

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks at the Gila River Indian Community in Laveen Village, Arizona
October 25, 2024

The President. I'm Joe Biden. I'm Jill Biden's husband [*Laughter*]

Gov, thank you for that introduction and to the Gila Indian River Community—the Gila—yes, Gila—nothing wrong with me—[*laughter*—Gila River Indian Community for welcoming me today.

You know, I say this with all sincerity, this, to me, is one the most consequential things I've ever had an opportunity to do in my whole career and as President of the United States. It's an honor—a genuine honor to be in this special place on this special day.

Thank you to Senator Mark Kelly, a great friend, who also is married to an incredible woman who is my friend.

Please have a seat, by the way. [*Laughter*]

And Congressman Greg Stanton. I saw Greg when I came in. He's over there somewhere. Greg, thank you.

And I'm putting these glasses on because I'm having trouble seeing this.

And all the elected leaders and the Tribal community leaders for being here.

You know, I can't tell you what a special thanks I have for Deb Haaland, my Interior Secretary. I was determined—I was determined—I made a commitment when I became President to have an administration that looked like America. Except you're America, and there's—never has been—never has been a Native American, an Indigenous person who was on—in the Cabinet or in a—in the Secretary's job or any consequential job in a Presidential administration.

She's the first—but it's clearly not the last—Native American Cabinet Secretary ever. And her historic and dedicated leadership is strengthening the relationship between the Tribal Nations and the Federal Government—is unlike ever happened before.

That's why we're here today.

You know, when I got to the Senate, I was only 29 years old. I had to wait 17 days to be eligible. And I had—after I got elected, while I'd be waiting, my wife and daughter were killed and my two boys were badly injured.

And a guy that came to my assistance was a guy named Danny Inouye. And the first thing he taught me—not a joke—was: "Joe, it is not 'Indians.' It's 'Indian Nations'—Indian"—[*applause*]. No, I—he was serious, deadly earnest about it.

It's been 10 years since a sitting President came and visited Indian Country. That's simply much too long. And that's why I am here today not only to fulfil my promise to be a President that—first President to visit Indian Country, but more importantly, to right a wrong, to chart a new path toward a better future for us all.

I am also here because, as I said, my wife Jill has been here 10 times in Indian Country, literally. The First Lady sends her love and said, "Joe, make sure you come home." [*Laughter*] Because every time she goes—she spent a lot of time in, excuse me for saying this, the Navajo Nation. I'm worried—every time she goes, I'm worried she's not coming home. [*Laughter*]

I watched that beautiful performance just now, and it moved me deeply. It's a reminder of everything Native people enjoy and employ: sacred traditions, culture passed down over thousands of—thousands of years.

Long before there was a United States, Native communities flourished on these lands. They practiced democratic government before we ever heard of it, developed advanced agriculture, contributed to science, art, and culture.

But eventually, the United States was established and began expanding, entering treaties with sovereign Tribal Nations. But as time moved on, respect for Tribal sovereignty evaporated, was shattered, pushing Native people off their homelands, denying—denying—their humanity and their rights, targeting children to cut their connection to their ancestors and their inheritance and their heritage.

At first, in the nineteen—1800s, the effort was voluntary, asking Tribes to sell their children—to send their children away to vocational schools. But then—then the Federal Government mandated—mandated the removal of children from their families and Tribes, launching what's called the Federal Indian Boarding School era. Over a 150-year span—150 years—from the early 1800s to 1870—to 1970. One of the most horrific chapters in American history. We should be ashamed. A chapter that most Americans don't know about. The vast majority don't even know about it.

I was at my hotel today. I told the people—the hotel staff, as we were leaving. They said, "Where are you going?" I told them. They said, "What are you doing?" I told them. They said they're Natives here. They said: "I never knew that. I never knew that." Think of how many people don't know.

As President, I believe it's imperative—important that we do know: know generations of Native children stolen, taken away to places they didn't know with people they never met who spoke a language they had never heard. Native communities silenced. Their children's laughter and play were gone.

Children would arrive at schools. Their clothes taken off. Their hair that they were told was sacred was chopped off. Their names literally erased and replaced by a number or an English name.

One survivor later recounted her days when taken away. She said, quote, "My mother standing on that sidewalk as we loaded into a green bus. I can see the image of my mom burned into my mind and my heart where she was crying."

Another survivor described what it was like at the boarding school, and I quote: "When I would talk in my Tribal language, I would get hit. I lost my tongue. They beat me every day."

Children abused—emotionally, physically, and sexually abused. Forced into hard labor. Some put up for adoption without the consent of their birth parents. Some left for dead in unmarked graves. And for those who did return home, they were wounded in body and in spirit: trauma and shame passed down through generations.

The policy continued even after the Civil Rights Act, which got me involved in politics as a young man. Even after the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, it continued.

All told, hundreds and hundreds of Federal Indian Boarding Schools across the country. Tens of thousands of Native children entered the system. Nearly 1,000 documented Native child deaths, though the real number is likely to be much, much higher; lost generations, culture, and language; lost trust.

It's horribly, horribly wrong. It's a sin on our soul.

