

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks at the Human Rights Campaign National Dinner
October 14, 2023

The First Lady. Hello! Hi, everybody. Hi. Thank you. Thank you. Please. [Laughter] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much. Please. [Laughter] Please. Thank you.

Audience members. Four more years! Four more years! Four more years!

The First Lady. Thank you. Thanks.

Audience members. Four more years! Four more years! Four more years!

The First Lady. Really, thank you. Please.

Well, I can certainly say we feel the love from you. Thank you. And thank you, Kelley, for that introduction. You are a trailblazer, and HRC is so lucky to have you.

So how is everyone tonight? Look at you. Such beauty and boldness. I'm so proud that this community has made DC such a thriving, welcoming home to LGBTQ+ people. It's a remarkable departure from where we had been, when DC was a place where outing was used as a political weapon. Tonight we can celebrate without fear or shame.

But despite the freedom and acceptance we have fought for in places like DC, we know that in too many other parts of our country, these rights and freedoms are under attack.

Across the country, in places like Texas and Florida and Alabama, LGBTQ individuals don't have the freedom to be honest with their family or embrace their gender identity at work. They don't have the freedom to walk down the halls of their school as their authentic self. They don't have the freedom to hold hands with their partner on the sidewalk.

So, while we celebrate this beautiful community tonight, let's also remember how lucky we are and harden our resolve to advocate for those who are not.

We look forward to a time when all people in all places can feel the freedom and the joy that we feel here tonight. But until then, we fight. We fight for the trans individuals who are being bullied and killed. We fight for the LGBTQ kids who are forced into conversion therapy. We fight for the communities around the world while—where being gay is punishable by death.

Joe and I stand firmly and proudly with you in these fights, and we will be with you every step of the way.

There's nobody that I'd rather have in my corner than my husband, Joe Biden. Joe has always been a fierce advocate for this community, and I am so proud of all the work that he has done for the LGBTQ+ individuals here in the U.S. and around the globe.

And I am so honored to introduce him tonight. So please welcome the President of the United States, Joe Biden.

The President. Hello, hello, hello! My name's Joe Biden. I'm Jill's husband. [Laughter]

Folks, let me begin with a sincere thank-you. Please have a seat.

Audience members. We love you, Joe!

The President. Well, thank you.

But I hope you understand that you are the beacon of light around the world—not a joke. Whether I was in India or wherever I am, the LBGQ community comes up to me and says, "Can you help?" Not a joke. Not a joke. "Can you help?" You've given people so much hope.

It's all about hope. Think about it. How do you live without hope? And this community in the United States of America is leading the world in giving people hope.

Folks, my first thing I want to say tonight: Thank you. Thank you for changing lives around the world. You're doing it. You really are.

And for some of you who are closer to my age, it wasn't easy to do. *[Laughter]* No, I'm not joking. You'd lose your job. You'd get beat up. You got—a whole different circumstance.

Audience member. Thank you for being here with us!

The President. Well, I tell you what, I've been here every time you've invited me, because—careful, I'm like a poor relative. I show up when I'm invited. *[Laughter]*

Look, Kelley Robinson, thank you. Thank you for the introduction and for your leadership.

And congratulations to tonight's awardees. Shonda Rhimes, unstoppable creative force. Lena Waithe, I tell you what, a pathbreaking storyteller. And Matt Bomer, an actor who inspires. And you do inspire, Matt.

And Grayson, Libby, Hobbes, and Daniel, courageous young activists who lift our hopes up for the future. Earlier this year, they were kind of—I was—you were kind enough to invite Jill and me to the Trans Youth Prom. We couldn't make it, but it sounds like you had a hell of a lot of fun.

But you know, these young honorees joined us in June for the largest Pride Month celebration ever, ever held at the White House. And there's going to be more—at the White House. LGBTQ youth are among the bravest people I know, and you four are no exception.

Folks, this is the fourth time I've joined this dinner, coming back to my days as Vice President. At this pivotal moment in our history, Jill and I have come here tonight to say thank you for your courage, thank you for your hope, and thank you for your pride. Thank you for defending equal rights and dignity of all people, despite intense opposition and hate-fueled rhetoric, even violence, to try to keep you from moving.

You inspire us. And I want you all—the LGBTQ Americans—to know the Biden-Harris administration has your back——

Audience member. *[Inaudible]*

The President. I don't know who's hollering down there, but I can't hear you. *[Laughter]*

But look——

Audience member. Let Gaza live! Cease-fire now! Let Gaza live! Cease-fire now!

The President. I can't hear her. What's she saying? Well, thank you. Whatever you're saying. I'm going to say thank—I can't hear you. *[Laughter]*

Look, I've been labeled the most—*[applause]*.

Audience members. Four more years! Four more years! Four more years!

