

**Remarks of Vice President Joe Biden  
United States Conference of Mayors 87<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting  
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***As delivered***

Thank you very much, you are very kind. You must have been sitting a long time, that's why you're standing. Thank you.

You know that famous phrase...I remember, as a student, reading about Adlai Stevenson running for president and he had a famous phrase that he said, "Flattery is fine as long as you don't inhale."

It's great to be back with you.  
I've been with you many, many times.

I want to say thanks to Steve [Benjamin]. Steve and I, your chairman, have known each other for a long time. He's done one hell of a job in Columbia.

You know I was a local official. I ran for the United States Senate because being a local official was too hard. You all think I am kidding, I'm not kidding. They know where you all live. They know where you live. Not a joke.

You affect-- how are you doing, man, how are things doing in Kentucky?

The fact of the matter is that you affect the quality of life and you're viewed as the person most responsible for the quality of life in your city, more than anyone else in politics, more than anyone else in government.

You know, picking up the garbage-- making sure it's picked up, is not "Democratic" or "Republican." It's not a matter-- if the streets aren't safe, it doesn't matter what your politics are...and if you don't have good schools... People are in trouble, and the whole world is sort of dropped on you.

I look at-- I want to thank Mayor Barnett and Mayor Fisher for their leadership at this conference and enabling me and inviting me here to speak today.

And I-- maybe it's just an Irish thing, but you know, this guy [Marty] Walsh is okay, too, a great, great personal friend...

You know, I've worked-- I've made it-- and this is not hyperbole, from the time I was a councilman, to as Vice President, I don't think there's anybody who's worked more closely with the mayors without them being the mayor.

I mean that sincerely. You are—the cities of America are the heartbeat of America. They are the economy of America. Everything about what kind of nation we are, can be determined by looking at our cities.

The rest of the nation is really important, to state the obvious, the rural areas, the suburban areas, but the heartbeat, the heartbeat of the country are the mayors. And everything lands on your lap first instance, whatever it is, whatever it is...

And so, I've been to more conferences than I can count, and I've always learned something when I've come. I'm not, it's not hyperbole-- I've been to probably 30 or more mayoral conferences and I've always walked away, and I'm not trying to be nice to you because you know I've-- no one ever doubts that I mean what I say. The problem is I sometimes say all that I mean. [laughter]

No one's ever accused me of being coy, but I've always walked away impressed, and no more so than as Vice President being able to work with you.

You know, when...you may remember, some of you, that when the recession hit I said this is the most significant economic crisis in American history short of a depression, and it really was. And it turned out to be

exactly what we thought it would be, and in 2008, some of you weren't in office, a few of you were...a lot of you weren't, but a few of you were...

And you may remember, that the economy was in absolute freefall. Families lost over 16 trillion dollars in personal wealth. There were nearly 4 million homes that were lost.

And people who would find that they were in their home and they had never missed a mortgage payment, everything was going fine, but all of a sudden, they found they were upside-down because property values had dropped so much because of three foreclosures on your block. And now your home was worth less than you owed the bank and there were foreclosures that way, too. And it all happened on your streets.

I spent an awful lot of time, as vice president the president gave me an honor, and it was an honor of doing what we could to revive Detroit. In particular Detroit because it was bankrupt at the time.

And you know, it's -- you all went through hell, and we were losing 700,000 jobs a month.

Now, my deceased wife, who was a brilliant woman, named Neilia, she had a great expression, she said, "the greatest gift god gave mankind was the ability to forget." And my mother would say, "Oh, that's true, otherwise a woman would only have one child." [laughter]

But all kidding aside, the good news, and it is good, we've forgotten how bad it was particularly for our cities a long time ago.

So, we went out and the automobile industry was bankrupt, and we wrote and passed, with your leadership, and I'm not being-- it's not hyperbole, we passed the Recovery Act of 2009.

