

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks Following a Tour of Allentown Fire Academy and an Exchange With Reporters in Allentown, Pennsylvania

January 12, 2024

The President. Well, folks, we're ending a good day. We came up here to the Allentown area and the greater area to make sure what we're—Bobby and I—the Senator and I were doing—along with the Governor—was making some sense and affecting people's attitudes.

I've said before that, you know, starting a new business is an act of hope. And a lot of people came out of the last several years, the previous several years, kind of down.

You know, I was talking with the owners of the coffee shop, and you saw me taking them around. And I said, "You know, I think we underestimate the impact that the failure to respond to the COVID crisis quickly enough had on the psyche of the American people." And they were—and they surprised me. They said, "Well, I know it did with us."

You had over a million people dying—a million people dying—and we had trouble at the front end of realizing there wasn't much done to deal with it. And we ramped up rapidly vaccinations and the like.

And that generated a comment from our host and hostess telling us that they had real troubles. One, the young woman who went to the—college graduate, very impressive young woman, owns the coffee shop—she was talking about how she had suffered from posttraumatic stress and all the things that were happening around her and the loss of hope and faith she had.

And then he, the husband, started talking about how he suffered from depression. But when they started to see what was happening, that we were actually investing in the community—you guys know people who have had posttraumatic stress in the military and firefighters and the like and how they began to gain some hope.

And they talked about how the increase in the Obamacare being available to them and the 800 dollars—extra dollars—how it made a difference in their lives in getting the help they needed from the hospitals that they were dealing with.

And they just went on and on about how what happened is, once they were able to fund the business—and they got help to do that—

Senator Robert P. Casey, Jr. Mm-hmm.

The President. —as well, through you and others—that they started to gain faith in what was going on.

And then talking to a lot of the business owners here. You've heard me say it before, and I apologize for repeating it because you hear it all the time, but I got tired of—so did Bobby—the trickle-down economics. You know, if everybody—if the big guys do well, everybody does well.

Well, you know, that may have been—occurred, but I'm not a big fan, never have been, of that. I've always believed if the middle class does well, everybody does well, the wealthy do very well, and the poor have a ladder up.

And so they—all of them talked about how the number of people coming into their coffee shop, the number of people come into the bike shop, the number of people coming into the running store, how the demography started changing, people started to be more engaged. And there is a real, genuine sense of optimism.

And I—and they talked about childcare and how, originally, when we had passed the legislation that—for the childcare tax credit, how that altered their life and ability to deal with their medical problems at the time because they had help being able to take care of their kids.

And so what we've talked about is, we're going to make sure that we're going to follow on. This is not the end of what we're doing. We're going to make sure that there is childcare available. It helps everybody. It's not only—not a impact on the taxpayer, it generates economic growth. Because when you can continue to work, if you have a child that needs help or needs to be taken care of, it generates economic growth. Everybody does better.

And then they talked about—I was talking to the guys here and in other places about the money we got here from the SAFER act—able to hire more cops—more cops—more firefighters and the way you built this training center. The idea that now you have a first-rate training center that goes all the way—I guess you've got Binghamton, you've got—not Binghamton, excuse me—you've got Scranton. You've got what's happening all across, up and down this State and this area where you—we have the best trained firefighters in the world.

And by the way, it matters. These guys risk their lives. Not a joke. And it matters to know they know they know what they're doing. It matters to know when they—so, anyway.

I just came away from this really reassured that what we've done has had an impact not just here in Eastern Pennsylvania and—but—in the Northeast, but throughout the country. And we're going to do more. We—the job is not finished.

Bobby, you want to say anything?

Sen. Casey. Mr. President, we're glad you're here today, and we're—we welcome the President back to Pennsylvania here in the Lehigh Valley to be in—in the Allentown area, to be in Emmaus today to meet with small-business owners and to talk about their real lives and their challenges.

A lot of those challenges that they had during the early time—early period of his first couple of years as President would have—would have been much more challenging without the American Rescue Plan.

Just think about it this way. We're in Lehigh County. This county alone had 70,000 families benefited by the child tax credit. And throughout our State, more than 80 percent of the families who—families with children benefited from the child tax credit.

