

Remarks by President Biden at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence

JULY 27, 2021 • SPEECHES AND REMARKS

National Counterterrorism Center
Liberty Crossing Intelligence Campus
McLean, Virginia

THE PRESIDENT: It's an honor to be here. I guess you all are the ones that lost the lottery, huh? (Laughter.) You had to be here in person.

Well, I'd like to thank Director Haines and Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, Christy Abizaid, for showing me around the watch floor.

Folks, the main reason I came — and I mean this sincerely — is to say thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you. The American people, almost by definition, are not able to know what you do. And you devote so much of your time, your effort, and many of you end up risking your lives in the Intelligence Community to do things to make sure that your families and people back here are safe — make a difference.

And you'd be amazed — as I traveled the world as Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee or member of the Intelligence Committee for all those years, or as Vice President of the United States dealing with national security issues, or as President of the United States — how many of now my foreign counterparts thank you for what you do.

I'd like to introduce you, by the way, to my National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan. Jake, would you stand up? (Applause.)

And, you know, the leaders of many of our intelligence agencies are here today. And I thank you for your diligence and keeping our country safe, and your commitment to supporting your teams. Because, if there's anything, a team sport is what y'all are doing if there's going to be anything that's going to be accomplished.

Because the people I most want to honor and thank today are the intelligence professionals whose names the public is never, ever going to know, never have any notion of what you've done for us: the analysts; the linguists; the collectors and field officers; scientists; support staff; so many others who are real experts, whose careers started much longer before my administration and whose service to our nation is going to extend well beyond my presidency.

You know, you're the eyes and ears around the world — in the frontlines of our national defense, and in many cases, for the world, through us. And you serve the American people no matter which political party holds power in Congress or the White House. It's so vital — so vital that you are and should be totally free of any political pressure or partisan interference. That's basic.

And I want to be absolutely clear that my administration is getting us back to the basics. To the basics. I promise you: You will never see a time, while I'm President of the United States, when my administration in any way tries to affect or alter your judgments about what you think the situation we face is. I'll never politicize the work you do. You have my word on that. It's too important for our country.

Getting back to basics also making — to make sure the IC scrupulously acts within the legal constraints and abides by our strong traditions of internal and congressional oversight, including respect for whistleblower protections.

And it also means understanding that much of the work you must do is in secret but necessary and for the sake of safety. But we should strive to be as open as possible with the American people about the nature of the threats we face and just how serious they are — and they are.

Every one of you joined up because you believe in being part of something that's bigger than yourself, especially you guys and women in uniform — bigger than yourself. You're patriots. It's a word that we use lightly, but I mean it. It's not — it's not — I don't use it lightly. I really don't.

My son, who spent a year in Iraq and died, he was a patriot. He wasn't just somebody else. You all are patriots. You risk your lives and your sacred honor for all that we need to have done for us.

And you believe in the American idea. And living up to that idea is embracing democratic values that are our greatest strength at the end of the day, leading not just by the example of

our power, but by the power of your example. The power of your example.

In addition to thanking you for your bravery, integrity, and your sacrifices, I want to make it clear to everyone here today and to the members of the Intelligence Community working around the globe that you have my full confidence.

That's doesn't mean I don't question what you send me. That meant — doesn't mean — it's not that I — I — you know, I'm not a new guy on the block in terms of these issues. But one of the reasons I question is to push — push you to the limits to determine just how certain you are about what you're doing. Lots of times, the only honest answer: "We're not certain. We're not certain, but this is what our best judgment is."

I know — I really do — know how hard the work you do is. I've been doing this for a long, long time before I became President. I know there's no such thing as 100 percent certainty in the intelligence world. Occasionally that happens, but rarely, rarely, rarely.

But I also know that your work is invaluable to our ability to make informed, strategic national security decisions. And I just had an interesting meeting, as you all know, with my very close friend, Vladimir Putin. (Laughter.) I can tell — one thing: I've been dealing with world leaders a long, long time. And just like all of you men and women, you can sort of sense somebody else after a while.

He knows that you're better than his team, and it bothers the hell out of him. Not a joke. Not a joke. And he, as a consequence of you, think we have capacities he may even exaggerate. That's a good thing. That's a good thing.