And it literally saved us from sliding into a depression. Even conservative economists now have acknowledged without that infusion of 836 billion

dollars, a single largest program in the history of America, maybe in the world, not a joke, of infusion of capital, saved us from a depression.

And it was the single largest investment ever made. And so, I made the mistake that sometimes your staff may make with you, I was vice president of the United States, and the president and I, every single week had a private lunch where we could talk about whatever we wanted to-- from our families, to hollering at each other... We were, all kidding aside, like brothers, it was a completely open relationship we had.

So, one day I went in with the help of a brilliant staffer named Ron Klain, and I laid out how I thought we should handle the Recovery Act. I never did it again. He took the memo and said, "Great, do it," and slid it back down the dining room table.

But the first thing I did, and this is to remind you of where we've been and what you could do, I went to you. I went to the mayors and spoke to over 200 of you, over that period of time, and in groups of as many as 30, 40 on the phone to one or two alone.

And the truth of the matter is that you are the reason why, the mayors, the mayors, and to some extent, but not as much, the governors, are the reasons why we came through all this. The reason I'm telling you that is that we're in a situation now where, as a couple of my friends out there that I see who worked in our administration know, is that, this is a pretty dysfunctional town, to state the obvious.

I know that's a shock to hear somebody say that, but here's the deal. The more dysfunctional this town has become, the more consequential local officials become. Not a joke. It's a reality. It's a reality.

All the innovation in America is coming from the governors, the mayors, the county executives...It's coming up. It literally is bubbling up. It's the reason why we haven't seen much, in my view, and I know-- look, I get in trouble, I read in the New York Times today that one of my problems is, if I ever were

to run for president, I like Republicans. Okay, well, "Bless me, Father for I have sinned." [applause]

But, you know, from where I come from, I don't know how you get anything done...The only way to get anything done is if we start talking to one another again.

There's a big article today, with Fred Upton, I went out and spoke at an event and he was there, and I praised him. And he was in a race, but I praised him about the fight against cancer.

His vote and his ability to join me in the Cures Act that was passed. It turns out, it was over 8.5 billion dollars to fight cancer. And it mattered, it saved people's lives.

And he stepped up, he and three other Republicans stepped up, and helped us pass it. So, I acknowledged that, and now I'm-- I don't know what I am.

But, anyway, the point of the matter is, at your level, where the rubber meets the road, I don't find a lot of distinction between the problems Republican mayors face and Democratic mayors face. We have different philosophies, but we want to get things done.

And you know, at the time when this godawful recession hit, it wasn't just that your infrastructure was in shambles. It wasn't all the things you know and the impacts on employment in your cities and the like, but your schools were shutting down.

Remember? Remember, you couldn't pay your teachers? Remember, there were thousands of school districts that were in real trouble. They were talking about doubling the size of classes because there was not enough money to keep the teachers employed.

So, we came along in that Act, and Barack and I actually sat down and wrote that in an interregnum period to try to figure out how to change government a little bit. We decided that we should put 97 billion dollars into the schools: the single largest infusion of money in education any single time in American history. 97 billion dollars.

But it kept your schools open. It kept people-- their education from falling behind and losing a year or two.

But the point I'm making is that you guys did it. It saved 368,000 teachers' jobs, but *you implemented it. You implemented it.*

And you know, that we invested 48 billion. 48 billion dollars in infrastructure projects. We rebuilt 42,000 miles of highways, and 2,700 bridges.

I remember getting a call from the, at the time, the governor of Pennsylvania Ed Rendell, talking about two cities, which were literally divided by a stream, or a creek, with a bridge that you couldn't cross with a fire engine. So, people were losing lives [because] it took another 25 minutes, to get around to get to where the fire was, when it was only, if you could cross the bridge, a matter of five minutes.

But, you were the ones that came forward with the ideas that were needed to revitalize your cities.

We had a thing called TIGER Grants, 5.1 billion dollars for 421 projects. The money went directly to mayors, directly to your communities because one of the things we wrote into the law was, you didn't have to go through the legislature to get this. You didn't have to go in and have it divided up 75 different ways. It went straight to the mayors. Straight to the mayors.

