

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks on Signing a Proclamation on the Establishment of the Springfield 1908 Race Riot National Monument and an Exchange With Reporters
August 16, 2024

The President. Well, hello, everybody.

Welcome, all my former colleagues, colleagues, and members of the administration and those outside the administration that made this happen.

I was—I want to say one thing at the outset. I never thought that, having been in the Senate for so many years, as well as Vice President for 12 years—for 8 years and President for 4 years, that I'd see an effort—we would worry about people wanting to erase history—to literally erase history: what we can't read, what we can't write, what—and what I'm excited about, beyond the specifics of this: We're rewriting history—we're allowing history to be written—what happened—so our children, our grandchildren, everybody understands what happened and what could still happen. As a matter of fact, something happened here similar recently.

And so, you know, I want to thank—especially thanks to Senator Duckworth and Senator Durbin and Senator—I mean Representative—excuse me—Budzinski—like "Bidenzinski"—*[laughter]*—Nikki.

By the way, I moved from a Irish neighbor in Scranton when we—when coal died, moved down to Delaware. I was the only kid with a name who didn't—name didn't end in "s-k-i."
[Laughter]

Now, look, you know, over a hundred years ago this week, a mob not far from Lincoln's home unleashed a race riot in Springfield and—that literally shocked the conscience of the Nation. I mean, it shocked the conscience of the Nation.

But what these folks worked so hard to make sure we—a lot of people forgot it. It was railroad tracks—there was a lot going on there. And people forgot it as if, you know, it didn't happen. If you listen to some of our colleagues, you'd think: "Oh, no, no, no. We've never had this problem."

Well, you know, you're going to continue to have these problems unless we talk about the problems we had before making sure we solved them.

And it also sparked the creation of the NAACP and the leaders here today—one of the most important organizations, in my view, in this country.

And by signing this designation for the Springfield 1908 Race Riot National Monument, we remind ourselves we have to—we have no safe harbor unless we continue to remind people what happened—what happened. It's really important.

I'm not—I'm—you know, as you've heard me say, when I had an operation years ago, the doctor said—he told me what my chances were. And he said, "You know, your problem is, you're—Senator," he said, "you're a congenital optimist." *[Laughter]* Well, I am an optimist. I'm optimistic about this country because we're good people. But we can't let these things fade.

And I want to thank the engineering firm who went out and found the remnants of a facility. I want to thank the Catholic hospital for donating the site there to make this happen, and all these people behind me.

And by the way, we have a Secretary of Interior who knows what she's doing. She cares a lot about all this.

And so I know this may not seem significant to most Americans, but it's an important—it's important, important, important. And then, when you walk by this area, you know what happened here, because it can happen again if we don't take care of ourselves and fight for this democracy.

So I'm going to sign this. And what I'm going to do, because they didn't want to bring out 99 Biden pens—[*laughter*—I'm going to give this first signing to the Secretary, and then you've got to make sure every one of you get—who made this happen can get a pen. Okay?

All right.

[*At this point, the President signed the proclamation.*]

There you go.

[*Inaudible*] We don't usually do this, but, Dick, do you want to say anything? Or, Nikki, you want to say anything? Or—no, seriously, you guys worked like—you started this in 2022, I think.

Senator L. Tammy Duckworth. I did, Mr. President. Actually, we started it even before then, but we really gained steam and got it passed out of the Senate, and it's been stuck in the House.

And so I just want to thank everybody here who came together to work so hard, because this is such an important part of our Nation's history, what the Midwest has done—what the Midwest has done in terms of being part of the civil rights movement.

So much of what happened in the South started and was supported through places in Chicago and in Springfield. And I'm so proud that Springfield, Illinois, is home to the beginning of the NAACP.

Good things can come out of bad things, as long as you don't forget what happened.

The President. Yes.

Sen. Duckworth. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. Thank you.

Participants. Thank you.

The President. Dick?

Senator Richard J. Durbin. This was not the only race riot in America by any means. My hometown of East St. Louis, Illinois, had one as well.

Participants. Yes.

Sen. Durbin. The difference here was, it was the home of Abraham Lincoln. At that moment in history, people reflected on the fact and were stunned and outraged to think this happened in Mr. Lincoln's hometown.

And I think that's what inspired the NAACP, Mr. President.

Participants. Yes.

Sen. Durbin. That's why that has national significance. But it was the connection with Lincoln that really drove home the point that racism has to end in America, and we're still fighting that battle.

The President. Nikki?

Representative Nikki Budzinski. I would just add, again, an appreciation to you, Mr. President, for honoring this moment in history for Springfield and this—just the unanimous support for the community.

This is a happy day for us, but then we have so much more work to do in our community and to strive for equality and justice. We still have a lot of work to do.

The President. You know, I got involved in politics because of the—this movement. My State, to its great shame, was a slave State. And when I got elected, I ran to begin to change the nature of the parties.

To make a long story short, we're making a lot of progress, but it can never stop. We can give hate no safe harbor. Period.

Thank you.

[*Several reporters spoke at once.*]

Israel-Hamas Cease-Fire and Hostage Release Negotiations

Q. Has a cease-fire deal been reached? Has a cease-fire deal been reached? Mr. President, how close is a cease-fire deal?

[*Several reporters spoke at once.*]

Q. Has a cease-fire deal been reached or is it close?

The President. I can't hear you.

Q. Is a cease-fire deal, Mr. President—

The President. I'll say one thing about this. One of the reasons why I was late for you all was I was dealing with the cease-fire efforts in the Middle East, and we are closer than we've ever been.

I don't want to jinx anything. But as my grandfather would say, with the grace of God, the good will of the neighbors, and a lot of luck, we may have something.

But we're not there yet. It's much, much closer than it was 3 days ago. So keep your fingers crossed.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:46 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Derrick Johnson, president and chief executive officer, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); Austin Randolph, Jr., president, NAACP Springfield Branch; and Secretary of the Interior Debra A. Haaland.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Springfield 1908 Race Riot National Monument, establishment, signing the proclamation; Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters, White House.

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