

## Remarks by the President and the Vice President in Presentation of the Medal of Freedom to Vice President Joe Biden, January 12, 2017

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Hey! All right, that's enough. Don't want to embarrass the guy. [LAUGHTER]

Welcome to the White House, everybody. As I have already delivered my farewell address, I will try to be relatively brief. But I just wanted to get some folks together to pay tribute to somebody who has not only been by my side for the duration of this amazing journey, but somebody who has devoted his entire professional life to service to this country, the best Vice President America has ever had, Mr. Joe Biden. [APPLAUSE]

This also gives the Internet one last chance to talk about our bromance. [LAUGHTER] This has been quite a ride. It was eight and a half years ago that I chose Joe to be my Vice President. There has not been a single moment since that time that I've doubted the wisdom of that decision. He was the best possible choice, not just for me, but for the American people. This is an extraordinary man with an extraordinary career in public service. This is somebody the people of Delaware sent to the Senate as quickly as they possibly could. [LAUGHTER]

Elected at age 29, for more than a dozen years apiece he served as chair or ranking member of the Judiciary and Foreign Relation Committees. Domestically, he championed landmark legislation to make our communities safer, to protect our women from violence. Internationally, his wisdom and capacity to build relationships that shaped our nation's response to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain, to counterterrorism, Iraq, Afghanistan.

And for the past eight years, he could not have been a more devoted or effective partner in the progress that we've made. He fought to make college more affordable and revitalize American manufacturing as the head of our Middle Class Task Force. He suited up for our Cancer Moonshot, giving hope to millions of Americans touched by this disease.

He led our efforts to combat gun violence, and he rooted out any possible misappropriations that might have occurred. And as a consequence, the Recovery Act worked as well as just about any largescale stimulus project has ever worked in this country. He visited college after college -- and made friends with Lady Gaga [LAUGHTER] -- for our "It's On Us" campaign against campus sexual assault. And when the Pope visited, Joe was even kind enough to let me talk to His Holiness, as well. [LAUGHTER]

Behind the scenes, Joe's candid, honest counsel has made me a better President and a better Commander-in-Chief. From the Situation Room to our weekly lunches, to our huddles after everybody else has cleared out of the room, he's been unafraid to give it to me straight, even if we disagree -- in fact, especially if we disagree.

And all of this makes him, I believe, the finest Vice President we have ever seen. And I also think he has been a lion of American history. The best part is he's nowhere close to finished. In the years ahead, as a citizen, he will continue to build on that legacy, internationally and

domestically. He's got a voice of vision and reason and optimism, and a love for people. And we're going to need that spirit and that vision as we continue to try to make our world safer and to make sure that everybody has got a fair shot in this country.

So, all told, that's a pretty remarkable legacy. An amazing career in public service. It is, as Joe once said, a big deal. (Laughter and applause.) It is.

But we all know that, on its own, his work -- this list of accomplishments, the amazing résumé -- does not capture the full measure of Joe Biden. I have not mentioned Amtrak yet or aviators. [LAUGHTER] Literally. [LAUGHTER]

Folks don't just feel like they know Joe the politician, they feel like they know the person -- what makes him laugh, what he believes, what he cares about, and where he came from. Pretty much every time he speaks, he treats us to some wisdom from the nuns who taught him in grade school -- [LAUGHTER] -- or from an old Senate colleague.

But, of course, more frequently cited -- Catherine and Joseph, Sr., his mom and dad: "No one's better than you, but you're better than nobody." [LAUGHTER] "Bravery resides in every heart, and yours is fierce and clear." "And when you get knocked down, Joey, get up -- get up." [LAUGHTER] "Get up." [APPLAUSE]

That's where he got those broad shoulders. That's where he got that Biden heart. And through his life, through trial after trial, he has never once forgotten the values and the moral fiber that made him who he is. That's what steels his faith in God, and in America, and in his friends, and in all of us.

When Joe talks to autoworkers whose livelihoods he helped save, we hear the son of a man who once knew the pain of having to tell his kids that he had lost his job.