In St. Paul, Minnesota, Mayor Carter knows one of those grants helped the union depot and revitalized the hub of public transportation in that city. It was a 35 million dollar grant, but since that grant, the mayor and the successors and everyone in that city, it reopened and added 2.2 billion

dollars in private investment. It leveraged 2.2 billion dollars in private investment that's flowed into those neighborhoods. It's a different part of town.

I don't know if Mayor Duggan is here, if Mayor Duggan from Detroit is here, he can tell you what is happening in downtown Detroit, by minor investments by the federal government that had phenomenal impact on what it was able to attract. And the point of, you know, you have like I said, you have at the depot you now have a farmer's market, a new minor league ballpark, families go out there on the weekend.

Look, again, the nonpartisan US government accounting office did a study about how well you all managed the money we gave you.

Less than 2/10 of 1% was wasted or was fraudulent. Less than 2/10 of 1%. The largest government program in history with less than 2/10 of 1% waste, fraud or abuse in the program.

Now, okay, Biden, why are you going back on this now, this magical mystical tour [laughter] you know about what happened before? Well, we worked together. The Recovery Act required us, Democrats, Republicans, presidents, vice presidents, mayors, senators, governors, to work together because our back was against the wall.

And the end result of this was we have 75 straight months of economic growth, the longest in American history. Added 15 million jobs. It brought the unemployment rate down. You brought the unemployment rate down from 10% to 4.8% by 17 and it's now down even lower.

The point of raising this is, in order to get something done, I know where to go, and we should know where to go: We've got to go to the mayors, we've got to go home. Not a joke.

And two, we've got to remember, which bothers me today, I know I'm referred to when we were in the White House as "the White House

Optimist,” like, as my grandfather would say, like I “fell off the turnip truck yesterday,” you know, I’ve been there longer than all of them.

The reason I’m optimistic, I know the history of the journey of this country. And folks, we’re walking around with our heads bowed too much, walking around, “oh my god, how can we handle the problems we face?” “What are we going to do?”

We’re in real trouble. We are in trouble, but we have a been in so much more trouble in the past.

It was a simple proposition. The American people are capable of doing anything, give them an even chance. They’ve never ever ever ever let us down.

That’s why I’m coming to you, because the fact of the matter is, we need to reestablish this partnership, which has fallen by the wayside. I don’t know how many times you’ve been to the White House. I don’t know how many times you’ve had the White House intervene to tell you how they’re going to help the cities, maybe a lot, I hope.

But I haven’t seen much of it, I haven’t seen much of it. It’s like we’ve divided the country in pieces. How can we be one America if we continue down this road? I don’t care what your party affiliation is.

It’s not just a partnership between the federal government and the city government, it’s a partnership with the private sector as well. Embedded in the recovery act was the single biggest investment in clean energy in the history of the country.

90 billion dollars. It leveraged 150 billion dollars in private sector money. The investment helped create hundreds of thousands of clean energy jobs in the years that followed.

By the end of the administration, we were generating 30 times as much solar energy and creating energy jobs at a rate 12 times faster than any other sector of the economy and a lot of it was happening with you.

Mayor Caldwell, you know what it meant to the people of Honolulu. You're leading the nation in solar per person, solar watts per person. You don't have to go through your tough neighborhoods and wonder why the asthma rates are higher, why, in fact, there's more illness, why, in fact, there's still lead paint in the wall, that mercury makes a difference whether or not you are going to extend your life or limit the time of your life.

You guys see it. You know it. You don't have to be a scientist. You know what happens. You know what the plume off from the energy plants, what it does to neighborhoods, what it does to people. But you see it every day. You see it in hospital admissions. In your hospitals.

