

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks to an Overflow Crowd at the Department of Education's National Historically Black Colleges and Universities Week Conference in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

September 16, 2024

The President. Hey, everybody. How are you?

Well, look, I think we're really—not because of me, because of you—we're at a real point where things are about to change in a big way in America. No, I really mean it. I really mean it. I think we have a—not because of me, because of you.

Look, you know, I was thinking about it——

Audience member. It's because of you.

The President. Well, no. [*Applause*] You're nice to say that. But look, one of the things that I—[*laughter*]*—*one of the things that I think about—you know, I was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania. And in Scranton, there was a hierarchy, and the bottom of the barrel are Catholics. Seriously, because of the way they came in the mines. The English own the mines and so on. And then after that—not just Irish, but other denominations.

And I was raised by a dad who just said: "Look, just get up when you get knocked down. Just get up." I have a cartoon on my desk my dad gave me when he showed up at an event at my house. And I was lamenting, looking out at the back door at a pond, that my deceased wife couldn't see the house because it had water behind it, and she was raised in Skaneateles, New York, near the water.

And my dad—what he did was he said, "I'll be back in a minute." I was about—doing a fundraiser—I think it was my fifth or sixth campaign for the Senate—at my home. And he went up to a Hallmark store, which was in a strip shopping center not far from the house, came back before anybody got there, and he gave me a framed picture—a framed photograph—I mean, cartoon characters: Hågar—do you remember Hågar the Horrible, the Viking?

And there's one frame in this—and I've had it on my desk for over 20 years. There's one frame in that desk—I mean, excuse me, in that frame that shows Hågar looking up and his Viking—ship has been hit by lightning, his hair—his helmet is knocked off, he's looking up at Heaven and is screaming "Why me?" to God. In the next frame, the same scene, but a voice from Heaven coming back and saying, "Why not?"

Well, that was my dad. He said—and he came back, and he—and he was—he was mad that I was lamenting what happened earlier on. And he said: "What—why would you be spared with that? Why? You've just got to get up. Get up."

Well, to me, that exemplifies the African American community I was—I worked with. No, I'm not joking. To me, when I was—there's a photograph in my office—[*inaudible*]*—*Oval Office—of my mom holding Barack's hand as we were announced as the next President and Vice President out in Chicago. She wasn't even supposed to walk out. My mom was 94 years old at the time.

And the photograph reminds me of what she said. She said to me, after Barack cleaned my clock in the—[*laughter*]*—*and I—and so he had—I was—he was—he became the de facto nominee the second week in August, and I was riding home on the train, which I did every night because right after I got elected, my wife and daughter were killed and my two boys were badly

injured in an accident, so I started to commute. And for over—over 1,200,000 miles on Amtrak every day.

And I was coming out of the Baltimore Tunnel, heading north, and my phone rang. It was Barack. And Barack said, "Joe, I want to do a background check on you." [*Laughter*] I knew what he meant. He meant for Vice President.

I said: "Barack, I don't want to be Vice President. I'll do anything I can to help you. I can help you more as a senior Senator. I'll bust my neck for you. I'm better there for you."

He said, "Well, there's only three of you." And I said, "Barack, I don't want to be Vice President." He said, "Well, damn it, it's only you." [*Laughter*]

And I swear to God, I said: "I don't want to be Vice President, Barack. I really don't, but I'll do what I can." He said, "Well, do this." He knew my family fairly well. His—my two—my number-three and -four granddaughter are his two daughters' best friends. They went school together. They always hang out together.

Anyway, to make a long story short, I called my—my mom and dad. I mean, my dad had passed. I called home. My mom was living with us because my dad had just passed. And I said to the family, I said, "Let's have a meeting, because Barack just called me about something I want to talk to you about." And he said—he made me promise I'd go home and talk to them. He said, "And get back to me in 24, 48 hours at the latest," because he knew the family, as I said.

So we sat in the back porch, and I started off—and I thought that they'd all agree with me. And so I said—I turned to my wife Jill, who is the love of my life and the life of my love—[*applause*—I married way above my station. [*Laughter*]

But all kidding aside, I said, "What do you think?" She said, "I think you should take it." I said, "Why?" She said, "If you don't, he'll make you Secretary of State, and you'll never be home." [*Laughter*]

Then I went to my deceased son Beau, who was then attorney general. He said, "Dad, you've got to do it," and gave me a lecture of my obligation. And my son Hunter, the same thing, and my daughter the same thing. I went down the list, and my mom was sitting on the railing on the porch—by the railing. I said, "Honey, you haven't said anything."

