

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks at the National Italian American Foundation Gala
October 16, 2024

The First Lady. Thank you.

Thank you, Alexa. And I'm excited to see your generation forging new connections to our past and shining such a bright light into our future.

And I'm also grateful to the National Italian American Foundation. *[Laughter]* John, Robert, you've all—you've helped so many people experience our heritage in Italy and preserve it here in the United States. So thank you.

Buonasera, everyone. *[Laughter]*

Audience members. *Buonasera!*

The First Lady. And welcome to the White House.

When I was a little girl, I learned what it means to be Italian American in my grandparents' tiny, well-worn kitchen and not only because there were ribbons of pasta—homemade pasta—and sauce bubbling over on the stove.

No, the most important lesson that I learned in their kitchen was that, when you're Italian American, there's always room for one more chair at the table, enough bread toast to feed one more guest, enough space in our hearts for another friend to become like family.

And even when times are hard, there's——

The President. Looking at me. *[Laughter]*

The First Lady. There's always enough time to——

[At this point, the President made the sign of the cross.]

[Laughter]—enjoy the pleasures of life together.

My grandparents also taught me to never waste an opportunity to invite more people to the table and make a difference together. So I knew I had to bring those values of love, abundance, and service to the White House as the first Italian American first lady.

That's why I've used this platform to give more women a seat at the table in discussions about their own health—to hear from military families about how we can support them, to uplift community college students.

And I've had the opportunity to bring so many more people inside the historic walls of the White House by creating new educational experiences that allow more Americans to immerse themselves in this house, "the people's house"—by using these rooms to celebrate the young people who are changing our world; by honoring the immigrants who helped build this country; and tonight—thank you—and tonight, gathering with this community—my community—to celebrate our culture. *[Laughter]*

So it's been the honor of my life to serve as First Lady. And during my time here, I've often thought of my great-grandparents leaving everything they knew behind to chase the promise of America. And then, when they arrived on Ellis Island to take their first strides into a new life, I don't think that they could ever have imagined that a group of hundreds of Italian Americans—coming together in the White House.

When our roots run deep, there's no limit to how high we can reach. So tonight I hope that you feel the power of our ancestors' values beating inside of us as we carry their legacy forward; that you feel home—you feel at home, eat good food, and end up with a little something sweet together, as a family. *[Laughter]*

Now, it's my pleasure to introduce a man who's always felt at home—*[laughter]*—with Italian Americans. In fact, Joe first met my family at a big cookout at my grandparents' house in Hammonton, New Jersey.

So I was pretty nervous, you know, about Joe coming to meet my family. But as soon as Joe pulled up into the driveway—and you know—you can picture this—my tiny grandmom bolted out of the house, bounded down the porch steps, in her housecoat and her apron, and she gave Joe this huge hug, as if she'd known him his entire life. And before he could even get a plate, Joe was greeted not as a stranger, but as family.

Over the years, I've seen the Italian American community extend the same joyful love and support to Joe. You mean so much to him. *[Laughter]*

So please welcome—I don't know why I'm getting so emotional—your President, my husband, Joe.

The President. Welcome to the White House. My name is Joe Biden, and I'm Jill Biden's husband. *[Laughter]*

And I may be Irish, but I'm not stupid. *[Laughter]* I married Dominic Giacoppa's granddaughter.

And, 5 years ago, I want you to know, I received the Sons of Italy "Man of the Year" award. To the best of my knowledge, I'm the only non-Italian ever to receive that award. *[Laughter]* There was a large crowd when I received that award. It was down by the train station.

You know, I said I moved from an Irish Catholic neighborhood in Scranton to an Italian Catholic neighborhood in Claymont, Delaware. And I went from a—where—a place where you ended like Finnegan and Murphy and all that, down if your name didn't lend—end in "o," you're in real trouble. *[Laughter]*

I was one of the few guys whose name didn't end in "o." I'd look out there and look at all my friends. You know, I accepted the award and named some of the guys I grew up with next door: Sonny Daramo, whose mom would say: "Joey, it's not sauce; it's gravy, Joey. It's gravy, Joey." *[Laughter]* Oh, you think I'm kidding. I'm not. *[Laughter]*

No, Anzilotti, De Sabatino, Buccini, Bifferato, Ceni, Congialdi, Deletterio, Monaco—no, you think I'm kidding—

By the way, after I talked about it, I looked down at that crowd and said, "You know"—thinking about it, I said, "I deserve this damn award." *[Laughter]* "With that many Italian friends, man, I deserve that award." *[Laughter]*

Thank you, Alexa, for being here and sharing your pride in your family and your heritage.

Look, and it's great to see so many friends from the National Italian American Foundation, you know, the sons and daughters of Italy, and so many other Italian American leaders and organization from all across the country.

You know, I can honestly say, I wouldn't be President without you. I wouldn't be President without the Italian American community.

Now, what she didn't say is, we do have something in common. I'm Catherine Eugenia Finnegan—Irish Catholic's background. You guys, a lot of you are Catholics, you know. [Laughter] I know you don't admit it as much, but there—[laughter].