Look, folks, the fact of the matter is that, this is all within our wheelhouse. You know, I went out there-- we more than tripled wind generation. Today we generate wind power for 24 million homes. There's no reason why we can't quadruple that, virtually overnight. This is, this is no longer rocket science. We figured out how to have solar energy as cheap per kilowatt produced as gas.

We helped install 16 million meters in your cities and towns to make it easier for people to save energy, weatherized millions of homes, saving 3,000 bucks a year for people.

Most of us come from neighborhoods where we weren't all that wealthy not necessarily poor, but let me tell you something, 3,000 dollars a year means the difference between getting to pay your insurance, keep your kid in community college, whether or not you're going to be able to get that new sink, whether you have to put 4 new tires on the car.

I don't know where these people live. They don't live in the neighborhoods I grew up in. And we weren't poor. We lived in a nice neighborhood. When suburban sprawl was occurring.

Three bedrooms...filled up the house with four kids and a grand pop but it was safe with good schools. But I'll tell you what, it mattered, whether you had an extra thousand dollars a year. Or 2,000 dollars a year. Very practical things.

So, what we did was, with these investments we made, we understood the longing, your urging, and I don't know how many mayors I sat with in large groups talking about this as an opportunity. "Help me change my street lights. I can save x amount of energy" ... "Help me move to having all my busses run on propane or natural gas" ... "Figure out a way to help me figure out how to do blah blah blah," and it has mattered.

It has had a profound impact. Ten years ago, we knew we needed a green revolution, we understood the urgency. In terms of people's health, in terms of economic growth, in terms of the quality of life. And with you all, we put the country on a path.

We reduced carbon emissions from power plants by one third. That was a goal in the next ten years. Increased renewable energy by 30 percent with a goal of being able to do it by 50 and then 90 percent within the near term.

There's no reason that by 2025 all of North America can't get half its electricity from non-polluting sources. It's within our grasp, ***but for special interests.***

We need to reset these goals, for our children and our grandchildren. The administration has walked away, but there's no reason we can't pull us back on the path.

There's unanimity in my party, the vast majority of Republicans agree and they support the goals as well.

They've got a more of a political problem, I'm not being a wise guy, they've got more of a problem with an administration.

But every single one of you knows that investing in clean energy gives your city a chance to grow and create jobs. But you also know this is about more than that it's about a matter of survival. The threat posed by climate change is existential.

You know the first meeting we had in what we call "the Tank," over in the Pentagon, Barack and I as new president and vice president getting briefed...you know what the military said our greatest security threat is? *Global warming.*

The military. The military. Simple reason. Sea levels rise a half a foot or a foot, you have tens of millions of people migrating. **That's how wars start. That's how Darfur started.**

It matters. And you're seeing elements of this in your city and I see it in my own state. Delaware has the lowest average elevation of any state in the country.

We're an average 60 feet above sea level. Our state department of natural resources in conjunction with the feds, in the environmental control agency said by the end of this century, that's a long time, so it's hard for anyone to fathom that, 8 to 11 percent of my state will be underwater. Homes destroyed, jobs lost, towns off the map...

I was down in Rehoboth Beach Delaware, some of you from this area may know where that is, down on the ocean, and when the EPA report came out talking about how sea levels are rising, next thing I see, literally same day, is the national realtors on the air saying, "We've heard these warnings before, don't worry, buy on the beach." Not a joke.

So folks, this is real. I don't have to tell you that. But the fact of the matter is, that uh, you're on the ground every day. You see it. Hurricanes, droughts, wildfires, mudslides.

Mayor Adler, you saw it in Austin. Record rainfall led to sediment clogging up your city's water treatment system. That didn't happen before. You saw it in Denver, Mayor Hancock, when last year the heatwave was so extreme it was literally deemed dangerous for people to be inside without air conditioning.

Our government's own most recent report found that heat stress and drought kill off up to a quarter of our corn, can kill off up to a quarter of our corn and soybean harvest. What's that going to mean for you mayors from the Midwest, from Iowa, from Kansas, from Nebraska? What happens?

