

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Commencement Address at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia
May 19, 2024

Thank you.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, President Thomas, faculty, staff, alumni. And a special thanks: I'll ask all the folks who helped you get here—your mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers—all those who got you here, all the way in the back, please, parents, grandparents, all who helped, stand up, because we owe you a debt of gratitude. To all the family.

And that is not hyperbole. A lot of you, like my family, had to make significant sacrifices to get your kids to school. It mattered. It's mattered a lot.

And the friends of Morehouse and the Morehouse Men of the class of 2024.

I've got more Morehouse Men in the White House telling me what to do than I know what to do. [Laughter] You all think I'm kidding, don't you? [Laughter] You know I'm not. And it's the best thing that's happened to me.

Scripture says, "The prayers of a righteous man availeth much." In Augusta, Georgia, a righteous man once enslaved set foot for freedom. The story goes, he feared no evil; he walked through the valley of the shadow of death on his way north to free soil in Philadelphia. A Baptist minister, he walked with faith in his soul, powering the steps of his feet to glory.

But after the Union won the war, he knew his prayers availed him freedom that was not his alone. And so this righteous man, Richard Coulter, returned home, his feet weary, his spirit in no ways tired.

A hundred and fifty-seven years ago—you all know the story, but the rest of the world doesn't, and it should—in the basement of a Baptist church in Augusta, he and two other ministers, William Jefferson White and Edmund Turney, planted the seeds of something revolutionary—and it was at the time—a school: a school to help formerly enslaved men enter the ministry, where education would be the great equalizer from slavery to freedom, an institution of higher learning that would become Morehouse College.

I don't know any other college in America that has that tradition and that consequence.

To the class of 2024, you join, as you know, a sacred tradition. An education makes you free. And Morehouse education makes you fearless. I mean it. Visionary. Exceptional. Congratulations. You are Morehouse Men. God love you.

And, again, I thank your families and your friends who helped you get here, because they made sacrifices for you as well.

This graduation day is a day for generations, a day of joy, a day earned, not given.

We gather on this Sunday morning because—if we were in church, perhaps there would be this reflection. There would be a reflection about Resurrection and redemption. Remember, Jesus was buried on Friday, and it was Sunday—on Sunday he rose again. But—but—we don't talk enough about Saturday, when the disciples—his disciples felt all hope was lost.

In our lives and the lives of the Nation, we have those Saturdays, to bear witness the day before glory, seeing people's pain and not looking away. But what work is done on Saturday to move pain to purpose? How can faith get a man, get a nation through what was to come?

Here's what my faith has taught me.

I was the first Biden to ever graduate from college, taking out loans with my dad and my—all through school to get me there. My junior year spring break, I fell in love at first sight, literally, with a woman I adored. I graduated from law school in her hometown, and I got married and took a job at a law firm in my hometown, Wilmington, Delaware. But then everything changed.

One of my heroes—and he was my hero—a Baptist minister, a Morehouse Man, Dr. Martin Luther King—in April of my law school graduation year, he was murdered. My city of Wilmington—and we were a—to our great shame, a slave State, and we were segregated. Delaware erupted into flames when he was assassinated, literally.

We're the only city in America where the National Guard patrolled every street corner for 9 full months with drawn bayonets, the longest stretch in any American city since the Civil War.

Dr. King's legacy had a profound impact on me and my generation, whether you're Black or White. I left the fancy law firm I had just joined and decided to become a public defender and then a county councilman, working to change our State's politics to embrace the cause of civil rights.

The Democratic Party in Delaware was a Southern Democratic Party at the time. We wanted to change it to become a Northeastern Democratic Party.

Then, we were trying to get someone to run for the United States Senate the year Nixon ran. I was 29 years of age. I had no notion of running—I love reading about everybody knew I was going to run; I didn't know I was going to run—[laughter]—when a group of senior members of the Democratic Party came to me. They couldn't find anybody to run and said, "You should run."