You know, one of the things I miss most during the four years between my time serving as Vice President and being a professor in a college — and I mean this sincerely: From the time I was 31 years old, every morning I woke up and got in the train to come to — I commuted every day from Delaware after my wife and daughter were killed. And I'd come every day, and one of the things I would get — I'd get a brief in the morning. And I was more informed than 99 percent of the American people. You know what I miss most, for real, from those four years of being a professor? The PDB. (Laughter.) No, you think I'm joking. I am not. A sense of knowing where all the pieces were. Whether we had it all down, we knew where all the pieces were. We knew where the pieces were.

And so now I have access again — and to the chagrin of many of you, I read it in detail. (Laughter.) And I ask questions of my briefers and follow up with my team. And I ask each of

you the same thing I asked Director Haines, “Just give it to me straight.” I’m not looking for pablum; I’m looking for straight-from-the-shoulder assessments. And when you’re not sure, say you’re not sure. But give me your best judgment of what you think is — your best judgment is better than almost anybody else’s judgment in the whole world — even if the news is hard, even if the news is bad.

I can’t make the decisions I need to make if I’m not getting the best unvarnished, unbiased judgments you can give me. I’m not looking to hear nice things. I’m looking to hear what you think to be the truth.

I greatly appreciate just how much work goes into the analysis that the IC produces and the tactical and intelligence supporting our warfighters and the superb effort to ensure our IT, our human capital, and the facilities are the best in the world. Because, again, without knowing what — without you telling me, I don’t know enough to know what to ask for from the Congress — how much money we need, what we need to focus on.

It’s a massive, coordinated, global effort to pull together reliable intelligence in a timely way. And all of you, no matter which agency you work for, are part of one team with one shared mission: keeping America strong and secure in the world, or simply making sure your families are safe. It gets down to basic things. Just really basic things.

You know, for most of the last 20 years, much of the work has been focused on counterterrorism, making sure the United States doesn’t experience another horror like occurred on September the 11th. And that work has to continue and evolve to address the changing shape of terrorism as we find it today. And that’s no great insight on my part, it’s going to change significantly more. It’s going to change significantly more.

I always get kidded by my colleagues when I served in the Senate for 36 years for quoting Irish poets. They think I quoted Irish poets because I’m Irish. That’s not the reason I quote them; they’re simply the best poets in the world. (Laughter.)

And there’s a famous poem written by — that says, “All has changed, changed utterly. A terrible beauty has been born.” The world is changing so rapidly — technologically and in terms of alliances and human intercourse — that war is going to change across the board in the next 10 years than in the last 50 years. That’s not hyperbole; that’s a fact.

If I talked to you 15 years ago about hypersonic flight, you’d look at me like I was crazy. So

much is going to change and that's going to put an enormous burden on you to stay ahead of the curve. It's really going to get tougher.

But we have the best folks in the world. And one of the things that I think — and I don't want to get off too far afield here, but one of the things that is really important is — our greatest strength, in fact, is our diversity, bringing completely different perspectives to it. And I really mean that. That's not hyperbole. I'm not trying to be "Kumbaya, everybody get along." It's just a fact. It's a fact.

And so, threats that are more geographically dispersed than they were 20 years ago are going to continue to require our vigilance. And we have to continue our efforts to better understand some of the hardest and most important intelligence targets we face as a nation.

But, you know, we also need to make sure that we're positioning ourselves to stay ahead of security challenges that will stretch the IC in new ways it has never been stretched before.

You know, we've seen how cyber threats, including ransomware attacks, increasingly are able to cause damage and disruption to the real world. I can't guarantee this, and you're as informed as I am, but I think it's more likely we're going to end up — well, if we end up in a war, a real shooting war with a major power, it's going to be as a consequence of a cyber breach of great consequence. And it's increasing exponentially — the capabilities.

When I was with Mr. Putin, who has a real problem — he is — he's sitting on top of an economy that has nuclear weapons and oil wells and nothing else. Nothing else. Their economy is — what? — the eighth smallest in the world now — largest in the world? He knows — he knows he's in real trouble, which makes him even more dangerous, in my view.

Take a look at China. I've spent more time with Xi Jinping as a world leader than anyone else has. I spent 25 hours alone with him when I was Vice President because it was important that, according to President Obama, that someone knew who the new guy coming on board was, and it couldn't be the President.