What happens in Dubuque when John Deere has nothing to plow? Not a joke. EPA has spoken. They've laid all this out. Our scientists have spoken. There's no dispute about this among scientists.

Since when did we become science deniers? The United Nations told us, whether you agree with the exact numbers, we have 12 years to act before it's irreversible. So, say it's 10 years or 20 years. Nobody's disputing, if we fail to act, we're going to have a serious, more serious problem.

Until the world is destabilized by food and security disasters, until we lose trillions of dollars in the fallout, until devastation we've already seen a terrifying glimpse of becomes the new normal.

Maybe that's the only thing that's going to change people's minds. But I believe, and I hope you do, we have to put the country back together.

When we pulled out of the Paris Climate Agreement, 400 of you said "Not us," Republicans, Democrats said, "Not us. Not my city. We're going to meet the standard." Governors across the nation said, "Not us. We're not going to do it."

When we established the first ever limits on carbon emissions from power plants, doubled fuel economy standards of passenger vehicles to 54.5 miles per gallon by 2025.

Would've saved cities and businesses and families almost 2 trillion dollars. These are economic models. 2 trillion dollars. One of the proudest achievements of our administration was leading the passage, and Barack did it, of the Paris Agreement, which prompted every single country in the world to commit to reducing greenhouse gasses. Every single one has it but us. Every country in the world.

In the last two years this administration has walked away from the progress we made. *They walked away, but you stepped up*, as I said. The United States, we backed out of an agreement but 400 of you said, "No, no, not me."

Conference of Mayors survey last fall you all did, 57 percent of you said you planned to take action in 2019. Hundred cities and towns have committed to transition to renewable energy, total renewable energy. They say they'll move away from fossil fuels. Renewable power is within our power. It's the equivalent of taking 26 million cars off the road. 30 coal fired plants. Now I'm beginning to sound like the wonk I hate.

But look, the point is, this is really important, and it's within our power. It's within our power to stem this erosion. You know, you banded together to purchase more electric vehicles, to provide cleaner air, to reduce oil dependence.

Last year the 1 millionth electric vehicle was sold in the United States. 10 years ago, when we rescued the automobile industry, today Ford and GM are intent on being the world's leaders in electric vehicles. How many of you have taken action to put re-charging stations in your city where your parking meters are? 48 electric vehicle charging corridors in American highways Barack and I laid out before we left. But just like we opened up

gas stations in the 1920's, we need towns to lead the way as well, cities and towns. Mayor Brown is getting it done in Buffalo. Who's going to step up next?

*We need leaders to understand this is the most urgent priority facing the nation and that we'll be judged by our children and grandchildren on what we do today and they deserve a strong federal partner. This nation cannot continue down this blind path. We cannot ignore science we cannot abdicate our duty to lead the world.*

We can't stand alone in ignorance while every other country in the world signs on an agreement, because the simple truth is, the American people are with us in this issue. Democrats, Republicans, Independents, they understand the realities, and the younger generation understands it even more, and they're demanding action.

So, my plea to you is hang in there. We need you.

You're literally Horatio at the bridge attempting to hold back the threat that is to wipe out the progress we made and the commitments we made. I'm telling you that help is on the way. This position cannot be sustained. But you are the key.

You are the key to keeping it from sliding all the way back to what it was before. You did all the things you did during the Recovery Act. Together, I'm absolutely confident, we can do this, and folks, uh, parting comment...

I, uh, I think we've got to start to begin to believe in our people again. They're tougher than you think they are. They're ready to do great things. They're looking to be led.

Every one of you, my guess, was raised like I was, to believe there wasn't anything you couldn't do, not a damn thing in the world America couldn't do.

This is the United States of America for God's sake. It's time to lift our heads up, man, not walk around staring at the ground, and take these on.

*This is all within our wheelhouse and you demonstrate it more than any other group of elected officials in the United States of America.*

God bless you for what you do, and may God protect our troops.

Thank you.