

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Eulogy at a Memorial Service for Ethel Kennedy
October 16, 2024

Hello.

Joe, thank you.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

I'm sure you're clapping because I'm the last speaker.

Well, that was worth that partial comment—or concert. You know what he said on the way out? Can I tell them, pal? He said, "If I get a Grammy, I'm going to give it to you," the only guy in this whole darn church who can't sing a note. *[Laughter]*

My dad used to have a band and sang. He said: "Joey, I don't know where the hell you came from. You can't carry a tune. You can't sing. You can't dance. I don't know where you came from, but I love you anyway." *[Laughter]*

Father MacMillan, thank you for everything. Thank you for being so good to us.

President Clinton, President Obama, distinguished guests; the Kennedy family, children and grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and extended family: It's been an emotional journey listening to all of you. When I knew I was going to be the last speaker, I thought, "How did that happen?" Because, you know, it brings back so many memories.

Ethel was always there for so many people, and she played an essential role in my life as well—maybe a little different than with others. She was there as soon as I entered political office in 1972 as a 29-year-old kid before I got sworn in.

I was in her brother-in-law's office, Teddy's office, hiring staff—I was only 29; you had to be 30 years old to be sworn in, and I wasn't 30 yet—when I got a phone call from the fire department in my—by my house saying there had been an accident. A tractor-trailer had broadsided my wife's automobile, Christmas shopping with a Christmas tree on top, on December 18, and killed my wife and killed my daughter, and my boys weren't expected to live.

When I lost my family—and she was there. Joe, your mom was there then—then.

As soon as I got elected President, I received a letter from your mom. The letterhead was titled Mrs. Robert Kennedy, and in her very neat handwriting, she had written that she took great comfort in knowing the country was in good hands.

She had no idea, for a 29-year-old kid in that circumstance, how much it meant. Because, as some of you know—Bill knows—I didn't plan on sticking around after that accident.

She said she was honored and proud there was a bust of her husband, Bobby Kennedy, in my office, the Oval Office.

I have only two political heroes in my life: Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy. Not a joke. So I didn't realize—my two colleagues from the—who were President know—you get to pick what you want in your office, and I wanted to be able to see both of them from my—from the Resolute Desk by the fireplace: Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy.

And, days later, I received another letter from her that I'll always remember, and I know all of you look forward to each year: a valentine card—a valentine card. Which, in our house, Valentine's Day is known as "Jill's holiday." *[Laughter]*

Like Ethel, Jill is a practical joker. So it was no surprise—it was no surprise that Jill loved Ethel's card that year, which said—I'm not sure the hundred others who receive it felt the same way because, apparently, she sent that card—she sent it to everyone that year. *[Laughter]* It was a picture of me and Ethel surrounded by hearts. *[Laughter]* Oh, you think I'm kidding. I—it meant a lot to me, I'm telling you.

Printed—the language on the card, it said—in the printed language of the card, it said, "I'm not Biden my time waiting for you, Valentine." *[Laughter]* And then in her handwriting, she says, "'Cause he's no ordinary Joe." *[Laughter]*

I don't know how many of you got that damn valentine, but I tell you what, it meant a lot to me. *[Laughter]* I've received a lot of honors in my life, but that might be the best one I've ever received. *[Laughter]*

You know, yes, Ethel was Mrs. Robert Kennedy. She was one of my political—he was my—as I said, one of my political heroes. But I always knew her as Ethel Kennedy, a hero in her own right. I loved Bobby Kennedy. I've only met him once when I was in Syracuse law school and he was campaigning. But I just—I admired him so damn much.

I've told John Kerry this, my buddy. I could picture Bobby at my kitchen table with my dad and my mom. I could picture him there.

But you know, Ethel was a hero in her own right, full of character, full of integrity and empathy—and genuine empathy. She was full of laughter and joy and light. She was a great athlete in her own right, for real. She was a mother. Literally, there was nothing, from my perspective and, I suspect, most of you, that she couldn't do—nothing.

Four years later, after I had gotten—after Bobby—she lost her beloved Bobby, she invited me and my boys to her home after the accident left my family broken, having lost my wife and daughter, my boys barely making it. Along with Teddy, she got me through a time I didn't want to stick around. I wanted no part of being in the Congress or the Senate. I mean it.

I'd spoken to my Governor, because we had elected a Democratic Governor, to find a replacement for me. But Teddy and Ethel Kennedy would hear nothing—none of it. You know, the fact is, like she did for the country, Ethel helped my family find a way forward with principle and purpose.

We saw how she picked up Bobby's cause and stamped her own mark on the country. Marching for civil rights, as you heard about today, and working to end poverty at home, attempting to secure peace abroad, and so much more. She once said: "For anyone to achieve something, you have to show a little courage. You're only on this Earth once. You must give it all you've got."

Reminded me of my mom. My mom used to say: "Joey, courage lives in every heart, and one day you'll be called upon. Be ready to stand up." And that's not—that's from Catherine Eugenia Finnegan Biden, and she meant it. She meant it.

For over 50 years, with Ethel's own iron will and moral courage, she gave it everything she had, and we're a better nation and a better world because of Ethel Kennedy.

Let me close with this. On a Sunday in May this year, I delivered a commencement speech at Morehouse College in Atlanta. I noted that had we been in church that day, there'd be a reflection about the Resurrection and redemption. We remember Jesus was buried on Friday, and on Sunday, He rose again. But we don't talk nearly enough about that Saturday when His disciples felt all hope was lost—all hope was lost.

In our lives and in the life of our Nation, we have those Saturdays—and thank God your mom, your grandmom, your great-grandmom was there for me—to bear witness to the day before glory, to see people's pain and not look away. But work is to be done on Saturday, is to move pain to purpose. How can faith get a person, get a nation through what is coming?

Well, my message to all of us here today and to the entire the country is, look to Ethel Kennedy's faith.

To the Kennedy family—presumptuous of me to say this and maybe sound inappropriate, but to the Kennedy family, the Biden family is here for you, as you've always been for us. You changed the life of my boys. You really did.

When I lost my son Beau, he was attorney general of the State of Delaware. And he volunteered to join the National Guard as attorney general. You either have to be State property or Federal property. And he temporarily gave up his office to go with his unit for a year in Iraq. And unfortunately, I was in—in out—in and out of Iraq, as Barack knows, because—and Afghanistan 30-some times. And I got to see him several times.

But the bad news was he was about a quarter to a half mile away from a burn pit—100 yards long, 10 feet deep, burning everything from waste to—everything, poisoning the air. And he came home with stage 4 glioblastoma, and he died. Your mom was there then too.

I apologize.

So, from the Biden family to the Kennedy family, the hymn that's very close to our heart based on the 91st Psalm, it goes like this: "May he raise you up on eagle's wings and bear you on the breath of dawn, and make you to shine like the Sun, and hold you in the palm of his hand."

May God bless Ethel Kennedy, and may we—she—may be—she be reunited with the blessed pieces of her soul in Heaven.

God bless you all, and thank you for letting me participate. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:53 p.m. at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle. In his remarks, he referred to U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland for Economic Affairs Joseph P. Kennedy III, who introduced the President; musician Stevie Wonder, who performed before the President was introduced; Donald A. MacMillan, former campus minister, Boston College; former Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy II; and former Secretary of State John F. Kerry. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on October 17.

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