And she said, "Joey, let me get this straight." This is an absolutely true story—my word as a Biden. She said, "Joey, remember when you were 14 years old, and they were desegregating the neighborhood Lynnfield?" About eighty homes were built once—once around—you know, and we lived in an area called Mayfield, the next neighborhood up in suburban Wilmington and in a split-level home with three kids and a grandpop living with us—four kids, counting me.

And—and so I—she said, "Don't go down there, Joey; there's—there's going to be—there's protests." But I went down, and I got arrested for standing on the porch with a Black couple because the police were worried I was going to get hurt. They brought me home.

I said: "Yes, I remember that, Mom. What's that have to do with anything?" She said, "And remember, Joey, you had that job in the country club as a lifeguard, but you wanted to be the only guy to work in the projects—in the public housing projects, the swimming pool that summer—for summer, the only White employee?" I said, "Yes, Mom, I just wanted to learn more."

She said: "Joey, let me get this straight. The first Black man in American history has a chance to be President and he said he needs you, and you told him no?" [*Laughter*] I said—so I called him and said yes. But my generic point is that, you know, for a lot of us, we come from States that were segregated by law. Delaware was a slave State. Delaware fought on the side of the North because it couldn't get to the South, like Maryland and a few other States.

And when we moved down from Scranton, Pennsylvania, there were no—there were no African Americans where I lived in Scranton—virtually none. Moving to Delaware, Delaware has the eighth largest percent of African Americans of any State in the Nation.

And I remember being dropped—we went and moved to a little steel town called Claymont, Delaware, when coal died in Scranton and—and died in Claymont, as well as steel. But anyway, we would be dropped off because we were out along what they called the Philadelphia Pike was too—we were only lived—in a what later became a public housing project, we only lived probably a quarter mile, maybe half a mile from—we could have walked, except it was too dangerous crossing the road, so we would be dropped off in the morning.

Every morning, when we'd get dropped off, I'd see a bus go by—at the time, referred to "colored kids" going by—you know, by the Catholic school I—grade school I went to. But they also went by Claymont High School and Claymont Middle School, which is right up the street. And I thought that just—it just struck me as that—that can't be right.

And from that is what got me engaged, not a joke. I wasn't any great shake. But you know, I got involved in the civil rights movement. I got involved in—I'd usually go to—go to 7:30 Mass at St. Joe's, and then I'd get up and go to 10 o'clock Mass with Reverend—anyway—at the Black church—AME Church, where we'd plan what we were going to do.

The whole point is that I had the opportunity to get a little glimpse—just a little glimpse of what it was like and all the talent—all the talent that I knew. All those guys who were the lifeguards with me down at the—[inaudible]—swimming pool, four of them were all—were honor students in college. They were first-rate people.

And I just got—I wasn't any great shakes, but I got involved in desegregating movie theaters, those kinds of things. And one thing led to another, and then what happened was—and the reason I'm telling you this story because I think this is going to be a significant extension, what we're doing.

What happened was, Delaware was the only State in the Nation that had—was occupied by the military for 10 months after Dr. King was assassinated, because of the riots. There was National Guard on every single corner in Delaware with drawn bayonets. And I had gotten a job with a fancy law firm, and I—you have to clerk for 6 months as a lawyer before you can even—even if you pass the bar, before you could be admitted. And it was the middle of the clerkship, and I decided I just couldn't do it anymore because I'd look out my window and see the cops in Rodney Square—or the National Guard, I should say.

So I remember walking over—a guy named Frannie Kearns ran the public defender's office, and I walked in, and I sought a job. It was only part time. And he said, "Don't you work for Prickett, Ward, Burt?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "Are you okay?" [Laughter]

I said, "Yes, but I quit, and I want—that's what I wanted to do." And my State was a State that had—was a Democratic Party. It was a Southern Democratic Party—southern part of the State—George Wallace did very well in the State before he was assassinated on the Eastern Shore.

And so what happened was, we got—I got engaged, and one thing led to another. And I ended up getting involved in trying to change the Democratic Party to a Northeastern Democratic Party, because it was split at the time. And one thing led to another. I was a young lawyer. I got to—I joined a group called the New Democratic Coalition. And when you're the youngest lawyer or man or woman in the room, you get to turn the lights on and off. [Laughter]

And one thing led to another, and I kept to try—I started this effort to try to attract people to begin to run for office in States where—in districts we hadn't run. And they came to me and asked me to head up a group to find somebody to run for the United States Senate.

