

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks on the 60th Anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in Austin, Texas
July 29, 2024

The President. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Really. *[Applause]* Thank you. Please. Please.

Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. Ambassador, thanks for that introduction and, above all, for your friendship over the years. There's literally one word that comes to mind every time I think of Andy Young. The word is integrity—absolute integrity.

And thank you to the Johnson family for carrying forward the legacy of a truly great President and First Lady. Your mom was incredible as well. And same goes to Mark Updegrove, president of the LBJ Foundation.

It's great to be back here. I thank you all and the distinguished guests gathered here today.

Look, I was in college at the University of Delaware in my early—beginning years when I heard the news of doctor—that President Kennedy had been assassinated. I remember exactly—like anybody in my generation remembers exactly where they were sitting, standing, or walking. I was on the steps of Hullyhen—of one of the halls—one of the university halls called Hullyhen Hall at the university, listening on a transistor radio with three other people. It seemed unbelievable.

And then, later, watching President Johnson help the Nation find a way forward. In his first address after the tragedy, President Johnson said, and I quote, nothing "could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest passage of the civil rights bill." That's what he said.

As a kid coming up, I always admired President Johnson for his public service, whether it was a schoolteacher in southern Texas—South Texas; a master of the United States Senate; a historic Vice President and President. His philosophy was simple: In a great society—in a great society, no one—no one—should be left behind. He'd say—it's time for us to come to see that every American gets a decent break and a fair chance to make good.

And as Andy Young said, President Johnson met repeatedly with the civil rights leaders and built a coalition to bring that vision to life. And he did. He brought it to life.

Over 50 years, the LBJ Foundation has convened this symposium to reflect one of the crowning achievements: the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a defining moment that has since opened doors of opportunities for all Americans regardless of race, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religion, national origin.

Together with the Voting Rights Act and the Fair Housing Act, these three landmark laws he signed are remarkable in their scale and their scope. Taken together, these three acts have made this Nation fundamentally more fair, fundamentally more just, and most importantly, fundamentally more consistent with our founding principles. *[Applause]* No, really—for real.

And we're a better nation because of them. But we must be clear: Their work, our work is not done. It's not done. We do not celebrate these laws as part of our past, but as critical components of our future.

President Johnson understood what President Lincoln understood in his own time: that the courts would determine the scale and scope—the scale and scope—of our laws. Over 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, President Johnson vowed, in his words, "to do this job that

Lincoln started"—"to do this job that Lincoln started"—by challenging the Court to live up to its constitutional responsibility.

He did that by nominating Thurgood Marshall as the first Black Justice of the Supreme Court—and by aggressively defending civil rights throughout the courts. But now we live in a different era.

In recent years, extreme opinions that the Supreme Court has handed down have undermined long-established civil rights principles and protections. In 2013, the Supreme Court in the *Shelby County* case gutted the Voting Rights Act, opening the floodgates to a wave of restrictive voting laws that have seen States across the country pass.

In 2022, the Court overruled *Roe v. Wade* and the right to choose that had been the law of the land for 50 years—50 years. The following year, the same Court eviscerated affirmative action, which had been upheld and reaffirmed for nearly 50 years as well.

And now there's an extreme movement and agenda called Project 2025——

Audience members. Boo!

The President. Well, it—by the way, they're serious, man. [Laughter] They're planning another onslaught, attacking civil rights in America.

For example, Project 2025 calls [for; White House correction] aggressively attacking diversity, equity, and inclusion all across all aspects of American life. This extreme MAGA movement even proposes to end birthright citizenship. That's how far they've come—end birthright citizenship, which if you're born in America, you're an American citizen. That's how extreme these guys are.

This issue and so many other civil rights that Americans take for granted are likely to come before the Court in the years to come.

And most recently and most shockingly, the Supreme Court established in *Trump v. the United States* a dangerous precedent. They ruled, as you know, that the President of the United States has immunity for potential crimes he may have committed while in office—immunity.

This Nation was founded on the principle there are no kings in America. Each of us is equal before the law. No one is above the law. And for all practical purposes, the Court's decision almost certainly means that a President can violate their oath, flout our laws, and face no consequences.

