

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks at Vernon Electric Cooperative in Westby, Wisconsin
September 5, 2024

The President. Hello. Hello, hello, hello. Hello, Wisconsin.

The first time I was here was about 180 years ago with William Proxmire when I was a 31-year-old Senator. [*Laughter*] I'm only 40 now, but you know, it's going—please have a seat, if you have one.

It's great to be back.

Shooting at Apalachee High School in Winder, Georgia

Before I begin, with your permission, I'd like to say a few words about the school shooting yesterday in Winder County, Georgia. You know, my wife Jill and I are mourning those four gunned down—two students and two teachers—and wounded and hospitalized nine others. I'm sure you all are as well.

You know, students—just young teenagers. Educators just doing their jobs. A community, like so many around the country, just getting back to school. And a joyous and exciting time absolutely shattered—shattered.

I directed my team to immediately ensure that we're doing everything we can to provide support. The Department of Justice and the FBI are working closely with the State and local law enforcement of—investigating this. We have a lot of information, not all of it. We're grateful to the school personnel and first responders who prove—and prevented more people from being killed or injured and brought the suspect to custody.

But, as a nation, we cannot continue to accept the carnage of gun violence. I'm a gun owner. I believe strongly in the amendment, but we need more thought—more than thoughts and prayers. Some of my Republican friends in Congress just finally have to say: "Enough is enough. We have to do something."

Together, let's ban assault weapons. My dad was a hunter. I don't know a whole hell of a lot of deer wearing Kevlar vests. I'm serious about this. High-capacity magazines—once again, what do we need them for in terms of domestic use?

There are too many people who are able to access guns that shouldn't be able to. So let's require safe storage of firearms. I know I have mine locked up. But how could you have an assault rifle, a weapon in a house, not locked up, and knowing your kid knows where it is? We've got to hold parents accountable if their—let their child have access to these guns.

Let's enact universal background checks and end immunity—and end immunity for gun manufacturers.

And I realize I'm in a rural area, like the rural parts of my State, where guns—we all have them. And it's not popular to talk about it. But the truth is, there's a difference between rational and irrational.

Imagine—you know, the only outfit in the world that we can't sue—and by law; passed by law—are gun manufacturers. How about if that was the case with Big Tobacco? What do you think would happen if we were not able to have sued Tobacco how many more people would be dead now but for the—but for the ability to change the law?

Folks, commonsense measures supported by responsible gun owners. You know, it won't bring back those children, but thousands of children have been gunned down across—you know, more children are killed or die from a gunshot wound than any other reason in the entire United States—every disease, every accident—everything. More die as a consequence of a bullet in the United States of America.

But it will help save lives if we do the things we're talking about and prevent communities from being ripped apart again. We can do it if we do it together, and I really think we can.

Clean Energy and Infrastructure Development Efforts

So I just wanted to say that before we began. And now to our event today.

Thank you, Darin, for that introduction and for sharing your story as a family farmer.

And thank you to one of America's best—I say one of the three best Governors in the entire United States of America. Where—where is he? There he is. Tony, you're the best, pal. [Laughter] When I think of Tony Evers—and I mean this sincerely—one word comes to mind: integrity. Integrity.

And sitting next to him is a former Governor of not far from here—from Iowa—named Tom Vilsack, who's a—and his wife Christie. Christie, you're the—yes, there you are. She's smarter than he is—[laughter]—just like Jill is smarter than I am. But Tom is doing a hell of a job as Secretary of Agriculture.

And thanks to all the local elected labor and community leaders that are here. And a special thanks to Brent Ridge, the CEO of Dairyland Power Cooperative, for hosting us today.

You know, I come from the State of Delaware. Everybody thinks it's an Eastern industrial State. Our largest industry in Delaware—and I served as Senator there for 36 years; I know I don't look that old, but I am—[laughter]—for 36 years—is agriculture. It's a \$4 billion enterprise in the Delmarva Peninsula.

And it's co-ops made it happen. But millions of Americans rely on co-ops like yours for electricity every single day. And it matters.

