meeting I attended of the G-7—the seven wealthiest nations in the world—in Europe, the NATO meeting, I sat down—it was in February—January, after being elected—so late January—early February—and it was in England. And I sat down, and I said, "America is back." And Macron looked at me, and he said: "Mr. President, for how long? For how long?"

And then, the Chancellor of Germany said: "Mr. President, what would you think if you picked up the paper tomorrow—tomorrow, the London Times—and it said a thousand people broke down the doors of Parliament, marched, and killed two bobbies in order to overthrow an election of the new Prime Minister? What would you think then? What would America think?"

What would we think, the leading nation in the world, having gone through what we went through? And many of you travel internationally. Many of you know people from around the world. I'd be surprised if you heard anything different than the concern about: Are we okay? Is the democracy going to be sustained?

And from that institutional damage, we see distrust and division among our own people. I'm here to tell you: We lose these institutions of our government at our own peril. And I've always been clear: Democracy is not a partisan issue, it's an American issue.

I have come to honor the McCain Institute and Library because they are a home of a proud Republican who put his country first. Our commitment should be no less, because democracy should unite all Americans, regardless of political affiliation.

And there is something dangerous happening in America now. There is an extremist movement that does not share the basic beliefs in our democracy: the MAGA movement.

Not every Republican, not even a majority of Republicans, adhere to the MAGA extremist ideology. I know because I've been able to work with Republicans my whole career. But there is no question that today's Republican Party is driven and intimidated by MAGA Republican extremists. Their extreme agenda, if carried out, would fundamentally alter the institutions of American democracy as we know it.

My friends, they're not hiding their attacks. They're openly promoting them: attacking the free press as the enemy of the people, attacking the rule of law as an impediment, fomenting voter suppression and election subversion. Did you ever think we'd be having debates in the year—stage of your careers where banning books—banning books—and burying history?

Extremists in Congress—more determined to shut down the Government, to burn the place down than to let the people's business be done.

Our U.S. military—and this is not hyperbole; I've said it for the last 2 years—is the strongest military in the history of the world. Not just the strongest in the world—in the history of the world. It's the most diverse, the most powerful in the history of the world. And it's being accused of being weak and "woke" by the opposition. One guy in Alabama is holding up the promotion of every—hundreds of these officers.

Frankly, these extremists have no idea what the hell they're talking about. *[Laughter]* No, I'm serious. They're pushing a notion the defeated former President expressed when he was in office and believes applies only to him. And this is a dangerous notion: This President is above the law, with no limits on power.

Trump says the Constitution gave him, quote, "the right to do whatever he wants as President," end of quote. I've never even heard a President say that in jest. Not guided by the Constitution or by common service and decency toward our fellow Americans, but by vengeance and vindictiveness.

We see the headlines. Quote, "sweeping expansion of Presidential power." Their goal to, quote, "alter the balance of power by increasing the President's authority over every part of the Federal Government," end of quote.

What do they intend to do once they erode the constitutional order of checks and balances and separation of powers? Limit the independence of Federal agencies, put them under the thumb of a President? Give the President the power to refuse to spend money that Congress has appropriated if he doesn't like what it's being spent for? Not veto—he doesn't like what it's being spent for—it's there. Get rid of longstanding protections for civil servants?

Remember what he did as he was leaving office: He imposed a new thing, the civil service—but then he imposed a new schedule. "Schedule F," it was called. These civil servants had to pledge loyalty to the President, not the Constitution. It did not require that they had any protections, and the President would be able to wholesale fire them if he wanted, because they had no civil service protection. One of the first things I got rid of when I became President.

Just consider these as actual quotes from MAGA—the MAGA movement. Quote, "I am your retribution." "Slitting throats" of civil servants, replacing them with extreme political cronies. MAGA extremists proclaim support for law enforcement only to say, "We"—quote, "We must destroy the FBI."

It's not one person. It's the controlling element of the House Republican Party.

Whitewash attacks of January 6 by calling the spearing and stomping of police a—quote, a "legitimate political discourse."

Did you ever think you'd hear leaders of political parties in the United States of America speak like that? Seizing power, concentrating power, attempting to abuse power, purging and packing key institutions, spewing conspiracy theories, spreading lies for profit and power to divide America in every way, inciting violence against those who risk their lives to keep America safe, weaponizing against the very soul of who we are as Americans.

This MAGA threat is a threat to the brick and mortar of our democratic institutions. But it's also a threat to the character of our Nation and gives our—that gives our Constitution life, that binds us together as Americans in common cause.