When Joe talks about hope and opportunity for our children, we hear the father who rode the rails home every night so that he could be there to tuck his kids into bed.

When Joe sticks up for the little guy, we hear the young boy who used to stand in front of the mirror, reciting Yeats or Emerson, studying the muscles in his face, determined to vanquish a debilitating stutter.

And when Joe talks to Gold Star families who have lost a hero, we hear a kindred spirit; another father of an American veteran; somebody whose faith has been tested, and who has been forced to wander through the darkness himself, and who knows who to lean on to find the light.

So that's Joe Biden -- a resilient, and loyal, and humble servant, and a patriot. But most of all, a family man. Starts with Jill, "Captain of the Vice Squad." [LAUGHTER] Only the Second Lady in our history to keep her regular day job. [APPLAUSE] Jill says, teaching isn't what she does, it's who she is. A few days after Joe and I were inaugurated in 2009, she was back in the

classroom teaching. That's why when our administration worked to strengthen community colleges, we looked to Jill to lead the way.

She's also traveled the world to boost education and empowerment for women. And as a Blue Star mom, her work with Michelle to honor our military families will go down in history as one of the most lasting and powerful efforts of this administration.

Of course, like Joe, Jill's work is only part of the story. She just seems to walk this Earth so lightly, spreads her joy so freely. And she reminds us that although we're in a serious business, we don't have to take ourselves too seriously. She's quick with a laugh or a practical joke, disguising herself as a server at a party she once hosted -- [LAUGHTER] --to liven the mood. She once hid in the overhead compartment of Air Force 2 to scare the senior staff. [LAUGHTER] Because why not? She seems to have a sixth sense of when to send a note of encouragement to a friend or a staffer, a simple thank you or a box of macarons. She is one of the best, most genuine people that I've met not just in politics, but in my entire life. She is grounded, and caring, and generous, and funny, and that's why Joe is proud to introduce himself as "Jill Biden's husband." [LAUGHTER]

And to see them together is to see what real love looks like -- through thick and thin, good times and bad. It's an all-American love story. Jill once surprised Joe by painting hearts on his office windows for Valentine's Day.

And then there are these Biden kids and grandkids. They're everywhere. [LAUGHTER] They're all good-looking. [LAUGHTER] Hunter and Ashley, who lived out that family creed of raising good families and looking out for the least of our brothers and sisters. Beau, who is watching over us with those broad shoulders and mighty heart himself -- a man who left a beautiful legacy and inspired an entire nation. Naomi, and Finn, and Maisy, and Natalie, and little Hunter -- grandchildren who are the light of Joe's eyes, and gives him an excuse to bust out the squirt gun around the pool. [LAUGHTER] This is the kind of family that built this country.

That's why my family is so proud to call ourselves honorary Bidens. [LAUGHTER] As Yeats put it -- because I had to quote an Irish poet, and Seamus Heaney was taken -- [LAUGHTER] -- "Think where man's glory most begins and ends, and say my glory was I had such friends."

Away from the camera, Jill and Michelle have each other's backs just as much as when they're out championing our troops. Our girls are close, best friends at school, inviting each other for vacations and sleepovers. Even though our terms are nearly over, one of the greatest gifts of these past eight years is that we're forever bonded as a family.

But, of course, I know that the Obamas are not the only ones who feel like they're part of the Biden clan because Joe's heart has radiated around this room. You see it in the enduring friendships he's forged with folks of every stripe and background up on Capitol Hill. You see it in the way that his eyes light up when he finds somebody in a rope line from Scranton.

[LAUGHTER] Or just the tiniest towns in Delaware. [LAUGHTER] You see it in the incredible loyalty of his staff, the team who knows that family always comes before work because Joe tells them so every day, the team that reflects their boss's humble service. Here in this building where there have been no turf wars between our staffs because everybody here has understood that we were all on the same mission and shared the same values, there has just been cooperation and camaraderie. And that is rare. It's a testament to Joe and the tone that he's set.