In June of 2021, 5 months after I came into office, I went to nearby La Crosse, Wisconsin. It was the 65th anniversary of President Eisenhower signing the bill that created the Interstate Highway System. I talked about my vision to do something just as historic: to invest in infrastructure, in clean energy, and so much more in rural America; to invest in all America and all Americans; to propel us into the future, creating millions—and I mean millions—of good-paying jobs, and positioning America to win the economic competition of the 21st century.

And I'm back again today to begin a series of trips and events showing that progress we've made together by our "Investing in America" agenda, an agenda that has come to fruition over the last decade. Invest in America. Invest in American workers.

Here in Westby, you know, I'm proud to announce that my investments—that through my investments, the most significant climate change law ever—and by the way, it is a \$369 billion bill. It's called the—we should have named it what it was, but it—but any rate. [Laughter]

The Department of Agriculture is able, from that legislation, to announce \$7.3 billion in grants to 16 electrical co-ops nationwide to help rural communities transition to clean, affordable, reliable energy.

It's the most significant, transformative investment in electricity—in electrification and clean energy for rural America since FDR's New Deal nearly 90 years ago. And that's not hyperbole—that's a fact. And it includes Dairyland Power Cooperative, that will receive \$580

million to develop and purchase solar power, wind power, energy storage right here in Wisconsin and all across the Midwest.

And here's why it's a game changer. Before the New Deal, private companies refused to provide affordable electricity to rural communities. As a result, 1 in 10 rural households—only 1 in 10 had electricity before FDR came to power. So farmers had to organize electric co-ops to distribute electricity to their families and their communities.

With help from the New Deal, there are now more than 800 rural electric co-ops to provide electricity for 40 million Americans in 48 States. But key challenges—they've overcome them, but there's still—the co-ops are still nonprofits. They don't have the same resources that private utility companies have to modernize their energy infrastructure. And for decades, they couldn't access tax credits to make clean energy more affordable.

That's why Kamala and I ensured that the—for the first time in American history, that these nonprofit co-ops can benefit from clean energy tax credits just like for-profit utilities have for decades.

We also created new tools for co-ops to refinance prior debts so those—they can go out there and not be held back from investing in their future.

Today's historic announcement of \$7.3 billion for rural electric co-ops builds on those steps. It means clean, affordable electricity for over 5 million rural households and businesses across 23 States. It means 20,000 jobs—good-paying, high-quality jobs, including union jobs—so rural America is empowered to lead our clean energy future.

It means covering the upfront costs of clean energy so rural families can save on their energy bills and get just a little more breathing room at the end of the month. And it means rural entrepreneurs and manufacturers, who are so fundamental to our economy, are powered with reliable, affordable energy and they can create more job opportunities in their communities.

And guess what? It's also good for the environment as well.

Because of our historic actions, we're going to reduce by 43 million tons greenhouse gas pollution every single year as a consequence of these investments. That is the equivalent of removing pollution from more than 10 million gas-powered vehicles—10 million. It's going to save \$265 billion [White House correction] in health care costs because of better, cleaner quality of air. People aren't breathing polluted air and getting sick. That comes from the NIH. It matters, folks. You know it.

And, folks, I've kept my commitment to be President for all America and all Americans, including rural America. Your communities are the backbone—and that's not hype—you're the backbone of this country. You deserve the same resources as folks in our cities and our suburbs. And that's what today's announcement is all about: generating rural power for rural America.

But that's not all. Last year, I was next door with your good neighbor, Governor Walz of Minnesota. I think the guy is going places, but anyway. [Applause] I talked about we're making the most fundamental and significant investment ever in rural America, creating new and better markets, new income streams that are generators of rural America that can grow and thrive.

For example, we're taking on big corporations and doing everything from increasing competition in the meat markets to boosting domestic fertilizer production. In fact, here in Wisconsin, that means \$12 million to lower fertilizer costs for farmers across the State, which also creates jobs and grows new businesses.

Here in Wisconsin, we also invested \$47 million to lower energy costs; install renewable and energy-efficient technologies, like solar panels behind me, on farms and rural small businesses.