So that helped for families. That helped to—for small businesses that came from the American Rescue Plan. The investments here from infrastructure, whether it's roads or bridges or high-speed internet.

So what we've got to continue to do together is to focus on those real challenges that families face, those small businesses face, get those costs down for families. And a lot of those costs in grocery stores are high because of one reason: corporate greed. That's what drove up those costs.

The President has been trying to get those costs down. I have as well. One of the best ways to do that is to help those families directly and to go after companies that are jacking up their food prices—these big conglomerates—and then you go to your local grocery store, and the costs are high.

So the President has been working to get those costs down, as I have, and we'll continue that fight. I hope Republicans will join us in that effort to lower costs for families.

But we're honored to be here with the firefighters and to once again affirm the valor that they demonstrate every day to protect this community. We're just so grateful for your service and the commitment you make to this community.

The President. And by the way, all this is connected. You know, we've invested, because of the Infrastructure Act—I want to get the number right—I think it's roughly—how many billion dollars? A hundred and forty-five billion dollars so far.

For example, you know, when you increase the number of jobs, that increases the number of customers. When you increase the number of customers, it increases the sense of stability. When you increase that—I mean, it just goes across the board.

And so we're talking about 26,000 manufacturing jobs in Pennsylvania just since we became President. Twenty-four thousand—it was down 24,000 jobs under my predecessor. Because we invested. We invested in the infrastructure bill. We invested in the people who, in fact, need the opportunity to have a good job.

And I'll end by saying—you've heard me say it a thousand times, but it's worth saying because it's the kind of language we understood in the neighborhoods I grew up in. My dad said: "Joey, a job is about a lot more than your paycheck. It's about your dignity. It's about opportunity. It's about being able to look your kid in the eye and say, 'Honey, everything is going to be okay.'"

It's interesting. One of the owners in one of the shops—I don't have permission to say the name, so I won't, but if you—but I can check, if you want me to—saying that: "I can look at my kid now and say, 'It's going to be okay. We're going to make it. We're going to make it.'"

A lot more to do. We're not finished. But it's just—this has a self-fulfilling prophecy when—and, again—I'll give you one last example. We talked about prescription drugs with the folks. The idea that prescription drugs—and we—us being able to pass a requirement that Medicare has to negotiate drug prices was—you know, people say, "Well, that costs money." Guess what? It saves the taxpayers billions of dollars—billions of dollars—billions of dollars.

It not only takes the burden—for example, insulin. It costs 10 bucks to make, total of around 12 bucks when you package it all. They can now only charge \$35, and Medicare will only pay out 35 bucks. It was costing \$400 or more. Who was paying that? In addition to saving the taxpayer, you're not—your taxes aren't having to pay 400 bucks.

And so we're going to make—by the way, we're going to go back, and we're going to get—make sure it applies to everybody, not just seniors——

Sen. Casey. Yes.

The President. ——before it's all over. Anyway.

Thank you. I'll take a few questions. I've got——

National Economy

Q. Mr. President, polling still shows that more Americans than not still disapprove of your handling of the economy. So what specifically will you do this year to turn that around and make Americans feel better about how the economy is doing?

The President. If you notice, they're feeling much better about how the economy is doing. What we haven't done is letting them know exactly who got it changed. That's the part. That's what's happening.

If you look at the consumer confidence measures, they're way up. Looking across the board, everybody is doing better. And they believe it; they know it. And they're just beginning to sink in.

One of the things that people don't know—I mean, the idea that the people—the firefighters know—but the idea that I—because of what I did in terms of the funding for fire departments. Guess what? They've got a fire school now here. Guess who's paying for it? Not local. The Federal Government is paying for it.

And guess what? It's changing the dynamic, and people—find somebody here who thinks there shouldn't be a fire school here. Find somebody who thinks that doesn't make sense. And it's going to save money over time because you're going to save property, you're going to save lives, you're going to save a lot of things.

And so it's a matter of this—none of what we passed was able—and I knew it when I proposed it. Remember when I was—proposed the infrastructure bill, and I said it's going to be over \$350 billion? And you all looked at me like it's—I've taken leave of my senses. Well, I never thought—it's going to take time. It's starting to sink in to people what's happening.