I'd like to ask, with your permission, for a moment of silence as we remember those lost and the generations living with that trauma.

[At this point, the President observed a moment of silence.]

After 150 years, the United States Government eventually stopped the program, but the Federal Government has never—never—formally apologized for what happened until today.

I formally apologize, as President of the United States of America, for what we did. I formally apologize. And it's long overdue.

At the Tribal school—at a Tribal school in Arizona, a community full of tradition and culture, and joined by survivors and descendants to do just that: apologize, apologize, apologize—rewrite the history book correctly.

I have a solemn responsibility to be the first President to formally apologize to the Native peoples—Native Americans, Native Hawaiians, Native Alaskans—and [at; White House correction] Federal Indian Boarding Schools. It's long, long, long overdue. Quite frankly, there's no excuse that this apology took 50 years to make.

The Federal Indian Boarding School policy and the pain it has caused will always be a significant mark of shame, a blot on American history. For too long, this all happened with virtually no public attention, not written about in our history books——

Audience member. Yes, what about the people in Gaza?

The President. ——not taught in our schools.

Audience member. What about the people in Palestine, huh?

[The audience disruption continued.]

Audience members. Boo!

Audience member. *[Inaudible]*

The President. Let her talk. Let her talk.

Audience member. *[Inaudible]*—empty promise for our people. How can you apologize for a genocide while committing a genocide in Palestine?

Free Palestine! Free Palestine!

Audience member. Get out of here!

Audience member. Free Palestine!

The President. No, no. Let—let her go. There's a lot of innocent people being killed.

Audience member. *[Inaudible]*

The President. There's a lot of innocent people being killed, and it has to stop.

For those—*[applause]*. For those who went through this period, it was too painful to speak of. For our Nation, it was too shameful to acknowledge. But just because history is silent doesn't mean it didn't take place. It did take place.

While darkness can hide much, it erases nothing. It erases nothing. Some injustices are heinous, horrific, and grievous. They can't be buried, no matter how hard people try.

As I've said throughout my Presidency, we must know the good, the bad, the truth of who we are as a nation. That's what great nations do. We're a great nation. We're the greatest of nations.

We do not erase history; we make history. We learn from history, and we remember so we can heal as a nation. It takes remembering.

This formal apology is the culmination of decades of work by so many courageous people, many of whom are here today: survivors and descendants, allies and advocates—like the Nation's Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition and other—all of you who are part of that, stand up. Stand up. As my grandfather would say, you're doing God's work.

And other courageous leaders who spent decades shining a light on this dark chapter. And leaders like Secretary Haaland, whose grandparents were children at one of those boarding schools.

U.S. Interior Department, the same department that long ago oversaw Federal Indian Boarding Schools—guess what?—the extensive work on the—breaking ground, it's happened with her. It's appropriate that she is bringing an end to what that very agency did. Groundbreaking report documenting what happened.

We owe it to all of you across Indian Country. The truth—the truth—must be told. And the truth must be heard all across America.

But this official—a policy [apology; White House correction] is only one step toward and forward from the shadows of failed policies of the past. That's why I've committed to working with Indigenous communities across the country to write a new and better chapter of our—in our history, to honor the solemn promise the United States made to Tribal Nations, to fulfill our Federal trust and treaty obligations. It's long, long, long overdue.

And I say this with all sincerity, from day one, my administration, Jill and I, Kamala and Secretary Haaland, our entire administration have worked to include Indigenous voices in all we do. Along with Secretary Haaland, I've appointed Native Americans to lead across the Federal Government.

I signed a groundbreaking Executive order to give Tribes the—more autonomy to make your own decisions—requiring Federal agencies to streamline grant appropriations and applications, to comanage Federal programs, to eliminate heavy-handed reporting requirements. It's about representing your autonomy. And, I might add, it's a hell of a lot more efficient when you do it too.

Folks, I'm proud to have reestablished the White House Council on Native American Affairs; relaunched the White House Tribal Nations Summit; and taken historic steps to improve Tribal consultation.

With the historic laws I've signed, we're making some of the most significant investments in Native communities ever—ever—in American history.

It's part of my "Invest in America" agenda, and it's helping all Americans from every State and every Tribe, and that's good for all America.

Helping Native communities get through the pandemic with vaccine shots in arms and checks in pockets. I'm proud this helped cut child poverty in Native communities by more than one-third.

I'm proud our economy—our economic plan has created 200,000 jobs for Native Americans, record-low employment [unemployment; White House correction] in Native communities.

With the strong support from Secretary Haaland and all of you, we're finally modernizing Tribal infrastructure, for God's sake: building new roads, new bridges; delivering clean water, affordable high-speed broadband in every Native community; and so much more.

Folks, we're just getting started. We're making historic climate investments in clean energy, conservation, and clean water [for; White House correction] Native communities, including costewardships of our land and waters.

We just designated the first National Marine Sanctuary proposed by Indigenous communities, which is off the coast of California. We just got that done. And I have restored and designated multiple national monuments to honor Tribal Nations, including the Ancestral Footprints of the Grand Canyon, right here in Arizona, where I had the honor of visiting. It was breathtaking. It was breathtaking.