Darin just shared how that's cut his family electricity bill in half. We're helping farmers and ranchers and entrepreneurs tackle the climate crisis.

Climate-smart agriculture, such as cover crops, nutrient management, storing carbon in the soil—these practices reduce the greenhouse gas emissions and improve the overall health of the soil and the water. They put us on a path to continue to grow the food, the fuel, the fiber that will power our Nation for decades to come.

Through our bipartisan infrastructure law—it's a fancy way of saying that \$366 billion for the environment—the most significant investment in America's infrastructure. And what the infrastructure bill, by the way—the bipartisan bill—that was a trillion 200 billion dollars. And guess what? We're still lowering the deficit. Any rate—[*applause*].

The most significant investment in America since Eisenhower's Interstate Highway System. We've invested \$4 billion so far in 350 projects to modernize Wisconsin's transportation—just in Wisconsin that's been invested—[*applause*]*—infrastructure—[inaudible]*—three roundabouts on Route 14—U.S. 14, and a new bridge on County Highway M.

Folks, look, just like we're making the most significant investment in rural electrification since FDR, we're also making the most significant investment ever in affordable high-speed internet. Because affordable high-speed internet is just as essential today as electricity was a century ago. In order to be able to do business and—when things are shut down, your kid doesn't have to sit outside of McDonald's and—anyway. [*Laughter*]

That's why we've invested \$1.6 billion, just in Wisconsin, to connect everyone to affordable high-speed internet in Wisconsin. And since I took office, 72,000 more Wisconsin homes and small businesses have access to high-speed internet for the first time ever. And we're going to keep it going.

We've also invested \$200 million to relace [replace; White House correction] lead pipes across the State so a kid can drink clean water without worrying about brain damage—and changing their schools as well.

We've launched the Rural Partners Network, putting new Federal staff on the ground to help communities access Federal resources—let them know what they are, where to go, how to get it, because it's complicated. So I want people on site being able to tell people how they qualify, how they apply, how they get it done.

And after years of importing 90 percent of our semiconductor chips, which, I might add, America invented—we invented the computer chip; it's needed for everything for automobile engines to weapons—we passed the CHIPS and Science Act.

It has led private companies from around the world to come back. We used to have 40 percent of the market not too many years ago. And now we've got down to basically zero. Invest—and so, around from—countries around the—I traveled from everywhere from North Korea—anyway—South—excuse—South Korea to across the world to get these computer chip factories to come.

I asked the—I asked, when we convinced one of the companies in South Korea to invest in building these chips in America—I said, "Why would you do it?" And they're investing several billion dollars. They said, "Because you have the finest—you have the most advanced workers in the world, and it's the safest place in the world to invest."

Well, our CHIPS and Science Act has led private companies from around the world to invest hundreds of billions of dollars in new chips and battery factories and more of them right here in America. With the leadership of your Governor, you've already added 200,000 new jobs and

attracted over \$5 billion in Wisconsin in private-sector investments in clean energy and advanced manufacturing.

In fact, this spring, I was with your Governor in Racine, where Microsoft announced a \$3 billion investment—\$3 billion investment—to build a data center to help operate one of the most powerful artificial intelligence systems in the entire world. It's going to create thousands of good-paying jobs on site and across the State, creating even more opportunities in rural communities.

And let's remember: My predecessor promised you that he would redevelop Foxconn factory in Racine. *[Laughter]* You been there lately? *[Laughter]* He didn't do a damn thing. Nothing.

Folks, all these investments means family farms can stay in the family, rural entrepreneurs can build their dreams, your children and grandchildren won't have to leave home to make a living.

I don't know how many of you have been confronted, growing up, where everything is going well and the son or daughter comes to mom or dad and said: "I can't stay. There's not work for me here. I've got to leave." That's stopping now.

Because we're spreading opportunities that benefit everyone, building a future where no one is left behind, growing an economy from the middle out and the bottom up, not the top down. Because when you do that, everybody does well—everybody does well.

When it comes—my dad used to have an expression—say, "Joey, a job is about a"—my dad was a hard-working guy. Didn't go to college—well-read guy—because of World War II. Anyway, he worked like hell. He'd always come home to dinner before he'd go back and close his shop.

