

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks at a Campaign Reception in New York City
February 7, 2024

The President. He doesn't want to admit it, but we go back a long way.

Linden Trust for Conservation Founder Lawrence H. Linden. It's true.

The President. And I—it's means a lot to me.

Mr. Linden. It means a lot to me, sir.

The President. Folks, look, this is pretty informal, but the fact of the matter is—I think the key word—and I want to thank Kathleen and Dana for all you guys are—all three of you are doing.

Look, I look around the room—and some of you have been with me and I've been with you for a long time. And you've educated me. You know, I started off back in 1972 as a 29-year-old kid. I know I don't look that old, but—[laughter].

But I was a 29-year-old kid, and we had big problems in terms of the environment. And people wonder why in God's name was I talking about the environment. I mean it sincerely.

And—I'm just going to just walk out here. Can you all hear me if I'm standing out here?

Audience member. Yes.

The President. Okay.

Well, what I realized was that I—when we moved from Scranton, Pennsylvania—a coalmining town—because coal died. Although my dad wasn't in the coal business, but that's—he worked as a salesperson. And he moved back to where he was raised as a kid: Wilmington, Delaware. Actually, we were in a place called Claymont, Delaware, which was steel town at the time—4,500—it was Worth Steel.

And it also—it was right on the border, if you know anything about Delaware, there's an arch that goes up into Pennsylvania and around the Delaware River. And that corner where the arch meets the Delaware River in Pennsylvania, there are more oil refineries when I was growing up than there were in Houston.

And the prevailing winds—literally not figuratively, literally—are southwest—I mean southeast. And so I grew up, like a lot of other of my friends—we moved there when I was in third grade—suffered from bronchial asthma.

And we had one of the worst environmental records of any State in the Nation. We were listed for a long time as having the worst environment where we—period—in terms of exposure to carcinogenic substances.

And I just couldn't understand how—like, I'd get in the car—I didn't plan on saying this, so I apologize I'm taking longer. But I'd get in the car in the morning—we lived in a place called the Philadelphia Pike, which was a four-lane access highway from Wilmington, Delaware, to Philadelphia. And we lived not far from—we lived not far from a little school I went to, probably the equivalent of a—maybe three-quarters of a mile. And you could walk up the Pike, but it was too dangerous. My mother didn't want third- and fourth-graders—or first—a first- and third-grader, I mean—walking up to the school we went to. So she'd drive up in the morning, drop us in the parking lot.

And two things always impressed me. And I mean this sincerely, and then I'll stop. When the first frost came and she turned on the windshield wiper, there would literally be an oil slick on the window. Not a joke. We were one of those fence-line communities. You all are familiar with them in the environmental community. An oil slick.

And a lot of us—a lot of my buddies, a lot of my friends ended up with various lung diseases in the case of many of us. I don't know many of my friends who didn't have bronchial asthma, because of it.

But my generic point is this: You know, what you're doing is changing the world. What you're doing. Not me. What you're doing. You're the economic, political, and philosophic engine of this change.

There is only one existential threat we face in this world, and that's the environment. I mean, it literally is the existential threat. It's even more consequential than nuclear power, nuclear war. That would be horrible and awful, and it would just make the environment incredibly worse. But it's about the environment.

And so many of you didn't have to do—none of you had to do what you've done. You've taken your intellect, you've taken your fortunes, you've taken your interests, and you've inspired a lot of people. I'm not joking about this now when I say this.

Twenty years ago, it was a—we couldn't fill this room this way—although you all were working on it 20 years ago, but it just wasn't there.

And I've—if I hear one more—I used to hear at the beginning when I was running this time out when I was Vice President that there's no environmental problems.

Well, as I traveled—as Vice President, I traveled the Nation for every major forest fire. More timber has burned to the ground than, in fact—as a consequence of what has happened in the environment—than makes up the entire State of Maryland, the square—square footage.

I don't hear many people, even in the business community, saying: "Well, we don't have a problem with the environment. We don't have a problem."

And even when I go around the world, the world is looking to us. I've known every major world leader—because of my job, not because I'm so important—because I've just been—I've done foreign policy issues. I was chairman of Foreign Relations Committee for years as well as—that's why Barack asked me to be Vice President: on the foreign policy side.

And so I literally know every major world leader, every—almost every major world leader. And the major ones, I do know. And they're looking to us. They're looking to us, both to maintain their energy needs and deal with the environment. They're not one and the same.

But that's—so it's amazing to me how much the rest of the world looks to us, to the United States, for everything—not to Joe Biden, to the United States of America—because the rest of the world is in a very—in a piece—in a moment of transition like we haven't seen. We see it once every six or seven generations.

And there's a transition going on based on the changes—incredible technological changes—that are taking place in the world.

And so I just want to thank you for not only dealing with the environment, but for helping us manage our international relations in ways that we have been unable to do. And it's going to get harder before it gets easier, but it still matters.

Second point I'd like to make, and then I'll shush up and take your questions. Second thing I'd like to say is that one of the things that—how can I say this? One of the things that I think

matters is that, all of a sudden—and I mean it in a historical sense, "all of the sudden"—the rest of your colleagues around the country understand what you've been doing. They don't like it, maybe, but they understand.