Nixon won my State by 60 percent of the vote. We won by 3,100 votes. We won by the thinnest of margins, but with a broad coalition, including students from the best HBCU in America, Delaware State University. You guys are good, but—[laughter]—they got me elected. All you all think I'm kidding. [Laughter] I'm not kidding.

But, by Christmas, I was a newly elected Senator hiring staff in Washington, DC, when I got a call from the first responders, my fire department in my hometown, that forever altered my life. They put a young woman first responder on the line to say: "There was an automobile accident. A tractor-trailer hit your wife's car while she was Christmas shopping with your three children." And she—poor woman, she just blurted out. She said, "Your wife and daughter are killed"—my 13-month-old daughter—"they're dead, and your almost 3-year-old and 4-year-old sons are badly injured. We're not sure they're going to make it either."

I rushed from Washington to their bedside. I wanted to pray, but I was so angry. I was angry at God. I was angry at the world.

I had the same pain 43 years later when that 4-year-old boy who survived was a grown man and a father himself, laying in another hospital bed at Walter Reed hospital having contracted stage-4 glioblastoma because he was a year in Iraq as a major—he won the Bronze Star—living next to a burn pit. Cancer took his last breath.

On this walk of life, you can understand—you come to understand that we don't know where or what fate will bring you or when. But we also know we don't walk alone. When you've been a beneficiary of the compassion of your family, your friends, even strangers, you know how much the compassion matters. I've learned there is no easy optimism, but by faith—by faith—we can find redemption.

I was a single father for 5 years. No man deserves one great love, let alone two. My youngest brother, who was a hell of an athlete, did a great thing. He introduced me to a classmate of his and said, "You'll love her; she doesn't like politics." [Laughter] But all kidding aside, until I met Jill, who healed—who healed—the family in all the broken places. Our family became my redemption.

Many of you have gone through similar or worse—and even worse things. But you lean on others, they lean on you, and together, you keep the faith in a better day tomorrow. But it's not easy.

I know 4 years ago, as some of your speakers have already mentioned, it felt like one of those Saturdays. The pandemic robbed you of so much. Some of you lost loved ones—mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, who were—aren't able to be here to celebrate with you today. You missed your high school graduation. You started college just as George Floyd was murdered and there was a reckoning on race.

It's natural to wonder if democracy you hear about actually works for you. What is democracy if Black men are being killed in the street? What is democracy if a trail of broken promises still leave Black communities behind? What is democracy if you have to be 10 times better than anyone else to get a fair shot?

And most of all, what does it mean, as we've heard before, to be a Black man who loves his country even if it doesn't love him back in equal measure?

When I sit behind the Resolute Desk in the Oval Office, in front of the fireplace across from my desk, I have two busts: one of Dr. King and one of Bobby Kennedy. I often find myself looking at those busts and making decisions. I ask myself: Are we living up to what we say we are as a nation, to end racism and poverty, to deliver jobs and justice, to restore our leadership in the world?

Then I look down and see the rosary on my wrist that was that of my late son, he had on him when he died at Walter Reed and I was with him. And I ask myself: What would he say? I know the answer because he told me in his last days.

My son knew the days were numbered. The last conversation was: "Dad, I'm not afraid, but I'm worried. I'm worried you're going to give up when I go. You're going to give up."

We have an expression in the Biden family. When you want someone to know—give you their word, you say, "Look at me." He was lying—to me, he said: "Look at me, Dad. Look at me." He said: "Give me your word. Give me your word as my father that you will not quit, that you will stay engaged. Promise me, Dad. Stay engaged. Promise me. Promise me."

I wrote a book called "Promise Me, Dad," not for the public at large, although a lot of people would end up buying it. It's for my grandchildren and great-grandchildren to know who Beau Biden was.

The rosary on the—my wrist, the bust in my office remind me that faith asks you to hold on to hope, to move heaven and earth to make better days. Well, that's my commitment to you: to show you democracy, democracy, democracy is still the way.

If Black men are being killed on the streets, we bear witness. For me, that means to call out the poison of White supremacy, to root out systemic racism. I stood up for George—with George Floyd's family to help create a country where you don't need to have that talk with your son or grandson as they get pulled over.