None of this is surprising though. They've tried to govern that way before. And thank God, they failed.

But they haven't given up. Just look at recent days: their accusations against—of treason, treason—against the major news network because they don't like its coverage. I don't know what the hell I'd say about Fox if that becomes the rule. *[Laughter]*

But think about it. I'm joking, but think about it.

Tomorrow I have the honor of overseeing the change of responsibilities of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the United States military from one genuine hero and patriot, General Mark Milley, to another, General C.Q. Brown, both—both—defining leaders of our time.

And yet here is what you hear from MAGA extremists about the retiring patriot general honoring his oath to the Constitution: quote, he's "a traitor," end of quote. "In times gone by, the punishment"—quote, "In times gone by, the punishment would've been death," end of quote.

This is the United States of America. This is the United States of America.

And although I don't believe even a majority of Republicans think that, the silence is deafening. The silence is deafening.

Hardly any Republican called out such heinous statements, just as they watch one MAGA Senator outrageously, as I said, blocking the promotions of hundreds of top military leaders and affecting not only those leaders but their families, their children.

MAGA extremists claim support of our troops, but they're harming military readiness, leadership, troop morale, freezing pay, freezing military families in limbo.

Just as they looked the other way when the defeated former President refused to pay respects at an American cemetery near Paris, referring to the American servicemen buried there—and I've been to this cemetery—as "suckers" and "losers," quotes.

I'm not making this up. I know we all tried not to remember it, but that's what he said. He called servicemen "suckers" and "losers." Was John a sucker? Was my son Beau, who lived next to a burn pit for a year, came home, and died—was he a sucker for volunteering to serve his country?

The same guy who denigrates the heroism of John McCain. It's not only wrong, it's un-American. But it never changes.

The MAGA extremists across the country have made it clear where they stand. So the challenge for the rest of America—for the majority of Americans—is to make clear where we stand.

Do we still believe in the Constitution? Do we believe in the basic decency and respect? The whole country should honestly ask itself—and I mean this sincerely—what it wants and understand the threats to our democracy.

I believe very strongly that the defining feature of our democracy is our Constitution. I believe in the separation of powers and checks and balances, that debate and disagreement do not lead to disunion. I believe in free and fair elections and the peaceful transfer of power. I believe there is no place in America—none, none, none—for political violence. We have to denounce hate, not embolden it.

Across the aisle, across the country, I see fellow Americans, not mortal enemies. We're a great nation because we're a good people who believe in honor, decency, and respect.

I was able to get the infrastructure bill passed. It's over a trillion dollars. The majority of it so far has gone to red States who didn't vote for me. *[Laughter]* Because I represent all—no, I'm serious. *[Applause]* I represent all Americans, wherever the need is.

And I believe every President should be a President for all Americans. To use the Office of the President to unite the Nation, uphold the duty to care for all Americans.

I've tried my very best, and I'm sure I haven't met the test of every—all of you want me to meet. But I tried to do my very best to meet the highest standards, whether you voted for me or not. Because that's the job: to deliver light, not heat; to make sure democracy delivers for everyone; to know we're a nation of unlimited possibilities, of wisdom and decency; a nation focused on the future.

I've spent more time with Xi Jinping than any world—-ping than any world leader has. Sixty-eight hours alone with just he and I and an interpreter. Traveled 17,000 miles with him here and in China. On the Tibetan Plateau, he turned to me and he asked me—he said, "Can you define America for me?" And I was deadly earnest. I said: "Yes. In one word, possibilities."

We, in America, believe anything is possible if we try it. Anything we do together, we can get done.

We've faced some tough times in recent years, and I am proud of the progress we made as a country. But the real credit doesn't go to me and my administration for the progress—for this progress. The real heroes of the story are you, the American people. And that's not hyperbole again.

Which is why I'm asking you that regardless of whether you're a Democrat, Republican, or Independent, put the preservation of our democracy before everything else. Put our country first.

Over the past few years, we can and should be proud of American democracy, proud of what we've been able to hold on to. We can't take democracy for granted.

Remember when you were in high school and college, if you took political science, they said every generation has to protect democracy. I used to think that that was just a saying. But here I am, as President of the United States of America, making this speech about my fear of the diminishment of democracy. Folks, every generation has to be vigilant.