Here is what Justice Sotomayor, Supreme Court Justice, wrote in her dissent, and I quote: "Under the majority's reasoning, the President now will be insulated from criminal prosecution. Orders a Navy Seal Team 6 to assassinate a political rival? Immune. Organizes a military coup to hold onto power? Immune. Takes a bribe in exchange for a pardon? Immune. In every use of official power, the President is now a king above the law." Just what Justice Sotomayor wrote in her dissent.

Folks, just imagine what a President could do in trampling civil rights and liberties given such immunity. The Court is being used to weaponize an extreme and unchecked agenda. This decision is a total affront to the basic expectations we have for those who wield the power in this Nation, that they are expected to be wholly accountable under the law.

The Presidency is no longer constrained by the law, and the only limits on abuse of power will be self-imposed by the President alone. That's a fundamentally flawed view and a fundamentally flawed principle, a dangerous principle.

On top of its extreme decisions, the Court is mired in a crisis of ethics. These scandals involving the Justices have caused public opinion to question the Court's fairness and independence that are essential to faithfully carrying out its mission of equal justice under the law.

For example, there are documented reports of a decades-long effort to reshape the judiciary, including the Supreme Court, backed by shadow special interests that also support Project 2025; undisclosed gifts to Justices worth hundreds of thousands of dollars from wealthy benefactors who have interests before the very Court they're contributing to; conflicts of interest from those connected to January 6 insurrectionists; and the blatant attack on nominating and confirming Justices to the Court itself.

Do you all remember when Justice Scalia died in February of 2016 and the Republicans blocked our—the President's nomination—President Obama's nomination to fill that vacancy for nearly a year by making up an entirely new standard that there would be no confirmations to the Court during an election year? But then when Justice Ginsburg died—Ginsburg died in 2020, Republicans rushed through the President's—Trump's nominee at the very same time votes were being cast in an election that Trump would lose. It's outrageous.

I know I don't look it, but I served in the Senate for 36 years—[laughter]—including as chairman and ranking member of the Judiciary Committee.

I've been told that I've overseen more Supreme Court nominations as Senator, Vice President, and President than anyone in history—anyone alive today, I should say. I have great respect for our institutions and the separation of powers laid out in our Constitution.

But what's happening now is not consistent with that doctrine of separation of powers. Extremism is undermining the public confidence in the Court's decisions.

As soon as I came to office, I convened a bipartisan Presidential Commission on the Supreme Court of the United States comprised of leading constitutional scholars, both liberal and conservative, to provide recommendations on potential reforms to the Court.

I've been careful in these deliberations because these are serious, serious decisions. In the face of increasing threats to American democratic institutions, I used the Commission's analysis, and today I'm calling for three bold reforms to restore trust and accountability to the Court and our democracy.

As the press shouted to me as I got off Air Force One, the Republican Speaker of the House said, "Whatever he proposes is dead on arrival." Well, I think his thinking is dead on arrival. [Laughter]

First, I'm calling for a constitutional amendment called "No One is Above the Law Amendment." [Applause] It holds—and I mean this sincerely. It holds there is no immunity for crimes a former President committed while in office. I share our Founders' belief that a President must answer to the law and the President is accountable in the exercise of the great power of the Presidency. We're a nation of laws, not kings and dictators.

The decision can be boiled down to the title of one case: *Trump v. the United States*.

The Court asserted it was making a ruling for the ages. That isn't true. The Court made a ruling for one: a former President. No other President in our history has asked for this kind of immunity for criminal actions, and no President—no former President, not me, not one—not one has in fact—should have been given the—be given any expectation to this with such immunity.

The second thing I'm asking for: We've had term limits for Presidents of the United States for nearly 75 years after the Truman administration. And I believe we should have term limits for Supreme Court Justices of the United States as well.

In fact, the United States is the only major constitutional democracy that gives lifetime seats to their high court.

Term limits would help ensure that the Court membership changes with some regularity. That would be—make timing for the Court's nomination more predictable and less arbitrary. It would reduce the chance that any single Presidency imposes undue influence in generations to come.

The bipartisan Commission I convened analyzed various term limit structures. Based on their report, I believe the best structure is the 18-year term limit. That would help ensure the country would not have what it has now: an extreme Court that's the product of an attack on the confirmation process that's been weaponized by those seeking to carry out an extreme agenda for decades to come.

