

Vice President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Remarks

**National Action Network
*Annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Breakfast***

**Monday, January 21, 2019
Mayflower Hotel, Washington, DC**

As delivered

Well I have an announcement to make: I am not one of the famous flames. Those of you who know James Brown...

Good morning, everyone— Rev¹, thank you for that introduction.

The one title I can claim is, I am Mr. Amtrak. I tell you people, the press will tell you... They keep fastidious records of how many miles you are flying in an air force plane, and, about six and a half years in, the headline of the paper was: Biden Travels Over One Million Miles in Air Force Two.

I've tried to go home to see my mom every Friday, and I didn't want to take that G5 because it cost too much money, so I'd take the train. Secret Service did not like that, they thought it was more dangerous.

So, I'm getting on the train and one of the senior guys on the road, I've been riding since 1973, came up said, "Joey, Joey!" and grabbed my cheek – I thought the Secret Service was going to shoot him.

He said, "Joey, a million miles? Big deal! The boys and I sat down and figured out how many miles you travel on Amtrak." I said, "You did?" and he said, "Yes. The average of 119 days a year for 36 years and as vice president, we figured it to be about 18 thousand 210 roundtrips, 259 miles a day...Joey, you've traveled over two million miles on Amtrak. I don't want to hear any more about Air Force 2!"

¹ Reverend Al Sharpton, President and Founder of the National Action Network

Look, let me be quick and get to the point. Everybody knows, today and about looking back, on the legacy of your dad². It's about carrying that legacy forward.

In October, I was invited to the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis to receive the Freedom Award. I sat in black churches next to two Jewish rabbis, getting ready to go out and desegregate movie theaters in Delaware; I never ever thought in my life that I would be worthy of it, and I'm still not sure I am.

But I stood on the balcony at the Lorraine Motel where your dad was assassinated, and it brought me back to that moment in 1968.

That balcony leads back into Dr. King's room—and nothing has changed. The bed is still unmade, the coffee cups are still scattered around the room. And when you walk in, you could feel that restless spirit—I mean you can feel it. You can taste it. It was still in the room—of a dream deferred...of unfinished business.

The night before your dad, as you all know, Martin, was assassinated, he stood in the pulpit at Mason Temple talking to two thousand people. And what was he talking about? It was a strike, it was about wages, but it was ultimately about dignity.

He was insisting these garbage workers be treated with dignity. *Dignity.*

And ladies and gentlemen, the fact of the matter is, many of you remember, he said, it may not have been the last sentence but it was close to the last sentence, he said, "Let us move on—in these powerful days... these days of *challenge*... to make America *what it ought to be.*"

"*Make America what it ought to be.*" We all know what it ought to be. That was among his last words spoken, "to make America what it ought to be."

² Martin Luther King, III was in attendance

America has been made better, all the struggles many of you in this room have endured and led. But we've learned in the last two years that it doesn't take much to awaken hate—to bring those folks out from under the rocks. That part of American society has always been there, will always be there, but has been legitimized. 50 years later, the hate that cut your dad down, is still nurtured by those forces of darkness.

We saw it in Charlottesville, as Klansmen, white supremacists, and neo-Nazis, literally, slunk out of their dark rooms and their digital hideaways—their crazed, vicious faces, literally, contorted and illuminated by torch light. You couldn't make up a Hollywood movie, like that.

In a historic city, and confronted by decent, honorable Americans, who said this is not us.

Dr. King knew these faces well—the same lost souls who once stood like cowards hooded behind burning crosses.

They have been deliberately awakened again—it is not an accident, they have been deliberately reawakened again. Unearthed by loose talk and by direct appeals to prejudice from the alt-right. And then, something I never thought I'd live to see again, a president of the United States, make a moral equivalence between those who are spreading the hate and those who are opposing it, saying there were “very fine people on both sides.”

No president since the Civil War has ever, ever, ever, uttered words like that.

One thing we know for certain, and we've learned it over and over through history, the Holocaust and the Civil Rights movement: silence is complicity. *Silence is complicity.*

And so, we have to do what you've been doing, Rev, and what everybody in the room's been doing for a long time: we have to speak out. We have to challenge these forces of

hate, and stand up and simply say, what the vast majority of Americans agree to, *this is not our America. This is not who we are.*

This is not the image we wish to spread around the world, which is happening... *This is not who we are. Because it's not who we are.*

Years ago, there used to be a poll tax. Now, as our last speaker pointed out, just last year, 24 states introduced at least 70 bills, to make it harder for people to vote. They now use voter ID laws like the poll tax used to be used— simply designed to keep people from being able to vote. We saw it in Georgia in the governor's race, we saw it in Florida, we saw it in other parts of the country.

2017. These guys never give up, and we knew that. They never will give up. It's like cutting grass, man. You cut it, it looks nice, but you let it go for a while it gets a little ugly, then it grows into a forest again. We can't let this happen.

You know, I've been in this fight for a long time. It goes not just to voting rights, but it goes with the criminal justice system. I haven't always been right. I know we haven't always gotten things right. But I've always tried.

Rev, it was with your help, back in 2010, that Barack and I finally reduced the disparity in sentencing, which we'd been fighting to eliminate, in crack cocaine versus powder cocaine. It was a big mistake when it was made. We thought, we were told by the experts, that, "crack, you never go back." That it was somehow fundamentally different—it is not different. But it has trapped an entire generation.

As Vice President, I saw firsthand the courage of Barack, excuse me, the President, he *is* my buddy. [laughter] He really is my buddy. All those memes are true, except, he made the first friendship bracelet, not me. [laughter]

But every day, I was always proud of his courage, never more than when he commuted over 1,700 sentences. More than the past 13 presidents in a row.