The President. Oh, I get it. Okay. *[Laughter]* I'm not sure that's a good thing. No, I'm only joking. *[Laughter]*

Look, I've been labeled the most pro-equality President in history. I'm not sure if that's true, but I tell you what: I'm grateful to lead an administration with more out-and-proud staff members at every level than every previous administration combined. All combined.

Together with all of you, my administration is defending, advancing equal human rights of the LGBTQ community all across the country—and I mean it—and around the world. I'm proud of our record. I signed the historic Executive orders strengthening civil rights protections in housing, employment, health care, education, the justice system.

As Commander in Chief, I ended the ban on transgender Americans serving in the military. As I pointed out, they can shoot as straight as anybody else I know. And on the anniversary of the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell," the Department of Defense announced a review of the records of LGBTQ servicemembers who had been discharged for "less than honorable service." That's going to make it easier for these veterans to finally access the benefits they earned through their service.

We launched an ambitious plan to end HIV epidemic by 2030, proposed new national PrEP program to prevent the spread of HIV, and we finally did away with the outdated policy banning gay and bisexuals from donating blood. We're leading with science, not stigma.

We've made human rights for LGBT around the world a top priority in my foreign policy: increasing our assistance to brave activists on the ground; defending human rights in countries to pass antigay laws—that passed antigay laws, like Uganda—going after Uganda, making clear that they cannot get the same benefit as other countries—and achieving tangible progress in—*[inaudible]*.

Look, folks, here's the deal: Together, we're standing up for families. Some of you were with us on the South Lawn last December when I signed the Respect for Marriage Act, a law protecting the marriage of gay and interracial couples.

As I said in a TV interview more than a decade ago, marriage is a simple proposition. Who do you love? And will you be loyal to the person you love?

I was raised that that was quite a simple proposition. I've told this story before, but I'll tell it again. I was raised by a man who was a really decent, honorable man. I remember he was dropping me off. I wanted to be a—I wanted to work in the projects as a lifeguard on the east side of Wilmington. And he was dropping me off on his way to work at the City Hall to go get an application to be a lifeguard there.

And as I got out of the car at the four corners at the center of town, two men—it turns out, one going to the Brandywine—one was a—worked for the Dupont Company; the other worked for Hercules Company. This was back when I was a kid. And they leaned up and kissed one another. And I'd never seen that before.

And I turned and looked at my dad. And he just looked at me and said: "Joey, it's simple. It's simple, Joey. They love one another. It's a simple proposition." I mean it.

To everyone who helped make the Respect for Marriage Act a reality: Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.

And together, we're standing up for children. As you know better than anyone, there are young people all across America sitting in their bedrooms at night scrolling through social media and staring at the ceiling wondering will they ever be loved, what happens if they tell their parents, what's going to go on. You've been through—many of you have been through it. Will they be ever accepted by their families, ever be free to be themselves, or if they should even be there or here on Earth.

Nearly every day, I get letters, literally, from children and parents terrified by what they're—what's happening all across America.

A 13-year-old transgender child wrote to me and said: "I hate looking at the news, not because I'm a teenager and it's boring, but because it's painful. I hear adults much older than me debate about my existence when they don't even know me."

Our message to young people across America must be unequivocal: You're loved, you're heard, and you're understood, and you belong. I mean it. And we see who you are, made in the image of God, deserving dignity, respect, and support.

That's why my administration, in combating the dangerous, cruel practice of conversion therapy, has been so outspoken. That's why we launched a nationwide crisis hotline where HB—LGBTQ youth who are feeling isolated and overwhelmed can get help. They just have to call 9-8-8 and talk to a counselor; 9-8-8 to talk to a counselor.

And this year, we're committing even more resources: new Federal action to address LGBTQ youth homelessness, new steps to protect kids in foster care. All of it matters.

But, for all the progress we've made, we know the barriers, the bias, the bigotry still exists. Perhaps because of the progress we've made, people want to push us back and pull us back.

Over 600—600—hateful laws introduced across the country, more than 70 of them becoming law just this last year, denying the existence of transgender people, silencing teachers, banning books, threatening parents with prison for getting their children health care.

Families across the country now face excruciating decisions to move to a different State to protect their child from dangerous anti-LGBTQ laws. I received a letter from one mom who wrote me, quote, "I despair for families like mine who have already become refugees inside our Nation." Refugees inside our Nation? That's how she feels, like a refugee inside our Nation. This is the United States of America.

In the United States Congress, extreme MAGA Republicans are trying to undo virtually every bit of progress we've made. They're trying to wipe out Federal funding to end the HIV epidemic, strip funding from community centers for seniors, reinstate the ban on transgender troops, ban the Department of Justice from enforcing civil rights laws, ban Pride flags from flying on public lands.

Who the hell—oh. [*Laughter*] Not very Presidential.

And they threaten the legal recognition of same-sex marriage.

And these are just the cruel attacks on the LGBTQ community. They're attacks on the foundations of our democracy. You know, they take aim at our fundamental values and principles, like the right to free expression, the right to make your own health care decisions, the right to raise our own children.

