

Vice President Joe Biden Awarded Presidential Medal of Freedom

Thursday during a surprise event in the State Dining Room of the White House, President Barack Obama gave Vice President Joe Biden a parting gift: the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

After a somewhat lengthy review of Biden's biography, which the vice president believed was supposed to preface his own farewell address to the nation, Obama switched gears by turning it into a medal presentation ceremony. He said:

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

Biden turned away from the media briefly to wipe away tears, before regaining his composure and turning back around. At that point, the military aide read the citation that accompanied the medal presentation:

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.

After embracing Obama, Biden took the podium to deliver his own remarks. He had obviously been caught by surprise, and in typical fashion, was quick to give the credit to others around him.

The following are his complete remarks:

Mr. President. [Interrupted by applause] Please, please, thank you. Thank you. Please. Thank you.

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

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.

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. With good reason. 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!"

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."

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

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 (sic) been other great First Ladies, but I really genuinely mean it.

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." And I give you my word as a Biden, I knew when I left to go to the convention, opened 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. 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 once doubted, on these life and death decisions, I never once doubted [or thought] that your judgment was flawed—not once. Not once.

And we've disagreed, and we've argued, and we've raised our voices, one of which [times] 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 II 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.

You know, I can't let a comment go by without quoting an Irish poet. 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, "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 (sic) in either one of our minds. We'll talk about family an awful lot. And

about six months in, [the] president looks at me, he said, "You know, Joe, you know what surprised me? How we've become such good friends."

And I said, "Surprised you?"

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. {eo}