Make a long story short, no one would do it. There were some competent people and very important people that didn't want to run. And so I'm reporting back to this group all the time.

And so I'm down—I go to an off-year convention in the—1971 convention, the Democratic Party in Dover, Delaware. I went down with four guys that I—two were radio guys—anyway, all good men. They happened to all be men at the time.

And I—I came back and—after the afternoon meeting, and I went in to shave and get ready for the evening meeting. And what happened was, as I'm going in—I go in—you know, a little—a nice motel, when you have an 8-by-10 bathroom, a shower, a toilet, a sink. You know? And I'm shaving, and I have a towel around me, getting ready to go back. And hear, "Bam, bam, bam," at the door, and I thought it was Bob Cunningham and a few other people I came down with kidding with me.

I opened the door, and there were four leaders there. One family had more United States Senators than any family in American history, the Tunnells—former Justice Tunnell. The other was a chairman of the—was a former Governor, a gentleman named Carvel, a great, big guy, was a moderate guy—a moderate—Democratic member of the House of Representatives who had been defeated. And the State chairman.

And I'm standing there with a towel on and shaving cream on my face. *[Laughter]* They said: "Joe, we just had dinner. We want to talk to you." And they walked in. I said, "Well, okay." You know, with two headboards nailed the wall, a desk nailed to the other wall. I ran in to try on—I thought I was going to put something on. Well, I couldn't find—I just took the shaving cream off.

I'm standing, leaning against the thing. They said, "Joe, we decided: You should run." *[Laughter]* I said, "For what, Mr. Justice?" "For the Senate."

I said, "I'm not old enough." He said, "Obviously, you didn't do very well in constitutional law." *[Laughter]* He said, "You have to be 30 to be sworn in, not to be elected, and you'll be 30."

One thing led to another, and I'd hope what you had—one professor at school you really admired. Well, there was one I had. And on the way home, I called him, and I went from Dover to Newark, Delaware, to the university. And I said, "What do you think?" And I'll never forget what he said. He said, "Remember what Plato said." And I'm thinking, "What the hell did Plato say?" *[Laughter]*

Plato said, and I'm paraphrasing, "The penalty good people pay for not being involved in politics is being governed by people worse than themselves."

So I went home to my deceased wife, and I said, "What do you think I should do?" She said: "Look, you're working part time as a public defender. You're trying to start a law firm. You're working 40 to 80 hours a week. Pick one." *[Laughter]*

One thing led to another, and I won—ran and I won. And I won because the African American community showed up over 90 percent for me in my State and every election since then.

The point I'm making is simple. You can do things you don't think you can do. You can do things you don't think you can do.

And by the way, I—for 36 years—not a joke, and you'll all check this, I know; check on your phones—*[laughter]*—I was—I was listed the poorest man in the United States Congress—

not just Senate—Congress—for 36 years I was there. I had a good salary. I was making \$42,000 as a Senator and, after that, it went up. *[Laughter]* I never thought I was poor.

But my point is, I didn't come from any means. So I hope some of you do more than just change things. I hope you run. I hope you get involved in the political process. It's not just supporting people, but thinking of yourself as being engaged, because we can really—the country is ready.

We really are, as I said, at one of these inflection points. Think about it. What's going to happen? Mark my words. You tell your children, and you're—if you're young enough, you'll know. In 20 years, you're going to see a different world, a different nation.

We can—I think we can make it a hell of a lot better. I really do. And I am optimistic. So remember.

I'm sorry to talk so long. But I just—I—I just want you to—please, please, please get a—not just get involved—it all gets down to the vote. The bottom line is the vote.

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

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:14 p.m. at the Philadelphia Marriott Downtown hotel. In his remarks, he referred to former President Barack Obama and his daughters Malia and Sasha Obama. He also referred to his granddaughters Finnegan J. and Roberta M. "Maisy" Biden, his brothers James B. and Francis W. Biden, and sister Valerie Biden Owens. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on September 17. Audio was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Department of Education National Historically Black Colleges and Universities Week Conference in Philadelphia, PA, overflow crowd.

Locations: Philadelphia, PA.

Names: Biden Owens, Valerie; Biden, Finnegan J.; Biden, Francis W.; Biden, James B.; Biden, Jill T.; Biden, R. Hunter; Biden, Roberta M. "Maisy"; Obama, Barack; Obama, Malia; Obama, Natasha "Sasha".

Subjects: Civil rights movement; Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs); Pennsylvania, President's visit.

DCPD Number: DCPD202400789.