Instead of a trail of broken promises, we're investing more money than ever in Black families and Black communities. We're reconnecting Black neighborhoods cut off by old highways and decades of disinvestment where no one cared about the community.

We've delivered checks in pockets to reduce child—Black child poverty to the lowest rate in history. We're removing every lead pipe in America so every child can drink clean water without fear of brain damage, and they can't afford to remove the lead pipes themselves. We're delivering affordable high-speed internet so no child has to sit in their parents' car or do their homework in a parking lot outside of McDonald's.

Instead of forcing you to prove you're 10 times better, we're breaking down doors so you have a hundred times more opportunities: good-paying jobs you can raise a family on in your neighborhood; capital to start small business and loans to buy homes; health insurance, prescriptions drugs, housing that's more affordable and accessible.

I've walked the picket line and defended the rights of workers. I'm relieving the burden of student debt—many of you have already had the benefit of it—[applause]—so I [you; White House correction] can chase your dreams and grow the economy. When the Supreme Court told me I couldn't, I found two other ways to do it. And we were able to do it, because it grows the economy.

And I—in addition to the original \$7 billion investment in HBCUs, I'm investing 16 billion more dollars—[applause]—more in our history, because you're vital to our Nation. Most HBCUs don't have the endowments. The jobs of the future require sophisticated laboratories, sophisticated opportunity on campus.

We're opening doors so you can walk into a life of generational wealth, to be providers and leaders for your families and communities. Today, record numbers of Black Americans have jobs, health insurance, and more [wealth; White House correction] than ever.

Democracy is also about hearing and heeding your generation's call to a community free of gun violence and a planet free of climate crisis and showing your power to change the world.

But I also know some of you ask: What is democracy if we can't stop wars that break out and break our hearts? In a democracy, we debate and dissent about America's role in the world.

I want to say this very clearly. I support peaceful, nonviolent protest. Your voices should be heard, and I promise you I hear them. I determined to make my administration look like America. I have more African Americans in high places, including on the Court, than any President in American history—[applause]—because I need the input.

What's happening in Gaza and Israel is heartbreaking. Hamas's vicious attack on Israel, killing innocent lives and holding people hostage. I was there 9 days after, seen pictures of tying a mother and a daughter with a rope, pouring kerosene on them, burning them and watching as they died. Innocent Palestinians caught in the middle of all this: men, women, and children killed or displaced in despite—in desperate need of water, food, and medicine. It's a humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

That's why I've called for an immediate cease-fire—an immediate cease-fire—to stop the fighting—[applause]—bring the hostages home. And I've been working on a deal as we speak, working around the clock to lead an international effort to get more aid into Gaza, rebuild Gaza.

I'm also working around the clock for more than just one cease-fire. I'm working to bring the region together. I'm working to build a lasting, durable peace. Because the question is, as you see what's going on in Israel today: What after? What after Hamas? What happens then? What happens in Gaza? What rights do the Palestinian people have? I'm working to make sure we

finally get a two-state solution—the only solution—[*applause*—for two people to live in peace, security, and dignity.

This is one of the hardest, most complicated problems in the world. And there's nothing easy about it. I know it angered and frustrates many of you, including my family. But most of all, I know it breaks your heart. It breaks mine as well.

Leadership is about fighting through the most intractable problems. It's about challenging anger, frustration, and heartbreak to find a solution. It's about doing what you believe is right, even when it's hard and lonely.

You're all future leaders, every one of you graduating today. And that's not hyperbole. You're future leaders, all of you. You'll face complicated, tough moments. In these moments, you'll listen to others, but you'll have to decide, guided by knowledge, conviction, principle, and your own moral compass.

And the desire to know what freedom is, what it can be is the heart and soul of why this college was founded in the first place, proving that a free nation is born in the hearts of men spellbound by freedom. But the—that's the magic of Morehouse. That's the magic of America.

But let's be clear: What happens to you and your family when old ghosts in new garments seize power, extremists come for the freedoms you thought belonged to you and everyone?