I'm never going to stand by and watch families terrorized, doctors and nurses criminalized, or any child targeted who—for who they are. It's who they are.

Jill and I, Kamala and Doug, and our entire administration will always stand with you against hate. And together, we're going to make even more progress.

You've heard me say it before, and I apologize having to repeat it: When a person can be married in the morning and thrown out of a restaurant for being gay in the afternoon, something is still fundamentally wrong in this country. And that still exists.

That's why we must pass the Equality Act and pass it now. That's why we must do this.

At a time when studies show violence against LGBTQ Americans is on the rise, we have to do more to keep people in the community safe. Twenty-five years ago this week, Matthew Shepard was brutally taken from us. His courageous parents Judy and Dennis have turned his murder into a movement.

As we remember him, we also remember the LGBTQ people and allies killed this year. Like O'Shae Sibley, killed while dancing and expressing joy. Laura Ann Carleton, who simply hung a Pride flag outside her home—think of that—she hung a Pride flag outside her home. She was killed. Colin Smith, stabbed while defending a friend being harassed. And dozens of transgender Americans, especially transgender women of color, killed every year.

The Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice and Health and Human Services has launched a safety partnership to better protect festivals and marches and community centers and businesses, to better protect health care providers serving the community, and to help folks report hate crimes.

Nearly a year after the horrific shooting at Club Q in Colorado Springs, we have to fully implement the most significant gun safety law in nearly 30 years and then pass again the assault weapons ban, which Dianne and I passed. No excuse.

Who, in God's name, needs a weapon with a hundred rounds in their chamber? And the weapon's only meant for one thing: to kill people. We did it before. We can do it again. As long as I'm in office, I'm not going to stop until we get it done again.

Look, folks, let me close with this. A week ago, we saw hate manifest in another way in the worst massacre of Jewish people since the Holocaust. More than 1,300 innocents—lives lost in Israel, including at least 27 Americans.

Children and grandparents alike kidnapped, held hostage by Hamas. A humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Innocent Palestinian families—and the vast majority of them have nothing to do with Hamas—they're being used as human shields.

Yesterday I spoke for over an hour with the family members of those Americans who are still unaccounted for on a Zoom call. They've endured an agony of not knowing what's happened.

Not the same thing, but I can tell you what it's like. It's one thing to lose someone who you know you're going to lose and be there with them and hold their hands, like I was able to do with my son. It's a very other thing to get a phone call, like I got years ago, saying: "There's been an accident. Your wife and daughter are dead. I'm not sure your boys are going to make it." The uncertainty of those 2 or 3 hours, trying to get back to find out. It's the worst feeling in the world. It's gut-wrenching.

And it's yet another reminder that hate never goes away. It only hides. It hides under the rocks. I thought, being so deeply involved in the civil rights movement, when I was able to convince, of all people, Strom Thurmond to vote for the Voting Rights Act in his last year—changed his mind—I thought, "Well, you can defeat hate."

But guess what happened? Hate just hides under the rocks until there's a little oxygen blown under, like happened—what happened in Charlottesville. Just a little bit. And then it comes roaring out again.

Folks, we have to reject hate in every form. Because history has taught us again and again anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia—they're all connected. Hate toward one group, left unanswered, opens the door for more hate toward more groups, more often, readily.

But here's what—which history shows: The antidote to hate is love. The answer to twisted, dehumanizing ideologies is solidarity and standing up for everyone's humanity.

That's why the laws that actually protect equality matter to every single American no matter who you are, who you love, or where you come from. This shouldn't be about conservative or liberal, red or blue. It should be about realizing the promise of the Declaration of Independence—it sounds corny—but a promise rooted in the sacred and the secular that all people are created equal, endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Folks, it may sound corny, but we've never fully lived up to that promise, but we've never walked away from it like many want us to do. And we're not going to walk away for it on my watch, I promise you.

And all of you here tonight and all the advocates and allies across the country, I see the light that's going to triumph over the darkness. I see the hope that's going to conquer fear. I see the love that's going to overcome hate in all its forms.

I see a great nation because we're basically a good people. We just have to remember who we are. And we're not the victim. And although we are good folks, we've got to stand up and holler. We've got to stand up and holler. You cannot be silent. Silence is complicity. Silence is complicity.

Folks, we're the United States of America. And there is nothing beyond our capacity when we do it together. Nothing, nothing, nothing. So let's stand together and get everyone else on the deal.

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

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 6:40 p.m. at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to Kelley Robinson, president, Human Rights Campaign and Human Rights Campaign Foundation; television creator, producer, and author Shonda L. Rhimes; actor, producer, and screenwriter Lena Waithe; Grayson McFerrin, Libby Gonzales, Hobbes Chukumba, and Daniel Trujillo, organizers of the May 22 Trans Youth Prom on the National Mall in Washington, DC; and Vice President Kamala D. Harris and her husband Douglas C. Emhoff. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on October 15.

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