And finally, you see Joe's heart in the way he consoles families, dealing with cancer, backstage after an event; when he meets kids fighting through a stutter of their own, he gives them his private phone number and keeps in touch with them long after. To know Joe Biden is to know love without pretense, service without self-regard, and to live life fully.

As one of his long-time colleagues in the Senate, who happened to be a Republican, once said, "If you can't admire Joe Biden as a person, you got a problem. He's as good a man as God ever created."

So, Joe, for your faith in your fellow Americans, for your love of country, and for your lifetime of service that will endure through the generations, I'd like to ask the military aide to join us on stage.

For the final time as President, I am pleased to award our nation's highest civilian honor -- the Presidential Medal of Freedom. [APPLAUSE]

And for the first and only time in my presidency, I will bestow this medal with an additional level of veneration, an honor my three most recent successors reserved for only three others: Pope John Paul II, President Ronald Reagan, and General Colin Powell.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am proud to award the Presidential Medal of Freedom with Distinction to my brother, Joseph Robinette Biden, Jr.

Will the aide please read the citation.

MILITARY AIDE: Vice President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. In a career of public service spanning nearly half a century, Vice President Joseph R. Biden, Jr., has left his mark on almost every part of our nation, fighting for a stronger middle class, a fairer judicial system and a smarter foreign policy; providing unyielding support for our troops; combatting crime and violence against women; leading our quest to cure cancer; and safeguarding the landmark American Recovery and Reinvestment Act from corruption.

With his charm, candor, unabashed optimism, and deep and abiding patriotism, Joe Biden has garnered the respect and esteem of colleagues of both parties, and the friendship of people across the nation and around the world. While summoning the strength, faith and grace to overcome great personal tragedy, this son of Scranton, Claymont, and Wilmington has become

one of the most consequential Vice Presidents in American history, an accolade that nonetheless rests firmly behind his legacy as husband, father, and grandfather.

A grateful nation thanks Vice President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. for his lifetime of service on behalf of the United States of America.

(The Medal of Freedom is presented.) [APPLAUSE]

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Mr. President. [APPLAUSE] Please, please, thank you. Thank you. [APPLAUSE] Please. Thank you.

Ricchetti, you're fired. [LAUGHTER] For the press, Ricchetti is my chief of staff. [LAUGHTER]

I had no inkling. I thought we were coming over, Michelle, to -- for you, Jill, and Barack and I and a couple of senior staff to toast one another and say what an incredible journey it's been.

Mr. President, you got right the part about my leaning on Jill. But I've also leaned on you and a lot of people in this room. I look around the room, and I see great friends like Ted Kaufman, who has been -- has so much wisdom. Guys like Mel Monzack. I look around here and I'm startled. I keep seeing people I don't expect. Madam President, how are you? Mr. President, look at my new boss over there. [LAUGHTER]

But you know, I get a lot of credit I don't deserve, to state the obvious and -- because I've always had somebody to lean on. From back that time in 1972, when the accident happened, I leaned on -- and I mean this in literal sense; Chris knows this -- Dodd knows this, and Mel knows this, and Ted knows this -- I leaned on my sons Beau and Hunter. And I continue to lean on Hunter who continues to in a bizarre kind of way raise me. I mean I've leaned on them.

And, Mr. President, you observed early on that when either one of my boys would walk in the room, they'd walk up and say, Dad, what can I get you? Dad, what do you need?

And then Jill came along, and she saved our lives. She -- no man deserves one great love, let alone two. And -- but everybody knows here, I am Jill's husband. Everybody knows that I love her more than she loves me. [LAUGHTER] With good reason. [LAUGHTER] And she gave me the most precious gift, the love of my life, the life of my love, my daughter, Ashley.

And I continue to lean on the family. Mr. President, you kidded me once. You heard that the preparation for the two debates -- vice presidential debates that I had -- I only had two that Beau and Hunt would be the last people in the room. And Beau would say, look at me, Dad. Look at me. Remember, remember home base. Remember.