And I—you know, I don't get any phone calls from DuPont company anymore what we're doing. I don't get—I mean, it's a realization.

And two things that we've done—we, all of us—number one, some of you were upset when I—and I don't blame you—when I announced in 2020 and I didn't lay out my detailed plan on the environment until I first talked to labor—not because I needed labor, because I want labor to understand: When I think environmental protection, I think jobs, I think opportunity, I think change.

And you saw what happened when I was able to convince the IBEW to join on. I've become most pro-union, pro-environmental President in—[inaudible]—history—both, at the same time.

If you had told me or you—I told you 10 years ago that organized labor and the environment would be one and the same and they were going to be on the same page, I think we all would have looked like we were crazy.

But I invited all the major labor unions to the West Wing, to the—excuse me—the yard behind it—the White House. And they realized that their future lies in being able to have the jobs that are going to produce these fundamental changes that are taking place—everything from the use of hydrogen to—I mean, a whole—and by the way, even when you guys got started, did you think that cement was a great polluter? You did. I didn't. I didn't know that. I didn't know that.

So it's just you've provided an opportunity for the public to get educated in a way that it wasn't before. And I thank you for that. I really do.

And I'm flattered that you'd be willing to stick with me, because I've made some pretty tough decisions that made a lot of people mad on the environment. But I think they're beginning to figure it out.

But our—last comment. When I got elected when I was 29 years old—and I come from a modest background. We weren't poor, but I come from a modest background: a three-bedroom home in—45 houses—they're split-levels homes that were in suburbia being built and—with four kids and a grandpop living in a three-bedroom home with us.

So we weren't poor, but we were—we had figure out how to get to college, how to borrow money. My dad was good man.

And the interesting thing is that it took a while for me to figure out that I'm not a big trickle-down guy. I just want you to be aware, because that does relate to the environment as well. But the idea of trickle-down economics, not a whole lot trickled onto to my dad's kitchen table. He was a very well-read man and never got to go to college. He got to go to Johns Hopkins, but went—World War II occurred, and he never went.

But he'd always say, "You're going to be a college man, Joe." [Laughter] And I said, "What the hell difference does that make?" I said, "Dad, they could still get fired as a college man." And he said, "But they can't take your degree away."

But my whole point is that it was a matter of giving people an opportunity. So I want to tell you, because you probably get heat sometimes—[inaudible]—the economy overall—is I think the way to grow the economy is from the middle out and the bottom up. The wealthy still do very well, and we—invest in America.

And one of the things that allowed me to do some of the things you wanted me to do in the environment is, there's a provision in the law that I was unaware of—and I've been around a long

time—that passed when Roosevelt was President, relating to unions. The issue was: Are unions legit? Can they be organized? Can they be protected, et cetera?

It's a provision that no Democrat or Republican President paid much attention to. It said that when the President is given money as a consequence of the Congress passing money—passing legislation to build something, do something, he should hire an American, and he should invest with American products.

That's one of the reasons why we're growing. And that's one of the reasons why a couple of you were talking about the unions you work with and how they've becoming supportive.

Well, all of a sudden, people are realizing—you know, electric vehicles—well, that's 550,000 charging stations. That's a lot of jobs. It's a lot of savings of the environment. So, across the board, I think we're in the right direction.

And I'll end by saying there is one existential threat, and it's Donald Trump. It's not about me, it's about Trump. He will try to do—undo everything we've done. Make no mistake about it. Many of you know him better than I do. But he will try.

And you think that won't happen, do you see what's happening today in the United States House of Representatives, the United States Congress? I tell you, I've been around—as I said, I served in the Congress for 36 years. Never thought I'd see something like I'm seeing now.

And even people already who signed up—everything from the environmental issues straight through to the border and—[inaudible]—they're walking away at the last minute because Donald Trump called them and threatened them—threatened retribution if they stick with their position.

So that's why I'm running, because we cannot let that happen.

We're on—I'm optimistic, and I think we're on the verge of some real change because of you.

So I'm going to hush up and answer questions.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:38 p.m. at the residence of Lawrence H. and Dana Weschler Linden. In his remarks, he referred to Kathleen Welch, principal, Corridor Partners; and former Presidents Barack Obama and Donald J. Trump. He also referred to his sister Valerie Biden Owens and brothers Francis W. and James B. Biden. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on February 8. Audio was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Campaign reception in New York City.

Locations: New York City.

Names: Biden, Francis W.; Biden, James B.; Linden, Dana Weschler; Linden, Lawrence H.; Obama, Barack; Owens, Valerie Biden; Trump, Donald J.; Welch, Kathleen.

Subjects: 2024 Presidential election; Border security; Climate change; Electric and hybrid vehicles, promotion efforts; Electric vehicle charging infrastructure, improvement efforts; Labor movement and organized labor; Natural disasters, climate change impacts; New York, Democratic Party event; New York, President's visit; U.S. diplomatic efforts, expansion

DCPD Number: DCPD202400086.