Same way with the health care piece. All of a sudden, people are realizing: "My God, not only insulin going down. We're going to have 15 more drugs where now they're going to be able to negotiate the price." Prices are going to come down dramatically.

Any of you have a prescription drug from an American company? You give me that drug, I'll go have it—I'll—you give you that prescription, I'll have it filled in Toronto or London or Brazil. Guess what? It costs a hell of a lot less. Same company, same outfit.

And the last thing is—one of the things that's going to have an impact is, and I know it doesn't matter to you guys—I'm being facetious; I shouldn't kid like that—but when you want to call and check the balance on your account, you're charged 30 bucks. Is that fair? Is that fair, these junk fees?

So you're going to go home for Easter or you're going to go home for Christmas, you're going to go home for the holidays with your kid, and you find out to get your kid sitting next to you is going to cost you another 200 bucks. These are junk fees. And guess what? We're getting rid of them.

So people are beginning to figure out what it is that—the reason why they got these opportunities, why it occurred. And that's my job and our job to make sure people know.

Q. Mr. President——

Houthi Militant Organization in Yemen

Q. Mr. President, you said—just to follow up on what you said a few minutes ago at the coffee shop. You said you think the Houthis are a terrorist group. I'm wondering how soon are you willing to designate them as such.

The President. It's irrelevant whether they're designated. We've put together a group of nations that are going to say that if they continue to act and behave as they do, we'll respond.

Q. What do you say——

Petroleum Prices

Q. And a quick one on oil prices, sir. Oil hit \$80 a barrel this morning after the strikes. How concerned are you about the impact the strikes will have on oil supply and prices?

The President. I'm very concerned. That's why we've got to stop it.

White House aide. Last question.

Q. Sir, how was your conversation——

Q. What do you say to members of your own party that believe you needed congressional authorization for last night's strike?

The President. I'm sorry?

U.S. Airstrikes in Yemen

Q. What do you say to members of your own party who are saying you needed congressional authorization for last night's strike?

The President. They're wrong. And I sent up the—I sent up this morning, when the strikes occurred, exactly what happened.

[At this point, several reporters began asking questions at once.]

Q. Sir, how was your conversation with Speaker Johnson?

Q. Mr. President, are you—are you concerned——

Speaker of the House of Representatives J. Michael Johnson

Q. How was your conversation with Speaker Johnson?

The President. I was pleased with my conversation with Speaker Johnson. And apparently, today he said he's sticking by the deal.

White House aide. Thanks, everybody.

The President. That matters. Thanks.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:55 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Joshua D. Shapiro of Pennsylvania; Juan and Lauren Vargas, owners, Nowhere Coffee Co. in Emmaus, PA; and former President Donald J. Trump. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on January 14.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Allentown Fire Academy in Allentown, PA, remarks following tour; Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters, Allentown, PA.

Locations: Allentown, PA.

Names: Casey, Robert P., Jr.; Johnson, J. Michael; Shapiro, Joshua D.; Trump, Donald J.; Vargas, Juan; Vargas, Lauren.

Subjects: Child tax credit; Childcare, access and affordability; COVID–19 pandemic; COVID–19 vaccines; Economic improvement; First responders, service and dedication; Gasoline, oil, and natural gas costs; Health insurance exchanges; Infrastructure improvements; Insulin cost controls; Job creation and growth; Junk fees imposed on consumers, prevention efforts; Manufacturing industry, domestic investment; Medicare and Medicaid programs; Pennsylvania, Allentown Fire Academy in Allentown; Pennsylvania, Emmaus Run Inn in Emmaus; Pennsylvania, Governor; Pennsylvania, Nowhere Coffee Co. in Emmaus; Pennsylvania, President's visit; Pennsylvania, South Mountain Cycle and Cafe in Emmaus; Prescription drug costs, reduction efforts; Speaker of the House of Representatives; Yemen, Houthi militant organization; Yemen, U.S. military operations.

DCPD Number: DCPD202400018.