By the way, these guys mean it. These guys mean it. Project 2025 is real. They mean it.

Third, I'm calling for a binding code of conduct for the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court's current ethics code is weak and, even more frightening, voluntary—voluntary. Any code of Congress [conduct; White House correction] must be enforceable.

Under the reform I propose, Justices would be required to disclose gifts, refrain from public political activity, recuse themselves in the cases in which they have—they or their spouses have a financial or other conflict of interest.

Most people don't realize that Congress passed a law decades ago that says all Federal judges, including Supreme Court Justices, have to recuse themselves in such cases. But the current Justices insist on enforcing that requirement themselves without any public oversight or compulsion. See, that's their decision. They don't have to tell us how they made it.

That might work if the Court was actually enforcing those requirements, but they are not. The Court is not self-policing. The Court is not dealing with the obvious conflicts of interest. We need a mandatory code of ethics for the Supreme Court, and we need it now.

My fellow Americans, based on all my experience, I'm certain we need these reforms. We need these reforms to restore trust in the courts and preserve the system of checks and balances that are vital to our democracy.

They're also commonsense reforms that a vast majority of the American people support, as well as leading constitutional law scholars, progressive and conservatives. I look forward to working with the Congress to implement these necessary reforms. A number of Members of Congress are here today.

Let me close with this. President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 just 2 days before the Fourth of July. He said in that bill signing, and I quote: "This is a proud triumph. Yet those who founded our country knew that freedom would be secure only if each generation fought to renew and enlarge its meaning," end of quote.

That's what I've tried to do throughout my career, inspired by the cause of civil rights.

Audience member. We love you, Joe!

The President. That's what got me involved initially.

My State was a State that was segregated by law. We were one who, the only reason we didn't fight on the side of the South: We couldn't get there. And I'm serious.

What motivated me to be a public defender, a county councilman—I'll never forget, I had a good job with a big trial firm. And in Delaware, you have to study for the bar for 6 months before you're allowed to take it. And in the meantime, while I was studying for the bar, that's when Dr. King was assassinated.

We were the only State in the Nation—city in the Nation that had the military stationed on every corner with drawn bayonets for 10 months—for 10 months—in the sixties, because we had a very conservative Democratic Governor.

In those days, when the Democrats won, they could choose to be part of the Southern Governors' or Northern Governors'—Northeast Governors' Conference. And they'd choose the Southern Governors' Conference lots of times.

But guess what? It got me engaged. I love how—reading these biographies of me now—that I knew I was going to run for President. *[Laughter]*

I remember walking in to the public defender's office, which was part time at the time, and asking for an application because I wanted to join the public defender's office. And then he looked at me—his name was Frannie Kearns—he said, "Don't you work for Prickett, Ward, Burt, and Sanders?" *[Laughter]* I said, "Yes." He said, "Why in the hell would you want to do this?" *[Laughter]* Not a joke. But I said, "Let me do it," and I became a public defender.

Folks, here's the deal, because I got engaged like a lot of you do: Whether you run for office or not, you get engaged and you want to change things. So I kept trying to change the Democratic Party in my State, which was very conservative.

And then a group of people came to me—as my Senator knows, Chris Coons—came to me and said, "Look, we want you to run for State Senate." I said: "I can't. I can't go to Dover all the time. I'm just starting at a law firm and a part-time public defender."

And then they come back to me and said, "Why don't you run for the county council?" I said, "I can't." They said, "You stupid SOB; it's right across the street there." *[Laughter]* I'm serious. "It meets only twice a week." *[Laughter]*

So my sister, my best friend, managed my campaign. And we picked a district that we couldn't possibly win. No Democrat had ever won. *[Laughter]* But my problem was, I had my sister doing my campaign. *[Laughter]* And we won. *[Laughter]*

The next thing I know, I was part of a group assigned as young Senators, young elected officials to try to bring the party around to get someone to run for the United States Senate. And I was put on the commission. When you're the young lawyer, you get to turn the lights on and off after every meeting. *[Laughter]*

And so I remember going down to the Democratic Convention off year in Dover, Delaware. And after the afternoon session, went back and I was in my room. It was a nice motel, a motel you just drive up to, get out, and walk in your door there, and—*[laughter]*—and you know, an 8-by-10 bathroom with shower and a stall. *[Laughter]* And I had my towel around me and the shaving cream on my face, and I heard, "Bam, bam, bam," on my door. And I thought it was the guys I came down with, a guy who was a real—had a talk show, named Bob Cunningham—was a big civil rights guy—and two others. So I thought it was him, and I walked to open the door.