I secured the first-ever advanced funding for Indian Health Services so Tribal hospitals can plan ahead, order supplies, hire doctors and know that the money will be there.

We're also preserving ancestral Tribal homelands, restoring salmon and other native fish, recognizing the value of Indigenous knowledge and languages, especially those damaged in the boarding school era.

In fact, my administration was proud to defend the Indian Child Welfare Act, an act that was passed in 1970 [1978; White House correction] in no small part to remedy the harms of 150 years of taking Native children away from their families.

But you all know, that act was challenged just a few years ago in the summer of 2023. Those who opposed us challenged—challenged—on the grounds that Native families should not have priority over everyone else in adopting Native children. Well, I took that all the way to the Supreme Court, and we won. We won.

We also extended mental health programs through the Bureau of Indian Education so young people have the tools to end cycles of generational trauma.

As an educator, this is something Jill cares deeply about, my wife, just as she's traveled across Native communities to increase access to health care and so much more, including helping open the first cancer cure [care; White House correction] center in Navajo Nation.

And more to do—a lot more to do.

And by the way, the infrastructure bill is over a trillion dollars. It's not a decade. I mean, it's not a quarter. It's going to be there for a decade. Much, much more to come, and you've got to get your fair share.

By authorizing [reauthorizing; White House correction] the Violence Against Women Act—an Act I took great pains in writing 30 years ago, we also—we also reasirmed [reaffirmed; White House correction] Tribal sovereignty and expanded Tribal jurisdiction in cases where outside predators [perpetrators; White House correction] harm members of your Nation.

And as we mark Native Americans History Month in November—this November, we recognize the contributions of Indigenous people in—to American history. You—you are the first Americans. I might add, you're among the most patriotic Americans. *[Applause]* Oh, that's a fact. The whole of America should know, all Americans should know Indigenous people volunteer to serve in the United States military five times more than any other single group. Five times. Five. Five. Five. Many having paid the ultimate sacrifice in every war since our founding.

To all of you, thank you—thank you for serving in so many ways—as first responders, artists, entrepreneurs, educators, doctors, scientists, and so much more—sharing your culture and your knowledge for the good of future generations, believing in possibilities—the possibility to usher in a new era to a nation-to-nation relationship grounded in dignity and respect. It matters.

My dad used to have an expression. He'd say: "Joey, everyone—everyone—is entitled to be treated with dignity. Everyone." "Everyone is entitled"—he meant it.

Well, let me close with this. It's about restoring your dignity. I know no apology can or will make up for what was lost during the darkness of the Federal Boarding School policy. But today we're finally moving forward into the light.

As President of the United States, I've had the honor to bestow our Nation's most prestigious medals to distinguished people and organizations all across America. That includes Native Americans who survived the boarding school era.

Early in my term, I bestowed the Medal of Freedom—our highest civilian honor—on a man my grandfather, who was an Irish immigrant and was not treated very well because he was an Irish Catholic in the coal-mine era in Scranton—but he went on to be an all-American football player at Santa Clara. And every time they'd talk about all-Americans, he'd say, "Joey, the greatest athlete in American history is Jim Thorpe." Oh, I'm serious—I knew a lot about Jim Thorpe before some of you probably even knew. *[Laughter]*

As a child, Jim was taken from his home but went on to become one of the greatest athletes ever, ever, ever in all of American history.

And earlier this week, I bestowed two other revered medals—the National Medals of Arts and the National Medal of the Humanities—to 39 extraordinary Americans and organizations, including Roseta Wrol *[Rosita Worl; White House correction]*, an Alaskan Native.

More than 80 years ago, she was a 6-year-old when she was taken to a Federal boarding school. She spent 3 years without her family, her family not knowing if she'd ever come home. Nine years old, she was one of those who did come home.

Over the next seven decades, she became a leading anthropologist and advocate, building a new era of understanding. Her story, from being taken from her home as child to standing in the Oval Office receiving one of the Nation's most consequential medals, is a story of the truth, the power of healing.

When Roseta *[Rosita; White House correction]* sees young people signing traditional—singing traditional songs, just like we heard today, she says, and I quote, "We will hear the voices of our ancestors, and we are now hearing it through our children."

For too long, this Nation sought to silence the voices of generations of Native children, but now your voices are being heard.

That's the America that we should be. That's the America we can all be proud of. That's who we are. For God's sake, let's make sure we reach out and embrace, because you make us stronger. You are America.

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

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:44 a.m. at the Gila Crossing Community School. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Stephen Roe Lewis of the Gila River Indian Community; former Rep. Gabrielle D. Giffords; former President Barack Obama; Vice President Kamala D. Harris; and Rosita Kaaháni Worl, professor of anthropology, University of Alaska, in her capacity as a 2023 recipient of the National Humanities Medal.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Gila River Indian Community in Laveen Village, AZ.

Locations: Laveen Village, AZ.

Names: Biden, Jill T.; Biden, R. Hunter; Giffords, Gabrielle D.; Haaland, Debra A.; Harris, Kamala D.; Kelly, Mark E.; Lewis, Stephen Roe; Obama, Barack; Stanton, Gregory J.; Worl, Rosita K̡aaháni.

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