You know, toward the end of my Senate campaign, I convinced Strom Thurmond to vote for the civil rights legislation—not a joke—and I thought, "Well, you can defeat hate." You can't defeat it. You just bury it. But when someone comes along and lifts up the rock and breathes a little oxygen in there, it comes roaring back. It comes roaring back.

We should all remember: Democracies don't have to die at the end of a rifle. They can die when people are silent, when they fail to stand up or condemn the threats to democracy, when people are willing to give away that which is most precious to them because they feel frustrated, disillusioned, tired, alienated. I get it. I really do. I get it.

For all its faults though, American democracy remains the best pass [path; White House correction] forward to prosperity, possibilities, progress, fair play, equality.

And democracy requires all of us in all of the major parties. You matter. And again, I'm not just trying to be nice here. You matter—all of you in this auditorium—because history and common sense tell us that we can change things by adhering to our Constitution and our institutions of democracy.

Our task—our sacred task of our time is to make sure that they change not for the worse, but for the better. That democracy survives and thrives, not be smashed by a movement more interested in power than in principle. It's up to us, the American people.

In my view, the more people vote, the more engaged the whole Nation becomes, the stronger our democracy will be. So the answer to the threats we face is engagement. It's not to sit in the sidelines; it's to build coalitions and community, to remind ourselves there is a clear majority of us who believe in our democracy and are ready to protect it.

To the students here today and the young people across country, you're the reason I'm so optimistic. I know I don't look it, but I've been doing this for a long time. *[Laughter]*

But, all kidding aside, I've never been more optimistic about America's chances in domestic and foreign policy as I am today. I really mean it. To see young people—a hundred thousand students at this university and all across America—they are the most gifted, the most tolerant, the most talented, and the best educated generation in American history.

And it's your generation, more than anyone else's, who will answer the questions—the legitimate questions the young man asked me a moment ago—who I'm going to meet with—questions for America: Who are we? What do we stand for? What do we believe? Who will we be? It's not your burden alone, but your generation will not be ignored, will not be shunned, will not be silenced.

I've said it before: We're at an inflection point in our history. One of those moments that not only happens once every several generations, it happens once every eight or nine generations, where the decisions made in the short period of time we're in now are going to determine the course of this country and the world for the next six or seven decades.

So you, me, every American who is committed to preserving our democracy and our constitutional protections, we carry a special responsibility. We have to stand up for American values embedded in the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, because we know the MAGA extremists have already proven they won't.

You know, Madeleine Albright wrote a book—the former Secretary of State—saying we're the "essential nation." We are. And I think you've sensed it abroad, Cindy, haven't you? Any room I walk in and no matter what heads of state I'm with, everything stops. Not because of Joe Biden, but because I'm President of the United States of America.

We are the essential nation. We are the essential nation. The rest of the world is looking, so we have to stand up for our Constitution, our institutions of democracy, because MAGA extremists have made it clear they're not going to.

History is watching. The world is watching. And most important, our children and grandchildren will hold us responsible.

So let me close with this. In 3 years, we'll commemorate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, a moment not only about our past, celebrating all we've done, but a moment about the future, about all we can be—still be.

Imagine that moment and ask: What do we want to be? Now is our time to continue to choose and secure a sacred cause of the American democracy.

I know we can meet this moment. John knew we could meet this moment. He believed, as so many patriots before him did, that character [is; White House correction] destiny in our own lives and the life of this Nation. He believed in us.

That's what we see in the McCain Institute and Library and everyday places across America doing extraordinary things. And remember that the soul of America depends on the souls of all Americans: how we choose to see our Nation, how we choose to see ourselves, how we choose to lead not only by the example of our power, but by the power of our example.

So let's never quit. Let's never hide from history. Let's make history.

If we do that, we'll be—have done our duty to our country and to each other. Future generations will say we kept the faith.

We'll have proved, through all its imperfections, America is still a place of possibilities, a beacon for the world, a promise realized, where the power forever resides with "We the People." That's our soul. That's who we truly are. That's who we must always be.

And that's why I've never been more optimistic about America's future. We just need to remember who we are. We are the United States of America. There is nothing—nothing—beyond our capacity when we act together.

Well, God bless you all, may God bless John McCain and his family, and may God protect our troops. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:05 p.m. at the Tempe Center for the Arts. In his remarks, he referred to U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Agencies for Food and Agriculture in Rome Cindy H. McCain and her children Jack and Bridget; Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John F. Kerry; President Emmanuel Macron of France; Sen. Thomas H. Tuberville; and President Xi Jinping of China.

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