And the Secret Service can tell you, Mr. President, that Beau and Hunt and Ashley continue to have to corral me. We were at one of the national parks, and I was climbing up on top of a bridge to jump off the bridge with a bunch of young kids. And I hear my sons yelling, Dad, get

down. Now! [LAUGHTER] And I just started laughing so hard I couldn't stop. And I said, I was just going to do a flip -- a full gainer off here.

He said, Dad, the Secret Service doesn't want you up there. Dad. Look at me, Dad. [LAUGHTER]

So we've never figured out who the father is in this family. [LAUGHTER]

And, Mr. President, you know that with good reason there is no power in the vice presidency. Matter of fact I just did for Nancy Pelosi's daughter a reading of the Constitution. You probably did one for her. And they had me read the provisions relating to the vice presidency in the Constitution. And there is no inherent power, nor should there be.

But, Mr. President, you have more than kept your commitment to me by saying that you wanted me to help govern. The President's line often -- other people don't hear it that often, but when someone would say, can you get Joe to do such and such. He says, I don't do his schedule. He doesn't do mine.

Every single thing you've asked me to do, Mr. President, you have trusted me to do. And that is -- that's a remarkable thing. I don't think according to -- I see the President of Georgetown here, as well. I don't think according to the presidential, vice presidential scholars that kind of relationship has existed. I mean, for real. It's all you, Mr. President. It's all you.

The reason why when you send me around the world, nothing gets -- as my mom would say, gets missed between the cup and the lip, it's because they know when I speak, I speak for you.

And it's been easy, Mr. President, because we not only have the same political philosophy and ideology, I tell everybody -- and I've told them from the beginning. And I'm not saying this to reciprocate. I've never known a President and few people I've ever met my whole life -- I can count on less than one hand -- who have had the integrity and the decency and the sense of other people's needs like you do.

I know you were upset when I told the story about when Hunt and I were worried that Beau would have to -- that he would, as a matter of honor, decide he had to step down as attorney general while he was fighting his battle because he had aphasia. He was losing his ability to speak, and he didn't want to ever be in a position where to him everything was about duty and honor.

And I said, and he may resign. I don't know I just have the feeling he may. And Hunt and I had talked about this. And I said, he doesn't have any other income, but we're all right because Hunt's there, and I can sell the house.

We were having a private lunch like we do once a week. And this man got up, came over, grabbed me by the shoulders, looked me in the eye, and said, don't you sell that house. You love that house.

I said, it's no big deal, Mr. President. He said, I'll give you the money. We'll give you the money. Promise me, promise me you won't sell that house.

I remember when Ashley, Mr. President, we were in the Oval, and Ashley was in an elevator, and the elevator plummeted to the -- she was with a group of people -- I forget which building in Philadelphia, and it plummeted to the ground. And immediately the Service was worried that she may have been badly hurt. And I got up to take the call, and you didn't let up until you made sure your service followed through and made sure everything was all right.

But you know, Mr. President, we kid about both about marrying up. We both did, that kind of thing. But the truth of the matter is -- I said this to Michelle last night. Michelle is the finest First Lady in my view that has ever served in the office. There's been other great First Ladies, but I really genuinely mean it. [APPLAUSE]

When I got to meet Michelle's brother, and he told me about how you guys were raised, and I got to know and love your mom, if your mom -- were your mom 15 years older, she could have been my mom. Literally, the way you were raised, the way we were raised, there wasn't any difference. And I knew that this decision to join you, which was the greatest honor of my life, was the right decision on the night we had to go and accept the nomination, the formal -- we'd be nominated at the convention. And Finnegan, who is now 18 years old, was then 10 years old. And she came to me, and she said, Pop, is it okay if the room that we're in -- Finnegan, Maisy, and Naomi -- that we have the beds taken out. And I said, why? She said, maybe the Obama girls and your brothers' children, maybe they would come down, all sleep together in sleeping bags. [LAUGHTER] And I give you my word as a Biden, I knew when I left to go to the convention, open that door, and saw them cuddled together, I knew this was the right decision. I knew it was the right decision. I really did. Because, Mr. President, the same values set -- the same values set.