I traveled 17,000 miles with him. I've sat with him, with me and just an interpreter — each of us have a simultaneous interpreter. He is deadly earnest about becoming the most powerful military force in the world, as well as the largest — the most prominent economy in the world by the mid-40s — the 2040s. It's real.

I don't know. We probably have some people who aren't totally cleared — I don't know, but you

saw just what we found out about hypersonic — we — anyway, as they say in Southern Delaware, “This boy has got a plan.” And, you know, we better figure out how we’re going to keep pace without exacerbating and moving us in a position where we increase the hostilities unnecessarily.

I think we also need to take on the rampant disinformation that is making it harder and harder for people to access — assess the facts, be able to make decisions.

In today’s PDB you all prepared for me, look what Russia is doing already about the 2022 elections and misinformation. It’s a pure violation of our sovereignty.

Now you see what’s happening. More people get their information from the Internet than they do from any other outlet. What’s — all the disinformation that’s having real consequences in terms of people’s access.

And so, there’s so much that you all — particularly those of you who are new and coming along — are going to have to be — keep up with and ahead of in ways that are not even happening now, as good as everything is.

You know, as we compete for the future of the 21st century with China and other nations, we have to stay on top of the cutting-edge developments of science and technology.

If you’d hold for a second here, I want to point out something. You know, we used to — we used to be, when I first got here as a U.S. senator, actually three and a half decades ago, we invested more money — R&D — money in R&D as a percent of our GDP than any nation in the world. We’re now number eight. China was number nine; they’re now number two. It matters. It matters.

Look at where we are on things that intelligence communities and others don’t even think very often about — about how educated the public is. We’re coming around right now. This doesn’t relate to the intelligence community per se, but it does.

Think about it. If we were having the debate that was taking place in the United States in the late 1890s and the early 1900s about public education, do you think any of us would say 12 years of free public education was enough to compete in the 21st century? Not a joke. Think about it. What do you think? I don’t think there’s a shot if we were doing that today.

So the fact we have the best-educated public in the world — well, that’s our objective — will

matter a great deal. It will matter a great deal. It is as much a part of national defense, in my view, as anything else is.

So I think we have to think differently. I don't expect you to agree with me. I expect you to at least understand where I'm coming from because the world is changing so significantly.

And it's especially important that we work closely with our partners and allies to maintain our technological edge; shore up supply chains; ensure that the rules that govern technologies support democracies, not autocracies.

You know, at the same time, we have to work in cooperation with nations like China and Russia that are our competitors — and possibly mortal competitors down the road — in the context of there's — to meet the existential threats, for example, of climate change. There are certain things that are in our mutual interest. But we can't — we can't be lulled into thinking that that's enough and that we don't really have to keep a watchful eye on what the ultimate objective of the other team is. But there are things where we should be — where we should be cooperating.

This shared danger impacts all of nations. Climate challenges are already accelerating instability in our own country and around the world: extreme weather events that are more common and more deadly; food and water insecurity; sea levels rising, resulting in changing climates and driving greater migration and posing fundamental risk to the most vulnerable of communities.

If you could hold for just a second again. We're in a situation where — think about this. Think about this: I'll never forget the first time I went down in the tank as Vice President, after I got elected. The Defense Department said what the greatest threat facing America: climate change.

If, in fact, the seas' level rises another two and half feet, you're going to have millions of people migrating, fighting over arable land. You saw what happened in North Africa. What makes us think this doesn't matter? It's not your responsibility, but it's something you're watching because you know what's going to happen.

People who were Muslim, and the only difference was Black and/or Arab, killing each other by the thousands for arable — a piece of arable — arable land in North Central Africa. But what happens — what happens in Indonesia if the projections are correct that, in the next 10 years, they may have to move their capital because they're going to be underwater?

It matters. It's a strategic question as well as an environmental question.

A dramatically warming Arctic is opening up competition for resources that once were hard to access. I had — as they say in Southern Delaware — they talk at you like this, you know what I mean? — I had a “Come to Jesus” meeting, an “altar call” with Mr. Putin about what he thinks is what Russia's property is in the Arctic. China looking very closely at that as well, where they are.