And my dad used to say: "Joey, a job is about a lot more than a paycheck. It's about your dignity. It's about respect. It's about being treated with respect. And it's about knowing you can look your kid in the eye and say, 'Honey, it's going to be okay. You're not going to have to leave home to get a job.'"

That's in stark contrast to my predecessor. When he was in office, he enacted a \$2 trillion tax cut—\$2 trillion tax cut—that overwhelmingly benefited the very wealthy and the biggest corporations, and it drove up Federal deficit every single year of his Presidency. He left office with the largest annual deficit in American history—\$3 trillion.

And by the way, I made a commitment when I got elected, and my follow—and my Vice President made a similar commitment: No one making under \$400,000 will see a single penny in their taxes raised—not a single penny.

The neighborhood I come from in Claymont, Delaware, and Scranton, Pennsylvania, would say, "Well, that's too damn much." But the point is, it's to make sure that we know it's not a—this isn't an attack on the wealthy.

He left us with a pandemic raging, an economy reeling. His allies in Congress—with all due respect, I've had this conversation with your Senator, Ron Johnson—voted against every one of the things I talked about today. Every single thing I talked about in terms of rural economy, he voted against it—voted against it.

It's hard to imagine your Senator voting against interests in a rural State that's so large and so consequential as the State of Wisconsin. Meanwhile, your other Senator, Tammy Baldwin, has done everything to take care of the State so she can be devoted to you.

Vice President Kamala Harris fought like hell for all of you and for the future worthy of your aspirations.

Look, just think about how far we've come. We have more to go. We have more to go. Too many people are still in trouble.

But nearly 4 years that we've been President and Vice President, we've had one of the most extraordinary periods of progress in American history. COVID no longer controls our lives. We've gone from an economic crisis to the strongest economy in the world. Let me say it again: We have the strongest economy in the world, and no one challenged that. We've got a—more to do.

And we're seeing something else. In thousands of cities and towns across the country and across Wisconsin, we're seeing the great American comeback story.

The way I see it—and I talk—the other team talks about how bad off we are and how America is in trouble. The way I see it: Today's announcement is about far more than just giving rural America the power to turn on the lights, it's about giving the power to shape our own future.

In fact, Wisconsin has been a—has a strong, strong history of neighbor helping neighbor, in forming cooperatives which are literally owned and powered by the people of Wisconsin. Because of you, we're planting seeds today that grow and blossom for generations to come.

That's what we're seeing here in Wisconsin, a State with a proud tradition of rural communities leading our Nation forward. And, again, that's not an exaggeration. You've been a leader in the Nation.

Let me close with this. As I travel this State and the country, I hope you feel what I feel: pride: pride in our hometowns, pride in making a comeback, pride in America, pride in knowing we can get big things done when we work together.

Folks, I've never been more optimistic about our Nation's future. We just have to remember who in the hell we are. We're the United States of America. That's who we are. Not a joke.

We're the only nation in the world that's come through every crisis stronger than we went into that crisis, because we're a hard-working, optimistic people, a decent people. We know from experience that there's nothing—nothing—beyond our capacity when we work together. And, again, that's not an exaggeration—when we work together.

I remember the days when I first got started, when a lot of Republican Senators were my close friends. We worked together; we compromised. We didn't talk about things as if there was a—we were in a—it was a dire moment, that democracy was at stake, we actually worked together. We fought like hell, but we worked together.

We've got to return that for our children, because our democracy depends on it.

I'm keeping you too long in the sun, so let me just say—*[laughter]*—God bless you all. And may God protect our troops. Thank you.

Thank you. You've got a beautiful State.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:54 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Mason Schermerhorn and Christian Angulo, students, and Richard Aspinwall and Cristina Irimie, teachers, Apalachee High School in Winder, GA, who were killed in the shooting on September 4; Colt Gray, suspected gunman in the shooting; Darin Von Ruden, president, Wisconsin Farmers Union; and former President Donald J. Trump. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on September 6.

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Locations: Westby, WI.

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