

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks at a Campaign Event in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

April 18, 2024

The President. Thank you. Please, have a seat if you have one. [*Laughter*]

Mom and Dad, I hope you were listening. [*Laughter*]

What an incredible honor. What an incredible honor. I don't want to become emotional, but what an incredible honor to have the support of the Kennedy family.

John White, Jr., thanks for those kind words and for carrying on your family's civil rights legacy. And so is your son Kellan, who's doing a hell of a job on our campaign. He's helping us win Pennsylvania.

Kerry, I—that was the most meaningful introduction I've ever gotten in my life, other than when my sister introduced me. And I want to thank you for your friendship, well beyond the introduction.

It's an incredible honor to receive the endorsement of your family. And it means so much to me.

Your mom Ethel, whom I spoke with on the phone a couple weeks ago—well, I guess, last week—to wish her happy birthday, she's always been so gracious to my family during the most difficult time of my life. She's done so much for the country and the world in her own right.

And of course, your dad, who I never got to meet—I just missed—he was a Senator from New York. He came up to Syracuse University and spoke, and I waited in line, but I didn't get a chance to physically meet him. I never got—but he inspired me. And his passion and courage inspired my generation.

Like millions of Americans, I remember that night on April 4, 1968. I was finishing law school at Syracuse University when we heard Dr. King had been assassinated. The pain and the outrage sparked riots and despair all across the country, including in my home State of Delaware.

And then we heard a familiar voice I'd listened to many times—your dad, Bobby Kennedy, standing in the back of a truck in Indianapolis asking for peace and quoting one of his favorite Greek poets. He said, and I quote, "Even in our sleep, our pain, which cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart until, our own despair—in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

I had a hard time to believe that day that there was any wisdom, trying to work out from despair where—where we'd go. It was even harder to believe just 2 months later, on June the 5th [6th; White House correction]. I had just graduated from law school, earned an incredible—and learned about an incredible man, later that night, had been assassinated. Yet another tragedy in your family and a gigantic tragedy for the country.

Only two political heroes I had growing up were gone within a month of each other—months of each other. We faced a real inflection point as a nation.

When I returned home to my city of Wilmington, one of the cities—only city since Reconstruction to be occupied by the military, the National Guard, with drawn bayonets on every street corner for 9 straight months following Dr. King's murder.

When I graduated that summer, I went home to take a job at one of the oldest law firms in the State. But after only a matter of months, I left that law firm and took a job as a public defender because I wanted to be more engaged in the effort.

I went on to run for the county council, for the United States Senate, and then as Vice President of the United States. I've done so in large part because I thought that's something your dad would have done. I'm not exaggerating that. He's always been on my mind, been one of my heroes.

Today, I sit behind the Resolute Desk, where President John F. Kennedy once sat. And as I look from the desk—if you've ever taken a tour of the White House, I sit in that desk, and I look—in front of the fireplace, to the left is a bust of Martin Luther King, to the right is a bust of your dad. And I remember to keep looking and remind myself what they would do in tough calls.

The principles Bobby Kennedy embodied were principles taught by my grandparents and parents around our kitchen table. And that's not hyperbole, that's a fact. My dad used to say everyone is entitled to be treated with dignity and respect, no matter what their station—no matter what.

And they thought—I was taught the worst sin of all—and I mean this from the bottom of my heart—the worst sin of all was the abuse of power: physical power, economic power, psychological—that was the worst sin of all—abusing power.

And then we have an obligation to each other: to leave no one behind, to give hate no safe harbor. It's up to all of us to preserve and protect the very idea of America.

You know, we're unique—we're unique in America—in world history. We're the only nation founded on an idea. Every other nation in the world is founded on geography, ethnicity, race, religion—except us. Think about it. The idea was, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal," in the image of God, and deserve to be treated equally throughout their lives.

We've never fully lived up to it, but we've never walked away from it. We've never walked from it. And we're not going to walk away from it now.

Today, we face another inflection point in history. The 2024 election is about two fundamentally different visions of—for America. Donald Trump's vision is one of anger, hate, revenge, and retribution. He embraces the insurrectionists of January the 6th. He's running on it. And as mentioned already, he promised to be a dictator on "day one"—his own words. And he calls for——

Audience members. Boo!

The President. No, he—you know he means it. And he calls for another "bloodbath" when he loses again.

Look, your family, the Kennedy family, has endured such violence. Denying January 6 and whitewashing what happens is absolutely outrageous.

I have a very different view of America, one of hope and optimism, like I hope all of you do—optimism that Bobby Kennedy embodied.

I see an America where we defend democracy, not diminish it. I see an America where we protect our freedoms, not take them away. And I see an America where the economy grows from the middle out and the bottom up—and that way, the middle class does well and the poor have a shot—and where health care is a right, not a privilege.

By the way, all the stuff we've done so far—we've done it, and guess what? We've cut the budget by a lot of money: \$172 billion so far. So don't tell me it can't be done.

I see a future where the planet—we save the planet—as this guy is busting his neck doing—from climate change, literally—the climate crisis in—in America.

And we've got to do something—the idea we send our kids to school teaching them to duck and cover. Think about that. The idea, in the United States of America—[inaudible]—duck and cover at school. More kids being killed by gun violence than almost anything else.

Folks, the America we're building is significantly different. We're going to get it done. And now, it's time to keep going and not slow down, because there is so much at stake.

Let me close with this. I know Bobby Kennedy liked Greek poets, and they're great, but I prefer Irish poets. [Laughter] And that's not a joke, unfortunately. [Laughter] My colleagues used to always kid me for quoting Irish poets on the floor of the Senate. They thought I did it because I'm Irish. That's not the reason. They're the best poets in the world. [Laughter]

The one I enjoy particularly is Seamus Heaney. He wrote a poem called "The Cure at Troy" that reminds me of the courage of Bobby Kennedy, and I mean this from the bottom of my heart. And it goes like this, one stanza. It says: "History teaches us do not hope on this side of the grave. But then, once in a lifetime, that longed-for tidal wave of justice will rise up, and hope and history rhyme."

In 2024, we have a chance to make hope and history rhyme again. Are you ready to do that with me? Are you ready to move forward, not back? Are you ready to choose unity over division, dignity over demolition, and choose truth over lies? Are you ready to choose freedom over [and; White House correction] democracy? Because that's America.

Folks, I've been doing this a long—I know I only look like I'm 40, but I've been doing this a long time. [Laughter] But I've never been more optimistic about our future, and I mean it.

We just have to remember who we are. We're the United States of America. There is nothing—I mean this sincerely. Think about it. We're the only nation in the world—as a student of history, I can say—that's come out of every crisis stronger than we went in.

There's nothing—nothing—beyond our capacity when we do it together.

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

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

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:47 p.m. at the Martin Luther King Jr. Recreation Center. In his remarks, he referred to John F. White, Jr., president and chief executive officer, the Consortium, Inc., and his son Kellan White, a senior adviser to the Joe Biden for President reelection campaign in Pennsylvania; Kerry Kennedy, president, Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights; Ethel Kennedy, widow of former Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy; and former President Donald J. Trump. He also referred to his sister Valerie Biden Owens.

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