I was proud that our reforms have helped reduce the federal prison population by more than 38,000 people. But most people don't know that 91 percent of all the people kept in prisons are in *state prisons*, they're not in federal prisons. That's where the overcrowding is; they're in state prisons.

Ladies and gentlemen, we must say to the states: *no more mandatory minimums*. Enough is enough is enough. We should be reducing those sentences.

And, federally, we need to once and for all, finally, eliminate all of the disparity between crack and powder cocaine.

We need [to end] the legacy of debtors' prisons—and we have a legacy of debtors' prisons called *cash bail*. My daughter runs the Delaware Criminal Justice Center, she's been fighting for two years. Finally, the Attorney General of Delaware just announced they will eliminate cash bail in the State of Delaware— it can be done!

Folks, the fact of the matter is, the bottom line is, we have a lot to root out— but most of all, there's systematic racism that most of us whites don't like to acknowledge even exists. We don't even consciously acknowledge, but it has been built into every aspect of our system.

Because when your schools are substandard...when your houses are undervalued...when your car insurance costs more for no apparent reason...when poverty rates for black Americans are still twice what it is for white Americans...when Barack says, your name is Jamal and your name is Jim, and you have the same qualifications and Jim gets the job...there's something that we have to admit. Not you— *we*.

White America has to admit there is still systematic racism; and it goes almost unnoticed by so many of us. When all of that is surrounding us, is there any wonder that there's that spirit of restlessness?

How do we ensure that *every* American can live a life of dignity?

How do we fulfill the promise that working people, who still go to bed like my dad used to, staring at the ceiling, thinking— *God, if I get prostate cancer, or if my wife gets breast cancer, we lose everything*—single biggest reason for bankruptcy—*We lose everything*.

How can we stand by? *Guaranteeing* that every single American can get affordable healthcare and medications—because your health shouldn't depend on the color of your skin and your zip code.

But it does.

One study found that there are 30 million U.S. jobs waiting to be filled, that don't need a college degree, a bachelor's degree. When I wrote to the President, a year study of the jobs of the future, right then and there, there were 100,000 factory jobs going unfilled for high-tech because we didn't train people for those skills.

The average salary, according to this study, is \$55,000 a year. 30 million U.S. jobs that don't require a college degree that pay \$55,000 a year. Whether it's college, trade school, certificate, apprenticeships, community colleges, six-week coding programs—every single solitary child is capable of doing something consequential and filling these jobs. It's not rocket science. No, it really isn't. It is an absolute simple commitment.

Folks, what the hell are we arguing about a \$15 minimum wage for? *Why is it even a question?* Below that rate you're below the poverty level! People working, busting their necks!

Ladies and gentlemen, we need to eliminate, what you probably don't even realize, there's 40 million people out there who have to sign a noncompete agreement. You work for the equivalent of a Wendy's, you can't go and work for a McDonald's, if they pay you five cents more.

The fact of the matter is that these are hourly jobs. People are having them sign noncompete agreements. *What the heck are we doing?*

Folks, we need better public transportation, so much more that would literally change the lives of so many people: Blacks, Hispanics, and some whites as well.

Rev, I'm optimistic and the reason I am, and I'll end with this...I was always referred to, and the mayor knows, as "the White House optimist." I kind of liked that, made me look like I was a young guy—been there longer than all of them. As my grandfather would say, "I didn't fall off the turnip truck yesterday."

But folks, new generation of Millennials, those born after 1980, a study at Georgetown University showed that not only are they the most educated, *the most engaged*, but they're also the least prejudiced generation in American history.

And they have been *awakened*, like my generation was by your father. *They have been awakened.*

Ladies and gentlemen, over 60 percent of this millennial generation believe that *increasing, not accepting, increasing diversity is good for them and good for America. That has never ever happened in any point in American history.*

So, folks, we have a whole army out there, that's ready.

I said to Rev, actually I said to you, Martin, think about how things have changed. We've never come close to that before. Turn on the television, how many biracial ads do you see? I'm serious. They're normal. *What's behind is our government, what's behind are these people of prejudice who have found their voice again.*

Ladies and gentlemen, we've never come this close before.

They've been awakened—they're ready to speak. They're ready to vote. They're ready to win.

And then all of sudden, 10 years ago, when people tell me things can't change, 10 years ago yesterday, Rev, I stood on a platform in Wilmington Delaware at the Amtrak station. And I was at the end of the platform overlooking what we call the Third Street Bridge, in a neighborhood that I used to represent as a public defender in southeast Wilmington.

I got back from law school and had a job with a white shoe law firm. And my state, my city, was the only one in American history occupied by the National Guard, since Reconstruction, for nine months... I quit my job and became a public defender. I used to go down to those neighborhoods, as you know you've been there with me, and interview folks.

As I looked out, I'm standing there with my two sons, my daughter, and my wife, waiting for a train. I look out at what used to be, I remembered, there are houses there now, but they were vacant lots where kids used to play and people used to live.

And I thought things would never get better again because they had been burned to the ground...never get better again, and here I was, it just hit me, standing, waiting for a black man to come 28 miles from Philadelphia to pick me up and take me on a 128-mile ride to be sworn in as President and Vice President of the United States of America.

Don't tell me things can't change. Don't tell me things can't change!

You know, I apologize I've gone too long, my friend Reverend Barber put it this way— it isn't enough just to remember Dr. King. He said, we have to “reach down in the blood and pick up the baton... and carry [it] the rest of the way.” I know that's metaphorical but it is literally true.

The next generation is coming to carry it forward— so don't tell me there's no reason for hope.

I have never been more optimistic than I am today— I still believe the dream is within our reach. As your dad said, “let us move on in these powerful days... to make America *what it ought to be.*” Because, in fact, it *can be.*

Please, please, please don't give up hope.

Thank you.