There was the former Governor, a former Supreme Court Justice—*[laughter]*—I swear to God—*[laughter]*—a State—the State chairman, and the former Congressman. And they said: "We just had dinner. We think"—I said, "I'm sorry, gentleman." *[Laughter]* And they walked in, and I ran to the bathroom with the shaving cream, thinking I could put something on. There wasn't anything there.

I walked back out with a towel. I'm standing against the nail—a desk nailed to the wall, and there's—they're on the beds that are nailed to the—headboards are nailed to the wall—*[laughter]*—four of them sitting across. They said, "Joe, we were thinking you should run for the United States Senate."

I said, "Gentlemen, are you crazy—are you serious?" *[Laughter]* And they went on and made their case.

I hope all of you had a professor who's enlightened as mine. I had one professor named Dr. Ingersoll, my political philosophy professor at the University of Delaware, which is between Dover and where I was going, home. So I called him, asked if I could stop by and see him.

And I said, "What do you think I should do?" He said, "Joe, remember what Plato said." I'm thinking, "What the hell did Plato say?" *[Laughter]* Seriously. He said, "Plato said the penalty good people pay for not being involved in politics is being governed by people worse than themselves." *[Laughter]*

I went home and spoke to my deceased wife. She said: "Look, Joe, you're working 40 hours a week trying to set up a law firm, and you're working 40 hours a week as a public defender. Get in, or get out." *[Laughter]* Next thing you know, I was running. *[Laughter]*

We won by a—Nixon won my State by 60 percent of the vote. Won by—but we won by a staggering 3,800 votes.

My point is—I didn't know what the hell I was doing. *[Laughter]*

But look, then I went on to be able to be—I had to wait a little bit to be sworn in. You've got to be 30 to be sworn in. *[Laughter]*

And then I had the—I was the Vice President to the first African American President in American history. Now I'm President to our first woman Vice President.

I've made clear how I feel about Kamala. And she has been an incredible partner to me, a champion of civil rights throughout her career, and she'll continue to be an inspiring leader and project this very idea of America: the very idea that we're all created equal and deserve to be treated equally throughout our lives. We've never been—fully lived up to that, but we've never walked away from it. We've never walked away because of leaders like Lyndon Baines Johnson.

My fellow Americans, in 2 years, we'll commemorate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. That Fourth of 2026 will be a moment not only about our past, but about our future.

Imagine that moment and ask yourself: What do we want to be? We can and must be protected and expand our civil rights in America. We can and must prevent the abuse of Presidential power and restore faith in the Supreme Court. We can and must strengthen the guardrails of democracy.

We must—have to remind ourselves who we are. We're the United States of America, and there is nothing, nothing beyond our capacity—nothing—when we do it together. So let's stay together.

And God bless you all, Lyndon Johnson, and Lady Bird Johnson. And may God bless the whole family. Ladies and gentlemen, may God protect our troops.

Thank you for listening.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:11 p.m. at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and Museum. In his remarks, he referred to former U.S. Permanent Representative to the United

Nations and civil rights leader Andrew J. Young, Jr.; Lynda Johnson Robb, daughter of former President Lyndon B. Johnson and First Lady Claudia A. "Lady Bird" Johnson; Supreme Court Associate Justice Amy Coney Barrett; and Speaker of the House of Representatives J. Michael Johnson. He also referred to his sister Valerie Biden Owens. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on July 30.

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Names: Barrett, Amy Coney; Biden Owens, Valerie; Coons, Christopher A.; Harris, Kamala D.; Johnson, J. Michael; Obama, Barack; Robb, Lynda Johnson; Sotomayor, Sonia M.; Updegrove, Mark K.; Young, Andrew J., Jr.

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