That's what I mean about the world changing. What is that going to do to our strategic doctrine in the next 2, 5, 10, 12 years, when you can circumvent the Arctic without icebreakers?

So, look, we need your insight, we need your expertise on all these issues. The one thing you all have in common is you all have high IQs. You're all smart. You have significant intelligence quotients, and you put it to use to help the elected leaders in this country decide what the best route to go is.

So just as you always have been essential as we've sought to counter traditional threats, the Intelligence Community is going to be critical to America's strength as we take on these new challenges and hybrid threats.

Finally, I've laid out a broad agenda, and that's just a fraction of it. But we can't do any of this without taking care of our best and most important asset: the American people.

I know the intelligence community is already one of the best places to work in the federal government. I asked my staff when I found out you came in second just after NASA — I said, “Don't tell me what the White House is ranked.” (Laughter.) “It will hurt my feelings.” And they assured me, no, you don't rank them. That was a good thing: “We don't rank the Oval Office.” (Laughter.)

But all kidding aside, it's about the comradery you have, and most of all, it's about being able to trust one another — to trust one another.

My highest priority as President is the safety and security of all Americans, and that includes those who serve in our Intelligence Community.

You take on unique risks in these jobs, and we're taking the cases of anomalous health incidents that are affecting intelligence officers, government officials, and their families very

seriously, for example.

My administration is coordinating a government-wide effort to respond to these incidents, because this challenge demands — demands that departments and agencies, including the entire Intelligence Community, work together with urgency.

Talked about changes. What's going to happen as we move on and we're able to develop around the world pathogens that can be transmitted to societies and communities? It may not be a nuclear weapon. It may not be a hypersonic missile. It may not be any of the things we think of.

But think about it. Just think about what's happened with one — I'm not suggesting it was intended — a lot more we need to know — but think what's happened: More people have been killed in the United States of America because of COVID than in every single major war we fought combined. Every single one. What's next? What is intended? There's a lot of research going on. You're going to find — you're going to have to increase your ranks with people with significant scientific capacity relative to pathogens.

So, my point is: Your value is going to increase and increase and increase and increase in terms of security. You know, from the CIA to all the agencies, there's a lot that's going to happen.

And to all of you who've been affected, we recognize how important it is to make sure that they have the best possible care at a time you're figuring out how to deal with what's happening, not only to some of those who have been stationed abroad, but their families.

Look, this is a priority for our entire leadership team. So let me just close by saying how much I value the work you do. That's why I wanted to come here today.

So much of the work you do is in secret. It means many, many times you don't get credit — the credit you deserve — and the things you prevented from happening, the catastrophes you've enabled us to avoid, the judgments you've provided us to make our people safer.

And America is probably never going to learn about the lives you've saved or the disasters that never come to pass because of your diligent, professional intelligence work. But I want you to know I know. For the time being, at least as long as I'm around, I know.

And on behalf of the American people, thank you all for what you do every single day. And we're grateful — we're grateful that you're there for us. We're safer because of your dedication,

your honesty, your integrity, and your significant intellectual capacity to act in our interest.

We're stronger because of your insight. We're a more noble nation because of your insight. And American lives have been saved repeatedly because of your insight. I know it may sound like hyperbole, but from the bottom of my heart, I thank you. I thank you for all you do and continue to do.

And may God bless you all. And may God protect our troops and all those patriots serving in harm's way, because there's a lot still there. Thank you, thank you, thank you. (Applause.)

I have to seek permission to leave. I had to check, if you noticed. (Laughter.) Thank you again. (Applause.)

Q President Biden, will you require federal employees to get vaccinated?

THE PRESIDENT: Beg your pardon?

Q Will you require all federal employees to get vaccinated?

THE PRESIDENT: That's under consideration right now. But if you're not vaccinated, you're not nearly as smart as I thought you were.

Q Are you concerned that the CDC's mask guidance could sow confusion?

THE PRESIDENT: We have a pandemic because of the unvaccinated, and they're sowing enormous confusion. And the more we learn – the more we learn about this virus and the Delta variation, the more we have to be worried and concerned. And only one thing we know for sure: If those other hundred million people got vaccinated, we'd be in a very different world.

So, get vaccinated. If you haven't, you're not nearly as smart as I said you were.

Thanks. (Applause.)

END