This month is about celebrating the extraordinary contributions and proud, proud heritage of Italian Americans to our Nation. And it's kind of endless.

For some of our families, your story is America's story. It stretches back generations. For others, it just started. No matter when these stories of immigrants who left everything behind to travel across the ocean in pursuit of the American dream just for a shot—just a simple shot. You and your ancestors worked hard to help build this country and build the middle class.

People like my college friend, the late Congressman Bill Pascrell—he's been—Bill Jr. is here. Where are you, Bill? There you are.

I used to kid his dad all the time. I said, "You know, Delaware may be the second smallest State in the Union, but we own the Delaware River up to the highwater mark in New Jersey." [Laughter] There was actually a Supreme Court case about that. Anyway. [Laughter]

But he represented New Jersey, and his son represents the House of Representatives. And Bill did it for 27 years, and he passed away this summer. He was the grandson of Italian immigrants, a giant in the community, and a devoted patriot to the Nation. You've got good blood, kid, as my dad would say.

He was a part of a proud, proud heritage of Italian Americans who enrich every part of American life: entrepreneurs, educators, scientists, chefs, diplomats, doctors, servicemembers, veterans, athletes, actors, artists, and so much more. There's nothing the Italian community is not engaged in—I mean, virtually nothing. There's nothing—no community you don't excel in.

But I also know it wasn't always easy. Many of your ancestors faced horrific discrimination, like my ancestors faced horrific discrimination, when they first came to our shores. Yet, even in the face of—Italian Americans proved that they had the resilient spirit and a devotion to family and community, an unshakeable faith in the promise of a better tomorrow.

You know, my dad used to have an expression. He'd say, "Joey, family is the beginning, the middle, and the end—the beginning, the middle, and the end." It's a faith that has carried through to today, both at home and abroad.

Italian Americans are central to our Nation's deep friendship and strategic partnership with Italy. I've worked out a really good relationship with the Italians. I'm—well, Italian—I'd better have done that, but at home. [Laughter] But all kidding aside, with Italy. What a magnificent country.

You know, and—anyway, I won't get started. But—[laughter]—you know, the bond between our countries is founded on a shared principle and shared commitments, including the shared support for the brave people of Ukraine as they defend themselves against Russia's illegal—[inaudible].

I might add, they have a female leader. I wish Sonny Daramo were here to hear that. [Laughter]

In addition, Italy's remarkable stewardship with the Presidency of the G-7 this year, as well as Italy's longstanding contributions to transatlantic security through NATO—look, and their strong leadership in the European Union—it underscores how important Italy's role is on the global stage, not just, you know, for America, but for the world.

You know, let me close with this. You know, Michelangelo famously said he "saw an angel in the marble, and I carved until I set it free." "I saw an angel in the marble, and I carved until I

set it free." To me, that's the essence of what Italian Americans have done to our country for our entire history. You've carved until you set us free. I'm being deadly earnest.

We're all reminded that when Jill and I had the honor to host one of the greatest singers of all time, in my view, Andrea Bocelli, here at the White House for Christmas in our first year in office, he performed with his son and his daughter as if they were a choir of herald angels. They were incredible. You know, with their God-given talent, the Bocelli family moved our hearts, pierced our souls—and I mean this sincerely—I have all of the music on my—and they embody the spirit and beauty of all that connects us as people. A powerful reminder that America's story depends on—not on any one of us, but on—not on some of us, but all of us.

It's a story I see in all of you, working tirelessly—tirelessly—to help realize the promise of America—and I mean it—for all Americans. Not a joke. Because some of you have been on the short end of the stick like my family growing up had been.

This is what the Italian American Heritage Month is all about. It's about celebrating and connecting, feeling the pride in heritage and community, remembering who the hell we are. We're the United States of America, and there's nothing beyond our capacity when we do it together—nothing, nothing, nothing. *[Applause]* No, I really mean it.

So thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

And I want to tell you, you know what made me the most—probably one of the most famous guys in my family—the whole family? Not being President. I took her to a beautiful little island off of Sicily. *[Laughter]* And she keeps saying, "I'm going back." *[Laughter]*

The First Lady. Soon!

The President. "With or without you." *[Laughter]*

So, folks, all kidding aside, thank you. You're an incredible community.

The First Lady. Thank you.

The President. You're an essential part of my life.

Thank you, thank you, thank you. Enjoy the day.

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

Thank you. All right.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 6 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Waretown, NJ, resident and musician Alexa Tabbacchino; Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni of Italy; and musician Andrea Bocelli, his son Matteo, and daughter Virginia. The First Lady referred to John F. Calvelli, executive vice chair, and Robert E. Carlucci, chairman, National Italian American Foundation. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on October 17.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : National Italian American Foundation gala.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Biden, Jill T.; Bocelli, Andrea; Bocelli, Matteo; Bocelli, Virginia; Meloni, Giorgia; Pascrell, William, III; Tabbacchino, Alexa.

Subjects: Group of Seven (G-7) nations; Italy, Prime Minister; Italy, relations with U.S.; National Italian American Foundation; North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Russia, conflict in Ukraine; Ukraine, Russian invasion and airstrikes.

DCPD Number: DCPD202400920.