Today in Georgia, they won't allow water to be available to you while you wait in line to vote in an election. What in the hell is that all about? I'm serious. Think about it. And then the constant attacks on Black election workers who count your vote.

Insurrectionists who storm the Capitol with Confederate flags are called "patriots" by some. Not in my house. Black police officers, Black veterans protecting the Capitol were called another word, as you'll recall.

They also say out loud, these other groups, immigrants "poison the blood" of our country, like the Grand Wizard and Fascists said in the past. But you know and I know we all bleed the same color. In America, we're all created equal.

Extremists close the doors of opportunity; strike down affirmative action; attack the values of diversity, equality, and inclusion.

I never thought when I was graduating in 1968—as your honoree just was—we talked about—I never thought I'd be in—present in a time when there's a national effort to ban books—not to write history, but to erase history.

They don't see you in the future of America. But they're wrong. To me, we make history, not erase it. We know Black history is American history. Many of you graduates don't know me, but check my record, you'll know what I'm saying, I mean from my gut. And we know Black men are going to help us, lead us to the future, Black men from this class, in this university.

But, graduates, this is what we're up against: extremist forces aligned against the meaning and message of Morehouse. And they peddle a fiction, a caricature of what being a man is about: tough talk, abusing power, bigotry. Their idea of being a man is toxic. I ran into them all the time when I was younger. They got—all right, I don't want to get started. [*Laughter*]

But that's not you. It's not us. You all know and demonstrate what it really means to be a man. Being a man is about the strength of respect and dignity. It's about showing up because it's too late if you have to ask. It's about giving hate no safe harbor and leaving no one behind and defending freedoms. It's about standing up to the abuse of power, whether physical, economic, or psychological. It's about knowing faith without works is dead.

Look—and you're doing the work. Today I look out at all you graduates and I see the next generation of Morehouse Men who are doctors and researchers curing cancer; artists shaping our culture; fearless journalists and intellectuals challenging convention. I see preachers and advocates who might even join another Morehouse Man in the United States Senate.

You can clap for him. He's a good man. *[Applause]*

As I said, I'm proud to have the most diverse administration in history to tap into the full talents of our Nation. I'm also proud of putting the first Black woman on the United States Supreme Court. And I have no doubt, one day a Morehouse Man will be on that Court as well. *[Applause]* Well, you know it.

I've been Vice President to the first Black President and become my close friend and President to the first woman Vice President. Why—I have no idea—no doubt that a Morehouse Man will be President one day, just after an AKA from Howard. *[Laughter]* She's tough, guys. *[Laughter]*

Look, let me close with this. I know I don't look like I've been around very long. *[Laughter]*

[At this point, the President made the sign of the cross.]

But in my career, for the first 30 years, I was told, "You're too young, kid." They used to stop me from getting on the Senate elevator when I first got there, for real. And now I'm too old. Whether you're young or old, I know what endures: The strength and wisdom of faith endures. And I hope—my hope for you is—my challenge to you is that you still keep the faith so long as you can.

That cap on your head proves you've earned your crown. The question is now, 25 years from now, 50 years from now, when you're asked to stand and address the next generation of Morehouse Men, what will you say you did with that power you've earned? What will you say you've done for your family, for your community, your country when it mattered most?

I know what we can do. Together, we're capable of building a democracy worthy of our dreams; a future where every—even more of your brothers and sisters can follow their dreams; a boundless future where your legacies lift us up to sow—those who follow; a bigger, brighter future that proves the American Dream is big enough for everyone to succeed.

Class of 2024, 4 years ago, it felt probably like Saturday. Four years later, you made it to Sunday, to commencement, to the beginning. And with faith and determination, you can push the sun above the horizon once more. You can reveal a light hope—and that's not—I'm not kidding—for yourself and for your nation.

"The prayers of a righteous man availeth much." A righteous man. A good man. A Morehouse Man.

God bless you all. We're expecting a lot from you.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:29 a.m. on the Century Campus lawn. In his remarks, he referred to Sen. Raphael G. Warnock; Supreme Court Associate Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson; and former President Barack Obama. He also referred to his brother Francis.

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