Folks, you know, I joke with my staff that I don't know why they pay them anything, because they get to advise me. [LAUGHTER] Let me explain what I mean by that. As the President of the University of Delaware, where my heart resides, and my home campus of Delaware, as he can tell you, it's -- I get to give you advice. I get to be the last guy in the room and give you advice on the most difficult decisions anyone has to make in the whole world. But I get to walk out, and you make it all by yourself. All by yourself.

Harry Truman was right about the buck stopping at the desk. And I've never, never, never, never, never, never, never, never, never, never once doubted, on these life and death decisions, I never once doubted that your judgement was flawed -- not once. Not once.

And we've disagreed, and we've argued, and we've raised our voices, one of which we made a deal we'd be completely open like brothers with one another. But, Mr. President, I watched you under intense fire. I will venture to say that no President in history has had as many novel crises land on his desk in all of history. The Civil War was worse, the World War Two was worse, but, Mr. President, almost every one of the crises you faced was a case of first instance - a case of first instance. And I watched that prodigious mind and that heart as big as your head -- I've watched you. I've watched how you've acted.

When you see a woman or man under intense pressure, you get a measure -- and you know that, Michelle, and your daughters know it, as well. This is a remarkable man. And I just hope that the asterisk in history that is attached to my name when they talk about this presidency is that I can say I was part of the journey of a remarkable man who did remarkable things for this country. [APPLAUSE]

You know, I can't let a comment go by without quoting an Irish poet. [LAUGHTER] Jill and I talk about why you were able to develop the way you developed and with the heart you have. Michelle and I have talked about it. I've confided in Michelle, I've gone to her for advice. We've talked about this man. You give me insight. And I think it's because -- Mr. President, you gave me credit for having understanding other people's misery and suffering. Mr. President, there is not one single, solitary ounce of entitlement in you, or Michelle, or your beautiful daughters -- and you girls are incredible, you really are. That's not hyperbole, you really are. Not one ounce of entitlement.

And Seamus Heaney in one of his poems said -- [LAUGHTER] -- when you can find someone who says it better, use it. He said, you carried your own burden and very soon, your symptoms of creeping privilege disappeared. You carried your own burdens, and very soon, the creeping symptoms of privilege disappeared.

Mr. President, you have sometimes been like a lone wolf, but you carried yourself in a way that's pretty remarkable. The history of the journey -- your journey -- is something people are going to write about a long time, and I'm not being solicitous when I say this. And you're so fortunate, both of you, to have found each other because all that grounding, all that you have, made this guy totally whole. And it's pretty amazing.

Mr. President, this honor is not only well beyond what I deserve, but it's a reflection on the extent and generosity of your spirit. I don't deserve this, but I know it came from the President's heart. There is a Talmudic saying that says, what comes from the heart, enters the heart. Mr. President, you have crept into our heart -- you and your whole family, including Mom -- and you occupy it. It's an amazing thing that happened. I knew how smart you were. I knew how honorable you were. I knew how decent you were from the couple years we worked in the Senate, and I knew what you were capable of. But I never fully expected that you'd occupy the Bidens' heart, from Hunter, to Ashley, my sister, all of us. All of us.



And Mr. President, I'm indebted to you. I'm indebted to your friendship, I'm indebted to your family, and as I'll tell you -- I'll end on a humorous note. We're having a lunch -- lunches, and mostly it's what's ever in either one of our minds. We'll talk about family an awful lot. And about six months in, President looks at me, he said, you know, Joe, you know what surprised me? How we've become such good friends. [LAUGHTER] And I said, surprised you? [LAUGHTER]

But that is candid Obama, and it's real, and, Mr. President, you know as long as there's a breath in me, I'll be there for you, my whole family will be, and I know, I know it is reciprocal. And I want to thank you all so very, very, very much. All of you in here. [APPLAUSE]